



# GLEN RIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

April 2012 Vol. XXXIV No. 4

## THE GASLAMP

**Illuminating Our Past**

[www.glenridgehistory.org](http://www.glenridgehistory.org)



### *President's Letter*



An enthusiastic overflow crowd attended our February program titled "When We Were Bloomfield" which was researched and presented by our town historian Sally Meyer. Members of the Bloomfield Historical Society were in attendance as well. It was a terrific opportunity for both groups to learn more about our shared history.

Our Annual Meeting will be held on Monday, April 16th, at 7:30 pm in Robinson Hall at the Glen Ridge Congregational Church. Our speaker will be Marc Levinson, former president of the Historical Society and author of "The Great A&P and the Struggle for Small Business in America." The Wall Street Journal named it one of the ten best nonfiction books for 2011. It's an engaging account of American economic and political history seen through the rise and fall of the A&P, which was for many years the largest retailer in the world. Marc will be talking about his research and its historical connections to our area from Orange to Montclair. Glen Ridge even had its own A&P store on Herman Street located in the same building where Fitzgerald's is currently located.

We will also be presenting the 2012 recipient of the Glen Ridge Historical Society's Preservation Award, which will include a slide

show about the winning project. I hope all of you can join us.

**Karin Robinson**

*Here are the candidates for officers and trustees to be voted on at the meeting:*

**Karin Robinson** - Nominated for President, 2nd Term

**Nelle Jennings** - Nominated for Secretary, 1st Term

**Terese Broccoli** - Nominated for Trustee, 2nd Term

**Jon Russo** - Nominated for Trustee, 2nd Term

**David Taylor** - Nominated Trustee, 1st Term

**Alison Meyer** - Nominated for Trustee, 1st Term

**Save the Date**

### **Annual Meeting**



Remember this?

**April 16, 2012**

Glen Ridge Congregational Church

195 Ridgewood Avenue

7:30 pm

Marc Levinson will speak on his latest book,

*The Great A&P*

*and the Struggle for Small Business in America*

The Preservation Awards for restoration will also be presented at the meeting.

## History Lessons from Grandmother's Trunk

*News from the Town Historian*



As the school year verges on spring, I'm reminded to schedule my annual visit to Ridgewood Avenue School. Each June for the past thirty years I've offered students in fourth grade a Grandmother's Trunk type presentation on the history of Glen Ridge. Armed with boxes of artifacts and a portfolio of photographs I attempt to bring to life the story of their hometown.

The state mandated curriculum for fourth grade includes a unit on New Jersey history; teaching local history, then, at the end of the year seems opportune. It is my objective to instill in the students a sense of pride in Glen Ridge and a personal connection with the town through an understanding of its past.

At the start of my presentation I don a wide-brimmed black velvet hat with ostrich feathers that gets immediate attention. It serves to characterize the late nineteenth century when

Glen Ridge established its independence from Bloomfield. To develop a timeline leading up to that event, I go back to prehistory and talk about the Lenape people who first inhabited this area. The students are excited to see a spear point that was found in a Highland Avenue garden.

Stories of life during the nineteenth century in Glen Ridge are fascinating to the children. They know nothing of the industrial mills and quarries, horse drawn trains and fire engines, typhoid fever and polio, or unpaved roads and outhouses. They especially love hearing about children's escapades in the glen and commuting to school in Bloomfield.

In scheduling my visit in June, the experience of Memorial Day is fresh in the students' minds. While showing them a bayonet, a gasmask, and a civil defense nightstick, I talk about the various wars that affected Glen Ridge citizens both at home and on the battlefield. I remind them that preserving peace in their own community is a good first step to the establishment of peace worldwide.

In this age of hi-tech gadgetry, some might claim that a Grandmother's Trunk presentation is an old-fashioned method of teaching. The attentiveness and enthusiasm of the students prove otherwise. The history of Glen Ridge is their history and continues to captivate their imaginations.

