

HISTORICAL & PRESERVATION NEWS

President's Message by Brian Armstrong

The topic of June's meeting presentation, "Researching the History of Your House," is of great interest to me. As the son of an architect, I have always found buildings very interesting. When I was a kid, I would explore the ruins of old mills and houses near my house wondering who lived there and what happened over the years in the building. Rarely would anyone have good information about these old buildings. Most records were closed to the public and not indexed.



Recently, through the use of various sources, I have figured out where the original Dave Armstrong homestead stood in South River. For years I thought that the house must have stood at the end of Armstrong Avenue. Through researching the deeds and reviewing real estate maps, I determined that the house actually stood at the corner of Augusta Street and Whitehead Avenue (originally River Road). My great grandfather bought lots 2 through 8 of the Samuel W. Booraem tract and established a farm. He sold these lots off in the early

Today things have changed for the better due to access, organization, and automation of public records and historical collections. A homeowner or any person interested in a building has a number of sources to help them research the history of a building. Real estate maps, as well as Sanborn Fire maps provide a pictorial bird's eye view of the property. Old photographs donated to historical societies and libraries provide a visual record of buildings. Deeds and other documents provide the description of lots and the names of the people that had owned the property. Census records can provide detailed information about the people who lived in the houses.

1900s to Alexander Schack and others. Schack built the Riverside Hotel/Schack's Saloon and his outdoor grounds on the site. Later the site would become the location of the Ria-Mar Restaurant and parking lot. I have a picture of the old homestead on my wall at home.

Again, as an architect's son, I must admit that the Ria-Mar is a much more attractive building than the David Armstrong homestead; however, I can't help but think of the memories associated with this homestead and Riverside Hotel that are forever part of this location in South River.

Website Spotlight



The South River Historical & Preservation Society website enjoyed a banner year in 2009 with more than 21,000 visits to its pages, but 2010 may be even better: during the first five months, there have already been over 10,000 visits! While most visitors are from the United States, recent statistics show interest from such diverse places as Ireland, Slovakia, Denmark, Sweden, the United Arab Emirates, Canada, Belarus, India, the United Kingdom, Nigeria, Italy, France, and Belgium.

The latest addition to the website is the result of a volunteer project by Mary Ann Hoffman. Mary Ann created an alphabetically organized index to the material in R. Van Dyke Reid's scrapbook of deaths and obituaries for South River and the surrounding areas between 1844 and 1912.

We invite you to view the Reid index and all that we have to offer by visiting us at:

<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~njsrhps/>

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South River Historical & Preservation News

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To Our Readers:

The *South River Historical & Preservation News* willingly corrects its factual errors. If you believe we have made a mistake, please let us know.

Readers' contributions to the newsletter are welcomed. Submissions for the September 2010 issue must be received by August 15.

Please advise us if you would prefer to receive your newsletter via email.

For contact information, please see page 6.

Museum Hosts Visitors on Government Day

On May 21, another lovely day in South River, the third graders from the South River Elementary School, teachers, and parents visited the South River Museum as part of their Government Day activities.

Anita and Bill Hermstedt, Ann Rafano, and Marilyn Anastasio greeted the visitors. The docents pointed out the monuments in front of the museum, gave an introduction to the museum's history and identified some of the artifacts inside the museum, and talked about the gravestones, especially the Frazee Urn, behind the museum. The children are now aware that this is "their" museum because they live in South River. It is our hope they will return and contribute to the continued success of the South River Museum.



Ann Rafano shares some of the history of the Old School Baptist Church Cemetery which sits behind the Museum.

Cruise Nights Scheduled

Custom cars and hot rods will once again be lining lower Main Street as South River Cruise Nights have been scheduled for June 17 and July 15. Those attending can also enjoy good food and good music, and as usual, the South River Museum will be open for those whose historical curiosity predates the automotive era. The festivities will begin at 5:00 p.m.

Hand-Made in the U.S.A.

At the SRH&PS April Meeting, our featured presenter was Mr. Joseph Butewicz, who shared with us his expertise on American earthenware, slipware, and sgraffito. Mr. Butewicz began his program by appraising collectible pieces brought in by members of the audience.



