



# Gaslight News

The Historical Society of Riverton  
Riverton, New Jersey

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## Christmas Dolls to be subject of November Program

The Historical Society of Riverton will meet on **Monday, November 29, 1999 at 8:00 pm** in the Riverton Public School Media Center. The subject of the evening's program will be **Christmas Dolls – Santa Clause from all Nations**.

The presentation, approximately one hour in length, will be made by Mrs. Mary Nagurny, a former Riverton resident now residing in Palmyra.

Mary Nagurny celebrates her family's love of Christmas at home with an extensive collection of antique Christmas decorations - many too fragile to travel to our meeting. She will present some of her collection of Santa Claus dolls which she has gathered over the last 20 years.

Mary has many production dolls from various European and Asian countries, and many unique artist-made Santa Claus dolls. Her collection of Santa Causes once numbered over 200. The dolls are made of varying materials including china, cloth and composite, with hand painted faces, some with feather trees as part of the display (from Germany). Several have functions such as candy containers, many are antique reproductions.

All persons, whether Historical Society members or not, are invited to attend this event. The Riverton School, at Fifth and Howard Streets, Riverton, and the Media room (Library) are both handicapped accessible. Attendees should enter the building through the main doors facing Fifth Street. There will be a short refreshment period following the meeting.

## Delaware River Heritage Trail at January Meeting

The National Park Service and the Environmental Departments of both Pennsylvania and New Jersey have collaborated over the past two years to create the **Delaware River Heritage Trail**. We will take an excursion into the nature and history of the Delaware River and her river towns at the meeting of the Historical Society of Riverton on **Monday January 10, 2000 at 8:00 pm** in the Riverton Public School Media Center.

The idea for the Heritage Trail is simple: create a multi-use pathway as close to the Delaware River as possible, a trail that will connect the river communities with parks, historical sites and natural assets. The goal is for residents of both states and visitors to enjoy leisure and fitness activities such as walking, jogging, cross-country skiing and bicycling, while experiencing wildlife observation and historical interpretation.

The proposed Heritage Trail is envisioned as a loop, extending from Morrisville to Philadelphia in Pennsylvania and from Trenton to Palmyra in New Jersey, crossing the Calhoun Street Bridge at the Northern end and the Tacony-Palmyra Bridge at the southern end. Much of the infrastructure for this pathway already exists, but improvements and linkages are needed to connect waterfront parks, promenades, canal towpaths, railbeds, and bike trails.

The principal towns along the way in PA are Morrisville, Tullytown, Bristol, Bensalem, and Philadelphia. There, the trail will follow a large part of the Delaware and Lehigh Canal Park.

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### **Delaware River Heritage Trail**

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The primary host towns in NJ are Palmyra, Riverton, Riverside, Delanco, Beverly, Edgewater Park, Burlington, Florence, Fieldsboro, Bordentown, and Trenton. Here, the trail will follow roads, creeks, bike paths and other existing rights-of-way. Through Riverton, the Heritage Trail is expected to utilize Bank Avenue - which has already been discussed between our Borough Council and the steering committee of the trail.

The presenters for the Historical Society meeting in January 2000 will be William (Bill) Matulewicz, P. G. and Helen Mahan, both of whom are on the committee planning the trail.

Bill is a New Jersey native and Professional Geologist, living in Delanco where he serves on the township Planning and Environmental Boards. He is a graduate of Rutgers University with a B.S. in Geology and of Drexel University with a M.S. Degree in Engineering Geology.

Helen is an employee of the National Park Service, Division of Rivers, Trails & Conservation, based in Philadelphia. The Park Service role in the trail planning is to be a facilitator of planning, to provide coordination between the trail committee and the states' Departments of Transportation and such agencies as NJ Transit, as well as to provide administrative assistance.

Bill and Helen will present the original Concept Plan which was created approximately two years ago, they will elaborate upon how the plan has developed since then, and will tell us what to expect from the fruition of the Delaware River Heritage Trail plan in the future.