Sally Meyer

### Officers and Trustees

President	Karin Robinson	Trustee (2013)	Herb Addison
Vice President	Sarge Gardiner	Trustee (2013)	Nelle Jennings
Treasurer	Alden Provost	Trustee (2013)	Robin Westervelt
Secretary	Margot Macdonnell	Trustee (2014)	David Doernberg
Town Historian	Sally Meyer	Trustee (2014)	Andrew Grisafi
Trustee (2012)	Margo Garrison	Trustee (2014)	Lana Keppel
Trustee (2012)	Terese Broccoli-Bourscheidt	Ex-officio - Past President	Marc Levinson
Trustee (2012)	Jon Russo	Ex-officio - Library Director	Jennifer Breuer
		Ex-officio - Delegate LHSNJ	Gerry Addison

**Editor's Note...** In this issue we begin a new series that asks Glen Ridge residents to describe what it's like when they have made a historic house their home. On Page 4 Edith Payne tells how she and her husband, John, decided to buy one of only four Frank Lloyd Wright houses in New Jersey. In the years since they carefully - and no doubt lovingly - restored the house to what the architect originally intended. In 2010 the historical society presented a bronze plaque to Ms. Payne commemorating the extraordinary care of the restoration. On Page 3 Tom Meeker continues his articles on growing up on Hamilton Road. **Herb Addison** -- herb.addison@verizon.net

## Growing Up on Hamilton Road II

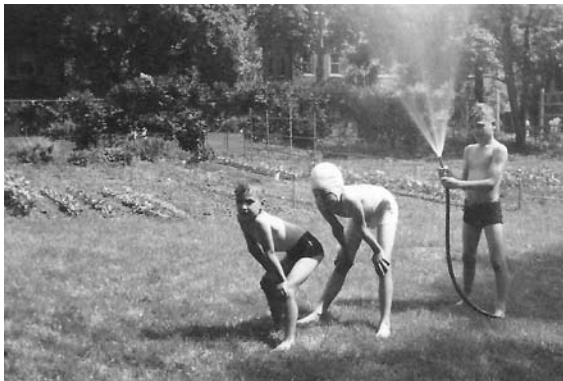
*Continued from the November 2011 Gaslamp*

In late 1940 Mom became pregnant again. The baby would become sister number two, Claire. Realizing that the 14 Hamilton Road home wouldn't accommodate a family of six, Pop reached out to purchase another home just up the street, number 19. This house was built in 1896 by a man named Pierson. His sister, married name Frasse, built the one next door, number 15. Our "new" house had been unoccupied for a number of years and was sorely in need of repairs and upgrades.

After gutting it, Pop's contractor advised him that war was almost certainly coming and that he should purchase all metal items right away to include kitchen and bathroom hardware as well as a furnace and related duct work. This was done, and the house renovation completed in 1942, when we moved in. The home had five bedrooms, which was fortunate, as sister number three, Gail, arrived in March of 1943. We were now a family of seven consisting of Mom, Pop, three daughters, two sons and a puppy dog, Tippy.

This new home had a huge back yard, about 120 feet by 150 feet deep. It provided us an additional location for softball and football, as well as a playground for the kids in the neighborhood.

As the war continued and rationing was instituted, Pop separated the rear 50 feet from our play area, and planted a Victory Garden. He even allotted about 25 percent of the area to a family across the street, the Apples, whose back yard was too shady for growing. Bejo, sister Beverly, and I helped a bit with the planting and weeding. We



Stephen, Beverly, and the author with the hose; the Victory Garden is in the background.

had carrots, beets, lettuce, peas, beans and rhubarb.

None of us really understood the severity and horror of the conflicts overseas, and just took for granted that our father would be with us. In fact, he worked for the company founded in part by Grandpa Meeker, Smith-Meeker Engineering. The company, from its founding in 1908 until the War, provided electrical and mechanical materials and services to the marine industry. It segued easily into providing the same for the war effort, including over 200 electricians who installed cabling and electrical equipment on board new US Navy vessels. This essential industry required Pop's professional design services.

He was a Princeton graduate, with a Masters in mechanical engineering, thus exempt from the draft. This did mean long work hours for him, including half days every Saturday. Pop was also an Air Raid Warden, who, when the practice alarm sounded in the evening, had to wear his jacket with the Warden's arm band, and don his white helmet. He then would patrol the street making sure



Father Horace Meeker as Air Raid Warden.

all shades were pulled, and that auto headlights had the top half blocked by tape.

We kids contributed to the war effort by removing the tops and bottoms from food cans and stomping them flat for delivery to the market, which would then send them for recycling to the war effort. We also saved tin foil from chewing gum wraps for the same purpose.

During these years the lives of the children in our house revolved around friends, schools, church, and even merchants, including my earliest recollection of a local "business man" who was the scissors grinder. He walked the streets pushing a wheeled cart that sported a grinding wheel.

