



# Gaslight News

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON, inc.  
Riverton, N.J. 08077

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## Program:

Monday, May 7, 1984

8 p.m.

Music Room, Riverton School

Colonial History of East and West New Jersey .....

Dr. Nicholas P. Kamaras

Dr. Kamaras, official historian of Burlington City and popular instructor and lecturer at Trenton State and Burlington County Colleges, will talk about Burlington, its people, and its Renaissance.

Burlington, once the State Capital, once our county seat, is rich in history that dates from the 17th century. William Penn frequently came across the river from Pennsbury to visit Gov. Jennings at his home here; Captain James Lawrence was born here; the Hon. Elias Boudinot, William Bradford, and many others figure not only in local, but also national, history.

Riverton's founders patterned our open riverbank after Burlington's Green Bank, later on called the Riverside, according to newspaper records at that time. This will be an interesting program, and one members and guests alike will enjoy.

This is also the Annual Meeting, at which time 4 members will be elected to serve a 3-year term on the Board of the Historical Society of Riverton. The Nominating Committee, headed by Anita Parry, will present its slate, after which nominations will be accepted from the floor.

Make known your own interest in serving on an elective or appointed committee, and exercise your right--and responsibility--to vote for those you want to represent you in conducting the business of this Society.

Suggestions for next year's programs and/or activities would be welcome. There is a direct relationship between the participation in an organization and the satisfaction and pleasure one derives from membership; what would you like to do?

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## Survey:

The black/white photographs required to accompany the written survey have been just about completed, now, thanks to Bunny Hunn, another of our members who has volunteered her talents and many hours of her time. Pete Dechnik had taken many of the individual buildings, and Bunny has taken more, plus the required "streetscapes", working between showers to get the shots before the rapidly opening foliage hides the building lines. Building information/descriptions continue to be added, and we are confident that when the next Newsletter is written, for the 1984/5 season, it will bring word that the project is just about ready for presentation.

## Important Local Issues:

There are 3 issues of particular interest to all local residents, as well as to our Historical Society Membership: update on the Baptist Home expansion plan, development of the former Evans Building property, and establishment of a Historic District by the Planning Board.

1. 307 Bank Avenue: Judge Haines has ruled that the variance sought by the Baptist Home of South Jersey should be granted, but remanded the application to the Zoning Board for conditions under which the expansion may be done. He has also retained the right to make a final decision after "reasonable conditions" have been set.

Some conditions were proposed during the lengthy hearings held last year, such as a Deed restriction to prohibit any further expansion at this site, a voluntary contribution to the Borough to offset the tax loss, and moving the building to another site instead of demolishing it.

Civil Rights action has also been brought against the borough by the Home.

The Borough is filing an Appeal opposing the decision, and the Zoning Board is making every effort to determine reasonable conditions under which use of the property can be met, as ordered. The meeting of that Board at which such conditions will be formed will be on Wednesday, May 9, at 8 p.m. in Riverton School Auditorium.

The significance of the building at 307 Bank Avenue is far too great to be written here, and extends beyond our own local roots. If there were no significance beyond that of being the home of William C. Biddle, one of Riverton's founders, and of being designed by architect Samuel Sloan in 1851, that would be enough to make it a valuable part of our heritage. It is one of a group of Sloan-designed Villas, located within the original boundaries of the village of Riverton, the only such group known to exist today. Of 9 original riverbank properties, this is the second to become a part of the Home's complex--the 1st being that originally occupied by the home of founder Prof. C. D. Cleveland, later moved to Penn St. by another owner (Mechling) and since used for a modern brick extension from the stone Victorian home of Ezra Lippincott by the institution.

A certificate of need, basis of variance approval, does not specify that the need be met at this particular site, only that there is a need for more beds within the area served--which is from Trenton to Cape May, the width of the State. Other sites have been offered to the Home for its expansion, but they seem determined to expand here, only, regardless of the cost to those who live and pay taxes here, and at the expense of another piece of our heritage, which cannot be replaced.

