

URGING THE BOROUGH OF RIVERTON TO ENFORCE ITS LAWS TO RESOLVE THE ISSUE OF NEGLECTED PROPERTIES

An open letter to Riverton Mayor, Borough Council, and other Borough officials

From the Historical Society of Riverton and Concerned Neighbors

August 8, 2022

Dear fellow Rivertonians:

Our beautiful, historic town currently has some properties which appear neglected, causing real harm to their neighbors, their block, and our entire town. We urge Borough Council and the Mayor to promptly address these problems, using the applicable State and local codes already on the books.

We strongly recommend that you begin with one property, the Groves Mansion at 409-413 Lippincott, because its deteriorating appearance has an outsized effect on many neighbors and because of its highly significant historical and architectural value.

We strongly urge this Council to adopt a Resolution at its August 17, 2022 public meeting, ordering the Borough enforcement officials to immediately enforce all applicable laws and immediately assess all applicable fines and use all other available enforcement mechanisms to ensure this historic property adheres to existing Borough and State codes.

Attached herewith you will find documentation, including photographs and State and local code citations, of the violations we have identified which are causing immediate harm to the neighbors and to our town. Also attached is the Statement of Historical Significance for this structure.

Our Goals:

- Ensure that existing Borough and State codes are enforced so that the structure does not appear vacant and subject to intrusion and vandalism
- Mandate repairs necessary to ensure the premises do not endanger the general public
- As soon as it is safe, ensure the removal of the cyclone fence, which creates a falsely negative impression of the property's restorability and is a visual blight on the block
- Ensure that the structure is secured from further damage
- Ensure the maintenance of the entire grounds to the condition customarily achieved by the neighboring premises on the block.
- Collect for the Borough of Riverton the appropriate revenue from the substantial fines already accrued from violations.

For months now, neighbors have watched this property deteriorate with no action by the property owner nor obvious enforcement by the Borough. Neighbors have attempted to resolve this issue through personal communications with the owner of this property. Apart from some grass being mowed, the entire premises continues to grow more neglected, as its degraded appearance places it at increasing risk for damage.

Because of this lack of enforcement by the Borough, we request affirmative transparency, starting now, sharing with the public in real time what orders are given and what actions are taken by the Borough to bring this property into compliance.

Note well that even though the property owner may appeal the Riverton Planning Board's rejection of his application to demolish the structure, these violations caused and continue to cause harm. Any appeal WOULD NOT release the Borough from its responsibility and duty to enforce previous, active and ongoing violations of our laws.

Many of us plan to attend the meeting on the 17th and look forward to an insightful and informative discussion from the Council and Mayor as to how you intend to address these violations rapidly, first for this property and then for others throughout our historic community that are also in states of disrepair.

Thank you.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON

William C. Brown, Jr. President

Signatures from concerned neighbors will be hand-delivered on August 17.

Attached:

- Before and After views of the property under current ownership
- Notes on Code Violations Observed, and Enforcement Mechanisms available
- Statement of Historical Significance

**URGING THE BOROUGH OF RIVERTON TO ENFORCE ITS LAWS
TO RESOLVE THE ISSUE OF NEGLECTED PROPERTIES**

When purchased - March 2021



Seventeen months later - August 2022



Notes on Code Violations Observed, and Enforcement Mechanisms available,
for the Groves Mansion, 409-413 Lippincott Ave., Riverton, NJ

Historical Society of Riverton August 8, 2022

1. “Unsafe Structure” Citation

March 10, 2022 UCC “Notice of Unsafe Structure” by Construction Official Roger Fort ordered: “Demolish the above structure by 06/10/22, or correct the above noted unsafe conditions by no later than 06/10/22.” (Revision of earlier Notice dated 11/19/21). The standard form wording reads “*Failure to correct the unsafe condition or refusal to comply with this ORDER will result in this matter being forwarded to legal counsel for prosecution and assessment of penalties up to \$2000 per week per violation.*”

At this writing, eight (8) weeks have elapsed since that deadline, indicating that the owner is now in violation for penalties up to \$16,000 and counting.

