



THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON

Riverton, New Jersey 08077

"GASLIGHT NEWS"

December - March, 1978

number 2

We hope that this expanded newsletter will be both interesting and informative, and will encourage more active participation by more members.....

Officers named, following Annual meeting in Nov:

Pres.	Mrs. Betty B. Hahle
V. pres.	Mrs. Lenore Probsting
Sec.	Mrs. Alice Myers
Treas.	Mrs. Ellen Layton
Curator	Mrs. Joan Hartmann
Publicity	Mrs. Ruth Schmierer
Historian	Mrs. Emily Christ

First of all, a date to mark on your calendar..... Monday, March 13... With Spring almost here (honest!) thoughts will be turning toward outings to nearby places that are interesting. With this in mind, we've asked Mrs. Gail Greenburg, Historian of Camden County Cultural and Heritage Commission, to present a program of slides and stories about historical sites in Camden County.

Mrs. Greenburg has a BA and Masters in American History, and lives in Moorestown. She has done extensive research of sites in Camden county, has inventoried them, and has co-authored a monograph, "Mt. Laurel Centennial History." Her knowledge and enthusiasm are inspiring.

COME .. BRING A FRIEND .. Music room, RIVERTON SCHOOL .. 8 pm, March 13

We now have a membership in the American Association for State and Local History. From them we have purchased several leaflets which should help us to develop and strengthen our Historic Society, and some "how-to" information on cataloging and caring for collections and recording local history.

A goal now is to have a place to display items donated to the Society where they can be properly cared for, enjoyed, and studied.

Historic Site

In December the Board voted to support a proposal to designate a section of Riverton for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. A letter was written to the Borough Council, and Board members planned to attend their meeting, when a representative from the State had been invited to discuss the proposal. Publicity was promised, to alert all interested residents of the town who wanted to attend.

Publicity was not seen by any of our Board members, so none attended. Even our letter did not reach the council before the meeting. However, council's rejection of the proposal did receive newspaper space. Three persons, of Riverton's 3500 residents, had attended.

This points up 2 things: 1, the need for each of us to be better informed  
2, the need for better communication

To this end: this type of newsletter will be sent quarterly to all members  
various printed information will be available, on loan, to  
Historical Soc. members. Call 829-6315 to borrow them.  
special meetings will be called for special issues  
Representatives from our Society should attend every council  
meeting, to open better communication lines in both di-  
rections. Will you volunteer?

a telephone committee is needed so that members can be  
contacted readily. Will you help?

Get Involved .. Become more Active .. An Historic Society is  
as Asset to its community--if its members make it so

## Riverton has Historic Value?

True, no battles were fought here; no great documents were drafted here. But its homes, many designed by noted architects and fine examples of their period, along wide, tree lined streets, make it a "gem." The area that is now Riverton was once a part of Chester Township, an area of scattered farms. In mid 19th century a few of Philadelphia's merchant aristocracy built country homes along the riverbank here, then planned "Riverton." The oldest part was small, near the river for the most part, and built within a span of about 40 years. The yacht club, built on the existing steamboat pier, was one of the first in the country, and the focal point of social activities. With its focus on homes, rather than industry, Riverton has maintained its appearance as a 19th century resort town with a strong sense of its past.

(condensed from Nat. Reg. Inventory-Nomination form, Statement of significance)

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If you attended Riverton Historical Society's Annual meeting last November, you had the opportunity of seeing some of these homes on slides presented by Keith Betten, of Burlington County's Cultural and Heritage Commission. He has gathered slides from all over the county, from the earliest cave-home of the early 1600s through the different architectural styles that evolved through the years. He traced the use of materials in their construction in different periods, his enthusiastic presentation opened the eyes of his audience to a greater appreciation of the Yacht Club's stick-style structure, mansard rooves, dormers and Eastlake porches, Italianate and Empire styles, and homes designed by Sloane, the architect who designed Philadelphia's City Hall. Mr. Betten's narrative has been scheduled for publishing in the future.

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Interested in learning more about early architectural styles? A free booklet, How to Date an Old House, can be obtained by writing Old-House Journal, Dept. 70, 199 Berkeley Place, Brooklyn N.Y. 11217.

