



GLEN RIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

February 2010 Vol. XXXII No. 4

THE GASLAMP

Illuminating Our Past

www.glenridgehistory.org



Local History in the Spotlight

President's Letter

The Glen Ridge Historical Society's museum room, financed by your membership dues, is a remarkable resource. The house files, one for almost every home in the borough, are widely used by residents, architects, and contractors planning restoration or painting projects. Our extensive photographic files have been called upon by high school students, professional filmmakers, and the Smithsonian Institution, and each year's fourth graders get to sample our collection of Glen Ridge memorabilia when town historian Sally Meyer unpacks Grandmother's Trunk at the Ridgewood Avenue School.

One part of our collection, though, rarely gets much attention: our assortment of letters, memoirs, and oral histories that provide first-hand descriptions of Glen Ridge life in the early years.

On February 24, we will try to rectify that situation. We invite you to join us at 8 p.m. at the Women's Club of Glen Ridge as our local theatre troupe, the Gas Lamp Players, presents "Dear Friend: An Evening of First Person Narratives of Early Glen Ridge."

"Dear Friend" is a dramatic program created from the writings of people who lived in Glen Ridge between the Civil War and 1900. Their letters and diaries have been woven into a recitation of letters between friends. Some of the descriptions make Glen Ridge life sound bucolic: digging a cave in the railroad embankment (please don't try this yourself), setting off fireworks at the Men's Club (ditto), and climbing the mysterious Indian Mound at Columbus Avenue. On the other hand, there were some problems in town. There was no postal delivery in the early days, and local residents had to trudge into Bloomfield Center to collect their mail. The efforts of Glen Ridge's lone police officer to enforce the speed limit for bicycles proved fruitless.

The risks involved in learning to swim in the Morris Canal, as most local children did, I will leave to your imagination.

This program is being produced for the Historical Society by Gas Lamp's Jessica Sporn. The actors include Lyn Hanson, Sharon Smolen, Greg Cancro, and David Shaw, all Glen Ridge residents whose faces you will know from *The King and I*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and other Gas Lamp productions.

"Dear Friend" promises to give us a very unusual, and very human, perspective on Glen Ridge history. And at a time when we put very little down on paper, it reminds us of the importance of the written word, especially when the writers had no inkling their words would be of interest more than a century later. Please come as we experience Glen Ridge through the eyes, and words, of those who lived here before us.

Marc Levinson

Old Maps Now Online

Thanks to an effort supported by the New Jersey Historical Commission, many of the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps for New Jersey from 1885 to the 1930s are now available online. Glen Ridge maps from 1906 and 1938 are included. These maps show lot lines and buildings, so are useful in researching the history of individual properties. An index to the available maps, with links, is at the following address:

<http://libweb.princeton.edu/libraries/fires tone/rbsc/aids/sanborn/sanborn-web.xls>

An Uneducated Glen Ridge Man of Letters

News from the Town Historian



In 1914 the President of the Glen Ridge Board of Education was a high school dropout. Thomas L. Masson, literary editor of *Life* magazine (before the name was bought by Henry Luce for his picture magazine), lived at 261 Ridgewood Avenue. He was born at Essex CT in 1866 and left school in New Haven at fourteen to travel the world with his father, a sea captain.

As a young man, Masson tried several dead end jobs in New York City. While working as a traveling salesman in the Midwest he contracted a serious illness and spent several years of rest in the Adirondacks. During his convalescence he began writing humorous articles and short stories for *Life*. The owner of the magazine, James A. Mitchell, liked his style and hired him as editor in 1893.

Soon after, Masson moved to Glen Ridge with his wife Fannie. They lived for a short while at 53 Woodland Avenue and 162 Ridgewood Avenue before settling at 261 Ridgewood in 1906. The family included two sons and two daughters. Masson was renowned at home for a slew of witty expressions. His motto for a married man was "...be sure you're right...then keep it to yourself."

