



GLEN RIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
THE GASLAMP



Illuminating Our Past

April 2024 Vol. XLVI No. 4

President's Letter

Looking Back to the Future

HAVE YOU EVER been to Penn Station in New York during peak hours? My wife avoids it at all costs during her commute, but, to me, a native New Yorker, there is something magical about it. I'm intrigued by the crowds of people, each with their own destination, each the main character in their storyline, but only a background actor in mine. Where are they heading to? Where are they coming from? What lives do they lead and will they cross paths with me again?

A related thought relates to my home. Our homes live in a different way than you and I, but they do have a past and, until demolished, a future. Even skyscrapers get re-used. Old windows and curtain walls are replaced with energy-efficient glass to bring new life to old structures. Structures that were once offices may get a new use as apartments, as commercial real estate stands partially empty due to a post-COVID culture built on remote work and Zoom meetings, and can be repurposed to create affordable places to live.

Preserving architecture, no matter the scale, is a theme that relates to Glen Ridge. Have you looked through your house file at the Historical Society archives? Did you discover information on a previous resident? Our houses are built and then get modified and evolve over time as their owners see fit. You are a future ex-resident of your house. There may be people years from now who do research into their home and find your name as a past resident. If you haven't done so, please stop by the museum to fill out a resident form, which will be kept with your house information.

Organizations such as the Glen Ridge Historical Society live and

evolve, too. In April, my term as president ends and I will pass the torch to someone new. I've met a lot of people I would not have known if it weren't for the Historical Society. One of my favorite activities during my tenure was the return of the gingerbread decorating event. I recall attending this event in 2019 prior to the pandemic and having such a wonderful time. I was happy to bring it back in 2023. My family once again had a sweet time, as did the other attendees.

It wouldn't have been possible without the generous help from past board member Megan Connolly.

Another favorite of mine was our collaboration with the High School History Club to bring in a re-enactor of William Livingston. Learning about local history engages us with a more meaningful understanding of the world around us. The students represent the future life of Glen Ridge and of the Historical Society. The event was extra-special for me as my son is a member of the History Club. I would like to thank Dave Majewski, the club's faculty advisor, for reaching out to the Historical Society and planning the event.

I also want to thank Karin Robinson, whom I collaborated with to self-publish *Glen Ridge: Living in History*, a book outlining the many architectural styles throughout our borough. And I can't not mention the official town historian, Sally Meyer. She has been an excellent resource, a sounding

board, and an immeasurable encyclopedia of Glen Ridge history.

If the Historical Society is a train, my job as president was to keep it moving forward and on the tracks. I may be moving to the passenger section, but I'll still be enjoying the ride.

Nicholas Colello



IN THIS ISSUE

- What's up with train-station names?
- Neoclassically classy
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News From the Town Historian

When Chestnut Trees Covered the Ridge

ON OUR FACEBOOK page in November, I characterized the former Benson Street Station as the Chestnut Hill Station, and commenters asked why.

In the 1800s American chestnut trees made up nearly 50 percent of the northeastern hardwood forest. Glen Ridge boasted extensive stands of the trees, as several residents later reminisced. In 1967 Addison Roubaud recalled when frost opened the chestnut burrs on five large trees on the Langstroth farm on Washington Street; the next morning, he found “the ground well-covered by the largest and finest chestnuts. Not one that I ever picked up had a worm inside. We ate them raw, roasted and boiled, but the roasted ones were the most delectable.” Dana Mitchell claimed over 50 chestnut trees on the family property on Ridgewood Avenue near Baldwin Street. He wrote in 1974: “In the fall people came out from New York City on the train, got off at the station and would come to the Mitchell house, sit on the porch and eat their picnic lunches! Then, unless asked to leave, they

would pick up stones and try to hit the ripe chestnuts or would shake the trees to make the nuts fall.” After a night of wind, Mitchell added, he could pick up a bushel of chestnuts in 20 minutes.