On that written order, the Construction Official described no unsafe condition, merely using the words “unsafe condition.” No testimony has ever been offered by him or any expert as to what existing condition(s) are legally “unsafe” and thus no evidence exists as to what actions are necessary to “correct” them. Nor has a distinction been made between conditions unsafe for occupancy and those unsafe for the general public. The owner has taken no actions to repair any part of the structure or prevent further deterioration in the nine months since the Construction Official inspected it on 10/20/2021.

Note that the Riverton Planning Board on 4/26/2022 denied the owner’s application for a Construction Permit, under authority of § 128-50, leaving repair the only option to resolve this citation.

Also **March 10, 2022**: Separate letter from Construction Official orders property “to be secured with a fence around it until such time that the owner can evaluate the cost of repairs and/or make the repairs or demolishes the structure.” Again, no specific repairs are mentioned, leaving the obligations of the owner ambiguous.

The temporary fence was erected and remains in place today, blighting this beautiful block of well-kept homes and making the Groves Mansion look utterly derelict.

What steps will the Borough of Riverton take now to resolve this problem acceptably? This solution must ensure that the structure is not “unsafe” to the general public so that the fence can be removed quickly.

2. Immediately close / repair broken windows and secure house from intrusion

The New Jersey Housing Code (enforced locally by the Code Enforcement Official) at [N.J.A.C. 5:28-1.10](#) requires the exterior of the structure “*shall be free from any opening that would permit the entrance of water*”.

Though the structure was previously secured, this has changed. For at least the past three months, multiple windows are now fully open to the elements. This is unacceptable because it (a) allows rain to blow in and further damage the historic home and (b) it makes the house an attractive nuisance for youths to trespass and vandalize or to plunder by copper thieves. The threat of a catastrophic fire for an obviously neglected, unattended house is very real.

One open window is a valuable wood frame casement sash with beautiful leaded glass (one of 32 intact leaded glass windows in the structure). On the 3rd floor on the river side, someone has opened its latch, allowing it to swing free in the wind, breaking one of its two hinges. Securing it now will be simple but this has not happened. Leaving it to swing until it tears the remaining hinge loose and crashes to the ground will destroy a beautiful antique window that will cost thousands of dollars to replace.



Either the home’s security has been breached and someone has broken in and opened windows for no obvious reason or some person with legal access has caused the windows to be opened.

The other two windows have had their lower sashes raised fully, for no obvious purpose. This is allowing the rain in to damage the structure and also makes the property appear abandoned, inviting vandalism, copper theft (or theft of the valuable windows) or arson.

Side facing Broad Street:



Rear facing Church Lane:



What steps will the Borough of Riverton take now to secure these windows in a closed position? The enforcement tools include, at least, the New Jersey Housing Code at [N.J.A.C. 5:28-1.10](#) (enforced locally by the Code Enforcement Official) which requires the exterior “shall be free from any opening that would permit the entrance of water”.

3. Secure garage door that has been broken in

Clearly visible from the alley (Church Lane), vandals months ago scaled the fence and forced the garage door, creating an opening large enough for a person to enter. The owner has not repaired it.

Again, this is a security breach that flagrantly invites trespassers bent on exploration, copper theft, vandalism, or arson.



This is a major security problem, yet easily resolved. NOTE: Merely boarding up with raw unpainted plywood is not acceptable, as it would telegraph loudly that the property is vacant and derelict.

Zoning Code Official Pete Clifford emailed the owner on 5/18/2022 politely requesting that he “seal” the shed and garage. That same date, at 6:56 pm, the owner replied “Got it, Pete, I will have it taken care of immediately.” He has not done so in the intervening three months.

On 6/1/2022, Mayor Cairns Wells emailed code official Pete Clifford to inform/remind him of this condition, asking him to follow up with the property owner to address this and other concerns. An OPRA request turned up no indication of further communication or enforcement.

What will the Borough of Riverton do now to resolve this immediate condition and defend against trespassers?

4. Failure to register as “Vacant or Abandoned Property”

The owner faces substantial fines for failure to comply with the Borough’s registration requirements for a vacant property.

