

Benjamin Small won the first Historical Society of Riverton History Writing contest with this essay.

The Writing Prompt: During the middle years of the nineteenth century, the United States experienced many dynamic changes, including the extensive growth of industry and cities, advances in modes of transportation, and political and social conflicts surrounding the issue of slavery. Riverton was founded in 1851. Please research and describe how any of these changes may have influenced where, why, and by whom the town was founded.

By the mid-19th century, Philadelphia's population had experienced significant growth. The city became overly crowded and heavily polluted by factories and a lack of sanitation. When summertime rolled around, these issues only became accentuated. A group of ten wealthy merchants in the city devised a plan to escape the unpleasant aspects of the city in the summer months; That plan was Riverton. These men founded Riverton as their summer oasis, building 10 villas directly on the riverbank, still a convenient 11 miles from Philadelphia's center. In addition to the reasons mentioned previously, advances in transportation, growth of industry, and social conflicts regarding slavery were changes that helped to influence where and why the town was founded.

By the time Riverton had been founded, the Industrial Revolution was in full swing in the United States, and Philadelphia was a hot spot for manufacturing. So much so in fact, that Philadelphia led the country in industrial production by the late 1800s. Quality of life started to improve with the Industrial Revolution. Department stores became increasingly popular, and people started to invest in things they wanted, rather than things they needed. While industry growth was an essential part of this time period, other factors are often overlooked. With industrialization also came an increase in immigration. Philadelphia being such a beacon for industry, led many people to move in and seek jobs which caused the city to get crowded. This along with the lack of an adequate and widespread sewage system made for an uncomfortable environment to live in. Since there wasn't a significant sewage system in place, there would often be human waste in the streets, which developed a much stronger and more unpleasant odor in the hotter months. These issues did not match the improving quality of life and were reasons why people began to move out of cities.

Another reason for the founding of Riverton is the innovations in transportation. In the early 19th century, ferry transportation became increasingly popular and provided an easier way to get across the river. Since the bridges between New Jersey and Pennsylvania would not be built until the early 1900s, the ferry was a perfect way to get to and from Riverton. The ferry was also important to them because it made it easy to get to and from their businesses in center city. The Camden & Amboy Railroad could have been another aspect that influenced where the town was founded. This railway ran straight from Camden to Amboy, providing direct access to Camden and Philadelphia, as well as Trenton, and New York City. Having access to this railway was something that was not available in other places in Pennsylvania, and was another reason why Riverton was a great location to build their new town.

Another reason Riverton was likely founded can be credited to the social conflicts regarding slavery that were prevalent at the time. Pennsylvania was founded by Quakers, a religious group whose core tenants were those of religious tolerance, peace, human rights, and at the time, the abolition of slavery. During this time period, the abolitionist movement had become increasingly popular in the United States, and Philadelphia was at the center of the movement. In addition, outside of the states where slavery was still permitted by law, Philadelphia had the largest population of African-Americans, many of whom were free and took part in the abolitionist movement, including the underground railroad. These facts are the reasons why Philadelphia was home to the abolitionist movement. While Philadelphia had a large number of abolitionists, there were still anti-abolitionists within the city that had a presence there as well. In 1838 the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society built Pennsylvania Hall as a meeting place for abolitionists. Three days after it opened, the building was burnt down by anti-abolitionists. When the firefighters got there to fight the fire, they were given orders to not fight the fire, and the building burned down. The remains of the building were left there for a couple of years as a

sign from anti-abolitionists that not everyone agreed with abolition. This could be another reason why they wanted to move out of the city. Since they were Quakers, they may have wanted to support abolition, but they were still non-violent in their beliefs, making a place away from the city where they could go with no conflict a viable option.

At the time of Riverton's founding, the country was on the cusp of the Civil War. The fugitive slave act was still in place, allowing for slave owners to search for runaway slaves in free states. Taking into consideration the likelihood that 501 Bank Avenue served as a stop on the Underground Railroad, and that Riverton's founders were either heavily involved in the abolitionist movement or related to it, it is not a stretch to theorize that the founders of Riverton may have built these homes in part as a way to serve as safe havens for fugitive slaves on their journey on the underground railroad. Riverton was situated perfectly on the Delaware River, in between the ferry route to the city, and the railroad taking people north. With these innovations in transportation, having access to those modes of transportation as a means of helping people on the underground railroad, Riverton's location was perfect for abolitionists who wanted to be a part of the underground railroad.

In conclusion, these advances in transportation, growth of industry and cities, and social conflicts regarding slavery were changes that heavily influenced where and why the town was founded. Overcrowded cities led to discomfort in people's lives, causing them to want to move out of the cities, and those who could afford it did. Easy access to water and rail transportation to Riverton as well as access to any city in the region from Riverton, and the benefits of its geographical location that could be used as a means to help people on the underground railroad, are all changes that likely influenced where, and why Riverton was founded.

#### Sources

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