Although chestnut trees flourished everywhere in town, the area near Mitchell’s house was known as Chestnut Hill, and when the Montclair Railroad (later the Erie) began service in 1872, it chose that name for its local stop. The first station was a small shed on Ridgewood Avenue. Two years lat-

er, it was moved to Highland Avenue. Finally, in 1891, the developer Edward Wilde built the existing building.

In 1904, a parasitic fungus that came to be known as chestnut blight was accidentally introduced to North America. By 1940, it had killed an estimated four billion trees. Very few survived, although today there are efforts to bring back a blight-resistant variety.

I haven’t been able to pinpoint when the Chestnut Hill Station became the Benson Street Station, but in 1952 the town council voted to “bring back the name” for its newest street in the south end: Chestnut Hill Place, built on the rear portion of George Reynolds’s former estate at 78 Ridgewood Ave. A final reminiscence from Ruth Easty Minasian in 1978 brings the chestnut history full circle: “I remember walking out to Reynolds Woods at the south end of Ridgewood Avenue to gather chestnuts. We would come home with large burlap bags filled with the small sweet nuts and later roast them by the fire.”

Sally Meyer



Chestnut Hill aka Benson Street Station circa 1910



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THE GASLAMP

The Gaslamp is published four times per year by the Glen Ridge Historical Society, P.O. Box 164, Glen Ridge, NJ 07028-0164. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: Glen Ridge Historical Society, P.O. Box 164, Glen Ridge, NJ 07028-0164.

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Our Favorite Houses

Mansion on the Hill

ONE OF MY favorite houses in town is 190 Ridgewood Ave. It is set back from the street just south of the high school. The site is used to its best advantage. Because the house is set so far back from the street and because the volume of the house spreads out horizontally, it does not have an imposing presence on Ridgewood Avenue. The design is focused less on the view from below than the view from above. It feels as if the front of the house is looking out over your head at something only the residents can see.

Our files for this house do not show the construction date, just the water hookup in 1898. The architect was Warrington G. Lawrence, who also designed Borough Hall in Roselle, the First National Bank in Red Bank, and houses throughout the Northeast. Born in 1868 in Baltimore, Lawrence went to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and got his start at the iconic firm McKim, Mead, and White. He also did a stint with renowned architect Richard Morris Hunt. When he set up his own office, he was well prepared to design Neoclassical buildings, a popular style of the time.

The most striking element of the house is the long colonnade which runs the full width of the house. Often such a design is characterized as Colonial, but this house borrows more closely from Greek and Roman traditions than from colonial America. The columns are unfluted Roman Doric, a very basic classical column. They support a heavy, undecorated cornice.

Our files include photos that show a porte-cochère at the right end of the porch, which extends the colonnade even further. It was taken down sometime after 1920. The same photos show that the left bay of the colonnade was

enclosed as a sunroom. Although Neoclassical houses usually have two-story porches with two-story columns, here the columns are only one story. I think Lawrence made this choice because the house is already high up on the hill and a two-story porch might have overwhelmed the site. And rather than having a two-story porch roof projecting over the second-floor windows and darkening the rooms, the single-story porch provides a wonderful second-floor balcony right outside the bedrooms.



The files also show that a balustrade originally ran the full width of the porch roof. Photos put the demolition date sometime between 1920 and 1952. That is a shame. The balustrade reduced the visual bulk of the porch, adding a recognizable human scale that put the rest of the house in perspective.

The unusual half-circle porch at the center, despite being one-story, is grand. It is pushed forward, reaching for the view we cannot see from the street level. The half-circle is supported by four columns, with the side columns connected to matching Neoclassical posts. The colonnade along the porch continues across the center of the house as if the half-circle weren't even there.

A grand entry door is flanked by grand windows that sit in the shad-

ow of the porch. On the second floor, the façade is essentially symmetrical and very simple. Long stretches of wall are broken up by seven elements: three simple, well-proportioned double-hung windows; a pair of doors at the far right in place of a matching window, providing access to the porch roof; a Palladian window at the center; and two vertical oval windows set in the expanse of the walls between the windows. These ovals have four keystones and ornate mullion patterns.