Per the definition in Riverton's code [Chapter 97 Article I – Vacant and Abandoned Properties](#), this property more than qualifies as “vacant”, which requires just two conditions present out of a list of 17. In fact, this property exhibits eight of those conditions.

It was this owner's obligation to register it as “Vacant” with the Borough within 30 days of his purchase of it. This owner settled on 3/26/2021, thus the “Vacant Property Registration Form” (VPR) mentioned in [§ 97-2](#) should have been filed by the close of business 4/25/2021.

The owner has done nothing. In a 6/9/2022 response to an OPRA request, Michelle Hack stated “ I don't have a VPR for this property”.

Per [§ 97-3B](#), that filing must include:

“... the name, street address and telephone number of a natural person 21 years of age or older, designated by the owner or owners as the authorized agent for receiving notices of code violations and for receiving process in any court proceeding or administrative enforcement proceeding, on behalf of such owner or owners in connection with the enforcement of any applicable code. ... The statement shall also include the name of the person responsible for maintaining and security of the property, if different.”

The Borough provides a convenient form indicated for this purpose on its website at <https://riverton-nj.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/House-Alert-Form-Rev.-72013.pdf>

Per [§ 97-5A\(2\)](#), the owner should have posted a sign “legible from the nearest public street or sidewalk” with names and contact information for the owner and whoever has day-to-day responsibility for “*supervision and management of the building.*”

The owner has not posted such a sign.

Per [§ 97-5B and C](#), the owner must “*maintain liability insurance by procuring a vacancy policy in an amount of not less than \$300,000*” and “*shall attach evidence of the insurance to the owner's registration statement. Any registration statement submitted that does not include such evidence shall not be deemed to be a valid registration.*”

There is no indication that the owner has obtained “*vacancy policy*” insurance.

Thus, there are at least three violations of this code section alone: (1) the owner has not filed the “Vacant Property Registration Form”, (2) the owner has not posted the required sign, and (3) the owner has not provided proof of insurance for the required \$300,000 “vacancy policy” liability insurance policy.

Substantial penalties for non-compliance are obligatory, per [§ 97-7](#) :

*“Any owner who is not in full compliance with this article or who otherwise violates any provision of this article or of the rules and regulations issued hereunder **shall** be subject to a fine of not less than \$500 and not more than \$1,000 for each offense. Every day that*

*a violation continues shall constitute a separate and distinct offense. Fines assessed under this article shall be recoverable from the owner and **shall** be a lien on the property.”*

The clock on these three violations began running on 4/25/2021, 30 days after purchase. A total of **463** days elapsed as of August 1, 2022. Three violations per day at “not less than \$500” per violation totals obligatory fines of at least **\$694,500** and growing.

This violation in itself provides the Borough with immense negotiating power to ensure that all the right things happen with this property. At what point will the Borough of Riverton place the mandatory lien on the property that our ordinance requires to ensure the citizens of Riverton are compensated for the damage this negligence has caused to our property values and the historic character of the town?

5. Large vines are climbing the home’s wall

Even though the owner was asked last year to remove the vines that were disfiguring the home, and even though cutting them would be absurdly easy, he still has not done so. With this year’s growth, they now contribute to the home’s derelict appearance and their roots are likely penetrating the home’s siding.



What can the Borough of Riverton do to remove these unsightly vines? Their presence makes the home appear neglected, attracts vandals, and detracts from the appearance of the neighborhood.

6. Overgrown jungle bordering 407 Lippincott

Neighbors say that the previous owners always kept the entire one-acre yard mowed and clear of overgrowth underneath all of those beautiful, mature trees. During the 16 months of ownership by the current owner, he has allowed a wide portion adjoining the Iannacone family home at 407 Lippincott to become a jungle. The Iannacones describe that a group of 4 deer were living in it for several days and the Rodgers family describes increased skunk and raccoon activity.



The Borough of Riverton has every power in both the State and Local codes to solve this problem:

The New Jersey Housing Code at [§ 5:28-1.10 \(g\)](#) provides “Lawns, hedges and bushes shall be kept trimmed and shall not be permitted to become overgrown and unsightly.”

