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01 A Short History of Riggstown (West Chester, Pennsylvania)

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A Short History of Riggtown (West Chester, Pennsylvania)



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THE GEOGRAPHY OF RIGGTOWN

West Chester, Pennsylvania, is located on high ground between two watersheds, about 25 miles due west of Philadelphia. The west side of town slopes down to the Brandywine Creek, which flows south into the Delaware River at Wilmington, Delaware. The east side slopes down to the Chester Creek, which flows southeast-east into the Delaware River at Chester, Pennsylvania.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the neighborhood that became known as "Riggtown" was built in the southeast corner of West Chester between the railroad tracks and Goose Creek, which flows into the Chester Creek. At Union Street, Goose Creek flows under the tracks from east to west and then south for about three blocks to Linden Street, where it creek turns east back to the railroad tracks. The creek and the railroad defined a long, narrow triangle of land that served as the local trash dump in the late nineteenth century. The lower end was usually a swamp, while west of the creek, an even narrower floodplain led up the hill towards Matlack Street.

As West Chester developed, Goose Creek became the sewer for the town's east side. By 1888, when the first houses in Riggtown were built, a reporter for the Daily Local News wrote:

Goose Creek is one of the filthiest streams that flow near West Chester. Nearly all the sewage of the town flows into it, and, besides, a number of water closets sit over it.

On the other side of Riggtown was the railroad. Two lines ran to West Chester from Philadelphia via Malvern and Media, and the Media line, finished in 1858, went right past Riggtown. In the 1880s, after completing the new passenger station on North Matlack Street, the railroad built some major facilities in the southeast corner of the borough. An engine house was located east of South Adams at Lacey, just across from the neighborhood that eventually became Riggtown.

Although teachers and students at the State Normal School asked for an additional passenger station at East Niels Street, the railroad decided instead to build a freight station north of Niels Street, along South Adams between Matlack and Union Streets.

East Niels Street was the main thoroughfare through Riggtown. Closer to High Street, Niels Street was developed before the Civil War, but the east end was a unpaved country lane until early in this century, and only paved with oyster shells as late as 1933. Farmers from Westtown and the southeast used it to reach the West Chester freight station and market. The borough started to improve the street in the 1893, clearing brush, leveling the railroad crossing, and bridging the creek east of the railroad.

THE FIRST HOUSES IN RIGGTOWN

C. Cadwallader Sellers purchased the land on April 1, 1865, just eight days before Lee surrendered at Appomatox. It is not clear if he put the land to use, but six years later, he began to sell it off in parcels. The first buyers included prominent Cestrians like A. D. Sharpless, Edward H. Hall, and Patrick King (who already owned most of the land along Rosedale Avenue), plus lesser known men like David Gill, William D. H. Serrill, John Doran, John Carey, and John Caldwell. The other investors left their land unimproved, but Doran, Caldwell and Carey built the first houses in Riggtown.

John Doran was a street cleaner for the borough, and evidently a frugal man, because he managed to save up about \$4000 by 1892. Sometime in the 1870s, he purchased a lot on the north side of East Niels Street by the railroad tracks. In 1882, he bought the lot across the street and built a house for his wife, their two sons James and Lawrence, and their daughter Ellen.

John Carey was a railroad worker who lived on East Linden Street across Goose Creek from the future Riggtown, in a beautiful brick house that still stands. In November 1871, Carey purchased a lot about midway between the creek and the tracks, and divided it between two of his sons in 1887. Sometime before 1893, William and Robert built attached houses that stayed in the family until 1952.

John Caldwell bought the largest lot in the neighborhood. Caldwell's land included the entire block between what are now Franklin, Niels, Adams and Howe Streets. He built a single brick house with a frame addition at the corner of East Niels and South Adams some time prior to 1883, and lived there until his death in 1894, when the property was put up for sheriff's auction to pay the estate taxes. The purchaser was Mifflin Rigg, the man who gave his name to the neighborhood.