Promises of no further expansion have been given before and not kept; deed restrictions seem ~~also~~ to be laid aside--Riverton's earliest deeds include the restrictions protecting the open river bank, height of fences, and so on--as typified in an 1877 deed in the area in question "...for unobstructed light air and prospects across to and from other lots...." (M-9, 432 etc, Lippincott to Roberts). The rights of all citizens must be upheld--but not so-called rights that may be met only at the expense of those of others.

2. "Evans property" development: once a cabbage patch, then site of a lumber yard, later expanded and faced with brick, and more recently burned and razed, the land is now owned by Dr. Heeter, who proposes to build an apartment complex on it. As the Master Plan designates the site as a part of the business section, a variance has been sought to permit erection of a group of 2-story apartments. Zoning Board Hearings have been held, with good public attendance and participation, during which plans have been submitted and described in detail, traffic and parking patterns, problems, and alternatives have been submitted, and expert witnesses have presented evidence that this would be the best possible use for the site, based on doubtful support of business or shopping areas there due to limited area from which customers could be drawn, and undesirable additional traffic at a particularly busy intersection such development would cause; and on the positive side, that the location and size of apartments would limit need for much traffic by renters, on-site parking and landscaping beyond what is required, and willingness to work with authorities to develop exterior designs compatible with the area.

Cinnaminson Avenue residents questioned parking problems, caused now by inadequate parking facilities for Post Office employees, who now park in front of their (res.) homes, and on some of land to be developed; and others supported the plan, provided there were fewer units than proposed. Planning Board Chairman and Vice-Chairman oppose the plan, saying they would prefer a medical complex or similar business facility developed on the site.

The decision will be made at the May 9th meeting, time and place noted above.

3. Historic District: The establishment of a Historic District by the Planning Board has been under consideration for some time. The Board of our Historical Society sent a letter supporting them in this plan, and strongly recommended that the district include all of Riverton, and not be limited to any one section. To focus on one part only would overlook the significance of other neighborhoods, each of which has architecture worth recognition and protection, and would permit loss of some of these features because they would be outside of district protection.

At the present time, the Board appears to be leaning toward designating only the business area as a historic district, as a means of making it more attractive. While this is certainly desirable, it should not be the sole criteria for designation.

To clarify the purpose of creating a municipal historic district, included is a summary of materials contained in "A Citizen's Guide to Creating Historic Districts", published by the N.J. Dept. of Community Affairs, a few years ago.

A locally designated district differs from one recognized by State and National Registers in that its requirements are less stringent, and that it protects local interests, be they notable architecture, buildings notable for method or style of construction, or association with a person or event of historical importance. The National Register, while protecting such sites or districts from harm by Federally funded projects, cannot regulate what is done with them within their own municipalities. Through zoning laws and enforcement of them at the local level, preservation of the external features of existing buildings, and appropriateness and compatibility of new or remodeling plans for buildings within a given neighborhood, can be assured. A building permit request would be referred to an advisory commission, which would consider such things as style, design, arrangement, color, texture, and materials to be used where they are subject to public view, and they would make their recommendation to the Planning Board, according to their findings. In our state they may function only in an advisory capacity, but since their purpose is to help each property owner to maintain or upgrade his property, and each neighborhood to protect its integrity, such advice is valuable, and experience has proven that property values are stabilized or improved and the local economy is strengthened where historic districts are formed. In addition, local heritage is preserved, where once it was destroyed in a rush to improve, to go forward; and all benefit from the educational and esthetic atmosphere.

A locally designated historic district supports adaptive use of buildings, extending the life of architectural styles of earlier times, without restricting the changes needed within a building to make it practical for use today. Preserving the physical evidence of our past strengthens our roots, makes that past come alive, and lends beauty, dignity, and character to our present.

Planning Board members welcome input from residents—both by letter from organizations or individuals, and from those attending their meetings. We would urge our members to support the designation of Riverton as a historic district, and to encourage organizations to which they belong to do the same. Meetings are held over the Fire House, and this matter will be scheduled for consideration at the June meeting. (Because of conflicting meeting dates of Zoning and Planning Boards, March and April meetings have been adjourned early to permit attendance at the Planning Board meetings, and it is expected that the May meeting will follow suit.)

