



# GASLIGHT NEWS

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON, INC.

Riverton, N. J. 08077

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May - July 1983

No. 4

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## Program:

Monday, May 2, 1983

8 p.m.

Music Room, Riverton School

"Down Barnegat Bay" .....

Robert Jahn

Robert Jahn, author of "Down Barnegat Bay: A Nor'easter Midnight Reader", will present a slide show based on his book, an illustrated folk and maritime history of the Barnegat Bay area. The program will focus on shipwrecks along the Jersey Shore, and in particular, the fate of the "John Martin", one of 10 ships lost during the terrible storm of February, 1846, in the Bay area.

Mr. Jahn's book is the result of seven years' research, and is a collection of folklore, library and private records, pictures, poems, and recollections, all put together in a way that paints a moving portrait of a time and place. It is a book that, once begun, is hard to put down.

Because of the distance Mr. Jahn must travel in order to bring us this program (from Mantoloking), the usual order for this meeting will be reversed, and the program will precede the business meeting. Please plan to arrive promptly--and invite a friend to enjoy a memorable evening with you.

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## Elections:

The May meeting is the final general meeting for this season, and is also our Annual meeting. Election of 4 members to serve a 3-year term on the Board of the Historical Society of Riverton will take place. The Nominating Committee has presented the following slate: William Baxter, Mrs. Edward Hartmann (Joan), Mrs. Gustav Probsting (Lenore), and Jack Geiss. Additional nominations may be made from the floor prior to balloting, with consent of a nominee.

The Board will meet after election for reorganization, during which officers for the next 2 years will be named.

All members in good standing are urged to exercise their right to vote.

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## Update:

Gaslights continue to be targets for vandals--and also for drivers who seem unable to stay within the limits of the town's wide streets. The gaslight mentioned in the previous Newsletter got a new globe just about the time the issue came out, only to have the whole lamp-post demolished about a week later. We appreciate its prompt replacement with another post that is comparable with the others in Riverton.

The final decision regarding the Sloan-designed home of Riverton Founder William Canby Biddle has not yet been made. Following denial of the Baptist Home of South Jersey's application to raze the building and replace it with a modern brick extension to the present wing of the Home on the riverbank, the non-profit group brought suit against the Borough of Riverton, contesting the validity of the Zoning Board, and therefore, of their decision.

In compliance with the ruling of Judge Haines some weeks ago, that the Borough must follow the 1977 procedures for each community's use of land, the Council passed the necessary Ordinance establishing a Planning Board, and then named its members. The Board has met, and organized as follows: James Wittmeyer, chairman; Ed Gillmore, vice-

chairman; Marie Yannetti, secretary; Thomas Jones, Art Waters, Robert Deegan, and David Styer. Alternates are Russell Cook and Townsend Wentz. Professional Planner Louis Glass has been hired to study the area, and will submit his recommendations for any revisions he feels appropriate to zoning ordinances. Thomas Norman has been retained as lawyer for the Board.

Another Hearing will be held at the end of the 90-day period set by Judge Haines for the Borough of Riverton to comply with his decision on the establishment of proper land-use controls. Borough Council has acted promptly and steps are proceeding as rapidly as possible. Riverton, with an area of under 1 square mile, has about 1% that is not yet developed. Costs must be borne by its tax-paying citizens.

Morgan Cemetery is still being cleared of brush and undesirable growth, and piles of materials awaiting removal by the chipper detract from its appearance. Here, too, drivers seem unable to stay on the road, and in at least 2 places the fine old iron fence along the street has been knocked down.

#### Survey:

A few scattered areas remain to be surveyed, and some earlier records need more complete descriptions; then all must be typed for presentation. Completion of this project is long overdue: if you can give a few days' time this summer, please call Betty Hahle and volunteer your help.

#### Special projects:

The Historical Society of Riverton has become a member of the Conservation Center in Philadelphia, and is working with the Porch Club toward preservation of their map of the village of Riverton. It is at the Center now, for evaluation. The map is significant because it depicts the plat as registered with the County Clerk, names the founders, and shows line drawings of their homes, the steamboat landing, railroad station, and general store of the Riverton Improvement Co. (later, Roberts'). Although undated, it is believed to be the plan of Samuel Sloan, known to have designed the village and the first homes built here, in 1851. No other copy is known to exist.