Riverton Code [Chapter 52 “Brush, Weeds, Debris and Litter”](#) also prohibits exactly this type of “obnoxious growth” and the same official enforces that. What is necessary to see that this enforcement takes place immediately?

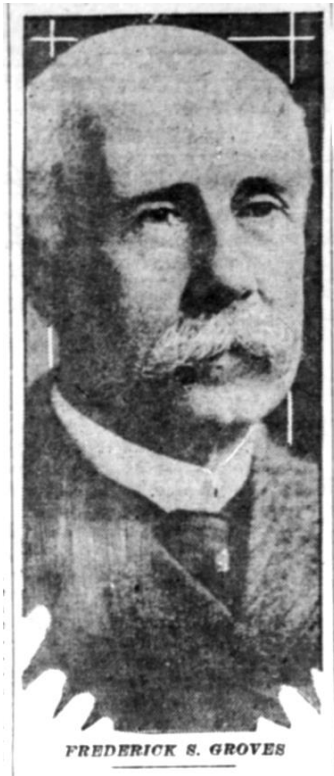
Enforcement of both codes is the responsibility of the Riverton Code Enforcement Official. On 5/18/2022 the official, Pete Clifford, emailed the property owner, directing him to clear that underbrush. No action has been taken. On 6/7/2022 neighbor Michael Iannacone emailed a complaint to Mr. Clifford and copied Michelle Hack. He never received any response.

STATEMENT OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

409-413 LIPPINCOTT AVENUE
RIVERTON, NEW JERSEY 08077

The Frederick S. Groves Mansion

Declared a “contributing resource” to Riverton’s Historic District
National Register of Historic Places and New Jersey Register of Historic Places



Baltimore Sun August 20, 1924



Steamboat company owner Frederick Stanley Groves hired architect Frank T. Mercer in 1901 to create this elegant Edwardian mansion for himself, his wife Elouise and their two children. It was an expansion of the family’s already-substantial home on the site. At the same time, he purchased the empty lots on either side to provide it with suitable lawns and gardens.

The house tells stories which illuminate Riverton’s history and the wider history of America’s emerging industrial wealth.

Groves himself inherited his wealth and the presidency of the steamboat company from his father, the founder of the Baltimore and Philadelphia Steamboat Company (“The Ericsson Line”). He must have had a substantial ego, transforming his home into a manor house more appropriate to the station in life to which he aspired.

He mingled with other wealthy families, and must have been gratified when, four years after building this house, his namesake son Frederick Jr. married the daughter of Arthur Dorrance, the man who created great wealth by putting Campbell Soup on the map. (There are multiple Riverton connections: Dorrance shortly thereafter also moved to Riverton and Joseph Campbell himself had already lived here since 1872.)

Groves and his family lived in this house for nearly 40 years, from his purchase of the initial Mansard-roofed home in 1885 until his death in 1924.

The Mansion itself. This elegant 1901 home and its grounds enhance the Historic District, making a graceful presence on Lippincott Avenue, arguably Riverton's most elegant street.

It is of particularly unusual value architecturally, notable for this reason:

It is a historic house surrounding another historic house.

Comparison of the values and dates on deeds indicates that a house was built in 1880 on the center lot (#411) by one Joseph A. Erwin, who promptly sold it.

The popular 1890 "birds eye view" lithograph of Riverton has our only known view of this house, a nice but not extravagant three-story Mansard. (Visible in the foreground is #407, clearly the same home that is today the residence of the Iannacone family, then the home of the Joseph Roberts family, who owned the legendary Brick Store, the general store at the point of Main and Howard.)

By the time of this image, the Groves family had settled in, having purchased it in 1885.



Coll. Historical Society of Riverton

Then, we find in articles in the *New York Times* and the *Philadelphia Real Estate Record* of early 1901 that architect Frank T. Mercer has hired a contractor for “large additions and general alterations to the residence of F.S. Groves of Riverton, N.J.” The additions completely transformed the 20-year-old house.

