



# Gaslight News

The Historical Society of Riverton  
Riverton, New Jersey

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## Underground Railroad Program at May Meeting

The Historical Society of Riverton will meet on **Monday May 11, 1998 at 8:00 pm** in the Riverton School Media Center for our Annual Meeting. After some business matters are conducted, there will be an interesting and informative presentation about New Jersey History.

Our program for the evening, is entitled "**The Underground Railroad in New Jersey**". Our guest speaker for the presentation, approximately one hour in length, will be Mr. Lester Owens.

The Underground Railroad was a humane response to the slavery system in America. This secret operation was not just an occurrence of the Civil War of the 1860's. It had begun during Colonial times and grew as part of the organized Abolition Movement.

As one could imagine, the geographic location of New Jersey placed the State in an important position between the southern states below the Mason-Dixon Line and the sympathetic States of New York and the New England region to the North.

Lester Owens, our presenter, was born and raised in New Jersey. He was originally from Hightstown and now resides in Blackwood. Lester has a Degree in Applied Mathematics from West Chester University. He has used his mathematics skills for over 20 years in actuarial research and development of life insurance products for some of the major insurance companies in the country.

For the past 23 years, Lester has been the "Math Doctor" - a mathematics tutorial service which helps learners from the basic skills to

advanced calculus. Locally, Mr. Owens is math instructor at Camden County College, and a computer instructor at Triton Regional High School Evening Division.

Recently, Mr. Owens combined his interest in New Jersey African American history, and his computer skills, to found a computer software company, named *Cultural Software Design*. The company is dedicated to increasing cultural awareness through state and local history.

Some of Mr. Owens' current computer products include: "Math and the Underground Railroad in New Jersey"; New Jersey and its '*Glory*' - Black Volunteers from New Jersey in the United States Colored Troops during the Civil War"; and "MTIS - Manual Training and Industrial School (Old Ironsides) of Bordentown, New Jersey".

Mr. Owens' presentation will include overhead transparencies of the various stations or stops throughout New Jersey where slaves from the Southern States were brought to freedom in New Jersey and the surrounding States of the North. Recognition will also be given to the historians, librarians, and archivists of New Jersey, who are the caretakers of this aspect of our national history.

All persons are invited to attend this meeting of historic interest. The Riverton School is located at Fifth and Howard Streets, Riverton. Attendees should enter through the main doors facing Fifth Street. The school building and meeting room are handicapped accessible. There will be a short refreshment period afterward.

## Gaslight News

is a production of the Historical Society of Riverton; and is published four times a year.

Daniel T. Campbell, AIA *President & Editor*

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## Election of Officers to the Board of Directors

Every year, at the Annual Meeting, we conduct an election of four officers to our Board of Directors. This action will take place at the meeting of May 11, 1998.

This year, all four candidates are incumbent directors, and coincidentally are Officers of the Board. The following are your candidates for new three year terms on the Board of Directors:

**Nancy Washington** is a long-time member of the Society, having served faithfully as Board Secretary and on several of the Board committees for many years.

**Jack Laverty** has served as Membership Chairman, dilligently keeping our membership lists up-to-date, and also thinking up with some new and interesting projects on behalf of the Historical Society and Riverton beautification.

**Paul Daly** has been our Treasurer for at least a decade - keeping faithful watch over the money collected, and spent on worthy projects. His outdoor activities include distributing the souvenir Fourth of July cards during the parade (plus Paul and Jack both climb their ladders to decorate our gaslights with the bows you see at Christmas).

**Dan Campbell** has been President for six years, edits this Gaslight News and coordinates the efforts of the other Board members to conduct the regular business and special committee activities of the Society.

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## National Register Nomination nears Completion

The long awaited nomination of Riverton to the NJ State and National Registers of Historic Places appears to be winding to a close. The State and National Registers certification is an honorary title for areas of historical significance in our country. It does not affect the private property rights of individual owners within a proposed district. Riverton is considered qualified because of its place in American history as an early planned American suburb and for the variety and quality of the architecture of its buildings.

