



GLEN RIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

October 2009 Vol. XXXII No. 2

THE GASLAMP

Illuminating Our Past

www.glenridgehistory.org



GLEN RIDGE'S WILDE SIDE

President's Letter

Glen Ridge has been home to more than a few individuals with unlikely passions. One of those was Edward Seymour Wilde. Our annual fall walking tour, on Saturday, October 17, will examine one of Wilde's passions, which has a good bit to do with the way Glen Ridge looks today.

Wilde was born in 1838 in a house at the corner of Bloomfield and Park Avenues, where The Reserve condominiums now stand. He graduated from Princeton, then studied the law and opened a law practice in Newark. Even as a young man, he was actively engaged in civic affairs as a member of the Olive Branch fraternal lodge in Montclair and helping incorporate Bloomfield's first streetcar line, the Newark, Bloomfield and Montclair Horse Car Railroad, in 1867.

The family of Edward Wilde's mother, Eliza Cook Cadmus, owned considerable farmland along Ridgewood Avenue in what was then the town of Bloomfield. After years of talk and construction, the New York and Greenwood Lake Railroad opened service between Montclair and Jersey City in 1872, and Wilde's property was valuable. He gave up his law practice and devoted the next three decades to designing a beautiful suburb, building streets and selling off lots in the neighborhood he called Chestnut Hill. To attract buyers he erected the train station at Benson Street that served Glen Ridge commuters until 2002. His family lived at 27 Wildwood Terrace from 1886 until 1904.

Wilde seems to have been an unusual man in several respects. In the 1890s, he was a free-silver man, a Democrat in what was then a very Republican town. As that issue faded away at the turn of the twentieth century, he took up a new cause, the Boer War between the British and Dutch-speaking Afrikaaner colonists in South Africa. The reason for Wilde's sympathy for the Afrikaaners is unknown, but his Newark office was the headquarters of the Boer Independence Association, and he wrote on the subject frequently.

Our October 17 walking tour will start at 2 pm at the former Benson Street station. Parking is available in the station lot. We will walk through the area Wilde developed, seeing some of Glen Ridge's loveliest homes and learning about the people who built them in the 1880s and 1890s. The walk will end at the New Jersey Transit station on Ridgewood Avenue, where we'll have refreshments and announce the winners of the Historical Society photo contest. The walk is open to non-members, and children are heartily invited.
Marc Levinson

Special Thanks

To

Lord & Grayson Associates, Inc.
Construction & Historical Preservation
For a donation to printing *The Gaslamp*

News from the Town Historian



High school yearbooks make up one of the more colorful collections in our Museum Room. They provide an annual glimpse into the lives of young adults as they navigate the years before graduation.

The first Glen Ridge High School yearbook was published in 1912. It measures about seven by ten inches and is called the *Senior Annual*. The book has 120 pages and each senior has a full page; the boys dressed in suits and ties and the girls in white blouses. Advertisements at the end of the book include jokes at the bottom of the page. For the next 18 years the simple design was nearly identical to the 1912 edition. The books have a literary feel to them with the inclusion of prize short stories and poems. The artwork is often pointedly humorous.

In 1926 students renamed the yearbook the *Glenalog*. The book was enlarged and hardbound. Snap shots were seen for the first time. The yearend summary of events includes a bit of code talk similar to yearbooks today. For nearly forty years the style, content and tone of the *Glenalog* remained virtually the same.

Over time, outside influences affected student lives. The 1918 book includes an honor roll list of Glen Ridge students in 'Uncle Sam's fighting forces'. The 1919 edition honors the memory of two teachers who died of influenza. The 1943 book shows a photo of high school boys in Company B 5th Battalion of the New Jersey State Guard and a somber poem about a classmate going off to war.

Then in 1963 the yearbook begins to show signs of rebellion. The faculty is moved to the back of the book with sarcastic comments posted above their pictures. The yearend review has veiled references to disagreements with academic and social policy. In 1967 the editors strove to completely reverse the basic format of the book "shifting from static, posed 'mug shots' to attention-focusing candid" and "cutting the amount of copy." The books are increasingly avant garde until 1981 with a return to the traditional format that is used today.