Architect F. T. Mercer, 717 Walnut street, has awarded builder George W. Ash the contract for the large brick and stone additions and general alterations and improvements to be made to the residence of F. S. Groves, at Riverton N. J. The work will include the very latest and best interior appointments, having hardwood finishings, tile and marble work, electrical work, etc. Work, under the direction of the architect, will start soon.

New York Times, January 4, 1901

In just 20 years, changing tastes in America had made the high Victorian design of a Mansard home no longer fashionable, so this transformation brought the family right up to date.

Examination of the Sanborn insurance maps pre- and post-1901 make it clear that the footprint of the original house is, indeed, the core of the Edwardian mansion we see today.

At the same time, Frederick Groves purchased the empty lots on either side to create the proper grounds to enhance this expansive mansion he was building for himself.

It is highly unusual in Riverton to know the date of construction, the architect, and the name of the contractor for any building.

The home remarkably retains nearly all of its features designed by Mercer in 1901.

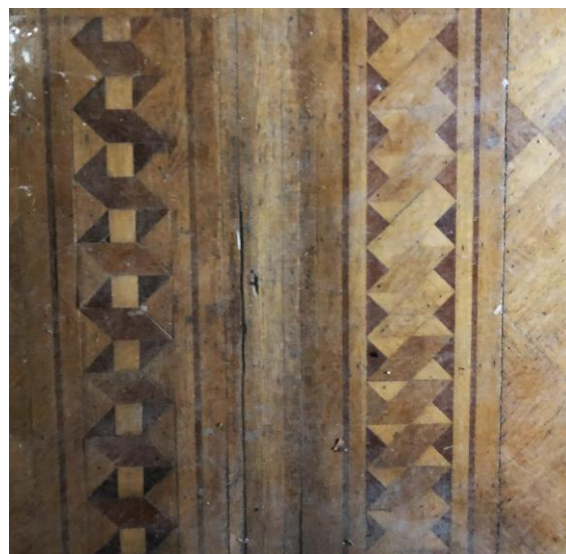
The oak-paneled grand stairway:



The oak-paneled entrance hall with working wood-burning fireplace.



Fancy hardwood parquet floors in all the principal first floor rooms.



Multiple fireplaces (north side living room shown here):



Three floors of elegant oak staircase.



About three dozen leaded glass sash, which appear to be completely intact, including unusual curved sash on the gracious turret and a fine elliptical window on the stair landing.

