



GLEN RIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

September 2012 Vol. XXXV No. 1

THE GASLAMP

Illuminating Our Past

www.glenridgehistory.org



President's Letter



The word is out. The Glen Ridge Historical Society is moving! We are relocating our museum room and archives to the second floor of the Boiling Springs Savings Bank at 222 Ridgewood Avenue. Originally known as Glen Ridge Hall, the building was constructed in the popular Richardsonian style for the real estate developer Asabel G. Darwin (1827-1892). Darwin built 26 houses in the center of town and, with others, the train station and the Glen Ridge Club that stood across Ridgewood Avenue.

His Glen Ridge Hall project, which was a rumor in March 1888 and opened to its first public event in March 1890, provided a large civic meeting space over a ground floor with Darwin's offices in front and a room for the Library Association behind. Real estate broker Nathan Russell Sr. occupied the offices from 1906 until 1912, when the Glen Ridge Trust Company bought the building and moved the library upstairs. As Sally Meyer describes on Page 2, a brick annex was added in 1923 to provide space for the post office. A succession of banks has each altered the building and annex.

This is a wonderful opportunity for us. We will have more visibility, easier access and, of course, more space. The rooms need relatively little restoration, but we will need to invest some funds to make the space suitable. The existing fluorescent lighting is not proper for the study and preservation of our archives. We also plan to restore the original raised ceilings and to purchase furniture. Our goal is to raise at least \$15,000 to create a construction and relocation fund.

The Historical Society has set up four categories for donations, and the names of participating donors will be included in a permanent display in the new space. The categories are:

- The Robert S. Rudd Circle \$1,000 and higher
- The Edward Page Mitchell Circle \$500 to \$999
- The Asabel G. Darwin Circle \$250 to \$499
- The Nathan Russell Circle \$100 to \$249

We hope you can help us with this endeavor. The bank has begun its construction work. We expect to follow them so that we can move to the new space later this year. **Karin Robinson**

Save the Date

Fall Walking Tour

Sunday, October 21, 2012

Learn about some of Glen Ridge's most interesting and historic houses on Lincoln Street, Winsor Place, Hillside Avenue, Appleton Place, and along Ridgewood Avenue toward the Boiling Springs Bank building

**Meet at the corner of
Lincoln Street and Douglas Road
at 1:30 pm**

Glen Ridge Gets Its First Bank

News from the Town Historian



On September 5, 1912, the Glen Ridge Trust Company opened its doors at 222 Ridgewood Avenue as the first commercial bank in Glen Ridge. Its founder and first president, Abijah R. Brewer, was a retired vice president of Western Union and the second mayor of Glen Ridge from 1902-1906. Its central location in the former Glen Ridge Hall building made banking convenient for the nearly 3,700 residents in town.

1912 was a year of significant progress in the community, and the initiative to open a local bank seemed warranted. Postal delivery began, double tracking was completed by the Lackawanna Railroad and a water distribution system was instituted. The Fire Department bought the first motor driven apparatus in New Jersey. The Literary Association was incorporated as the Free Public Library and the Glen Ridge Country Club opened its clubhouse at the north end of Ridgewood Avenue.

A handout on opening day promised three percent interest for checking accounts and four percent for savings accounts. It claimed "ladies will

receive special attention... with a private room furnished for their use and every effort to make them comfortable." Two bookkeeping machines were installed in 1918 and, thereafter, instead of presenting their passbooks to be balanced, customers received monthly statements.

In 1924 the Trust Company came to the rescue of the post office which had outgrown its space in the adjacent railroad station. The bank's board of directors agreed to construct a large brick addition at the rear of their building to serve as the local post office until its relocation across the street in 1937. The addition remained part of subsequent bank companies until PNC Bank vacated the building in 2011. This summer it was demolished by Boiling Springs Savings Bank.

During World War I the Trust Company handled subscriptions for millions of dollars in Liberty and Victory Bonds, and during World War II served as a depository for ration coupons. Over the years until its merger with National Newark & Essex Bank in 1967, the board of directors of the Glen Ridge Trust Company included six Mayors, five Councilmen, and seven members of the Board of Education. A 35th anniversary booklet entitled *Woven into the Fabric of Glen Ridge* recognized that these gentlemen who worked diligently for the good of the borough brought the same civic minded spirit to the running of their local bank.