In response to an early 1990's voter referendum endorsing the application, a non-profit committee was formed by several citizens and named the The Historic Riverton Nomination Committee (HRNC). The HRNC collected private donations, and hired an historical consultant - the lowest bidding - to write the application.

The application for Riverton was submitted to the NJ State Historic Preservation Office over a year ago, but was rejected for lacking some information. Since then, Betty Hahle, although not affiliated with the HRNC, has donated many hours of her time, assisting in the re-composition of the historical narratives of the application. Keith Betten, of the HRNC, has re-written those narratives under Betty's review. Keith and Dan Campbell have written detailed Architectural descriptions of the over 500 properties in the proposed district. Betty Hahle has provided facts about the ages, architects, builders, and historical significance of that inventory of buildings.

The nomination will be re-submitted to the State in mid-May, checked over the summer, and acted upon at a meeting in September. We will report the news about the result then! *DTC*

# Yesterday

*By Betty B. Hahle*

Riverton is a small town. It is small enough to easily walk from one end of it to the other. It is small enough to have friends and acquaintances throughout the town. With the river at one end, with all its related activities, and a golf course at the other, a small business section in the middle, and Churches, School, Library, and Park spread throughout the rest of it, Riverton is an easy place for people to get to know each other.

In spite of a century and a half of changing times the world over, Riverton has managed to remain pretty much what it was planned to be: a small residential community, where people care about the town in which they have chosen to live.

Planned and established in 1851, Riverton grew outward from its original core. By the last decade of the 19th century the town, incorporated as a borough (as of January 1, 1894) had established its present boundaries, although much of the land was still being farmed. One of the first Ordinances passed by the new borough council, in 1894, concerned sidewalks. "Where not of stone, brick, or other hard surface, walks must be provided (by owners) between November 1 and May 1, and be not less than 1 1/2 feet wide."

Each street was named in the Ordinance, giving us a picture of just how small Riverton was then. Bank Avenue, from Linden to Howard, was required to have sidewalks under the new law, as was Fourth Street (southeast side) from Linden to Howard. These were the only cross streets developed (having houses fronting on them) at the time. Howard (one side), Thomas, and Elm were developed only between Fourth and Broad Streets, and Linden was not mentioned at all. Main and Lippincott were listed for sidewalks on both sides of the street from Bank Avenue to Broad, with Main continuing above the railroad as far as Eighth Street. Cinnaminson, above the railroad, also went up to Eighth, but only on one side. Main Street properties went through to Cinnaminson, so were not built upon.

In just a few years Main Street residents were petitioning for cement sidewalks, and in November, 1897, the walks were laid. For a while it caused some muttering, because the company did both sides of the street at the same time.

Throughout the town hucksters, butchers, hawkers, peddlers, fish hucksters, and others offered

their wares and services to the residents paying a \$10 license fee for the privilege. Milk and bakery wagons, ragmen, umbrella men and scissors sharpeners all make their ways through the alleys (now called lanes) and streets, as well as local farmers who brought wagonloads of their fruits and vegetables in season.

Most properties had fences around them, some of decorative wrought iron, but more of simple wood. In time they began to be considered eyesores that should be removed--by law, if necessary. Others asked how their vegetable and flower gardens would be protected from thieves and small boys, and "hordes of roving animals" without them. After an Ordinance was passed (1897) preventing horses, cattle, sheep, swine, goats, and other animals from roaming at large, or being tethered in the streets, at least one problem was on its way to being solved. A few years later Dreer's introduced barberry and privet hedges as alternatives to wood fences, and they soon became the preferred way to mark property lines.

The popularity of bicycles had increased to such a degree that they were referred to as a "craze", and cyclists increasingly ran into pedestrians, or frightened horses pulling wagons and carriages. Perhaps the new bicycle race track on the Athletic Field above the railroad encouraged fast or "trick" riding. But something had to be done. and so another Ordinance prohibited people from driving horses or other animals while riding bicycles, required lights and "alarms", and excluded bicycles from walks on Main Street and on Broad between Elm and Howard--except for children under 10 years of age. Next, a speed limit of not more than 8 miles per hour for bicycles and all other vehicles, "including horses, carriages, electric cars, autos, etc. was set.

