President’s Letter

Hamilton! A Glen Ridge Walking Tour

Mark your calendar for the annual fall walking tour on Saturday, October 15. America’s feverish interest in Alexander Hamilton has inspired us to take an in-depth look at the history and architectural styles of the houses on Hamilton Road and neighboring streets: Washington Street, Old Oak Road, Summit Street, Hillcrest Road, and Woodland Avenue. All ages are welcome. We’ll meet afterwards for refreshments in the Terry S. Webster Museum. If you haven’t had a chance to look at your house file yet, this will be the perfect opportunity.

To add to your Hamilton experience, this issue of The Gaslamp contains a special report by newsletter editor George Musser on Revolutionary War sites in our area. He discovered a French military map from the period showing that Continental Army units—and perhaps the Marquis de Lafayette—camped on Glen Ridge Avenue near the current location of Nicolo’s Bakery.

Interest in Glen Ridge history doesn’t take a summer vacation. Information and inquiries come our way throughout the year from near and far through snail mail, phone calls, chance conversations, news, social media, and the web. People contact us to research their ancestors, share stories, compare experiences, and clarify their memories, and we do our best to help them out. Next year the Glen Ridge Historical Society will celebrate its 40th anniversary. As loyal members, you can be proud of our ongoing efforts to promote local history.

This spring I visited the fourth-grade students at Ridgewood Avenue School for my annual Grandmother’s Trunk presentation. I read them excerpts from an 1893 newspaper about bicycles ridden to the polls on Election Day, from a 1923 diary about the last day of high-school exams, and from a letter by Dana Mitchell about tripping on the uneven sidewalks of Clark Street and spilling a pail of milk. I explained the function of a dance card pasted into a senior-year scrapbook from 1909. I showed about 50 oversized photographs of people, places, and events in Glen Ridge history. Newspapers, diaries, letters, scrapbooks, photographs... the disappearing tools of historical research. It’s worrisome to think about.

Sally Meyer

News and Goings-On

Fall walking tour. On Saturday, October 15, meet us at 1:30 p.m. at the corner of Hamilton Road and Washington Street. Docents will point out the architectural styles of the 19th and 20th centuries and identify notable residents from the past. The rain date will be Sunday, September 16.

1006 maps for sale. Reprints from the famous 1906 A.H. Mueller Atlas of Essex County are available for $100, or $80 for members. Email us at glenridgehs@gmail.com.

Museum hours. The Historical Society maintains an architectural and historical file on every house in the Historic District, including documents and photographs from years past—an essential resource if you’re planning any renovations or just are curious. Located above Boiling Springs Savings Bank, the Terry S. Webster Museum also features exhibits of town history. It is open the second Saturday of every month from 9 a.m. to noon or by appointment with Sally Meyer at (973) 239-2674.
Hamiton! A Jersey Musical

How does a hip-hop historical Broadway way teach us about the founding of our nation? Through Hamilton, our era has reimagined the Founders in its own image. The musical is very Manhattan-centric, so you might never guess that much of the action actually takes place in New Jersey. Alexander Hamilton’s home town of call in North America was Elizabeth. He met and courted Elizabeth Schuyler at the Campfield House in Morristown, while Aaron Burr wooed Theodosia Prevost at the Hermitage in Ho-Ho-Kus. Hamilton and George Washington spent nearly half the war here.

More battles and skirmishes were fought on Jersey soil than in any other colony. A war of attrition laid waste to the eastern part of the colony, and residents were bitterly divided among Revolutionaries, Loyalists, and opportunists who played both sides. The presence of Hamilton expresses in the play about “an endless cycle of vengeance and death” were not at all hypothetical. Historian Jim Gigantino has argued that the wartime deprivations and fear of further instability were a big reason that New Jersey was a latecomer to the abolitionist cause, compared to other northern states.