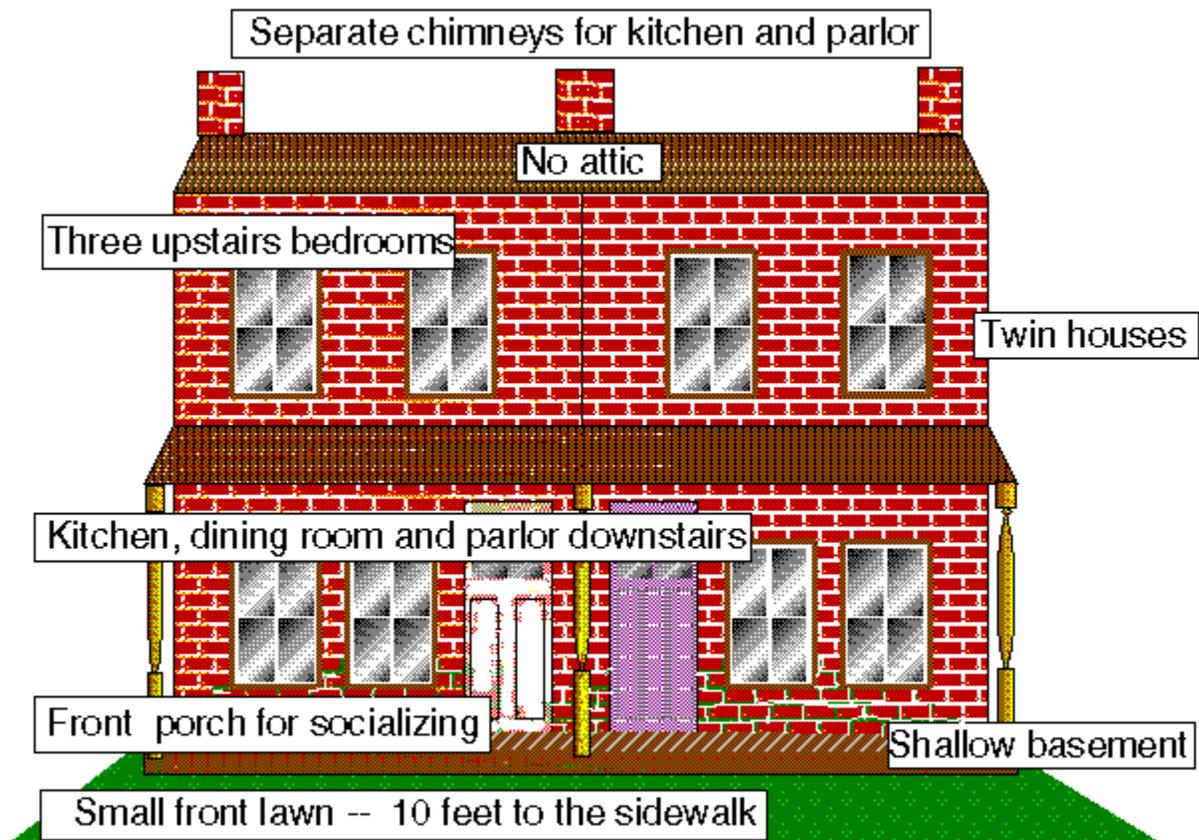


Mifflin L. Rigg (1838-1914)

HOUSING CONSTRUCTION IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

Rigg was typical of a phenomenon of the times--independent contractors with limited capital. Many were Irish or Italian immigrants who were experienced as builders, but lacked access to traditional sources of credit. Instead, they convinced landowners to "loan" them a piece of land, and perhaps even enough cash to buy materials for the first house. The builders then divided the land and constructed cheap, usually identical houses on long, narrow lots. The builder sold each house to an investor and used the proceeds to pay off the landowner and buy materials for the next house. According to figures published in 1892, houses in the 200-block of East Nields Street cost roughly \$1500 a piece, and the owners planned to rent them for \$2.50 per week. That worked out to \$130 per year, or a six percent return on the cost of a house.

That six percent was a "sure thing," because West Chester had a housing shortage in the late nineteenth century. While the rest of the nation's economy stagnated after the "Panic of 1893," West Chester's railroad, nurseries, tag companies and other factories stayed open and drew an influx of workers. The workers sought cheap housing and created a market for what the newspaper called "nice dwellings of moderate size with modern conveniences for working men."



Schematic drawing of typical Riggtown houses

The typical Riggtown house has a stone foundation and shallow basement, two stories of brick

divided into three rooms each, a lightly sloped roof that makes the attic unusable, an open porch in front of the house overlooking a tiny front yard, and an enclosed shed out the back facing a deep, narrow backyard and an alley.

The first of the builder-investors in Riggstown was Patrick J. Barry, an industrious Irishman who operated a hauling business at 117 E. Miner Street. By the fall of 1882, he had a thriving business as a builder and hauler, and counted the Hoopes Brothers and Darlington Wheel Works among his customers.

