

GSL Reviews

Garden State Legacy #3, March 2008. ©Copyright 2009. All rights reserved.

Parallel Communities: The Underground Railroad in South Jersey

by Dennis Rizzo

2008: The History Press, Charlston, NC

ISBN: 978-1-59629-542-1

Softcover, 160 pages black and white.

★★★★

Review by Gordon Bond

There's a joke email that makes the rounds from time to time titled, "You Know Your From New Jersey When..." Among such *bon mots* as how we never (ever) pump our own gas and refer to heading "down the shore," is often one about how folks from South Jersey are "different." Dennis Rizzo's book made me realize the truth of that statement—albeit not for the implied snarky reasons.

For a relatively small state, NJ has some pretty varied geography and the bogs, multitude of small streams and a shoreline on The Delaware River all contribute towards a South Jersey culture, economy and history set somewhat apart from northern communities.

In broad terms, we tend to think of slavery as having been peculiar to the southern United States. And yet, New Jersey was the last of the original 13 colonies to formally abolish slavery. The disappointment at that fact is perhaps a little blunted by the aspects of South Jersey's history that Rizzo highlights.

South Jersey's proximity to the slave states of Delaware and Maryland, along with a strongly abolitionist Quaker presence, made it the first free soil many runaway slaves stepped upon. Not that it was secure—fugitive slave legislation gave slave-owners the right to come into Jersey and retrieve their "property." A "catcher" trade evolved that made its money being hired as agents by aggrieved slave-owners to forcibly bring runaways back. Further, given their lack of social standing, even legally free blacks could be seized and sent south to a life of bondage. Children were even lured away and abducted.

Nevertheless, many blacks found South Jersey a reasonable place to settle down, obtain a plot of land to farm and start a family. These are the communities Rizzo explores.

Obviously, studying communities established by people who don't want to be found presented Rizzo with certain challenges. Nevertheless, he has been able to piece together a very compelling narrative of the people who founded and inhabited these unique places.

Among those he features are Gouldtown, Springtown, Marshalltown, Dutchtown, Cootstown, Saddlertown, Snow Hill, Evesham Meeting, Jacob's Chapel and Timbuctoo. Most no longer exist or are absorbed into the modern municipalities. Some areas, however, retain some of their original character and even family names. Old houses and (quite often) churches as well as cemeteries also mark the spots of these once secluded towns.

As the book's subtitle suggests, these locations were often stops on the underground railroad. White inhabitants would help spirit escaped slaves to free states and the black community provided a sort of extended family for those deprived of kin by the depravities of the bondage system. The celebrated "conductor" of this railroad, Harriet Tubman, was active in this area of New Jersey as well.

Whenever dealing with a culturally sensitive topic such as slavery—the effects of which reverberate to the present day—it is too easy to fall into the broad, politically correct assumptions. Rizzo avoids such traps by placing these communities within their proper historical context, beginning with the earliest histories of NJ. By the pointing out how Native Americans and even whites were held in bondage in the early days, the complexities of the topic are not shied away from. Indeed, they offer a contrasting context by which the fact of people of color being held in bondage for so long after emerges as all the more perverse.

In an age when we debate the use of the "N-word," Rizzo's explanation of the language of race is particularly interesting. For much of the 18th and 19th centuries, being labeled as "black," "colored," or "mulatto" could have serious implications for how one was treated in society.

Rizzo draws extensively from contemporary sources and later histories, giving those who lived in these places their own voice while also demonstrating how the interpretation of their place in history has changed over time. The text is supplemented by many old photos and current images. The addition of maps for those not entirely familiar with South Jersey would have been

useful, however, as would an index.

In many instances, blacks, whites, Natives and others lived side by side, intermarrying and even defending one another (see Dennis Rizzo's article in this issue of GSL). We may take heart from the fact that in the face of such virulent intolerance, these small groups in New Jersey found some harmony. Dennis Rizzo has helped to shed light on this important yet little-appreciated aspect of the Garden State's history.