The map will be photographed while out of its frame, and prints of it will be available for a small fee, which will help to meet preservation costs.

Probably the greatest single source of local history is the newspaper. The New Era, Riverton's weekly paper for almost a century, holds a wealth of information not found anywhere else. Papers deteriorate and are lost, and so is the information. The Historical Society, in conjunction with Riverton Library, is trying to locate copies of The New Era for copying on film. If you have any issues (or of Palmyra News or other Tri-Boro newspaper), please contact Donna Tarkington at the Library, or Betty Hahle, and give your name/address, and the date(s) of your papers. When filming is to be done, they will be picked up, and then returned to their owners. Will you help?

A One-day Workshop will be held at the Porch Club by the Historical Society on Saturday, September 24th. Speakers will offer practical suggestions on identifying special features of Victorian houses, using records to research them, and maintenance of them. Also included will be a guided walking tour and lunch. Brochures will be sent out during the summer, and the Fall Newsletter will also have detailed information and registration slip. Note the date now, as registration will be limited.

#### Notes:

As better weather invites more outdoor activities, why not stop in at the Library and pick up a copy of the self-guided walking tour of a part of Riverton, prepared by the Historical Society of Riverton? There is also a special one for children.

Deposits of clay in this area resulted in several brick-works businesses nearby, that of the Thomas Brothers being one of them. At the turn of the century New Jersey was the chief clay-producing state in the country, producing 34% of the total. There are many types, which are used for various purposes. Until the early 1900s they were used for streets and sidewalks, and Riverton has many of these remaining. Bricks last for hundreds of years, and are sturdy. Weeding brick sidewalks is one of summer's less than happy tasks, but the walks are more level and more attractive if kept weeded clean.

Commercial weed-killers, contrary to manufacturers' claims, are not advisable, because they will ultimately destroy the bricks along with the weeds.

"The New Jersey House" is a recently published book, written by Helen Schwartz in a very readable style. Together with many photographs by Margaret Morgan Fisher, it clearly illustrates architectural development and styles, from early log and plank houses to modern developments. Riverton is mentioned in a list of towns of interest, but is not pictured.

The Association for the Preservation of Riverton will hold its first Annual Old Time Riverton Porch Party on Sunday, May 22. A champagne brunch, served on porches throughout the town, will be in recognition of the 93rd birthday of the Porch Club. Tickets and information may be had from Eleanor McCord (829-0828) or Tony Centenni (829-3035). The menu is mouth-watering: make your reservations early!

Some other area activities are...

- 30 April: Salem County Open House Tour--30 homes, gardens, and churches. 10-5 p.m. Lunch available in area. Tickets, \$7.50. Inf: 935-5004 or 935-0075.
- 6 May: Haddon Fortnightly "Spring in Haddonfield" House & Garden Tour. Tickets, inf., Winnie Smedley 429-1135.
- 11 May: Conference/Workshop: Mobilizing Public Opinion for Historic Preservation; Haddonfield Preservation Society, Box 192 Haddonfield 08033, by May 4th. Registration, \$15; lunch optional, \$5.
- 14 May: Symposium 9:30-4 p.m., on Pinelands Preservation, at Smithville Mansion. No reg. fee, but space limited and pre-registration necessary. May join guest speakers for lunch in Mt Holly--cost, 5.50 pre-paid with reg.
- 18 May: Seminar--What's Eligible? (for register, historic district, tax act certification, archeological resource)..Wed. 9-3:30 pm Haddonfield Borough Hall. Reg. fee, \$25 in advance, to Preservation NJ, RD4 Box 864, Mapleton Rd. Princeton 08540.

For other activities throughout the summer, check The County Bell, Area Newspapers, and lists/pamphlets posted in Libraries.

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Yesterday .....

"Our town has now assumed its summer dress. The houses are being painted and cleaned, the gardens, walks, and lawns have been put in order; the trees are in foliage, the grass is fresh and green and flowers are blooming all around us. The fruit trees are covered with bloom and give evidence of an abundant crop of fruit. The face of nature is suddenly changed from winter into summer as if by magic."

