



Gaslight News

The Historical Society of Riverton
Riverton, New Jersey

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Christmas Past to be subject of November Program

The Historical Society of Riverton will meet on **Monday, November 27, 2000 at 7:30 pm** in the Riverton Public School Media Center. The subject of the evening's program will be **Christmas Past – a history of the traditions.**

The presentation, approximately one hour in length, will be made by Jane C. Peters, a member of the Mt. Holly Historical Society. This program explains the origins of many of our holiday customs and traditions. Mrs. Peters will emphasize the non-religious aspects of Christmas - the trappings of the season, such as Christmas trees, stockings hung by the fire, special foods, etc. In 1856 for instance, a Mrs Hill's cookbook, included instructions on how to build a small gallows to kill the Christmas goose - which then to became part of an 18 course meal !

Mrs. Peters will appear in Victorian period dress and will emphasize the Christmas customs observed during the Civil War and later. She will read quotations from diaries and letters written by soldiers who were away from their wives and families, and some of their responses from home, where situations were also desperate. Her presentation includes a small collection of Christmas gifts from the 1860's.

All persons, whether Historical Society members or not, are invited to attend this interesting and informative event. The Riverton School, at Fifth and Howard Streets, Riverton, and the Media Center (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.

Walt Whitman History and Poetry at January Meeting

The Historical Society of Riverton will present a program on **Monday January 29, 2001 at 7:30 pm** entitled **Walt Whitman, New Jersey's Good Gray Poet.** The speaker for the evening will be Edward Cifelli, Ph.D. of Newton, NJ. Dr. Cifelli, a Professor of English at the County College of Morris since 1969 has a Ph.D. in Early American Studies from New York University, and has published seven books and score of articles on American Literature covering the entire spectrum of our history, from Colonial times to Postmodern. He has written biographies of the Revolutionary War poet David Humphreys, the mid-twentieth century American poet John Cicardi, and the last poet to read at a presidential inauguration, Miller Williams.

The greatest of 19th-century American poets, Walt Whitman, was born the third of eight children, on a farm near Huntington Long Island on May 31, 1819. His family left that area in 1824 when they moved to Brooklyn and by the age of 11 he began to learn printing, journalism, and newspaper editing. Although his formal education was limited, he was teaching school in Long Island by the time he was 17 years of age.

In 1838-39 Whitman edited a weekly newspaper, The Long Islander, which is still in existence. Walt drifted from one job to another, often losing newspaper posts because of his political views. He occasionally taught school, wrote short stories and poems for magazines, and edited such newspapers as the New York Aurora and Evening Tatler and the Brooklyn Daily Eagle. As a contributor (1848) to the New Orleans Crescent, he made a trip to the South, his first exposure to the vastness of the "States" that he later extolled in his poetry.

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Walt Whitman

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Whitman took the name "Walt" when in 1855 he published at his own expense, his first book of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, which now is among the seminal works of American literature. The book did not win universal acclaim, however, because of his irregular poetry as well as his candid subject matter, such as commonplace experiences, labor, and sexuality antagonized many early readers. Until 1860, while revising and expanding *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman supported himself by free-lance journalism.

Late in 1862, Whitman went to the Civil War battlefield to find his wounded brother George, then returned to Washington, where he served as a volunteer nurse to soldiers of both sides, who were sick and dying in the unhygienic military hospitals in Washington. He aided his "comrades" with food and other necessities and wrote letters home for them.

In *Drum-Taps* (1865) Whitman printed poems based on his wartime experiences; *Sequel to Drum-Taps* (1865-66) contained what later became two of his most famous works, "*When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd*" and "*O Captain! My Captain!*" commemorating the death of Lincoln.

After he suffered a permanently crippling stroke in 1873, Whitman moved to Camden, New Jersey, to be near George and his mother. *Leaves of Grass*, which was constantly expanded, slowly became known in the United States and abroad; and Whitman, now acknowledged as a major literary figure, welcomed writers and artists from all over the world to his modest house on Mickle Street, which is today preserved as an historic house museum. Walt Whitman died on Mar. 26, 1892, and is buried in Harleigh Cemetery, in Camden, in a tomb which he designed himself.