Exhibition:

New Jersey's Gilded Age:

Opulence, Struggle & Innovation

The Cornelius Low House

1225 River Road, Piscataway, NJ

October 19, 2008 - November 29, 2009

Tel.: 732-745-4177

Fax.: 732-745-4507

Email: info@cultureheritage.org

Admission: Free

Parking: ★★★

Kid-Friendly: ★

Handicapped Accessible: ★★★

Exhibit: ★★★★★

Review by Gordon Bond

When Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner coined the phrase, "the Gilded Age" in their 1873 book, "The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today," they were describing an ironic American culture. The disparity between rich and poor and attitudes towards class were something of an anathema to the principles the nation had been founded upon nearly a century before.

In a perversion of Darwinism, economist William Graham Sumner justified wealth in the hands of the privileged few by claiming, "Millionaires are a product of natural selection... They may fairly be regarded as the naturally selected agents of society for certain works."

Andrew Carnegie asserted "Wealth only comes to the moral man," reflecting the class bigotry of the obscenely wealthy.

While the likes of Carnegie, Astor, Morgan and Vanderbilt were worth billions of dollars, a silk factory worker in 1881 labored ten hours a day and earned \$7.00 a week. Rent was around \$4.00 a week, which meant supporting a family on \$3.00 a week.

It this untenable period of American history and its effects on NJ that is explored in "New Jersey's Gilded Age: Opulence, Struggle & Innovation" at

The Cornelius Low House until November of this year.

The exhibit focuses on the years 1870 to 1900 and the rooms of this Georgian manor are divided into displays of specific topics of the era but with a New Jersey slant.

A room on the first floor is dedicated to the immigrant, laboring classes who were lured to New Jersey by the promise of work and even weather like that of the South of France or the Mediterranean. The walls feature images of recent arrivals in the ethnic garb of their homelands and processing tags from Garden Castle (the predecessor of Ellis Island). On the floor are examples of the trunks many dragged with them across the ocean. An icebox—the kind that actually took a block of ice—and an iron wood burning stove manufactured in Paterson exemplify the kinds of things found in their crowded tenements both in New York and New Jersey.

We may think of New York City when it comes to immigrant neighborhoods—as represented by a specimen of wallpaper and some children's toys from the New York Tenement Museum. But the proximity of many eastern NJ factories to the ports and markets of New York creating concurrent conditions here across the Hudson River. A plaque in the exhibit points out that in one five block area of Hoboken, sixteen different ethnic groups were represented.

The next room stands in contrast, with examples of the kinds of expensive furniture, china and other items found in the homes of the opposite end of the socioeconomic spectrum. The ornately carved desk of J.P Morgan dominates the room. Off in the opposite corner is an example of a dress designed by Charles Frederick Worth, the creature of the *haut couture* concept where clothing was custom designed and fitted for wealthy patrons in his Paris shop.

The cabinets on either side of the fireplace contain some smaller treasures—including a gold toothpick.

The wealthy classes might be vilified as “Robber Barrons,” but in all fairness, many also contributed vast sums of money for philanthropic causes and institutions—including libraries, hospitals and public parks which sought to improve the lives of those on whom the wealthy depended for their lavish lifestyles.

It’s worth noting that the New Brunswick Free Public Library a short drive across the Raritan River from the Low House was funded by steel barron, Andrew Carnegie, who championed the marriage of funding free public libraries with new ideas in library design and administration. The Scot industrialist financed many philanthropic projects, from such public libraries to universities (Carnegie Institute of Technology at Pittsburgh, now part of Carnegie Mellon University, in particular) to the 100-inch telescope on top of Mt. Wilson in California.

It was interesting to note from one plaque in the exhibit that Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt moved to New Brunswick, NJ in 1818, where he bought a tavern, Bellona, along the Raritan River which was run by his wife.

The first floor exhibits are completed with a room devoted to child labor. New Jersey’s textile mills, particularly in Paterson and the cranberry bogs of southern NJ are featured for their dependence on the labor of children.

A child-sized coffin is a stark reminder of the human cost. Bad working conditions resulted in the maiming and killing of many children.

In response to the dismal conditions, compulsory schooling laws were passed in New Jersey and elsewhere, though they were not always observed nor enforced.

Climbing the stairs to the second floor, the visitor is greeted by the wood horn of an Edison phonograph. Pressing a button turns on a recording of martial music taken from the original.