**Tom Meeker**

*To be continued in later issues*

LIVING IN A HISTORIC HOME

## When Home is a Frank Lloyd Wright House

*LIVING IN A HISTORIC HOME intended to describe what it's like when an owner has made a historic house a home*

When my husband, John, was in college, he chose to move from the ivy-covered collegiate gothic residence hall to which he had been assigned in order to live in one of the newly constructed buildings designed by the Finnish-born architect Eero Saarinen. He figured that it would be his only opportunity to live in an architect-designed space. For many years, he was correct, as architectural appreciation played a role in his and my lives only as a spectator sport. However, a day-long excursion sponsored by the Metropolitan Museum of Art took us to Usonia, the planned community designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, located in Pleasantville, New York. Our payment for that visit included a year-long membership in the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, and through that national organization in 1996, we learned that the Frank Lloyd Wright house in Glen Ridge was on the market.

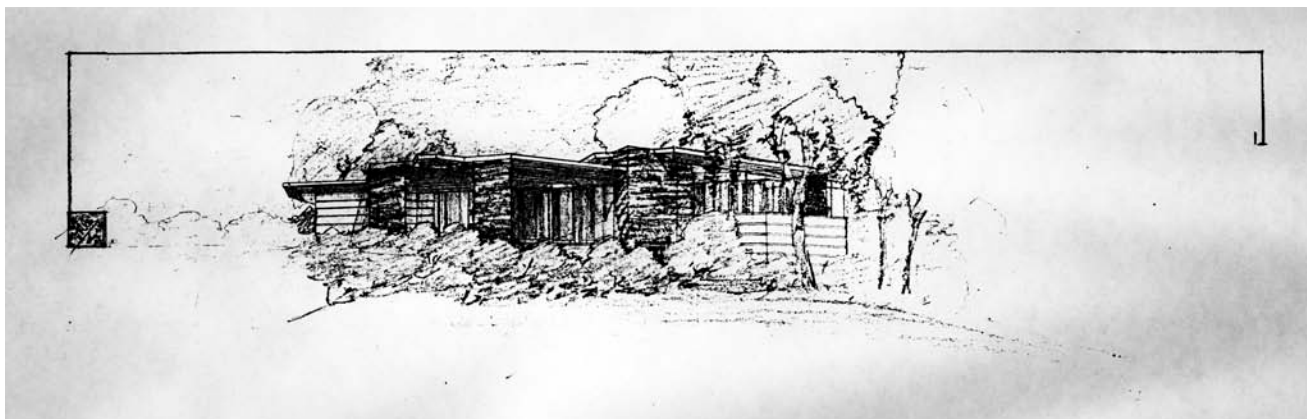
We were intrigued. John knew the realtor, Pru Borland, and like many others, we asked if we could see the house, while telling Pru that we were merely architectural enthusiasts with no plans to purchase. Two weeks later, we had signed a purchase contract with a Bergen county anesthesiologist who owned the house but only used it for parties. Seeing the house on a sunlit

February day, even in its imperfect condition, was captivating.

Many of you saw the house last winter when the Historical Society had its annual party here. However, for those who did not, I'll provide some background. The design of the house is called "Usonian" -- a word Wright made up that is of uncertain derivation and meaning. Such houses were conceived by Wright relatively late in his career; many Wright scholars agree that the first purely Usonian house was constructed in 1936 when Wright was sixty-nine years of age. It was Wright's goal to design Usonian houses for the common man. For that reason, they are generally small, with relatively large living rooms, no dining room, a small "workspace" -- Wright's euphemism for a kitchen -- and miniscule, utilitarian bedrooms. They are all designed on a geometric grid, generally with concrete floors containing radiant heat systems. The theory was that once the concrete was cast with the geometric forms scribed in it, any workman would be able to construct the remainder of the house with very little supervision and at low cost. The difficulty with that plan is that Wright was not content with squares and rectangles. Our house, for instance, is designed on a hexagonal module, with walls intersecting at sixty- and one hundred twenty-degree angles -- a challenge for any carpenter or brick mason used to squared-off spaces and materials.

The house was designed in 1941 for Stuart and Betty Richardson for a site in Livingston, NJ. But the advent of WW II prevented construction and the Richardsons were not able to hold on to the lot during the war. The Richardsons eventually built the house in 1951 on its present

*Continued on Page 5*



A presentation drawing from the Frank Lloyd Wright studio of the Richardson House as originally intended for Livingston, NJ

*Continued from Page 4*

site after asking Wright to make changes to accommodate children. It is constructed of brick and of cypress, which is screwed to an inner wood core without studs or any internal open space. It is thus theoretically possible to unscrew the whole edifice, although I have not been tempted to do so. Its exterior shape is basically triangular, with a short tail extending from one side to accommodate the bedrooms. The most architecturally interesting feature arises from the manner in which the span of the roof is supported over the living room. There, Wright chose to place an inverted truss, which is clad in cypress and visually resembles an inverted pyramid, to which our children always threatened to attach a similarly inverted Christmas tree.