In 1922 Masson became associate editor of *The Saturday Evening Post*. During his seven years at the *Post* he also did editorial work for *The New York Times*, *Collier's*, and *The Christian Herald*, and a weekly review of books on radio station WOR broadcasting from Bamberger's in Newark. He was the author of over thirty books including a local history that was published upon the dedication of the Glen Ridge Municipal Building called *Glen Ridge: 1895-1932*.

While at *Life* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, Masson befriended many notable figures. Novelist Kenneth Roberts and acclaimed short story author Lawrence Perry were frequent guests at his home, along with artists Charles Dana Gibson, James Montgomery Flagg and Robert Dickey. They often attended festive supper parties in his barn that were followed by a baseball game at the outing fields on Lincoln Street. One evening Masson had the occasion to introduce Woodrow Wilson at a dinner at the Robert Treat Hotel in Newark. The family recalled with pride that before they left home Mr. Wilson changed his shirt in Mrs. Masson's room.

Masson and Robert Sterling Yard, a fellow commuter on the D.L.& W. railroad, were founders of the Dutch Treat Club in 1905. Every Tuesday writers, illustrators, editors, and publishers would lunch together each paying for their own meal. The group grew to number several hundred and continues to meet today at the National Arts Club. Members have included Ogden Nash, Isaac Asimov, Robert Benchley, Rube Goldberg, and Phil Silvers.

Masson died in 1934 at the age of 67.

The Museum Room is open by appointment. If you would like to schedule a visit, please call Sally Meyer at (973) 239-2674.

Sally Meyer

Officers and Trustees

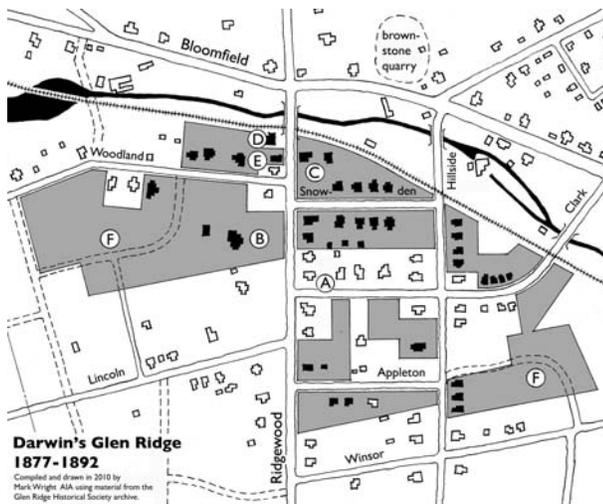
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Editor's Note...We are pleased to welcome back Glen Ridge architect and resident, Mark Wright, whose feature article in this issue is on Asabel G. Darwin (Page 3). In the buildings, especially the houses, that developer Darwin built he helped to define Glen Ridge's architectural character that eventually led to the town's designation as a historic district.

Contact: **Herb Addison** herb.addison@verizon.net

Darwin's Glen Ridge 1877-1892

Beginning in the early 1880s, developer Asabel G. Darwin (1827-1892) built a group of buildings that defined a new civic core for what became the Borough of Glen Ridge. These projects included a large home for his family with a matching train station, semi-public secular social facilities, and fashionable Queen-Anne style houses for lease to tenants. Though accounts of Darwin's activities seem cryptic now, at least a few of his houses seem to have been built for particular tenants, and the large parcel at the lower end of Clark was held in partnership with Joseph D. Gallagher. The map below shows (in gray) the maximum extent of his property in 1889 and (in black) the structures he built or began between 1882 and 1892.



A 125 Clark Street—In 1877 Darwin rented a house (demolished) at this location.

B Darwin Estate—In 1882-83, Darwin erected a substantial house and stable on the site where the high school now stands. It was built of gray rubble stone quarried in the Oranges, with brick trim.