In May 1889, Barry bought a lot along South Franklin Street. He held it for two years until the summer of 1891, when he built his first pair of semi-detached houses at the corner of Lacey and South Franklin Streets. That was the most desirable part of his property because it was the farthest away from the swamp. He sold one house to Michael Lacey in October 1891 for \$1450, and started on a second pair the following summer. He built two pair in 1892, and one pair each year after that, until by 1894, Barry had constructed five pairs of houses that still stand on the west side of South Franklin Street.

If you stood on the front porch of one of Barry's first houses and looked east in 1893, you would have seen an open field backed by the Philadelphia and West Chester Railroad. Beyond the railroad was the freight yard, a round house, and Georgetown, West Chester's predominantly black neighborhood. To your right sat the Caldwell farm, with its brick house and stable, and beyond that, the two houses built by Doran and Carey. The railroad track disappeared in the distance past the swamp that formed at the bend where Goose Creek curved behind Carey's house.

In 1894, Mifflin Rigg altered that view dramatically. Rigg was a blacksmith from Upper Oxford who moved to West Chester and became a carpenter in the 1870s. Rigg bought the Caldwell land (plus a horse) at sheriff's sale in the summer of 1894 for \$1601. A month later, he began to build his first "row" of houses along South Franklin Street. Two months after that, the borough laid water lines under South Adams Street, and a week later, Rigg began to build there as well. By the end of his first year, Mifflin Rigg had started six houses, and in the next year he built four more. By 1898, Rigg had built fourteen houses--six twins and two singles--as many as Barry, Doran and Carey put together.



Typical houses built by Mifflin Rigg (385-7 E. Nields St.)

The last eight houses in Riggstown, at 386-400 East Nields Street, were built by a family from

Philadelphia named Braunstein. Nathan and Frieda Braunstein received the land in an 1891 court award, and built their first houses in the summer of 1893. Samuel and Bertha Braunstein took over six lots in spring 1894, and completed the rest of the houses in 1895. Unfortunately, I have not been able to learn anything else about the Braunsteins, or even the relationship between these two couples.

THE FIRST RESIDENTS

The first residents of Riggstown were renters and laborers, so the documentary record on them is slender. They were mostly Irish and German, and they were almost all poor. For example, in 1894, Rigg's first tenant at the corner of East Niels and South Franklin was a "gasmaker" named Thomas V. Hayes. Two years later, Hayes and his wife Kate bought the house from Rigg. They probably had trouble making the monthly rent of "eight to twelve dollars," because they took in a boarder named James Caldwell in 1898, shared their house with William Hayes (a laborer) in 1900, and shared it with Edward J. Hayes (a fireman) in 1904.



Taylor Stanley and his grandson
544 S. Adams St. (c.1900)

Many houses had a high rate of tenant turnover, like 396 Niels Street, which housed Farras, Giffords, Townsends and Finnegans between 1894 and 1910. There were a few stable families, like that of George Mendenhall, a railroad worker who lived at 540 South Adams Street for at least a decade before World War I. Three generations of Cavanaughs--a family of laborers, watchmen and laundresses--lived at 388 East Niels Street. Their house changed ownership five times, until Mary Cavanaugh Westwood and her husband bought it for \$1000 in 1920.

Most Riggtowners prospered during World War I, and used the money to move out of the neighborhood. Some simply disappeared from the directories, but many moved up the hill to Matlack Street or even closer to High Street, and some even made it to the north side of town. The Dorans and Careys stayed on as the new people came to Riggstown, but since prosperity continued after the war, the newcomers were not renters, but homeowners.

AFTER WORLD WAR I, A NEIGHBORHOOD

One of the newcomers was Alonzo Harvey, a harnessmaker from Embreeville who came to West Chester sometime before World War I. Harvey purchased his first Riggstown house in spring 1918, and added three more over the next fifteen years. He chose the largest house for his own,

at 539 South Franklin, and used the stable next door for his workshop. He bought one house at 390 East Nields for his daughter Helen and her husband Levi Gincley, and another house at 437 East Nields for another daughter Gertrude and her husband Roy Ferrier. In between, he bought and sold a third house (392ENS) to the Townsend family.

Now the Townsends were no strangers to Riggtown however. William K. Townsend may have been related to William Henry Townsend, who bought 437 South Franklin Street in 1903, but he was certainly related to three other Nields Street families including the Hamiltons at 396, the Harry Townsends at 400, and the Smileys at 506. Meanwhile, the Careys were related to the Holstons at the corner of Nields and Franklin. Later on, in 1944, Alonzo's son Earl bought the Carey house at 500 East Nields Street. Thus, in the decade after World War I, three extended families occupied most of the houses in Riggtown.