The central Palladian window is the most Neoclassical element on the house. A standard Palladian window has a tall arched window in the center and smaller vertical windows on each side. Here it has been elaborately decorated with details specific to the Neoclassical style. The center window is aligned with pilasters below and a keystone above. Two more pilasters support the ends of a cornice with a blank panel rather than clapboards above. The arched window has mullions that can be traced in different sized pointed arches.

In contrast to the cornice of the porch, the cornice of the house is large and aggressively Neoclassical. It has enormous dentil moldings, perhaps to be seen better from the street. The Yankee gutters are nicely hidden above the cornice. Centered on the pediment is a third oval window exactly the same size as the others. Two dormers cut into the slope of the shallow hipped roof. They have a segmented pediment (a shallow arched roof) rather than a peaked pediment. In a façade full of curves, it was the perfect choice.

When the owners extensively restored this house, the Historical Society honored it with the Preservation Award in 2017. **Karin Robinson**

The Glen Back When

curated by the officers and trustees

Our Local Microbrewer

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY recently purchased a blob-top beer bottle on eBay inscribed “Vincenzo Nicaastro Glen Ridge New Jersey.” Nicaastro appears in the 1903 town directory at 245 Baldwin St., now addressed as 123 Highland Ave. We asked our local bottle expert, Connor Rush, for comment:

This is not a bottle I’ve seen before. I thought I had a relatively complete set of the known pre-Prohibition bottles from Glen Ridge, but this one is new to me. There were only a few local bottling operations circa 1900, and those based in Glen Ridge were very small and short-lived. A.B. Lembeck bottled soda, mineral water, and possibly beer. Bossert and Rose ran a saloon in town, the only one I’m aware of, and sold bottled beer. Petro Scola was fined by the town for selling beer without a permit.

The bottle would have been filled up by the bottler Vincenzo Nicaastro, likely using rented bottling apparatus, which was available from “bottle jobbers” in New York, who acted as middlemen between the local bottlers and the factories and breweries. Most of the local demand for beer was met by brewer-

ies in Newark or New York: Lembeck and Betz Eagle Brewery, Feigenspan’s, Kastner’s, Krueger, Hensler, Ballantine, and others. These breweries sold large kegs to the bottlers in each town, who bottled the beer into bottles like these to sell to consumers. Some breweries bottled their own beer on site at the brewery, but many did not, and that was the niche that bottlers such as Nicaastro filled.

Bottlers also applied paper labels, but after all this time you almost never find them, so it’s impossible to say precisely which beer Vincenzo was bottling. The popular brew at the time was a style called “champagne beer.” Light and refreshing, it was similar to a saison beer or what today might be marketed as a Belgian farmhouse ale. It was a break from the darker and heavier stouts, bocks, and porters that had been the standard. My friend Tod von Mechow maintains a database on the

history of beer at sodasandbeers.com.

Many bottles ended up buried in dumps or privies and recovered over the years, as I did in George Musser’s backyard a decade ago. [Editor’s note: For a video of how Rush and his partner dug out Musser’s privy, see Hidden Midden at youtu.be/C6zRUIk3pCE.] I haven’t done any digging in years, but I am still very actively buying and selling bottles, and I recently moved to Virginia to work at an antiques auction house, Jeffrey S. Evans and Associates, where I specialize in antique pottery and glass, primarily bottles.

Congrats on a great find!

Connor Rush



Send Us Your Stories

DO YOU HAVE a story, an old photo, or even just a thought about history to share? Please email us at glenridgehs@gmail.com.

The Glen Ridge Historical Society is grateful to our 2023–2024 sponsors and patrons for their generous support. If you’d like to join this illustrious group, see the membership link on the opposite page.