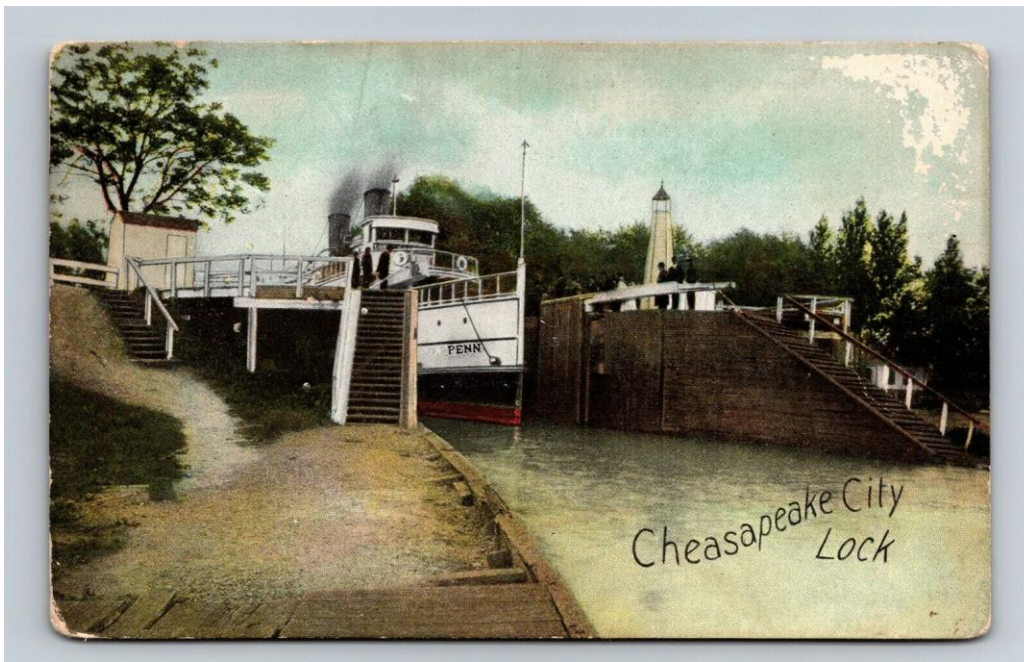


Steamboating and fortunes to be made. There is a continuing theme in Riverton's Historic District involving steamboats and steamships. Not only was the town founded because residents could use the steamboats to commute to Philadelphia, a number of families made their fortunes in shipping. This is one of them.

Frederick Groves' father Anthony had founded the popular Baltimore and Philadelphia Steamboat Company in 1844, generally called "The Ericsson Line" and Frederick worked in the company his entire life. The line ran elegant overnight boats for passengers and freight between those two cities, using the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal.



Collection of Roger Prichard



The boats were purposely built with a narrow beam to fit through the locks which that canal had at the time. This is their steamboat *Penn* locking through at Chesapeake City. Frederick Groves commissioned *Penn* from Wilmington's Harland and Hollingsworth yard in 1903. She was 203 ft. long but just 23 ft. wide.

Frederick inherited ownership and the presidency of the line upon his father's death in 1891, making him a wealthy man. The boats docked in Philadelphia at Pier 3 South (where today's Penn's Landing stands). This was just a few steps from the Chestnut St. Wharf where

the Riverton steamboats such as the *Columbia* docked so Frederick was undoubtedly a daily passenger from our pier. A more pleasant commute is hard to imagine.

Frederick Groves was also instrumental in developing a small resort named Betterton on the Sassafras River in Maryland, where his steamboats called for many years. (The main street is still named Ericsson Ave. today) He created himself a large estate close by and would die there in 1924. Betterton still exists, a quaint time capsule in the same way that Riverton is.

Wealth and social climbing. The increased wealth of the Groves family and the influence it created is fascinating to follow. This family developed connections galore.

Starting in the rough-and-tumble world of shipping and docks, by Frederick's time they were rubbing elbows with the elite of Riverton, the Fitlers, Biddles, and Dorrances, among others.

This socialite activity was capped in 1905 when Groves' namesake son, Frederick Jr., who grew up in this house, married the daughter of Arthur Dorrance, president of Campbell Soup (founded by another Rivertonian, of course). Shortly later, Dorrance *also* became a Rivertonian, building himself a grand house on the golf course at 200 Park (today Paul Grena's house). Frederick Sr. had been one of the Country Club's founders in 1900.

This son, Frederick Jr., thus became extraordinarily wealthy, and he and his wife built a magnificent estate (no longer standing) where Cinnaminson High School now stands. Stories about them and their children's prowess as equestrians and early aviators appeared in society pages frequently.

Frederick Sr. and Elouise's other child, Louise, who also grew up in this house, married Benjamin Boyer, whose family operated a textile mill in Camden. They also settled in Riverton at 800 Main St.



Camden Morning Post June 8, 1905

The African-American story. There are two interesting connections to Black history in this family and house.

The family's steamboats were used in at least two slave escapes. William Still's epic 1872 original history *The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narrative, Letters etc.*, notes that on two different occasions, slaves concealed themselves in crates in Baltimore, to be shipped through the canal to Philadelphia on Ericsson Line boats (note that Still's book misspells the name "Ericcson"). Of course, these events occurred many years before the founding of Riverton.

Less vivid, study of the Census returns for the family is notable, listing multiple servants at a time living in this house from 1900 onward, all African American and all born in the South. It helps tell the story that the Great Migration from the South started considerably earlier than is generally recognized.



For more information on the Groves family and other families mentioned here, please visit the Historical Society of Riverton's extensive family tree on Ancestry.com named "Early Families of Riverton NJ". The entry for Frederick S. Groves' may be found at <https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/108021762/person/322261284714/facts>

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