The area around present-day Glen Ridge was significant in two ways. First, it was the crossroads of a major north-south route (River Road along the Passaic) and a secondary but nonetheless important east-west route (roughly paralleling what is now Bloomfield Avenue). Second, it was a rich agricultural region from which both armies purchased food—and pilaged—their sus- tenance. Here are some local Hamilton-related sites that even history buffs might not know about.

“Right Hand Man”

New York City fell to the British in the late summer of 1776. Washington retreated across New Jersey in November and appointed Hamilton as aide-de-camp the following March. What remained of the Continental Army crossed the Passaic River on November 21 using what is now the Main Avenue bridge to Wallington to the City of Passaic (then known as Acquackonock) (1). It marched south to Newark along what is now Route 21, which was, by all accounts, a beautiful bucolic route. The only reminder of the retreat route today is a historic marker in front of the Bloomfield Mansion (2). Some of the pursuing British troops under General Charles Cornwallis detoured through Bloomfield (then known as Watessing) and ramscacked a dozen or so homes, including that of Joseph Davis, now the Bloomfield Steak and Seafood House (3). Refugees fled over the hill to Verona and Caldwell (then called Horseneck). The spectacular house was torn down in 1924 (The spectacular house was torn down in 1924). The next day the Redcoats marched up the Second River valley and were repulsed at what is now the south tip of Watessing Park, near the corner of Glenwood Avenue and Dodd Street (5). Markers near the Second River bridge in Branch Brook Park (6) and near the Watessing Avenue train station (7) memorialize the skirmish. Clinton supervised the battle from a mansion that mining magnate Arent Schuyler, Elizabeth’s great-granduncle, had built on the east bank of the Passaic (4). Their campsites are unmarked, and their foraging raids ravaged our area of New Jersey. In the most elaborate assault, several regiments led by British General Henry Clinton converged on Belleville (then called Second River) on September 12, 1777, and forced local militia to retreat west to Bloomfield (8) (The spectacular house was torn down in 1924). History seems to have repeated itself in a terrifying way when Hamilton recalled the battle of 1774 (The spectacular house was torn down in 1924).

“Stay Alive”

As THIS SONG recounts, Washington en- gaged in guerrilla tactics to avoid an open battle against superior forces. The British responded in kind, and their foraging raids ravaged our area of New Jersey. In the most elaborate of these raids, Colonel Israel Putnam’s Massachusetts militia was captured by the British (9). A plaque at the corner of Valley Road and Clarence Street claims that Washington himself stayed in Montclair (13). It is based on an 1894 article by Montclair resident Robert Erskine and contains an elaborate account—perhaps too elaborate—of how Washington slept in a “dignified and 谐音词的” tavern and had dinner at the home of an “old Revolutionary dollar note” (15). Washington may also have visited Joseph Folsom’s home (10) in Wayne throughout this period. He spent several days at the Kus (then Paramus) at the house of Germany’s aide-de-camp, James McHenry, placed the corner of Franklin Street and Berkeley Avenue in Verona (6). After his victory, the New Jersey Historical Society has a plaque on the opposite side of the street that reads “Washington’s Headquarters.”

“Guns and Ships”

In fall 1780, as he prepared to join forces with the French general Jean Baptiste de Rochambeau, Washington camped at the Dey Mansion in Totowa. From here Hamilton wrote at least one love letter to Elizabeth Schuy- ler, who was his fiancée by this time. After Hamilton penned a letter to six battalions to guard the southern approaches to his base, including the headquarters of General John Cadmus, Mont- gomery Avenue crosses into Verona (10). The next day Hamilton warned those troops about a possible British attack. A plaque at Washington’s headquarters on the east side of what is now Glen Ridge Avenue, just south of Bay Street (then known as Wood Road) (11), and his campsite on the opposing bank of Toney’s Brook (12). To judge from a report in the New York Gazette, they remained there until the end of November, when the Continental Army left for winter quarters in Jockey Hollow and elsewhere.