Sally Meyer

The Museum of the Glen Ridge Historical Society is located in the Glen Ridge Congregational Church. It is open by appointment. Please call Sally Meyer at (973) 239-2674.

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Editor's Note.... Chances are that even if you are a long-time resident of Glen Ridge – in fact even if you grew up here – you don't know that one of the most famous entertainers of the 20th century lived here briefly. In the feature article on Page 3 in this issue Robin Westervelt tells that story. In addition, the second in the new series *Living in a Historic Home* by Talia Schaffer and George Musser begins on Page 4. It's always gratifying when a sensitive family buys a 19th century house that had fallen on hard times and then after diligent research proceeds to restore it to very near to its original state.

Herb Addison -- herb.addison@verizon.net

A Steinway and a Future Legendary Pianist on Ridgewood Avenue

Every house has generations of stories to tell. I once saw the movie *The Red Violin*, which tells the life story of an Italian-made violin, portraying the stories of its owners and how the instrument figured into their lives. It's the social history of material objects that links us with the past and – oh, if these walls could talk! I recently spoke with Mr. Jay Mills, Jr. about his experiences growing up in Glen Ridge and the time that Liberace lived with the Mills family at 11 Ridgewood Avenue and played the family's grand piano.

The Mills family moved to Glen Ridge in 1939, when young Jay was eight years old. His father, Jay Mills, Sr., was the leader of the nationally renowned Jay Mills Orchestra. In the late 1930s, Jay Mills Sr., along with Dick Powell – actor in numerous films including *In The Navy*, and radio shows like the *Red Skelton Hour*, and the *Jack Benny Program* – were Warner Brothers emcees for live performances across the country. In 1939 the Jay Mills Orchestra performed a regular gig at the Edgewater Beach Hotel on the north side of Chicago, with jazz vocalists Miss Dale Evans (the future Mrs. Roy Rogers) and Miss Vivian Blaine (who would play the original role of Miss Adelaide in the Broadway performance of *Guys and Dolls*).

Mr. Mills suddenly found himself without a piano player and, on a tip about a young pianist in Milwaukee, made the trip north to the Pabst Theater to check out this possible new addition to his Orchestra. Mr. Mills found the piano player an absolute delight, and hired the young Walter Liberace at once. Walter, as the Mills family called him, played with the Jay Mills Orchestra for about a year in Chicago. With dreams of becoming a classical pianist, Walter found a classically trained instructor in New York City and moved East. He asked Jay if he might live with the Mills family in Glen Ridge while he worked on his musical training.

The Mills' living room at 11 Ridgewood Avenue housed a beautiful Steinway piano, at which Liberace practiced his artistry. For a year and a half in 1939 and 1940, the future Vegas showman lived with the Mills family, took classical lessons in New York, and practiced at the

family's grand piano. Looking for a paying gig, Mr. Mills hooked Liberace up with a job playing piano at Pal's Cabin in West Orange. At a wage of \$65.00 per week plus dinner, dressed in full tails, Liberace entertained Pal's Cabin patrons Monday through Saturday.



Steinway of the same vintage as the one in the home of Jay Mills, Sr.

After Liberace had lived with the family about a year, Mr. Mills pulled him aside one night and said, "Walter, you're not really a concert pianist, you're a showman," and suggested a new direction for the performer's career ambitions. Jay had formed a local band and played at Pal's Cabin and Mayfair Farms so that he could work closer to home – though Liberace did not continue to play there at that time. During these years, Mr. Mill's career was shifting from musician and performer to talent agent.