When we moved in, the radiant heating system in the floor had been disabled, and the cypress walls were clad with glaringly white electric heating panels. We resurrected the former system, and for a few years it worked. But a catastrophic failure led to the need to jack-hammer the entire floor and replace the heat and plumbing systems -- a six-month project we undertook in 2005. We also determined to replace the kitchen which, as initially installed, consisted of a white steel "Kitchen of the Future" donated by G.E. to the Richardsons for advertising purposes that were never realized. As preservationists, the decision to change the kitchen was one over which we agonized. However, we eventually determined that, although "original," the kitchen was never suited to the house, and would have given Wright a heart attack if he had ever seen it. The kitchen, therefore, is now cypress and has won the approval of Mrs. Richardson, who visited shortly after its installation. Other house projects followed, consuming much of our time and interest and convincing us that Wright's hope that his Usonian houses would be economical was thoroughly aspirational.

Nonetheless, living in a Wright-

designed house has been a life-changing experience. It has opened to us a world of Wright experts and aficionados who have become our friends, particularly as the result of our active participation in the Building Conservancy that initially piqued our interest in the house. It has given us a much deeper appreciation for Wright's work and a fuller understanding of the issues surrounding architectural preservation and restoration.

On a daily basis, the house is a delight. Despite its small size, it is very well designed for daily living. The odd geometry of its construction offers a visual variety absent in other houses, and acts to expand spaces that otherwise might seem confining. The pierced wood panels that are inserted near the roof line in the living room and master bedroom, when caught by the sun, cast ever-changing shadow patterns on the walls.

We were concerned, when we moved in, that Wright would loom as a repressive presence over our lives. That has not occurred. It is hard ever to forget him, but his presence is benign. While Wright's life may have been chaotic and in many respects reprehensible, we are all fortunate that those qualities did not imbue his architecture, which remains as a delight to all who see and experience it. What he has done for us personally is to create not just a house, but a home for which we care deeply.

**Edith Payne**



The Frank Lloyd Wright house as it looks today



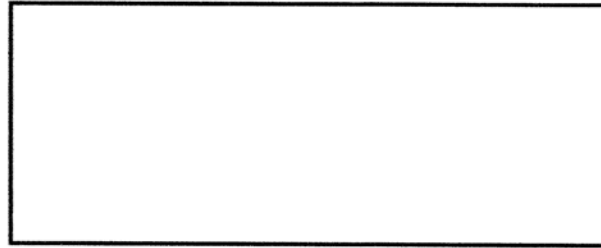
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***ANNUAL MEETING***  
***APRIL 16, 2012***

**Current and Coming Events**

April 16, 2012 – Glen Ridge Historical Society Annual Meeting; Glen Ridge Congregational Church, 195 Ridgewood Avenue. Marc Levinson, past president of the Glen Ridge Historical Society, will speak on his book, *The Great A&P and the Struggle for Small Business in America*. Named by the *Wall Street Journal* as one of the ten best nonfiction books of 2011, the book describes the turbulent history of A&P as it relentlessly cut prices to gain market share.

Through June 24, 2012 – Princeton University Art Museum presents *Princeton and the Gothic Revival: 1870–1930*. The exhibit investigates Americans' changing attitudes to the art, architecture, and style of the Middle Ages through the lens of Princeton University around the turn of the twentieth century. More information at:  
<http://artmuseum.princeton.edu/events/GothicR>

**News Briefs**

Continuing to July 1, 2012 – The Hoboken Historical Museum presents *Driving Under the Hudson: The History of the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels*. The museum celebrates the 85th anniversary of the Holland Tunnel and the 75th birthday of the Lincoln Tunnel. Drivers may love them for the access they provide to New York City, or curse them for the rush-hour traffic that ensnares Hudson County drivers. The tunnels define Hoboken's northern and southern borders. Today we take them for granted, but when they were built, they were marvels of both engineering prowess and public works initiatives. Glen Ridge Historical Society trustee Robin Westervelt is Education Curator at the Hoboken museum. More information, including free lectures on the tunnels, at: <http://hobokenmuseum.org/>