Whitman had created a poetry that would reflect the American melting pot of races and nationalities, the democratic aspirations of the people, and the physical vastness of the U.S.. He remains the nation's great celebrator and affirmer of democracy, freedom, the self, and the joys of living.

The January program is made possible by a grant from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities

Archives Project Underway

In August of 1999, the Historical Society received a review of our archived materials, conducted by the New Jersey Historical Commission. That report became a guide for us to catalog the over-1000 items in our collection, which have been donated to the Society over the past 30 years.

To accomplish this task, we have hired two experienced archivists, Harriet Beckert and Connie Houchins, both whom have degrees in History and Historic Preservation, and have cataloged and preserved the collections of several historic sites in PA. We also purchased archival boxes, folders, acid free tissue paper, and plastic photo sleeves, etc., necessary for the proper conservation of our collection.

The archivists have been working in the basement of the Riverton Free Library, where the Library generously donated some of their basement space for our items to be cataloged and stored. Local Contractor, Scott Corley, donated a large plan file where maps and other large documents can be stored flat, to eliminate damage caused by rolling such papers.

The list of items is being recorded in a computerized spreadsheet program, and the actual artifacts are being stored in their proper boxes, folders, and into filing cabinets. To complete the task, the Historical Society has applied for a \$3000.00 grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission to pay for the remainder of the storage materials, and the archivists time. The collection can then be made available to the public for research, on an appointment basis.

Old letters, postcards, photos, newspapers, awards, deeds, and maps are valuable keys to the history of Riverton. Before you throw away things you may no longer want to keep yourself, offer them to the Historical Society.

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Yesterday...

November yesterdays have often been turbulent. Early residents of Riverton were both active and vocal in their political preferences, and sometimes got into fights and name-calling. There were demonstrations, torchlight parades, and sometimes, boisterous rallies. One year a group of supporters bought 40 brooms, expecting to put on a fine show of "making a clean sweep" after their candidate won. He didn't...and the brooms quietly disappeared into numerous cleaning closets. Another time a losing candidate was hung in effigy and paraded through town. People were divided sharply.

Once elections were over, another dividing situation soon appeared, when School Boards called attention to things that needed attention. In less than five years after the fine new brick schoolhouse was erected (1910) it was already overcrowded, and space had to be rented in other buildings for some classes. When classroom sizes increased to more than forty pupils, it was obvious—but not willingly accepted—that either an addition was needed on a whole new building. Since PHS tuitions had been increased to \$45 per student, and more students were attending there each year, some thought Riverton should build its own high school. And some did not. Time and code and use changes brought about more budget problems, and always there are solutions and/or compromises to be found. Eventually these are reached, and once again people work together for the common good.

Thanksgiving, coming at the end of such a month with its joining together of families and citizens to give thanks for many blessings, paves the way for the coming Christmas season. By then many women were already knitting sweaters or mittens and caps, or secretly sewing new outfits for a child's favorite doll, in anticipation of Christmas gifts. Girls and boys made pen wipers (pieces of fabric caught together on one side with which to wipe off the removable pen tip that was dipped into an inkwell) or needle cases, or embroidered towels or handkerchiefs, or whittled whistles or toy boats. Children sought errands that would reward them with a few pennies with which to buy materials or ready made items to give. And the place in Riverton to find the best things was Mrs. Smith's on Main Street.

Mrs. Smith's Dry Goods and Notions Store at 414 Main Street was a long, low building that one entered via a door between two large rounded glass storefront

windows. Inside were tables and drawers and shelves up to the windows high up on the side walls. The store was sometimes referred to as "Riverton's Department Store", for it carried a wide variety of goods. Mrs. Smith advertised well. Her large ad in the special issue of the New Era in 1909 offered leather goods, stationery, fancy articles, stockings, toys, books, Japanese drawn work and Renaissance scarfs, neckties, suspenders, and much more. She said that all were welcome, whether to look or to buy. And added "there are plenty of attractions for the little ones; send them to do their own shopping."

In 1912 Mrs. Smith extended her ads with a folder called "The Riverton Holiday Messenger", with messages of Christmas cheer, pictures of children and snow and Christmas trees and expanded stock items--"ladies' lingerie," fancy aprons, Christmas tree ornaments, jewelry, and more.