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Events Calendar

curated by Tom Coleman

Glen Ridge Historical Society

Annual meeting and spring social. Please join us on Thursday, April 25, at 7:30 p.m. at the Women's Club of Glen Ridge, 219 Ridgewood Ave. Our guests of honor will be Christopher Matthews and Maisa Taha of Montclair State University. Their lecture will be entitled "Re-Indigenizing New Jersey." Matthews is a historical archaeologist who studies the anthropology of race, Native North Americans, and historical and public archaeology. Taha is a linguistic anthropologist. Prior to their lecture, members will vote for new officers and trustees. The nominees are Christine Brennan for president, Susan Link for secretary, and Tiffany Ludwig, Nicholas Colello, Kathryn O'Connor, and James O'Grady for trustees. Officer appointments would be for 2024 through 2026. (The vice president and treasurer positions are not up for election this year.)

Archives hours. The Terry S. Webster Archives is open the second Saturday of the month from 10 a.m. to noon. It maintains an architectural and historical file on nearly every building in town. You can also buy merchandise (see back cover). We are located on the third floor of the Glen Ridge Congregational Church on Clark Street. To visit at other times, make an appointment with Sally Meyer at glenridgehs@gmail.com or (973) 239-2674.

Neighboring Towns

Montclair History Center. Come on May 19 for a guided tour of the historic Israel Crane House. The Montclair History Center has too many other great programs to list here, so keep checking the website. montclairhistory.org

Montclair Art Museum. The exhibit *Century: 100 Years of Black Art at MAM* surveys African American artworks collected by the museum. Through June 23. montclairartmuseum.org

Farther Afield

Newark Museum of Art. *The Story of Newark Fashion: Atelier to Runway* exam-

tions is a broad survey to celebrate the centennial of one of the leading sculptors of 20th-century America. Through July 31. zimmerli.rutgers.edu

Grey Art Gallery, New York University. *Americans in Paris: Post War France, 1946–1962* focuses on the expatriate artists working in Paris during the post-war period. Through July 20. greyartgallery.nyu.edu



Archaeologist Christopher Matthews (left) and anthropologist Maisa Taha (right) will speak on April 25. Photos by Mike Peters, Montclair State University

American Museum of Natural History. Visit the museum's recently refurbished Northwest Coast Hall, featuring one of the world's finest collections of artifacts and material culture from indigenous communities of the Pacific Northwest. amnh.org

New York Botanical Gardens, Bronx. *Wonderland: Curious Nature* opens May 18 and will feature plantings, installations, and historical artifacts in the gardens, conservatory, and library inspired by *Alice In Wonderland*. nybg.org

ines Newark's impact on the world of fashion. Through June 2. *Bony Ramirez: Cattleya* opens April 18 and will feature surrealist works of the Dominican artist. newarkmuseumart.org

Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick. *George Segal: Themes and Varia-*

tions is a major retrospective of the ceramic sculptures, paintings, and weavings of the famous Japanese abstractionist. Through July 28. noguchi.org

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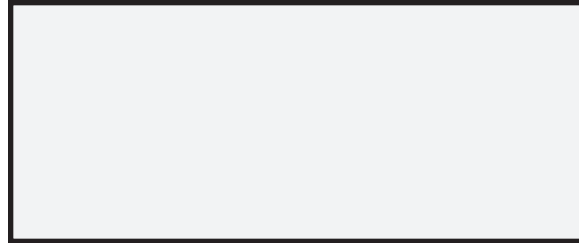
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ANNUAL MEETING AND LECTURE
APRIL 25, 7:30 P.M.
WOMEN'S CLUB

Glen Ridge Historical Society Catalog

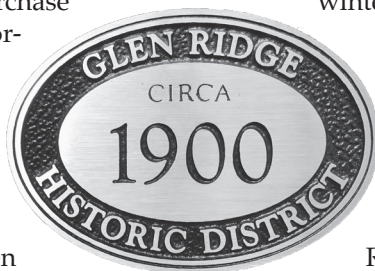
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lamp in spring, summer, autumn, and winter. \$1 each, four for \$3



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For all ages. \$15

Holiday ornaments. A beautiful custom brass ornament featuring the iconic image of a Glen Ridge gas lamp is available for \$15. Each ornament comes in a red presentation box and includes



a brochure on town history. We also still offer the older gazebo and train-station ornaments for \$15.

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