Student activities changed often. Early teams played football, baseball, basketball, tennis and track. Badminton, volley ball, archery, horseback riding, roller skating, modern dance and ping pong came and went. Student clubs like the Latin Club, International Relations Club, Junior Nurses, Service Squad, Varsity Club, Folk Dancers, Audio Visual Squad, Psychology Club, Radio Club and Model United Nations met contemporary interests and needs.

Musicians joined the stringed orchestra, marching band, choruses and glee club; budding writers published the *Comet*, *Pegasus* and *Journalist*; and actors took the stage in minstrel shows and *Our Town*. In 1954 students debated "Is McCarthyism Good for the Country?"

In 1958 the students dedicated the book to world peace saying "...we dedicate our yearbook to the dream of a great family embracing all nations, working hand in hand to make the world a better place." A member of the Class of 1959 recently donated a copy of the 1958 *Glenalog*. With its timely message of hope it is a welcome addition to the archives.

If you would like to donate a copy of the 1935, 1953 and/or 1999 *Glenalog* we would be happy to accept your gift. The Museum Room is open by appointment. If you would like to look at our yearbook collection or examine your house file please call Sally Meyer at (973) 239-2674.

Sally Meyer

Officers and Trustees

President	Marc Levinson	Trustee (2011)	Andrew Grisafi
Vice President	Karin Robinson	Trustee (2011)	Lana Keppel
Treasurer	Geoffrey Darby	Trustee (2011)	Alden Provost
Secretary	Martha Orbach	Trustee (2012)	Sarge Gardiner
Town Historian	Sally Meyer	Trustee (2012)	Margo Garrison
Trustee (2010)	Herb Addison	Trustee (2012)	Suzanne O'Connor
Trustee (2010)	Chuck Graziano	Ex-officio – Past President	Carolyn Badenhause
Trustee (2010)	Karen Palm	Ex-officio – Library Director	John Sitnik
		Ex-officio – Delegate LHSNJ	Gerry Addison

Editor's Note...The feature article in this issue is on a subject of timeless interest to a community with such a rich historical heritage. Glen Ridge resident, Suzanne O'Connor, a trained architect and teacher of art to children, describes the building boom that followed World War II and how the new houses differed from most of the existing homes built from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the war. Her conclusions may well change our perceptions of these newer homes in the years to come. Members are urged to contribute similar articles on aspects of Glen Ridge history.

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

The New vs. The Old: Glen Ridge and the Building Boom of the 1950's

When you mention "Glen Ridge" to many people, they think of old houses, tree lined streets and gas lamps. If you press them further to describe the types of houses, many people will say "grand colonials" and "large Victorians". Driving down Ridgewood Avenue, you pass large older houses, exactly what you would expect according to popular thought. But if you look closer you will see that there are other styles of houses mixed in that were built in the mid-20th century during the post-war housing boom in Glen Ridge.

What do these houses look like and where can you find them? Much post war housing, that is, houses built in the mid to late 1940's through the 1950's, was influenced by many social, cultural and economic events as well as by building innovator William Levitt, whose production-line houses and planned communities changed the face of many American towns.

Levittown on Long Island was the first mass-produced suburb, built with low cost and fast turn around time as the key factors. The end of WWII brought home 16 million G.I.'s from either Europe or the Pacific. The housing industry had fallen off rapidly during the war and there was enormous pent up demand for new low cost housing. G.I.'s were coming home and living with their parents or in rented attics, basements or other types of converted outbuildings.

"Here in Glen Ridge you were allowed to rent out your attic to a G.I.", according to local resident Carol Honeman, who lived here in the 1950's on Ridgewood Avenue. "I remember as a child we had a family living upstairs who my parents rented out to during that time. My mother had always said we were allowed to because of the war."

The Reynolds Development

In January, 1950 the headline of the *Glen Ridge Paper* reads, "Council Approves Layout For Reynolds Development". The heirs of George Reynolds owned 13 acres at 78 Ridgewood Avenue and sold it to Clifton developer, Ben Gallison. He proposed to build 46 "standard" houses in the Dutch colonial, Georgian colonial, English or ranch-style homes. They would have an open plan, a living room, dining room, kitchen and two bedrooms all on the first floor and a basement, garage and finished attic. These houses employed much of the same building technology that Levitt had become well known for, including standardized designs to take advantage of 4' x 8' sheetrock panels.