Girls attending Riverton school had sewing classed with increasingly hard projects in successive years, the final one, to make their own graduation dresses (1920's). Fabrics, patterns, threads and all

We Welcome New Members

The Historical Society welcomes the following new members for the 2001 year:

Cathi & Jerry Laughlin

Thomas and Dana Schneider

Barbara Westergaard

Also thanks for additional donations from:

Hank Croft, Architect - Business Patron

Paul Grena - Sponsor

Thomas Schneider - Sponsor

Barbara Westergaard

We thank all new members, as well as renewing members for their interest and participation in preserving the history of Riverton. Please attend our interesting meetings to hear informative programs, and to meet your culturally minded neighbors!

notions were found at Mrs. Smith's. Also attracting children were sheets of paper dolls, cases of penny candies, tops, marbles, penknives, and socks and stockings in patterns. Among the books sold there were Fitler's *Reddy* (1929) and the others of the series, that mentioned purchases at Mrs. Smith's; and *Betsy Ross: Quaker Rebel*, by Edwin S. Parry (1931). Both authors were local people.

Alfred and Emma Smith came to America from England in 1876, settled in Philadelphia, where four children were born, and then moved to Riverton. they rented a house on Main Street, and George, their fifth and last child, was born there in 1890-95 (records vary). Alfred was a bookbinder, and had his own shop. Emma, in 1901 decided to open a drygoods shop, and rented space in the new Price Building on Broad Street. Within weeks she moved her shop to her home at 504 Main, and then a few weeks later, in April she rented a building on the property of 412 Main and moved her shop there. And there it stayed for almost fifty years.

The twin brick Second Empire residence at 410 / 412 Main Street had been built by John Thornton some twenty years earlier. He had exclusive rights to sell steel needles (manufactured in England by John Smith and Son) in America, and built a small low building at the upper edge of his property for display of his wares. The building was simple, 1-story, long and narrow, with an open front porch, at the same building line as his home. After Thornton's death his heirs sold some of the properties he had owned, including 410 / 412 Main, which included the small building that had been rented to a drygoods salesman. In 1905 Alfred and Emma Smith purchased the property, and moved into the house—a convenient move, since Emma and her daughters all worked in the store, now on her own property. A small room was soon added to the back of the store, with an entryway facing the house, and circa 1930 the front porch was replaced with the bowed glass windows that distinguished

Smith's store for many years.

Alfred Smith died in 1923, and Emma followed him in 1927. Alfred had left his properties to Emma, and she, in turn, left the shop and the small lot on which it stood to their daughter, Edith, and the home etc. to the family. It was the first division of the property, and the shop then used its own number, 414 Main Street. For a time George, who had become a writer of children's stories under the name of "Farmer Smith" lived at 410, but otherwise it was rented out. Miss Edith and her sisters lived at 412, and worked at the shop. Also with them was Etta Philp, an "adopted" sister, who had been taken in by the Smiths in 1893, when she and her brother and sisters were orphaned when their parents died of typhoid pneumonia within days of each other. As was the custom at that time, orphaned children were placed as quickly as possible with families wanting them, with little time spent trying to locate other family members or keeping children together.

The Smiths took in the oldest two, a boy and girl, 10 and 8 year-olds. The boy left when he was able to be "on his own", but Etta stayed until she married. When another child from the family, who had been reared in Europe, came back to America, the Smiths met her at the dock, and she stayed with them until she found a job and home in the Philadelphia area.

Miss Edith retired, and sold her shop in 1946, and the new owner promptly sold it to a young couple who remodeled it for a luncheonette, which was named the Sharon Shoppe, for their small daughter. Its proximity to the school made it a popular place for teachers and students, since there was no lunch service or facility in the school. In 1977 the building again changed hands, the storefront windows removed and the building extended forward as much as possible, and it was converted into an office building.

A small building with a big—and fascinating—story to tell.

Betty B. Hahle, November, 2000

Meeting Schedule:

Meetings for the remainder of 2001 will take place:

March 12, 2001.....and.....May 8, 2001

Programs being considered for these meetings are Historic Carousels, NJ Lighthouses, RCA Victrolas, Riverton Park, and Riverton Yacht Club History.



*Wishing Happy
Holidays To All...*