Presenter Joseph Butewicz examines one of the pieces brought by an SRH&PS member.

During his talk and slide presentation, Mr. Butewicz referenced his sources including *Early New England Potters and Their Wares*, *Ceramics in America*, the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the *Pook and Pook Illustrated Catalog 2008*.

American earthenware is pottery made of porous clay fired at relatively low temperatures and tended to be utilitarian in nature. Pottery in 1800s America was made for pantry, kitchen, and dairy use. Items such as loaf dishes, pie plates, chargers, milk pans, and tart plates were common.

Slipware is earthen pottery decorated with *slip* (a liquid clay mixture), with lead-based glaze applied on top.

Sgraffito uses *slip* to decorate pottery. Earthenware is covered with *slip* which is then scratched off with a pointed tool to create decorative design, while exposing the layer underneath.

Redware is a common type of earthenware named for its high iron content; it is delicate and chips more easily than stoneware.

Famous potters of the day included Conrad Mumbauer, George Hubener, Johannes (John) Neis, John Monday, David Spinner, Samuel Troxel, John Leidy I, and John Leidy II. Each had a distinctive style. For instance, David Spinner (circa 1800) decorated plates with soldiers on horseback; Johannes (John) Neis applied leaping stags, birds, sprays of flowers and inscribed morals.

Earthenware artifacts for the 18th and 19th centuries have been recovered from various sites in New Jersey and Pennsylvania: north New Jersey, New Brunswick, Philadelphia, Harrisburg, Bucks County, Montgomery County, and the excavation of I-95.

The presenter, the presentation, and a glimpse of the appraisal values of items in the *Pook and Pook Illustrated Catalog of 2008* make us mindful of the meaningfulness of the concept and words “hand-made in America.”

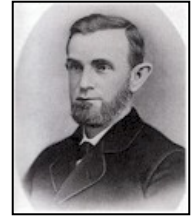


Just a few of the many pieces of earthenware, slipware, and sgraffito Mr. Butewicz put on display for curious members of the audience.

How will the 21st century fare – in retrospect – to future generations?

James Bissett: South River's First Mayor

by Mary Ann Hoffman



James Bissett, a lifelong resident and first Mayor of the Borough of South River, was born in South River in 1834. He had two siblings, Lenora Bissett DeVoe and Dr. John J. Bissett.

James married Maria Brown, and the couple had three children, Abraham W. V. Bissett, born in 1859, Maria B., born in 1868, and Margareta, born in 1871. Unfortunately, in January 1876, New Jersey Governor Joseph D. Bedle signed a warrant for the admission of Bissett's son Abraham to the New York Institution for the Deaf and Dumb.

When South River was founded on 25 September 1720 by Samuel Willett, it was known as Willettstown, and was part of East Brunswick. Around 1784, the name was changed to Washington, in honor of the General who was soon to become our first President, and by the time the Borough of South River was officially incorporated in 1898, Bissett had already served as a Middlesex County Freeholder for several years, as a member of Washington's Town Committee, and as its first Chairman of the Board of Commissioners.

In 1897, in preparation for the town's incorporation as a Borough, South River residents went to the polls to decide whether Bissett, a Democrat, or Republican Charles Whitehead would be their first Mayor. Bissett won, but seeking re-election in the fall of 1898, he waged a "hot," but losing fight against Andrew S. Church, a merchant and Republican.

In addition to his political career, James Bissett was prominent in the brickyard industry. In 1899 there were four brickyards in the Borough: Whitehead, Willett, Pettit, and Bissett. The Bissett clay bed was established in 1869 as the East Brunswick Brick Company by William DeVoe, Jacob Rue, Charles H. Bissett, and James Bissett. The brickyard was located on the east side of the Borough, along the South River.

By 1875, James Bissett's three partners had retired, but he successfully continued to run the business. Though the brickyard was long operated by horse power, in 1895, Bissett switched to steam. He also owned a sailing vessel, the *Express*, which facilitated the transporting of his clay and bricks to other cities in northern New Jersey and New York. When he finally closed the company in 1920, it was known as the Bissett Brick Company.