By the early 1940s, Liberace's career as a supper club act and showman was taking off, and he left the comforts of Glen Ridge for a wider audience. The Mills' family continued to stay in touch with their friend Walter, and in 1955 Jay Jr., then stationed with the Army in Yucca Flats, Nevada, attended a Liberace performance in Las Vegas. Backstage after the show, the old friends caught up and remembered old times. Jay Mills, Jr., like his father, went on to a long career in show business, which is a story for another *Gaslamp*. The family's Steinway, played by both Jay and his mother Helen Mills long after the young Walter had moved on, was sold in 1955. I wonder if the piano's subsequent owners ever learned of its unique history, and wonder who has tickled those ivories since the day Walter Liberace sat down at that piano bench and crafted his fantastical performances.

Robin Westervelt

LIVING IN A HISTORIC HOME

Restoring and Living in a 19th Century Gem

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

We moved into 80 Glen Ridge Avenue in 2002, attracted by its dignified, spacious rooms and found it a fascinating building. It was clearly a historic house, with elaborate moldings, high ceilings, and beautiful details like steam-turned mahogany banisters and honey-colored original pine floors. But it had also, just as clearly, fallen on hard times, with missing doorframes, cheap doors, and hacked-away structural beams. We had the usual historic-homeowner questions: who had built this house, when? How had it altered so much over the years? There were also bigger mysteries. Why was an exterior window in the kitchen hidden behind the drywall? Why did the builders put on an addition almost as soon as the house was built? Above all, what was an Italianate-style townhouse doing on a suburban lot?

Well, if you give a historian of Victorian culture (Talia) and a science journalist with a history of investigative reporting (George) a mystery like this, you will get an answer. We have spent years researching the history of the house, going through census records, dusty deeds, stacks of old phone books, and crumbling maps. We deciphered handwritten deeds at the Essex County Courthouse and blew the dust off 19th-century tax records in a locked storage room in the basement of Bloomfield Town Hall. Sometimes we found things purely by accident. When preparing to install solar panels, we discovered that the original 19th-century tin roof was still there, in good condition, under four layers of asphalt shingles. In the process of doing our research, we realized we had not just a history of our house but of the entire town, a window into the ebb and flow of the neighborhood and the local economy.

Our house was built in 1868 by a carpenter named Jacob Reynolds, who was living in Brooklyn when his mother died and he inherited half the land that is now Glen Ridge Avenue. The house he built was small, because he had a small



80 Glen Ridge Avenue in 1906
Picture from files of realtor Nathan Russell

family, with just one child who survived infancy, and his elderly father. Reynolds clearly took pride in building well for his family, installing well-designed wooden trim and a showpiece central staircase. The property had an orchard, a carriage house, and a grape arbor.

It occurred to us that if Reynolds had used a commercially available plan, we might be able to find it and discover the original configuration of the house. We scrutinized a dozen mid-19th century architectural manuals, to no effect, but we did discover something important: the unusual Italianate details of our house were frequently used by an architect based in Brooklyn. Following this clue, we came across materials collected for the Fort Greene Historic District and found Reynolds's name associated with a house on Cumberland Street. We quickly discovered that the house is still standing -- and it was a dead ringer for our house! And to top it off, the house is now occupied by the official historian of Fort Greene, who welcomed us into his home.

We have always joked that Glen Ridge and Montclair are Brooklyn West—so many people here used to live there. We never suspected that this trend goes back to Civil War times. Reynolds's Fort Greene house was a sort of first draft for ours, with a very similar floor plan. In fact, he was like any person who makes a living by flipping houses, and he moved between these two locales several times. He sold our house in 1881 to move back to Brooklyn, perhaps to help his newly-widowed daughter, who had two little girls to support. This sale marked just the beginning of the house's tumultuous history, and a few very interesting residents.

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The English family owned the house for 20 years at the turn of the century. They had three daughters, including Clara, who was a bookkeeper, and Gertrude, who was a stenographer; we like to imagine these 'New Women' striding off to their jobs in their shirtwaists.

During World War I, an editor named Lee F. Hartman rented the house for a few years. Hartman, it turns out, is the man who introduced mah jongg to America. Interestingly, the publisher Alfred Harcourt lived across Glen Ridge Avenue during this time (he would start Harcourt, Brace, & Co. in 1919, and published Sinclair Lewis). We wonder whether Harcourt and Hartman might have been friends and might have had a little literary coterie here.