Work on the development began in the summer of 1950. The builder requested that the new streets be named Reynolds Road and Chestnut Hill Place. Reynolds Road to honor the name of the late George Reynolds who was called by the paper, "...a civic minded citizen." Chestnut Hill perpetuated the name of the former Erie Railroad station, later the Benson Street station (now closed).

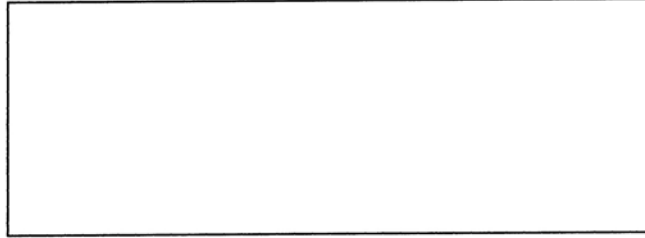
By the end of August, 1950, 23 houses were in development but the developer announced that "standardization was out" and each home would be different in size and plan, with prices varying from \$17,500 and up. However, the modern floor plan and use of modern building technology would remain. The demand for "modern", even in a town with many old houses like Glen Ridge, created a conflict. Progress is usually good, but it can be very bad for preserving the past. In the 1950's and 60's Glen Ridge, as much of the rest of the country, found itself between the old and the new.

Many houses which today would be 100 years old and considered historic, were only 50 and 60 years old then and considered out of date and obsolete. Some of the oldest houses were dilapidated and had fallen into disrepair. Builders were looking at these houses built on large lots as prime targets for sub-division and modernization.

Modern architecture and the International Style, as well as the well known construction of the Richardson house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in the Usonian style (1951) on Chestnut Hill Place helped usher in a phase of building that appealed to many new residents of the town. More lots on Ridgewood, Linden, Forest Avenue, Stonehouse Road, and Wildwood Terrace were the sites of modern style houses. In 1955 the last dirt road in Glen Ridge was finally paved, given the name of Astor Place, and the town granted permits for ten houses in a similar style to be built on smaller lots along the street.


These houses used the standardized components to their best advantage and seemed to lend their open plans to a more modern lifestyle. They were built with modern appliances, changes in family life including the use of television! Today these houses have withstood the test of time and have a beauty and simplicity of their own. Just as the town created the Historical Preservation Commission to maintain the character of our neighborhoods and preserve older historical houses, these houses are now 50 and 60 year old and will become tomorrow's historical homes to be preserved.

Suzanne O'Connor



NONPROFIT
ORG
US POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO 710
CALDWELL NJ

GLEN RIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
PO Box 164
Glen Ridge, NJ 07028



Coming Events

October 17, 2009 – GRHS Walking tour of buildings developed by resident Edward Seymour Wilde. See Marc Levinson’s President’s Letter for details.

October 17, 2009 -- Family History Conference. Cherry Hill, NJ. Details at www.MAFHC.org

October 19, 2009 – Lecture on Victorian architecture by Maureen O’Brien at the Montclair Women’s

Club. For details call Catherine at 973-762-6453

November 16, 2009 – Lecture on the architecture of Stanford White by his grandson, Sam White, at the Montclair Women’s Club. Call Catherine 973-762-6453

December 3, 2009 – GRHS Holiday Party; details to come

News Briefs

Since February, 17, 2009 the New Jersey Historical Society in Newark has been closed because of a “funding crisis” and is now open only by appointment. To schedule a visit call 973-596-8500, extension 244.

The latest news about the fate of the Bell Labs building in Holmdel is encouraging. Designed by Eero Saarinen, it is considered a major work of mid-20th century modernism. Its present owner, Somerset Development LLC of Holmdel, submitted a proposal to the town dated July 30, 2009, to retain a portion of the original building and develop the building and site for mixed use, including business, corporate, medical and professional offices, and retail, hotel, and residential facilities. It also conserves some of the original site plan, considered to be a masterpiece in its own right. This may be the best hope for saving at least part of one of New Jersey’s greatest architectural treasures.