Although James Bissett enjoyed success in politics and business, he also had his share of misfortune. For instance, Bissett lived in a home on lower Main Street, located near the current sites of Becker's and Lee Auto Parts, and when the "Great Fire of 1908" destroyed virtually everything on Main St. between Obert and Ferry Streets, including Schroeder's Barbershop and Citizen's Hall, it destroyed Bissett's residence, as well. Then, in November of that year, Bissett was driving along the road on election morning and found former employee Adam Shults trespassing on his property, strictly against Bissett's orders. When he demanded the man leave, Shults attacked him with a saw he had been using to cut planks, and Bissett was struck in the leg and injured. Charged with assault with intent to kill, Shults initially denied the charge, but when he agreed to plead guilty to a charge of simple assault, the plea was accepted.



Bissett died at age 77 on 13 February 1911. It was reported in the *New Brunswick Times* on 18 February 1911 that his was "one of the largest funerals ever held in South River." A short service was held at Bissett's residence on Main Street, and a formal service was held immediately afterwards at the Old School Baptist Church. He is buried at the Washington Monumental Cemetery on Hillside Avenue here in the Borough. Bissett's Pond on Whitehead Avenue was named in honor of this resident. The photo at the left displays the large distinguished headstone with the inscription "First Mayor of South River," dedicated to Bissett and his service to the Borough.

Special Acknowledgements (4/10 –5/10)

CONTRIBUTORS:

Mary Ann & Walter Boyler Lorraine Nisonoff
Elizabeth Litarowich Barbara Westergaard

CONTRIBUTIONS IN MEMORY OF:

Janet Mark Stout by Dr. & Mrs. Joseph P. Zawadsky

The South River Historical & Preservation Society extends its sympathies to the Mrozek family at the passing of Walter J. Mrozek.

EXCERPTED FROM SOUTH RIVER REVIEW, SEPT. 15 1904

South River

Edited by R. Van Dyke Reid

Rev. and Mrs. S. T. Horner, George P. Farr and wife, Mrs. E. A. Van Deventer, Misses Fannie F. Peterson, Virginia Van Hise, Amanda Cole and R. Van Dyke Reid of the Methodist Church, and Rev. J. C. Newman and wife, of the Baptist Church attended the 40th annual convention of the Middlesex County Sunday School Association, held in the Livingston Avenue Baptist Church last Thursday.

A fine baby girl has arrived at the home of John Suydam, on Thomas Street.

Rev. and Mrs. Newman report a pleasant time in Baltimore and Washington, where they are spending their vacation.

Mrs. Harry Lockwood and children, of East Millstone, were visitors, last week, at the home of Mrs. C. H. Manahan, on Main Street.

Miss Irene Booraem, of New Brunswick, a native of South River, was a recent guest of her cousin, Miss Almira Booraem.

The sidewalk along the Klauser building, at Washington and Ferry Streets, has been paved with brick.

George Radcliffe was the guest of relatives at Atlantic Highlands last week. His wife, who has been spending an enjoyable vacation in the vicinity of Atlantic Highlands, accompanied him home.

The electric light recently placed on the porch of the Washington Hotel, conducted by J. C. Voorhees, is appreciated by the patrons of the House.

William E. Simondson, an employee of the powder works at Parlin, has returned from a vacation spent with relatives on Long Island.

The Misses Mary and Elsie Rose were visitors last week at the home of their sister, Mrs. Clarence Cost, at Newark.

SRH&PS GIFT SHOP

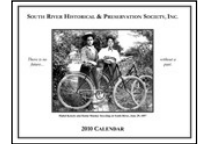
Old School Baptist Church Postcard – Set of 3 postcards, \$1.00

Features an 1894 photo of the OSBC (now the South River Museum).