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#### Other Notes:

Notepaper: still available, at \$3.50 a box of 15 triple-fold sheets with envelopes, at Riverton Library, or from Board members.

#### A New Project:

Historical Markers: Owners of buildings that are 100-or-more-years-old, or which have a particular architectural or local historical significance, may apply for an attractive historical marker to be attached to the building. The Historical Society's Committee will review the application for same, which will require such information as date, architect (if known), any special features, owner or events (and dates) of importance connected with building, etc., together with



source of information, such as Deeds (in possession, or search), dated photos, letters, records, etc, and verify it as eligible; then owner may purchase the completed marker and attach it to his house. For information, application, and cost, please contact Louise Vaughn, at 829-1238.

We will miss David Miller, who is leaving his position at Smithville as administrator of the Burlington County Cultural & Heritage Commission, but wish him well in his new one in Trenton. Under his direction and encouragement many projects have been undertaken and developed within our county, which we will continue to enjoy. Thanks, Dave.

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Yesterday.....

A century-and-a-quarter ago, when Riverton was young, there was no division into business or residential districts. A man liking a site could buy and build, and as he prospered, sell that house to be moved elsewhere and build again at the same location, or move his house to a better one and enlarge it. A man wanting to open a business might do so in his front parlor, or build a small porch addition, or a small building in front of his home nearer the street, or behind it, on the carriage alley-way. In those days a neighborhood grocery, butcher shop, milk depot, or a blacksmith or tinsmith would be welcomed as a convenience. Up and down Main Street, on Cinnaminson Street, both sides of the railroad, and along 6th, or Broad Street, such shops existed, as well as some others scattered about.

On Main Street, across from the Episcopal Manse, Milton Cowperthwaite set up a drug-store in a front room of his home, and in a corner of it was also, for a time, the post office. When a telephone exchange was also set up there, neighborhood boys could earn a coin by running to someone's home to call them to receive a telephone call, as well as to deliver someone's medicine. At the corner of the block lived Joseph Campbell and his family.

In between these houses stands a familiar house. The land was purchased from Prof. Charles D. Cleveland by Alphonso A. Willits, who apparently built a house on the site(which he rented to F. B. Rose, whose name appears at that location on the 1860 map of Riverton,)and then lost. Willits had invested heavily in real estate within this and neighboring counties, and apparently lost some, as he continued his investments. At a sheriff's sale in February, 1863, the house was acquired by Anna B. Senat, who died only a few months later, intestate. Her bachelor son, George, continued to live there, and eventually acquired full claim to the title of it, from the other heirs living by then in Philadelphia and in Paris, France. George Senat died in December, 1898, and devised the property to his niece, Mary, who sold it to Mrs. Sarah Ogden in 1907. A year later Mrs. Ogden donated the building to the Riverton Free Library Association, in memory of her husband, Edward H. Ogden, Riverton's first Mayor, who had died in 1903, shortly after they had celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary.

The building, built between 1855-60, is a fine example of Carpenter Gothic architecture. The Gothic Revival period, popular from about 1830 through Civil War years, brought back more medieval forms to replace the more classic earlier styles, a trend also found in literature of this period. Steeply pitched roofs, and lancet windows and/or doors were typical, and when fancy scrollwork was used (on eaves and porch cornices, primarily) the style was referred to as Carpenter Gothic. This house is  $1\frac{1}{2}$  stories high, 3 bays across, and has a central gable, pairs of pointed (lancet) windows, decorative barge boards, vergeboard ornaments, a balcony, and board and batten siding, typical of the period.

Extensions to the rear have been added, and in 1968 the interior was completely remodelled to better accommodate its use as a Library. A wrought-iron fence stretches across the front of the property, which extends through from Main to Penn Street.