The Braun family was the most tragic and memorable of the house's earlier inhabitants. A hardworking working-class immigrant family, Peter and Emma Braun were the children of German parents. Braun was a butcher who bought the house in 1928. They had six sons, but three died in their early 20s. The children's jobs were tough: a gardener, a laborer on the railroad, a meat-cutter, a chemist's assistant. Peter Jr. died on January 14, 1931 and his brother Frederick died just seven months later, in July, while the youngest, Otto, died in 1937. The family sold off some of the land but they still went bankrupt and the house was repossessed by the bank, remaining vacant until 1940.

The Braun family's difficulties show that the neighborhood had fallen on hard times. In the second half of the 20th century, our house entered a new phase: subdivided, with cheaper materials and do-it-yourself repairs, it lost many of its historic details, like its cupola and its original front porch. It became a two-family house around 1955, and eventually individual rooms were rented out. A notable occupant was Karlis Osis, a Latvian psychologist who was fascinated by occult phenomena and became

director of research at the American Society for Psychical Research in New York. We wonder if this house made him, too, wish to know more about its ghosts.



80 Glen Ridge Avenue today

Over the decade that we have owned 80 Glen Ridge Avenue, we have tried to bring it a little closer to Jacob Reynold's dream home of 1868. We have replaced the lost pocket doors, rebuilt the front porch to match the way it looked in the Nathan Russell photograph, and recreated historically accurate doors and moldings, thanks to the artistry of an extraordinary carpenter, Eric Weiss. Number 80 will always bear some of the scars gained in its long hard life. But it rewards us, sometimes, with reminders of daily life for ordinary folk whose stories are just as historically valuable as those who live in fancier relics: the 1940s-style linoleum in the attic where we suspect some of the Braun sons lived, the prayer card we found shoved into a doorframe, the rickety wooden chute in the basement where coal was delivered in winter. It rewards us, too, by reminding us of fascinating stories about everyday people trying to make their way in the Glen Ridge of the past.

**Talia Schaffer
George Musser**



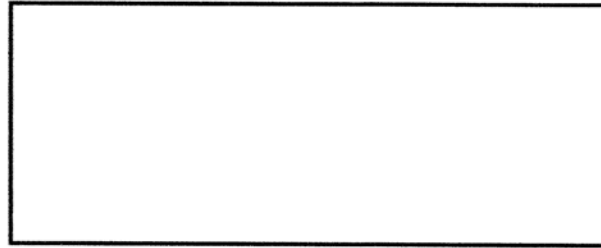
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FALL WALKING TOUR OCTOBER 21, 2012

Current and Coming Events

Continuing through August 1, 2013 – Princeton Art Museum installation of 12 monumental sculptures by Ai Weiwei in front of Robertson Hall, home of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. Ai Weiwei is one of China's most prolific and controversial artists. His work in recent years has included collaboration on the design of the Beijing Olympic Stadium, or "Bird's Nest," for the 2008 Olympic Games.

Continuing through November 5, 2012 – *Century of the Child: Growing by Design 1900-2000* – Museum of Modern Art, New York – A survey of 20th century design for children and overview of the modernist preoccupation with children and childhood as a paradigm for progressive design thinking. Includes school architecture, clothing, playgrounds, toys and games, children's hospitals and safety equipment, nurseries, furniture, and books.

Architectural Exhibit

Continuing through February 13, 2013 – Guggenheim Museum, New York – *A Long Awaited Tribute: Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian House and Pavilion* – On October 22, 1953, *Sixty Years of Living Architecture: The Work of Frank Lloyd Wright* opened in New York on the site where the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum would eventually be built. Two Frank Lloyd Wright-designed buildings were constructed specifically to house the exhibition: a temporary pavilion and a fully furnished, two-bedroom, model Usonian house representing Wright's organic solution for modest, middle-class dwellings. Glen Ridge's Frank Lloyd Wright house on Chestnut Hill Road is a Usonian design (see article in the April 2012 *Gaslamp* on this house). This presentation, comprised of selected materials from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Archives, pays homage to these two structures in the 1953 exhibit.