*DTC with assistance from John Farr, Program Chairman. Portions of this article are excerpted from Delaware Heritage Trail literature.*

## **Society makes donation to Riverton Yacht Club**

The Board of Directors showed their support for the efforts of the **Riverton Yacht Club** in restoring the Riverton Steamboat Landing, by approving a donation of \$1,000 to the Club's non-profit arm, the **Riverton Steamboat Landing Foundation**.

The Riverton Yacht Club pier, over 150 years old, is the last remaining former steamboat landing on the Delaware River. As such, it is a valuable historical resource as a reminder of the steamboat transportation that existed between Riverton, Philadelphia, and other river towns along the Delaware.

The Riverton Steamboat Landing Foundation has already applied for and received a combination State & Federal Transportation Act grant for \$919,000 to be used to repair the pier. That money will be spent in 2000 to install new bulkheads, add new soil, install new concrete topping, widen the causeway and add new equipment for the continued use of the pier as a sailing facility. After the repairs, the pier will be opened to the public and will house a small museum of Yacht Club and steamboat history.

The money donated by the Historical Society will be used to pay for the engineering fees for this work, which could be in excess of \$80,000. The Board of Directors is very pleased to support this worthwhile effort, and we urge all persons to participate if you are contacted by the Riverton Steamboat Landing Foundation for a donation.

## **Upcoming Program Schedule**

**March 13, 2000 - ALICE PAUL:** The Historical Society celebrates Women's History Month with a program about locally born womans' advocate and suffragist - Alice Paul.

**May 8, 2000 - AFRICAN AMERICAN CIVIL WAR TROOPS** - Delayed from January, and as a follow-up to our May 1999 program, this is an excellent live action presentation about the participation of African American troops during the Civil War.

• *Wishing Happy Holidays To All...DTC* •

## Yesterday

Information about other times and places can be found in various kinds of records, but none of them give quite the same perspective as that gained from oral histories. Here are two examples from interviews about childhood in Riverton a century ago:

In 1982 **Mrs. Barclay-Willits** (1889-1990) talked of her birth and childhood. She was born Therese Spackman, daughter of Walter and Ella Foster Campbell Spackman, at the home of her grandfather, Joseph Campbell. The new house being built for her parents on Lippincott Avenue was not quite finished in time for her birth, but it was to be her home for many years as not only she, but also her children, grew up there.

Therese attended private schools, first Mrs. Howard Sharp's, then Camden Friend's, then Friend's Central in Philadelphia. Mrs. Sharp's small school was held in the early frame Sunday School building of Presbyterian Church, and then (circa 1903) moved into Joseph Campbell's stables, at Penn and Fourth Streets. Classes were from K through 5th grade. She then went to Camden Friend's for three years travelling by train daily. Then three years attending Friend's Central which involved a longer trip, first to Camden by train, then by ferry across the Delaware, and finally a long walk up Market Street in Philadelphia. She could have taken a trolley up Market, Mrs. Willits said, but at least three groups of children were walking together there, some going to another Friend's school, some to Central, and some to Episcopal Academy, and they enjoyed that. "Besides", she said, "We could be excused if we were late, and we delayed as long as possible in getting to school." On foggy days they were excused because of the ferry crossing that was often delayed until the fog lifted.

Therese's playmates were most often the Fitler and Ogden children, who lived on the riverbank. One of their favorite places to play was a wooded section with a crumbling old stone house in the center of it. There was a

large bathtub in the basement that had fallen through the floors.

*(note: That was the Cook property, which extended from the river to 4th St. between Howard and Fulton Sts. The large stone house has been erected c. 1861 in the center of the estate, and had been destroyed by fire in 1872. Mrs. Cook died in 1873, and the property was never restored. It was divided in 1900, and the first riverfront lot sold in 1901.)*

Therese spoke of the fishery at the foot of Howard Street, and of watching the huge nets drawn, and people buying "a nice big wiggling fish to take home for supper." She also spoke of the boats on the river: "They made a nice way of life; they provided transportation, and you didn't have to leave your house until you heard the sight bell -- and then you could get to the wharf in plenty of time. The men would come home from work reading their evening papers and walk to their homes, talking to each other and making it a relaxing time of day."