In addition to family ties, Riggtowners shared a variety of experiences. As children, they all played together and attended the Demonstration School at the State College. As they got older, the boys and girls started to play apart, and did not rediscover each other until it became time to start dating. The girls played house or dolls, while the boys played ball, explored in the swamp, snuck cigarettes by the creek or went looking for swimming holes.

Organized team sports like baseball and football were extremely important in the neighborhood. Boys played pick-up games in Reilly's field on the far side of the tracks, and organized the Riggtown "Terriers" to play baseball and football against the likes of the Matlack Street "Bums." Other neighbors were spectators, and one father made baseball bats in his shop for the kids. Parents in Riggtown even got a petition to ask the borough to build a ballfield on the swamp. That field, Greenfield Park, is still in use today across from Ramsgate Apartments.

Everyone in Riggtown worked, and parents often worked together, as painters and carpenters, or at factories like Hoopes Brothers and Darlington wheel works, Schramm's air compressor factory, and the various incarnations of the United Dairy Equipment Company. If not, then young men found work in the mushroom houses or nurseries, while women served food at neighborhood tearooms, found work in downtown offices or stores, or ran a machine at one of the tag manufacturing companies. Despite the proximity of the railroad, few Riggtowners got jobs there, and even fewer worked outside of West Chester.

No shared experience was as spectacular as the Goose Creek fire of 1931. As the Daily Local News headline described it, "Flames Leap Hundred Feet Into the Air When Giant Asphalt Tanks Are Engulfed in Fire at Service Company in Southeastern End of Borough; Goose Creek Transformed Into Ribbon of Fire When Huge Containers Fall From Supports."

Goose Creek was no longer a sewer in 1931, but it ran beside a number of industrial properties that developed along the railroad. Late in the afternoon on September 11, the supports collapsed underneath two 10,000 gallon tanks at the Bituminous Service Company yard on Union Street. They leaked a highly flammable oil that floated downstream on the surface of Goose Creek. About an hour later, a spark or a cigarette ignited the fire. As an eyewitness described it:

I looked up and saw a huge pillar of black smoke. Down the creek was a flood of flame

and gas, which rolled up with lightning speed. Boy, it sure was traveling! In less time than it takes to tell, the whole creek was blazing, while buildings nearby had already begun to smoulder. Then it reached the tanks, and soon after, blasts began.

The fire burned for three hours and forced the Pennsylvania Railroad to shut down briefly when the insulation on the overhead electrical wires began to burn. The noise, smoke and flames drew an enormous crowd of:

... hundreds of men, women, boys and girls, and even little children, [who] packed the sidewalks and a solid portion of Union street from the intersection with Matlack almost to the railroad tracks, within thirty yards of the fire. Suddenly there was a deep-toned, reverberating `boom' from the oil tanks. A pillar of livid flame leaped several hundred feet into the air, rolled over in a billow of dripping oil sparks, and swept in a towering wave of heat towards the crowd. A gasp went up from the watchers. For one split second they were motionless. In that interval, someone screamed, and with one accord the mob turned and fled. In the tremendous rush, several people were knocked down, and at least one, Mr. Ashton B. T. Smith of 619 West Miner Street, was hurt.

Like all members of their generation, Riggowners were marked by the experience of the Great Depression. They did not starve, but they were poor, and each family had to find ways to augment their incomes. Most families had vegetable gardens and some kept animals--chickens, turkeys, pigs and even a horse. Nearly every family earned extra money by stringing tags at home. Others sold rags, paper and scrap metal, and even collected pieces of fuel that fell off passing trains.

World War II was a turning point for Riggtown, just as it was for the rest of the world. Every male who was fit volunteered to serve, and a few even lied about their age to enlist. Miraculously, only one soldier from Riggtown died in the service, and from one block of East Nields Street, five Gincleys, four Holstons, four Davises, three Boyles, two Thompsons, two Doughertys, two McCoombs, two Waltons, plus one each from the Careys, Smileys and Ferriers--27 soldiers from 16 families--all made it back home.

For the boys, military service was an extension of growing up--everyone else volunteered, so that was what you did. For their mothers, wives and sisters at home, the war years were a period of terrible anxiety dulled somewhat by the novelty of jobs in local factories. As one woman described it:

I worked [as a welder at Lukens] during the war. I would be inside of these big tanks, and anything that was connected with the machinery of war. And I must say I was a pretty good welder, and I was small enough to fit inside the little tanks. That was one of my advantages over some of the other people, because I could fit into the tanks, and they couldn't. But I enjoyed it very much, I really did.