New things were appearing, to make life easier. At the same time some also brought about complications and arguments. Since the Water Company had incorporated, in 1888, more families could enjoy water piped into their homes, instead of hand-pumping it in the backyard--or at a kitchen sink. After the Fire Company formed, in 1890 after the disastrous Roberts building fire, several fireplugs were installed in the most populated part of town. Unfortunately, the company's hoses did not reach from the plugs to all the places that fires were

fought, so they requested more plugs. Borough Council agreed to the need but protested to the Water Company the charge of 10¢ per plug. The company responded by increasing the cost to 15¢. A newspaperman commented that there are times when it's better to just let well enough alone....

Street lighting was another issue. Roads were often hazardous to travel, especially after dark. Except for Main Street, which had been given a Telford application (crushed stone), roads were simple dirt surfaces, with weeds cut down when they got too high, and which were maintained by plowing, from time to time. Otherwise, they were muddy, rutted, full of puddles--often deep ones--or very dusty, according to the season.

Grading made an attempt to direct rainwater to run in gutters toward the river. A sewage system was considered that called for 8 miles of 8" and 10" terra cotta pipe, with two outlets into the river (one at Main and one at Linden) which was projected as being able to support a population of 7000. Thomas brothers brought several wagonloads of oyster shells from the shore and spread them on the street in front of their coal and lumber yard. Streets had not been given even minimal care since the Riverton Improvement Company had gone out of existence, in 1872, and so it fell upon the new Riverton government to remedy that neglect. Streets were sprinkled with water to keep dust down (by Porch Club for years, until the borough finally took more responsibility). Then streets were sanded and oiled, and finally paved, a marked improvement over other methods.

When Edward Ogden became mayor in 1894 he planned to bring electric lights to Riverton streets, an answer to long voiced desires by residents. He favored the newly formed Cinnaminson Electric and Power Company, which sought permission to build a plant nearby. Others opposed that group strongly, set up another company, the La Roche, and finally the disagreement escalated to a point where Ogden and some of his council members resigned. Replacements did listen to a suggestion that the Ideal Electric Company offered cheaper rates, but still favored la Roche. In time, some electric street lights were installed. Meanwhile, the Rivershore Gas Company had been formed and in 1901 turned on gas in Riverton for the first time. A few gas street lights were installed, to test it out.

By 1907 citizens were again up in arms about

the poor quality and service of the electric lights, which cost the town \$90 each, but often were not working. The following year Council authorized a contract with Cinnaminson Electric and Power Company, and with Public Service, which had taken over Rivershore, for a "a few electric lights at prominent places" and gas lights elsewhere, the whole not to exceed \$2500 a year. It proved to be a more satisfactory arrangement, even though it was not until 1914 that the company could supply electricity for twenty-four hours each day.

Aside from community problems, and in spite of the long work-days and household tasks that were accomplished with none of the appliances or helpful products we take for granted today, life in Riverton was pleasant. There were many things to do, and many ways in which people found recreation and fun. The river offered boating, races, Regattas, water carnivals, swimming, exhibitions, fishing; and on the banks one could stroll, or sit a while to watch Yacht Club activities, or to participate in picnics, parties, and community celebrations. At the Lyceum there were lectures, musicals, dances, bazaars, and other events. There were baseball, bicycling, (and races) , cricket, badminton, tennis and croquet. There were pool tournaments, skeet shooting, gunning in the marshes, and many types of meetings. There were sewing circles, reading clubs, Porch Club, and many church related activities. And games--card games, board games, charades, and guessing games. Parties could be anything from a few friends enjoying freshly picked berries from the garden or a dish of home-made ice cream, to a formal catered affair.

And in Spring there were gardens to prepare and plant, with Dreer's good seeds. Both back yard vegetable and flower gardens by walks or fences were planted in straight, neat rows. (No instant gardens created with flats of bedding plants!!) There were walks to the woods and orchards at the upper end of town, or through the Dreer trial gardens, or perhaps a train or riverboat to take to attend an event or to visit friends in the city.

There were many things to do, in a small town like Riverton, a century ago.....