On October 23, Washington ordered de Rochambeau to march south to Newark along the route of the 1776 retreat and camped in Belleville on August 20 (16). A brigade under General Benjamin Lincoln followed a week later (17). Their campsites are unmarked, but the locations were estimated by historian Robert Selig in a 2006 report for the N.J. Historic Trust

“Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)”

Washington and Rochambeau rendez- voussed in July 1781 and marched across New Jersey on their way to the decisive Battle of Yorktown. The route is a National Historic Trail with multiple historic markers. The bulk of the Revolution ended on October 19, when Cornwallis was captured by George Washington. The spectacular house was torn down in 1924 (The spectacular house was torn down in 1924). Dotted lines are routes surveyed by French military map by La- fayette’s aide-de-camp Michel Capitaine du Chenoy (map 141 in the Louis Charles Karpinski Collection). George Musser...
IN JANUARY 1916 Henry S. Babbage began the first of his two terms as mayor of Glen Ridge. His four-year stint showed superb leadership during World War I and confident foresight about the needs of a growing community.

Babbage was born in Patterson, N.Y., the son of a Baptist minister and the eldest of many children. He left school in East Orange at an early age to begin a 40-year career as general manager of the V. J. Hedden & Sons Construction Company in Newark. Among its notable buildings were the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Tower, original Prudential Insurance Company, and Essex County Courthouse.

His first wife, Adele Johnson, died in childbirth, leaving him to care for three sons, Ernest, Laurence, and Chester. His second wife, Callie Johnson, died shortly after the birth of their daughter, Dorothy. Andress Parrott, the children’s nanny, who was 20 years his junior, soon became wife number three. They came to Glen Ridge in 1909, moving into a house Babbage himself built at 80 Douglas Road.

His first year as mayor was relatively uneventful, with the opening of Carteret Street and the paving of Ridgewood Avenue as the major accomplishments. But the demands of office changed dramatically with the U.S. declaration of war against Germany in April 1917. Babbage appointed a group of 30 town marshals as a kind of military reserve, which was soon absorbed into the state National Guard. These were middle-aged war veterans who drilled regularly on the school athletic field and the grounds of the country club. Babbage also formed a committee to organize a public food market and plant a Victory Garden, located at the corner of Ridgewood Avenue and Bay Avenue, to supplement the wartime vegetable supply. He convinced so many town residents to buy Liberty bonds to support the war effort that a naval cargo ship was christened “The Glen Ridge.” Some 215 residents entered military service during World War I and Babbage made a point of meeting every group of recruits before it left for army camp. Seven died, and Babbage commissioned the war memorial in front of Ridgewood Avenue School.

After the war, Babbage and the borough council acknowledged the importance of civic buildings in a thriving community and negotiated the purchase of a site to build a municipal building and a library. The latter opened in 1918.

In his personal life, Babbage was known for his hospitality. He was a gourmet cook who kept oysters in barrels and cured game in his attic. He enjoyed hunting, fishing, and gardening. He moved to Washington Street in Montclair in 1922 and died in February 1925 while hunting in Aiken, N.C. He is buried in Rosedale Cemetery surrounded by his three wives.

Sally Meyer
Three Generations in Glen Ridge

The Other Way Meeker, and Family

His employees called him “The Other Way Meeker.” Chester Meeker was a self-taught electrician and engineer who co-founded Smith-Meeker Engineering Company in 1907. The firm started off doing house and commercial electrical installations, soon graduating to outfitting luxury yachts, such as those owned by the Vanderbilts and Mays. The company became the exclusive distributor for Edison storage batteries in New York Harbor, decided by a handshake with Thomas Edison himself—no paper documentation required by him. Chester was a tough task master. He got his nickname because he invariably asked installers, “Why did you do it that way?”

In 1920 Chester and his wife, Martha, moved from Bloomfield to 117 Clark Street, becoming the first of three generations to reside in Glen Ridge. Their three children were David (the youngest), Horace, and Dorothy. Dorothy was called “Dos,” as Davey couldn’t pronounce her first name. Grandpa Thomas was called “Gonka,” as Davey couldn’t say “Grandpa,” either. Horace was “Horse” to this friends.