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Recently received is a transcript of an interview with Charles H. Stonaker, 91-year-old former resident of Riverton, who remembers school in a two-room building (1 upstairs, 1 down), graduations held in the Lyceum, the shad fishery at the foot of Fulton Street, sidewalks of gravel in summer, and removable boardwalks put out in the Fall; ~~of~~ open fields from the railroad to golf course, ~~a~~ 'sidewheelers "Twilight", "Johnny Warner", and "Columbia"--and of swimming in the river and sneaking on board those boats, then jumping off the top deck after they left the wharf, plummeting down to the bottom of the river! And the 1st tele- phone, in the home of a Main St. resident who had a paper route...boys would "hang around" to run messages to anyone in town receiving a call... and hoped for a 10¢ tip! ..... and more .....

Interested in helping to preserve more such memoirs? Let us know...

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A Bonus...in April, a showing of the film of the 20's, Romance of Riverton, for members of Historical Society and Fire Company, only. More later....

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Are you receiving "The County Bell"? It brings a calendar of events, reviews of books and activities, compiled quarterly. To get on the mailing list, write: Burlington County Cultural & Heritage Comm.  
c/o 42 Rancocas Road  
Mt. Holly, N.J. 08060

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These papers are available, on loan...

Complete Nomination Form of proposed Riverton Historic District  
N.J. State & National Register of Historic Places  
How to Research the History of a House  
Guidelines for Rehabilitation of Old Buildings  
Historic Preservation Loans--Grants  
National Historic Preservation Act of 1966; Tax Reform of 1976;  
Law of 1970, re. Establishment of N.J. Register of Hist. Places

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Yesterday, in Riverton.....

Dreer's Nurseries in Riverton were known throughout the world. It was founded in Philadelphia in 1838 as a seed and plant farm, prospered and grew, moved, and in 1873 located permanently in Riverton. It became the town's largest industry, and was instrumental in its development from a tiny resort area to a bustling community of families who built homes and churches and who were active in a large number of clubs and civic organizations.

The site had been selected 5 years before, influenced by available land, proximity to major cities, and excellent transportation (railroad and boat). It spread northward from Cinnaminson St., on both sides of the railroad, to cover about 100 acres. On the river side of the railroad were greenhouses covering almost 8 acres which, in the early 1900s, required 3000 tons of coal per season to heat. At the same time, 150 men were regularly employed in gardens, packing sheds, and other parts of the Nurseries, and in the busy season the number increased to 200.

Mrs. Dreer presented a pulpit to the Presbyterian church, a memorial to Henry A. Dreer, which both had been instrumental in founding the year after the nursery came to Riverton.

The Nurseries became an integral part of the town. Dreer's whistle sent many a housewife scurrying to have a meal on the table when her husband or son came home for lunch, and was a dependable check on the old parlor clock. A leisurely Sunday afternoon found many people, visitors and residents alike, strolling through magnificent greenhouse showrooms of rare specimens from all over the world, or through the rose gardens, where over 500 varieties of standard and hybridized roses bloomed. Or to the lily ponds, over 8 acres of them along the creek and on both sides of the railroad, where some specimen plants had pads 6 feet across and could support a man's weight, and where not only goldfish swam, but also some tropical varieties accidentally imported along with the water plants. In the 1930s it was even possible to fly over the acres of flowers in bloom in a small open plane (remember the little airport on S-41?). Helen Van Pelt Wilson illustrated her garden books with pictures taken at Dreer's Nurseries, and in some of the local gardens. And at the Philadelphia Flower Show, Dreer's roses were consistent 1st place winners.

After a century of developing improved strains of vegetables, grasses, small fruits, and many flowers and shrubs, Dreer's Nurseries closed their doors for the last time, during WW II. In less than 30 years the stores, parking lots, houses and apartments and industries that replaced the nurseries have erased it all, making it hard to picture the beauty that was once there.

(Some inf. from The New Era, Christmas, 1909)

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And, finally, ...

Your comments, suggestions, and help are welcome. . . . .  
Like to help with future newsletters? . . . . . Let us know. . . .  
Good reading ...Cunningham's 1-volume New Jersey: America's  
Main Road . . . . . old copies of the New Era ....

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To join Riverton's Historical Society...send annual dues of \$2.00 to  
treasurer, Mrs. Ellen Layton, 630 Linden Avenue, Riverton, N.J. 08077