



GASLIGHT NEWS

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON, INC.

Riverton, N. J. 08077

May - July 1982

No. 4

Program:

Monday, May 3, 1982

8 p.m.

Music Room,
Riverton Public School

Early American and Antique Tools

Dr. Richard Brown

In early America, when almost everything was, of necessity, home made, tools were vital for survival. Each had its purpose, was fashioned with care and treated with respect. Many were handed down from one generation to the next. Tools were adapted to meet new methods of producing some items, and devised to make others as times changed the ways in which people lived. A collection of tools can tell a story of the history of a people in a way that is unique and fascinating.

Dr. Brown, the assistant superintendant of Pemberton Schools, will bring many items from his own collection to illustrate his talk. It promises to be a most interesting program.

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This is also our Annual Meeting, at which time 4 members will be elected to serve on the Board for terms of 3 years. The Nominating Committee will present their recommendations, and additional nominations may be made from the floor. If you would like to become more active yourself, or to place a name in nomination, please find out if that person is willing to serve, if elected, and then...speak up. Your voice and vote are important in deciding who will represent you in the Historical Society of Riverton.

This is also the last general meeting for this season. Our membership has grown to 106, the largest membership in our 11-year existence. We should have a full house at meetings!

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Gas Lights:

There are still 2 gaslights on Thomas Avenue that are out of service, but we have been assured by Mr. Schenck, the Service Supervisor of PSE&G that they have not been forgotten, but will be taken care of as soon as the replacement parts that were ordered some months back are received. The standard that was knocked down during Christmas Holidays has been reclaimed and will be brought back at that time. Mr. Cobb, who does the regular maintenance on our gaslights, has a standing order now to take care of problems promptly as he sees them, without having to wait for special orders to do it. The newly set up annual inspection of all gaslights in Riverton and Palmyra will begin in May.

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Founder's Home, 307 Bank Avenue:

The Hearing of Application for proposed expansion of the Baptist Home on the riverbank began on April 14th. Many residents of Riverton attended, and were surprised by the court stenographer, the tape recorder, the strict legal procedure of presentation and questioning. It will apparently be a lengthy process, and was adjourned at 11 p.m., to be continued at 8 p.m. on Wednesday, May 12th. Since this is a continuation, further notification of the meeting is not required, so if you plan to attend, mark it down now.

Expansion at this site depends on the removal of the large home at 307 Bank Avenue, purchased last year. It has a particular significance, not only to Riverton's history, but beyond that because of its architecture and because it is one of the group of villas erected for the founders of Riverton, considered to be the first totally planned sub-division in our country.

The town plan and the designs for its first villas were designed by Samuel Sloan, the most sought-after architect of the period, for the group of Philadelphians and others from New Jersey who had chosen this site for summer homes for themselves, their families, and their friends. Eight of those villas remain today, 6 on the riverbank, one at 101 Main, and one moved to Penn/Carriage House Lane. Number 307 is one of these Sloan designed villas, that of founder William Canby Biddle. Biddles have for generations been contributors to education and philanthropic fields; Wm. C. Biddle's belief in a young man, the son of another founder, led to the founding of Strawbridge & Clothier, when he loaned Isaac Clothier the sum he needed, without hesitation. The families of the Biddle brothers who were founders, their descendants, and the families they joined through marriages, populated a large part of early Riverton, and some remain today.

The founders planned a community of homes, with those businesses in an area that blended without intruding, and offered needed services. Churches were formed, a school district incorporated, transportation developed, utilities developed, social groups formed, and Deeds written to insure that taverns would not change the character of the community, and that a neighbor could not put up a high fence or build beyond a certain line or height, to insure that everyone might enjoy the benefits of suburban living. And they established a park-like riverbank, maintained by those owners but to be free to all residents, without fences or structures being erected on it. They planned well, and surely did not envision a time when any one holding--business?--would present a solid building of brick and stone across 3 riverfront properties, as is now proposed.