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In the 1860's, Burlington county had just 3 townships where more than 1000 children attended school: Bordentown, with 1871; Burlington, 1768; and Northampton, 1021. New agricultural enterprises were developing in South Jersey--the cultivation of

grapes proving profitable, and the size of strawberry crops increasing so that the writer in the N.J. Mirror said that "if the trend continues, the worthless sandy soil and forests in so much of the state may in the future prove worthwhile and profitable after all"!

Pensions for veterans were established by passage of an act on June 6, 1866, and ranged from \$25 a month (total disability) on downward. Disabilities had to have been incurred since March 4, 1861, and would date only from the day of enactment.

Mt. Holly's Liberty Band was a new organization in June of 1871, and members were planning their first picnic, to be held July 4th at Spout Spring Woods--and hoping many would support them by buying tickets to it.

Fireworks were popular, in spite of serious accidents caused by them each year. An item told of a new firework, the size of a marble and colored red and blue, that a small child had put into its mouth. It went off, disfiguring the child for life. A sample of the same firework had been given to the newspaper office, where it, too, had gone off accidentally, causing "a mess" from the papers on the desk. Regulations controlling objects meant for children to use were urged. (note--we do have regulations today, but somehow each year more fireworks seem to be set off in town, and some person gets burned or hurt....)

It wasn't until 1813 that the rule of driving on the right side of a road was regulated by law, in New Jersey. The preamble to that law, passed in February of that year, spoke of the need for uniformity, and established that "drivers of carriages, sleighs, or sleds, whether of burthen or of pleasure, using turnpikes or public roads in this state, shall keep to the right." It went on to say that when a vehicle was overtaken, the driver should pull over to the right to allow the overtaking vehicle to "pass free and unobstructed"--something that had apparently not been the practice in the past.

Population in State Prisons was down to 540 convicts, most of whom were working in shoe shops, chair shops, and weaving shops.

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Acquisitions during the year 1983-1984:

- Xerox map of Delaware & Hudson Canal, and Gravity railroad connecting the mines, pub. by Wayne County Hist. Soc. in Pa.; State of N.J. Morris Canal & Banking Company, Final Report of Consulting and Directing Engineer, by Cornelius C. Verneule jr., June 29, 1929--80 Xeroxed pages. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Clarke Cooper.
- White leather lady's gloves, worn ca. 1930's; Gift from Mrs. Lea G. Marshall.
- Clippings from file of Mr. Young, from his daughter, Mrs. Raymond Coles.
- Xeroxed pages from book: A Story of the Public Schools of Burlington Co. N.J., about the public schools of Cinnaminson, Riverton, and Palmyra, from Mrs. Louise Vaughn.
- Book of Poems and Writings by Lenore Wright Showell, compiled by her daughters, Mrs. Ellen Showell Layton and Mrs. Lenore Showell Probsting, and donated by them.
- Photograph, Miss Elsie Evaul's 1st grade class, Riverton School, 1953; gift of J. Edward Gilmore.
- 2 Xerox copies of Chas. E. Price's Map of East Riverton; gift of Mr. Norman Anderson.
- 14 reels of 8 mm film of Sacred Heart Church and other Riverton scenes (still to be reviewed and labeled); given by Mr. Don Donovan.
- 1 negative, and 2 black/white prints of ship Columbia, made from original photograph privately owned, purchased by Historical Society, for use on Notepaper.

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Reminders: Space permits only a few of these. Please watch County Bell, Library Bulletin Boards, local Newspapers, etc., and enjoy events throughout the summer.

In May--5th, a Seminar on Cemeteries, an Overlooked Resource for Community History, in Princeton, by N.J. Historical Commission, Dept of State; \$4., plus lunch, \$6. Call Coordinator Mary Alice Quigley, in Trenton--there's a deadline.

Same day--Rancocas Nature Center tour of forgotten towns--check there for registration and details, and for other fine events that are planned.

20th--2nd Ann. Old Time Riverton Porch Party; champagne lunch on 30 porches throughout Riverton, sponsored by APR. Tickets, \$12.50.

Mt. Holly Historical Society's Shinn-Curtis Log Cabin on the large parking lot will be open again May 18th; plan a visit there...

(BBHahle, editor)