Dorothy went to Bryn Mawr and Columbia Medical School, after which she moved to California. Horace and David both graduated from Princeton and worked for their father at Smith-Meeker. Horace met Constance, “Connie,” Nichols at a family gathering, after which they fell in love and wed in 1932. Despite the Depression, the firm did well and in 1938 Horace was able to purchase a foreclosed house at 14 Hamilton Road in Glen Ridge. Three years later, they relocated across the street to 19 Hamilton Road to accommodate their growing family—soon to be five kids. Abutting their backyard was an Old Oak Road house rented by Jim Moultrie—the Bahamian Ambassador to the United Nations—and his wife, Bernie. The Meekers entertained them, as well as Hollywood and Broadway actor Eddie Bracken and his wife, also named Connie.

Of Chester and Martha’s 10 grandchildren, I was the only one who returned to Glen Ridge. Like my father, Horace, I graduated from Princeton and worked at Smith-Meeker, becoming its third president. I lived for a time in a garage apartment behind 182 Ridgewood Avenue. After a stint in the army, I moved to Madison, N.J., with my wife and three children, living there until my divorce. I came back to Glen Ridge in the early ’80s and in 1988 married Joanne Thompson, who had grown up at 51 Ridgewood Avenue. We now reside at 38 Chestnut Hill Place.

Chester and Martha had moved from Clark Street to 59 Chestnut Hill Place in 1953. She died in 1956, and Chester in 1972. David passed away in 1983, followed by Horace in 2002. A lasting legacy to the Meekers in Glen Ridge is the stained glass windows in the Congregational Church. Chester donated them in 1956 in memory of Martha. Designed by local architect Maxwell Kimball, the windows feature flowers to honor Martha’s love of them. The minister at that time wanted the windows installed on the west side of the church to be visible from Ridgewood Avenue. Chester insisted they be placed on the south side, where the sun would illuminate their beauty all day long, especially during Sunday services.

The author’s parents, Connie and Horace Meeker, in 1940

Gerry Addison, 1930–2016

Geraldyne “Gerry” Harvey Addison died May 14, 2016, in Warminster, Penn. As a long-time resident of Glen Ridge, Gerry was an active and devoted member of the Glen Ridge Historical Society. She researched the origin of the name Sherman Avenue, her street, in the 1980s as a part of a townwide program to determine how the names of the streets in Glen Ridge were chosen.

For many years Gerry served as the Historical Society delegate to the League of Historical Societies of New Jersey, representing our historical society at the state level, reporting back to us about ongoing programs in historic preservation in N.J. She and I moved to a retirement community near Philadelphia in January 2013.

Thomas G. Meeker

Herb Addison
Essex County Parks Tour. Official parks archivist Kathy Kauhl will lead a bus tour of the nine Essex County Parks in Newark. A picnic lunch will be provided. As Kauhl wrote in the November 2015 issue of The Gaslamp, the Essex parks system dates to 1895 and was the first of its kind in the nation. It contains historic landscape design by the Olmsted Brothers. Friday, October 14, 10:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Register at www.adultschool.org.

Simple Gifts: Shaker at the Met. The United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing—also known as the Shakers—is a utopian religious sect that rose to prominence in America in the 19th century. The Shakers established communities centered on gender equality, collective property, pacifism, and industry. This exhibit features more than two dozen works from the Met’s permanent collection, including furniture, textiles, and tools. These objects embody the Shakers’ characteristic minimalist designs and careful craftsmanship, which have strongly influenced other artists. Ongoing to June 26, 2017, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

How Should We Live? Propositions for the Modern Interior. This exhibition explores the collaborations, materials, and processes that shaped modernist interior design—including domestic interiors, re-created exhibition displays, and retail spaces—from the 1920s to the ’50s. The exhibition brings together over 200 works drawn from MoMA’s Architecture and Design department and other collections. October 1, 2016, through April 26, 2017, at the Museum of Modern Art.