C Glen Ridge Club—In 1885-86, a two-story Shingle Style wood frame clubhouse was built to the designs of architect W. C. Hazlett. Darwin was the founding president of the club, which had about 100 members. "Although...this is exclusively a membership organization, the prohibition of the use of liquor, the frequent 'ladies' nights,' and the periodical dancing and card parties, lectures, and other entertainments, have practically converted it into a family club..." (from Picturesque Glen Ridge, published in 1899).

D Train Station—In 1885 Darwin and other landowners lobbied the railroad for a new station to replace the shabby Ridgewood Depot. Unsatisfied with the railroad's proposal, Darwin offered to secure a new design and pay the balance for the upgrade, and deed the new building to the railroad as a gift on condition that the trains would always stop at the station. Architect Jesse H. Lockwood of Montclair designed the new building that opened in 1887. The station resembled Darwin's own house in its use of gray rubble masonry trimmed in red brick, but while the house had pointed Gothic arches the station did not. Its chimney details resemble those of the house at 9 Woodland. The new building's decorative cedar shingle work related it to the clubhouse across the street and to the houses Darwin was building along Snowden.

E Glen Ridge Hall—In 1888-90 Darwin built a handsome Richardsonian building of local brownstone to provide a large civic meeting hall on the second floor above a room for the Library Association and a small suite for himself. From his ground floor office in the corner bay Darwin looked out on a domain he could think of as his own: the train station, the clubhouse, and a street of the fine houses he had built.

F Dashed lines indicate roads built in later years.

Darwin's speculative houses (year completed)

Early

9 Woodland*	1888
15 Woodland (demolished)*	57 Clark
	65 Clark
	59 Hillside
	61 Hillside
	63 Hillside
	1889
	67 Clark
	76 Hillside
	33 Snowden
	19 Woodland

1887

61 Clark	1891
105 Hillside	30 Appletton
117 Hillside	34 Appletton

1886

109 Hillside	1892
113 Hillside	28 Woodland
181 Ridgewood	
205 Ridgewood	
21 Snowden	
24 Snowden*	
25 Snowden	
26 Snowden	

1887

61 Clark	
105 Hillside	
117 Hillside	
209 Ridgewood	
29 Snowden*	
30 Snowden	
34 Snowden	

*Date uncertain

Mark Wright, AIA

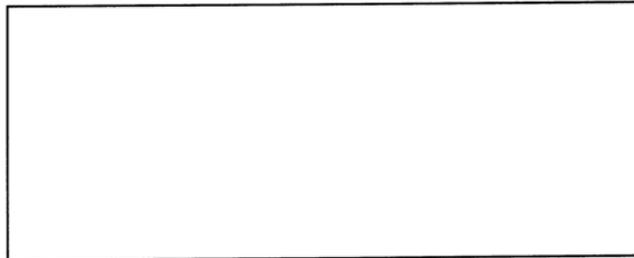


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Winter Public Meeting February 24, 2010

Coming Events

Wednesday, February 24 – Glen Ridge Historical Society Winter Public Meeting; “Dear Friend;” Women’s Club of Glen Ridge, 8:00 PM

Saturday, February 27—Light Rail trip through the Hamilton/Trenton Marsh to Roebling. Meet at Bordentown Light Rail station (100 W. Park Avenue at Prince Street) at 9:00 am sharp. Info and reservations: 609 924-2683

Saturday, February 27—“Colonial Cooking”—Food historian and open-hearth cook Michele Dansak will demonstrate 18th-century foodways while preparing an authentic dish from the period. Audience participation is encouraged. \$10. 2 p.m. Wyckoff-Garretson House, 215 S. Middlebush Rd., Somerset 08873. Info and Reservations: 732-560-1977.

News Briefs

Global Patterns: Architectural Photographs by Daniel Nadler – Fifty years of photographing “who we are through what we have built.” Morris Museum, Morristown, NJ, through April 18, 2010. Info: 973-971-3700

China Prophecy: Shanghai – Exhibit of new skyscrapers in Shanghai and their relation to American visions of the skyscraper city in the early 20th century, especially in New York. Skyscraper Museum, New York City; through March 2010. Info: 212-968-1961