AFTER WORLD WAR II, AN EXODUS

After the boys returned home from the war, they formed a new baseball team, the Riggtown

Bulldogs, and started to play on the ball field built on the swamp. But America had changed, and Riggstown along with it. The farm across the tracks had become an industrial park, and East Nields Street had become a major artery for the growing numbers of automobiles in West Chester. The young people of Riggstown began to marry and move out, and within a decade, the neighborhood had changed once again.

America in the 1950s was a land of great affluence, and everyone, even Riggtowners, finally had automobiles. That meant they could commute longer distances to work from larger houses situated on relatively cheap land. In the 1950s, even some of the older Riggtowners started to sell out, in order to find peace and quiet in the country. In those days, Riggstown houses sold for around \$3000, roughly twice what they cost in the prewar years. Their prices continued to climb to around \$5-6000 dollars by the early 1960s, and inched into five figures by the 1970s.

But by that time, some of the houses were in poor condition, and most families wanted a lot more room than was available in Riggstown. In the early 1970s, prices were at rock bottom, and private contractors like the DiRocco brothers made money by buying and restoring houses in Riggstown. The university's expansion in the late 1960s created a new housing shortage in the southeast part of West Chester, and a few Riggstown houses sold to investors. Although Riggstown has avoided the fate of the area around Linden and South Walnut Street, homeowners still express concern that they might have to rent out their houses someday, and worry about the effect that would have on the neighborhood.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RIGGTOWN

In a world where our cities are in serious trouble, it seems relevant to consider what the people of Riggstown achieved. In a poor working class neighborhood of the children of immigrants, they constructed a community that sustained them through the hardships of the Depression and the great uncertainty of World War II. Even after the neighborhood began to disperse, childhood friendships continued to influence their lives, and Riggstown remained symbolic of a time when things were good. That led me, as an interviewer, to raise a question: was Riggstown really as nice as they said, or had their memories been sweetened by time.

After interviewing people from Riggstown and elsewhere, I am led to conclude that Riggstown was indeed special. Riggstown developed a sense of identity that only two other neighborhoods achieved--the Italian-American neighborhood centered on St. Agnes church and the Italian Social Club, and the African-American neighborhood located east of the railroad tracks.

Perhaps the most tangible evidence of what Riggowners felt was provided by one of the men I interviewed. He entered the navy in 1944, and before he headed off to the Pacific, he got a tattoo that included the word "Riggtown." I asked him why, and this was his answer, slightly paraphrased:

I was in Norfolk where we were getting ready to ship out. There was a fellow who was supposed to be real good [tattoo artist], by the name of Coleman. I just went over and got the tattoo and went back to the ship. It's got "Riggtown," "Mom" and "Dad"--the things that were important. I was alone [when I got it]. I just did it because I was proud of Riggtown.



The Riggtown tattoo

THE FUTURE OF RIGGTOWN

In recent years, thanks in part to the research provided by West Chester University students, Riggtown has experienced a revival. The sandwich shop at Matlack and Nields Street has been renamed the "Riggtown Oven" and a number of other institutions have resuscitated the name for public affairs.



Springtime on E. Nields St.

THE SOURCES ON RIGGTOWN

Research on Riggtown began with conversations with older residents. The next step was to

consult the current deeds of sale for each property in the neighborhood and trace them back to Cadwallader Sellers who owned the property in 1865. The Chester County directories published by Boyd and Polk, which were the predecessors to modern telephone books, list the inhabitants of West Chester, with street address and profession. They provide the best source on the people who rented or owned houses or rooms in Riggstown, especially at the end of the 19th century.

Another useful source is the indexed file of newspaper clippings in the Historical Society's History Center. They provide information on real estate sales, housing starts, marriages and obituaries, as well as many odd details about the town and its people. Other useful sources include wills and marriage licenses at the Chester County Archives and the County Recorder's Office.

For the period from 1930 to the present, there are eyewitness accounts from people who lived in Riggstown. Current and past Riggstowners have shown a great deal of support and enthusiasm for this project. The most extensive interviews were with Jack and Charlotte Harvey, Anne Gincley, Siddy Stanley, Rebecca and Charles and Nancy Carey, Dorothy Parker, Sarge Clark, Marie Carroll and Maurice Linnett. The researchers of Riggstown thank them all for their help and support.