The artist's conception of the proposed expansion, framed and colored, and described as showing that it would blend well with the rest of the neighborhood (homes built more than a century ago), presents a wide expanse of blue water (the Delaware?) and a brick building nearly hidden by trees along the bank; and only a hint of what lies on either side of it. A closer look reveals a 3-story brick building, resembling as much as anything else the "Veterans' Apartments" on Main Street that were built after WWII, a solid wall of building added to all ready insulting addition to the old brownstone home that was Ezra Lippincott's.

A suggestion that the building could possibly be moved to another site is merely that: the many trees along our streets and the overhead wires would make such a move impractical, even if a suitable site were found.

Sometimes it takes the threat of losing what has been taken for granted and thus unseen for many years to startle us into appreciation. Since the Hearing began, a group of Riverton residents have banded together and formed "The Association for the Preservation of Riverton." The purpose of our Historical Society, outlined in our Constitution, is to create an awareness of our heritage and to discover, restore, and preserve local objects and landmarks, and we have been working in that direction since the Society was founded. We welcome all those, both individuals and groups, who share our goals.

Survey:

The Survey, begun several years ago, will be completed this year. Some areas remain to be completed, and will be done over the summer. Most of the photographs required are done. This has been a large undertaking, and one that requires far more hours than would seem, from the surface, because we are trying to make it as accurate as is possible, and the necessary research to do so takes many, many hours.

Spring.....a welcome change from the winter past; a time of growing plants, of green grass, of sun. And of weeds, of discovering painting and other refurbishing that needs attention. There are many brick sidewalks in Riverton. Have you noticed the various sizes and colors of the bricks, and the patterns in which they are laid? Or are they overgrown with weeds and soil that has washed onto them? Weed-killers help, but check first to be sure they do not destroy the bricks. Tackling the job on hands and knees early, before the weeds grow large, is the most effective way to meet the problem, but it is difficult for older residents to do. Wouldn't it be a great project for some Scouts or other civic minded groups to take on? Many hands could make short work of a tiresome job.

Old brick walls need special care, too, and if they are repointed with Portland cement mortar they will eventually deteriorate, according to an article in "Preservation magazine. A

good reference for their care is to be found in "Preservation Brief 2, "Repointing Mortar Joints in Historic Brick Buildings", by Robert Mack, pub. by Nat. Park Service and available from the Gov. Printing Office or the NJ Preservation office, in Trenton.

Other "how to" information, well written and illustrated, is contained in "A Primer: Preservation for the Property Owner", pub. 1978 by Preservation League of N.Y. State, and available from them at Albany, N.Y. 12210 for \$3.00.

The Old House Journal is currently offering a free booklet, "Painting the American House, 1820-1920" which includes not only color information, but what causes many problems with paint and how they can be corrected. A free copy may be obtained by writing to: "Painting, The Old House Journal, 69A Seventh Avenue, Brooklyn, N.J. 11217. Offer ends June 30th.

A copy of each of these references has been ordered by the Historical Society, and will be placed in the Library for anyone to use there. Updated self-guided Walking Tour outlines that take one through a part of the oldest section of Riverton will also be available again.

Yesterday.....

Back in 1851, when Riverton was barely more than a plan, figures released from the 1850 Census revealed the population of America had reached 23,267,498. Jenny Lind gave a concert in Louisville, and a ticket for the 1st choice of seats was purchased by a Mr. Nipp for \$100. Steamboats were getting repairs--the elegant "John Stevens" had been laid up briefly at Bordentown, and the ferryboat "Dido" had its paddle wheels elevated, "they having rather too much dip."

Ornamental iron railings, in the latest style, were advertised for cemeteries, gardens, and balconies as low as 62¢ per foot, and tree boxes, settees, and all types of architectural iron work were readily available. Fashions for the ladies drew frowns from some, and smiles from others, as Mrs. Bloomer's outfits became increasingly adopted. Ladies appeared in shorter skirts that showed pantaloons, and "in full Turkish dress", and in New York a Bloomer festival was being planned for September.