2010 SRH&PS Calendar - \$8.00

Previous years also available - \$6.00



Old School Baptist Church print by Joseph Csatari - \$25.00

Numbered limited edition print 13” x 15 3/4”, unframed, includes brief biography of the artist and history of the Old School Baptist Church building.

Commemorative 200th Anniversary Old School Baptist Church Medalion Ornament (South River Museum) - \$10.00

Commemorative Book in Celebration of South River's 275th Anniversary, 1720-1995 - \$10.00
Over 90 pages of text & photos.

Wooden Plaque of the Old School Baptist Church - \$10.00

Made from timber from the original portico columns.

Old School Baptist Church Note Cards with Envelopes - Set of 5 cards, \$2.50; set of 10 cards, \$4.00
Features an early photo of the OSBC.

SRH&PS Hat - \$5.00

Blue with white lettering and a picture of the Old School Baptist Church.

Lapel Pin - \$5.00

Collectible pin commemorating the South River Museum - Old School Baptist Church
[size- 7/8 inch]



Note: Prices do not include postage. Please visit our website (see back page) for additional items.



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Phone us: **732-613-3078**
Email us: **SouthRiverHistory@gmail.com**
Visit our Website: <http://www.rootsweb.com/~njsrhps/>
Visit our Museum: **See Calendar (insert)**
Write to us: **See mailing address, above**

Brickyard Employees Have Their Day in Court

Being a defendant in a court case can be a grueling experience, so one can only imagine how South River brickyard owner Theodore Willett felt when he faced four former employees who were plaintiffs in separate cases on September 7, 1882. As reported in the following day's edition of the *New Brunswick Daily Times*, this is how Mr. Willett fared:

Case #1- An Austrian who had worked less than two days for Willett quit, saying that the demanding work schedule (4 a.m-7:30 p.m. with 30 minutes for lunch) made him sick. Willett, however, claimed the man owed him money and would not allow him to retrieve a sack of his clothes until the alleged debt was paid. When the man picked up the sack, Willett reportedly threatened him, saying, "Put down those ____ clothes, or I'll break your ____ head with a stick!" The Austrian sued for his clothes or their equivalent worth, and after deliberating fewer than fifteen minutes, the jury found in favor of the plaintiff, awarding him the full amount of his claim, \$25.15.

Cases #2, 3, and 4- As in the earlier case, two of these men were seeking return of their clothes, and all three were seeking unpaid wages. In addition, one of the plaintiffs, a French Canadian who spoke no English, had been jailed for 44 days after Willett reported that the man had threatened him through "vicious shrugs of the shoulders and malicious gesticulations." In all three cases, the juries quickly returned with verdicts in favor of the plaintiffs.

It may well be that Willett began the day with hopes that his defenses would be as solid as his company's bricks. By day's end, though, he could only hope that his product would be nowhere near as porous.

Old School Baptist Church Cemetery Conservation Program Donation Form

Name: _____

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Email (Optional): _____

Amount of donation: _____

Please make checks payable to the South River Historical & Preservation Society, Inc. and send them with the form to: **SRH&PS, Inc.**

P.O. Box 446

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(If you would like to make a memorial donation, please add the information to the back of the form.)

South River Historical & Preservation Society Calendar

2010 Meetings: June 23 September 22 November 17

June 23: Wouldn't you like to know who built your house, the names of all the owners, when they planted that big tree in the backyard, why they put on that addition, what colors they painted the house, etc.? In this program, Ken Roginski will show you how to get started "Documenting Your Home's History."

This, as with all Wednesday meetings, will convene at 7:00 p.m. at the South River Museum (formerly the Old School Baptist Church/War Memorial Building), 64-66 Main Street, South River.

The Museum is also open to the general public from 1:30 until 3:30 p.m. on the first Sunday of each month (second Sunday if the first is a holiday):

July 11 August 1 September 5

2010 SRH&PS Membership Application Form

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[All dues and contributions are tax-deductible.]

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Company address: _____

As a tax-exempt corporation, the SRH&PS, Inc. is eligible to receive matching gifts. If your employer participates in such a program, please send matching gift forms with your membership donation. The Society's fiscal year is January 1 to December 31.

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