The upper floor displays focus on the rise of industry in New Jersey and the resulting emergence of labor unions in response to the often oppressive working conditions. Status in NJ factories, as elsewhere, was often a function of ethnicity. The descendants of colonial-era settlers who were native-born were usually the owners and managers. English, Irish and Germans were often the foremen or supervisors—middle management types. The unskilled labor was provided by the most recent immigrants, mostly from Eastern Europe.

By 1880, New Jersey was the 6th largest industrial state in the union and by 1890, a full third of NJ’s population lived and worked in the industrial centers of Camden, Trenton, Newark, Paterson and Jersey City. Paterson was known for its silk mills, Passaic County had wool mills. the sands of southern NJ supported The glass industry while the clay pits across Middlesex County gave rise to a strong ceramics and terra cotta industry that lasted into the 20th century.

In 1879, the New Jersey State Labor Congress was convened at New Brunswick with the goal of banning child labor, prohibiting convict labor and the elimination of paying wages in company “scrip.” The latter issue was particularly important to the glass factory workers who continued to be paid in this company-issued “money” that could only be spent at company-owned stores. Prices were inflated and many a worker’s family went into debt, maintaining something of a system of indentured servitude. The Congress fought for all classes of workers and gained enough clout that by 1883 it was a permanent organization and the forerunner of the Federation of Trades and Labor Unions of New Jersey.

With the help of such unions, skilled laborers gained in status, earning more than non-skilled workers and emerging as a new “middle class.”

A display exploring the financial panic of 1873 has an eerily familiar ring to it, but the period also produced industries which allowed New Jersey to grow and prosper despite the sometimes confrontational relationships between management and labor. A room is devoted to the employment opportunities offered by Thomas Edison’s factories in Orange (hence the Edison phonograph atop the stairs!) as well as silk mills, snuff manufacturers, the terra cotta kilns and Johnson & Johnson, who remain a financial powerhouse in New Brunswick.

Thanks to advances in labor laws that put limits on the number of hours per week one could be expected to work, Americans found they had more time for leisure activities. The last room of the exhibit features a faux-grass flooring to mimic the parks people would gather at. There are a collection of recreational items—a croquet set, bowling ball, a rather elaborate dress intended for the tennis-playing woman, a velocipede (an early form of bicycle with the one huge wheel and smaller one behind!) and a vintage folding bellows camera with which a family could record the fun.

Overall, the exhibition was well researched and assembled into logical parts that give a sense of the whole of the era. The contrast between rich and poor was well demonstrated. We caught one typo on one of the plaques and one criticism would be the repeating of texts, sometimes on the same wall.

The unsteadiness and dire predictions of the present economy has many peering back over their shoulders for fear of seeing the specters of The Great Depression. And yet, as many see the erosion of a middle class and the gap between rich and poor

widening, it may be this earlier period that we should really be examining. This exhibit provides a window into that past and is well worth a visit.

BOOK RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Poorly written, bad scholarship/factual errors.

- ★★ Factually correct but poorly written.

- ★★★ Interesting but nothing new or insightful.

- ★★★★ Strong scholarship, well written.

- ★★★★★ Excellent in scholarship writing style and graphic/typography.

To submit a review or suggest a book or exhibit for review, please email gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com

EXHIBIT RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Very amateurish; factual errors; poorly displayed.

- ★★ Factually correct but poorly displayed.

- ★★★ Interesting but nothing new or insightful.

- ★★★★ Strong scholarship, well displayed.

- ★★★★★ Excellent in scholarship and display quality.

To submit a review or suggest a book or exhibit for review, please email gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com

EXHIBIT KID-FRIENDLY RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Not really something young children will enjoy.

- ★★ Older children may find interesting.

- ★★★ Children of all ages will enjoy.

Some exhibits may not be for children but institutions may offer programs specifically for interpreting the displays for kids and school groups. Contact the museum or site.

EXHIBIT PARKING RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Not enough parking.

- ★★ Not many spaces but enough for a small museum/site.

- ★★★ Plenty of parking.

EXHIBIT HANDICAP ACCESS RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Not accessible.

- ★★ Partially accessible or requires advance arrangements.

- ★★★ Fully accessible.