This is the way the column of Riverton news begins on Saturday, May 12, 1883, in The Mount Holly Herald. It continued with various items of interest, such as the laying of the foundation for the new Episcopal church (the cornerstone was laid June 7th), new buildings were going up, and among new businesses were a new lumber yard established by the Thomas Brothers and a new bakery. Of the latter, "... (it is) conducted in a business-like manner. Bread, cakes, and ice cream can be had of the best quality. Mr. Haas understands his business."

"Mr. Conner has been trying to transfer the gravel hills of Westfield to Riverton. If he keeps on hauling at the rate he has been this spring we think he will succeed. The number of carts and persons employed at this business is surprising."

Shad fishermen were reported as making good hauls in Riverton, although Bridgeboro's column said their fishermen fished in vain. By May 24, however, things had changed, for George Fennimore made the biggest catch of the season (in Bridgeboro)--91 shad in 1 day.

Faunce's fishery in Riverton closed 2 weeks later, with the end of the season, and Al Horner, one of their leading fishermen, said it had been a poor season, with considerably fewer fish caught, and the average price only 17¢ per fish. With the official end of the season, at sunset, Fish Wardens of Camden, Gloucester, and Burlington counties were instructed to patrol the Delaware from Burlington to Pennsgrove. Special deputies were appointed to watch the river from the banks, and the Camden Warden hired the steam tug "David Smith" to patrol the waters.

There were complaints that the noise of pigeon shooting frightened the horses, and that the gambling had a bad effect on young men..."but how it is to be stopped we are at a loss to know."

"We would invite all the citizens of Cinnaminson to come and see their new lock-up. It is a model building of the kind and the inventors should take out a patent. It is a substantial building and very tastefully painted in stripes of red, white and blue. We think tramps must be getting up in the world or was it got up as a burlesque on some of the Rivertonians?"

The following week the new lock-up was dedicated, with the Bishop in attendance, and with many spectators enjoying the ceremony. However, among them was a woman from Palmyra, described as a bully, who "sang lusty songs, continuing until 4 o'clock". The "words and tune were Moyamensing", and finally she was called inside and charged with being disorderly, but let off with a warning.

Apparently a colorful figure, she was soon again causing problems and was arrested, unable to post bail, and "placed in the constable's hands to take her to prison, but her majesty did not fancy living in a stone mansion, so she suddenly sprang upon a passing train and gave the constable petticoat bail. Her majesty is in Philadelphia....".

Although churches were reported to have large congregations, and full Sunday Schools, there were "still a few boys outside the fold." It was predicted that when strawberry festival and picnic time arrived, they would all come in.

Strawberry festivals meant hours of making ice-cream, and freezers were hand-cranked. One man had begun on Wednesday to make the 350-400 quarts he needed for Saturday, and the reporter said he was working furiously at it.

June pea-picking brought in tramps to work in the fields, and the expectation of trouble. As soon as they got enough money for a quart of whiskey at West End Government mill the trouble began, the reporter said, and added that place caused more trouble for Palmyra than any other one place. (The peas were selling for 70¢ a basket, in Phila.)

By June of 1883 Riverton had more summer boarders than for some time past, lawn tennis was popular, and some "junior swells" were trying to renew the Riverton Journal, a brief predecessor of The New Era, but little success was predicted. A small boy, about 5 years old, apparently got off the Columbia with a crowd at Riverton's pier and was lost. He was awaiting someone to claim him, and was in the care of G. W. Bishop, the constable.

Mrs. McIlhenney had a number of stone masons boarding with her, and one of them left—with someone else's money. A trunk was stolen from Riverton station in broad daylight—a daring theft—and later found on Dreer's farm, broken open and emptied of the wearing apparel it had contained.

In Palmyra, young men enjoyed riding over the new bridge (across the creek) on a Sunday afternoon "with hair over their eyes and big bouquets in the buttonholes as if their fathers were rich...". Riverton's assistant station agent got married, and received "no less than a bushel basket of congratulations" which he said he planned to have framed, each with a picture of the sender.

Workers on Joseph Wharton's plantation at Batsto were building a fish-pond, after the mill dam had broken, allowing the water to escape into swamps below. The men struck for shorter hours—but returned to work at the regular schedule.

And so another summer began, one hundred years ago, in 1883. What of the summer of 1983? Use it well....enjoy the many opportunities all around us....get to know your home-town, your county, your state a little better. Become involved...make a contribution to your own place in history.....and join us again next Autumn with renewed enthusiasm.

(BBH, ed.)

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