**Charles H. Stonaker** (1885-1983) moved to Riverton when he was about six years old. His father was the Station Agent, and the PRR company had transferred him there. They moved into a rental house on Main Street, not far from the railroad, the first of several houses in which he lived as a child. "Dad never bought a house while he worked for the railroad, since he never knew when he might be transferred to another location," he said.

Charlie attended Riverton's school, still a 2-room frame building at Howard and 4th Streets. Within two or three years, he said during an interview in 1972, the building was enlarged, and had 4 classrooms on the second floor, and a large auditorium on the first. Each room had a teacher, and there was one extra teacher to help. The auditorium was used for some studies, but also each morning for roll-call and opening exercises, and for dismissal at the end of the school day. All



grades were taught in these rooms. There was no High School, but some High School subjects were taught to those who wanted them. Most students who wanted to continue their education did so at Farnum School, in Beverly.

Children had chores to do at home, and most boys also found jobs after school and during vacations. Charlie's regular Saturday chores included polishing the kitchen stove, cleaning the gas lamps, and cranking the ice cream freezer for Sunday's dessert. On Sunday mornings he and his best friend, Billy Wolfschmidt, sang in the choir of Christ Episcopal Church. "The choir was mixed, with men, women, and children singing together. We donned robes in the Parish House basement, then marched into the church singing, to open the two Sunday morning services. Billy and I were the ones who led the choir into the church. One time I fell asleep during a sermon and was awakened by the sexton after the choir and the church members had all departed from the church!!"

Both boys caddied at the Country Club – usually referred to as The Golf Links. On weekdays they caddied by turn, but on weekends they usually caddied for "Mr. Roberts and Mr. Reith, who had a wholesale grocery business in Philadelphia and lived on the riverbank. Most players did not tip very much, but these two took us into the clubhouse for lunch." The course was still 9 holes, and the men played two rounds in the morning, and again in the afternoon. The usual caddy fee was 15¢ a round. "Some players charged the boys for a ball if it was lost. They weren't very popular."

During several summers Charlie, like many boys in Riverton, worked at Dreer's Nursery. Hours were from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekdays, and until 5:30 p.m. on Saturdays. he was a mailboy, and went to the Post Office twice daily to pick up mail, then distributed it throughout the Nursery.

A few doors above Charlie's house lived George Tucker, who had a paper route and a

telephone. "Along the railroad was an open wire lead, belonging to the telephone company, that had 6 or 8 crossarms. The first telephone in Riverton came from that lead to Tucker's house. They mounted places to connect the cable on the wall of his house – there was no switchboard. The first switchboard was upstairs over the barber shop at Broad and Cinnaminson Sts., in the late 1890's, I think." later it moved to the second floor of the Price building. "Kids used to hang around Tucker's so that if a call came for anyone they could run to deliver the message, for which they were usually paid 10¢."

*(note: Boyd's 1897 Directory: George Tucker: news agent and telephone station. Census 1900 places Tucker at 516 Main, Stonaker at 512 Main, and Wolfschmidt at 513 Main.)*

There was also time for fun. On snowy days children gathered at the top of the hill at Thomas, Linden, and Elm Avenues and could sled all the way down to the railroad over open fields. There was ice skating on the river, or at Hunter's Pond on Union Landing Road. Sometimes they skated at Heuling's Pond, between Riverton and Moorestown, where ice was cut to be stored in an ice house near the station for summer use. The iceman delivered on Saturdays only. Ice wanted any other time was picked up by the customer.

Charlie also remembered the shad fishery (his father kept the books for Al Faunce) and the riverboats. He recalled "the fun of sneaking on a sidewheeler while swimming in the river around the wharf. You'd better be able to hold your breath for a long time! You'd go right down in the bottom of the river!"

Attending and participating in activities at the Lyceum were also recalled, as well as bicycle racing and baseball games.

There are varying lifestyles within every community, and each one contributes a part to our heritage. When they are put together, what a wonderful history they tell.

*Betty B. Hahle*