Spring brought strawberries, and the N.J. Mirror carried ads for them, with ice cream, at the homes of a number of individuals throughout the short season. A Mr. Evenan said he had a fine supply, and invited the public to call--but not on Sunday: no business would be conducted then. Tips on how best to keep cream in the warm weather offered "cream is best kept in a cool place above the ground...and stirred daily...otherwise moldy particles gather on the surface of the pots.".....

Summer saw brick-making at its height. An item said that thrifty Germans made bricks from the soil they dug for cellars, formed in a different way and dried in the sun, with a man making 2000 a day in this manner. But at Pea, above Camden, bricks were being made by steam, without the aid of sun drying.

New laws required pre-paid postage (at a savings of 40%), but the stamps were in short supply and often found to be without glue on their backs, causing mutterings. There had been talk of starting a hospital in Camden, an "area destitute of such convenience", but other things had set the plans aside. Later on an item under the heading of "A Delicate Operation" said a tumor weighing almost 4 lbs had been removed from the breast of a woman in Camden by Dr. Pancoast, assisted by Drs Parrish and Strafford. "The patient was under the effects of chloroform."

Schools had their items, too. In Philadelphia the Public Schools closed for the summer on July 18th until the 1st of September, "allowing 6 full weeks of relaxation for teachers and pupils." New Jersey wrote "The system of free public schools is the pride and glory of New England. Let New Jersey come forward in this great work till every son and daughter of her soil shall enjoy the blessings of at least a common school education."

Fourth of July celebrations were the order of the day, with one community--or section of a city--trying to outdo the other. They all read the Declaration of Independence, had Oration (prominent citizens and/or children), Bands, and topped the day with FIREWORKS. One, at a cost of \$300 (donations being solicited) planned activities from sunrise to sunset, after which "a superb display of fireworks...including The Star of Columbia, Liberty Tree, The Bouquet, and Pyramid of Mosaic Candles" would be seen. And the Conclusion would be "the magnificent Sun of Freedom", described as beginning with the wheel of Palestine in variegated

colors, suddenly changing to superb figure of Sun of Freedom, interspersed with rubies, emeralds and sapphires, all surrounded with commuscation of most refulgent dimensions, terminating with a flight of rockets. (Who could resist seeing THAT?)

Riverton's own Fourths, with parades, races, boating events, band concerts, picnics, and the fireworks set off from the pier and the clanging of bells on yachts and ah..h..h..s of appreciative crowds on the Bank, hold a special place in the memories of many....

By August (1851) the wharf was in use, and Charles Wallace lost a pair of horses when they stepped back and were drawn off the wharf into the river by their line tied to a wheel, and were drowned before they could be freed from the heavy wagon and rescued.

As time went on, excursion trains took families to the seashore for a day's outing, or trolley and ferry or riverboat took them to amusement parks. Picnics were frequent, both church groups and clubs had them, and summer was in full swing.

As you dress for the pool or beach this summer, think for a moment of a Wanamaker ad from June, 1899, for bathing suits:

Men's suits..plain black and navy blue worsted, \$2 and \$5; with fancy border, \$2.50, \$3, \$5; with full striped shirts in fancy colors, with plain breeches, \$3.

Women's and Girls--absolutely all wool blue flannel, trimmed with white braid, \$3; fairly satisfactory suits, especially if outing to seaside is short, \$2.50; mohair suits with braid on collar and skirt, \$3.50.

Reminders: Annual meeting, Monday, May 3; Brd. of Adjustment Hearing, May 12.
Porch Club Garden Tour and Luncheon, May 6th. Visit PAWS in Mt Laurel. And check the County Bell and Newspapers for many delightful activities.
And have a Happy Summer!

(BBHahle, ed. items from
Phila Pub. Ledger and NJ
Mirror, May-Dec, 1851)

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