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Founded February 8, 1851

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Ms. Michelle Hack, RMC, CMR, Board Secretary
Riverton Municipal Planning Board
505A Howard St.
Riverton, NJ 08077

June 21, 2021

Statement in re: 409-413 Lippincott Ave., Application by JRB Property Group, LLC

Chairman Brandt, Mayor Cairns Wells, and Members of the Planning Board:

I thank Mayor Cairns Wells for appointing me as Borough Historian last month and for this opportunity to offer factual information and commentary, speaking for the interests of Riverton's history.

It is a particular honor that this first statement be in support of this Planning Board, which has long played a key role in preserving and enhancing the historic character of our town. Later in this statement I review in more detail the leadership this Board has shown in this regard for nearly 40 years.

Summary and Recommendations

Steamboat company owner Frederick Groves hired architect Frank T. Mercer in 1901 to create this elegant mansion, an expansion of his family's already-substantial home on the site. At the same time, he purchased the empty lots on either side to provide it with suitable lawns and gardens.

A "contributing resource" to Riverton's National Register Historic District, it graces Lippincott Avenue, one of our finest streets of intact, restored historic homes.



The subject application requests a subdivision to remove the side yards and create new infill houses on them, intending to sell the Mansion to another party who would restore it from its currently neglected state.

This creates two principal concerns, in my view:

- ◆ that the loss of the Mansion's lawns and insertion of non-historic homes would threaten its chances of survival, and
- ◆ that the two new homes would negatively impact the neighboring historic homes, all of which are beautifully restored.

In any historic district, preservation of the building and its grounds is always the best choice and should be pursued here if possible. I recognize that the condition of the Groves Mansion may complicate this case by diminishing the pool of potential buyers.

Whatever action the Board takes, it should maximize the protections for the Mansion itself. Riverton is not a place that should ever see a teardown of a historic property.

If the Planning Board concludes that introduction of new construction on each side is the only course that is in the best interest of Riverton, those homes should be of the finest quality and completely compatible with their historic neighbors.

It is my recommendation that the Board use its considerable powers to ensure this *and* to establish a precedent that any future application for new infill in the District will be obliged to meet or exceed.

Background

Because this is my first statement, I'd like to make a quick review of this Board's role in establishing and defending the Historic District, familiar to many but possibly not to all.

How did the Historic District come about? In the early 1980s, the then-management of the Baptist Home proposed to demolish one of the Riverton Founders' irreplaceable riverbank villas (that of William Canby Biddle, at 307 Bank) to build the large, unsympathetic expansion we see today.

The town rose with one voice to oppose it and this Planning Board took the leading role against the proposal, in partnership with the Historical Society of Riverton (HSR). Unfortunately, the Board did not have the legal tools to prevail.

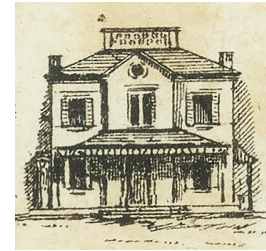
The home was lost.

The Planning Board then determined to assemble the tools they knew they would need in the future, including a restructuring of the Board, encouraging a volunteer effort to establish a formal Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places, and creating a Master Plan that looked like Riverton.

The nomination of the District and its 371 "contributing" properties to the National Register was a massive project of many years, coordinated by HSR, with more years until approval from the National Park Service. Final sign-off came on March 5, 1999.

A truly "Riverton" Master Plan. By law, the Master Plan sets the context for all land use ordinances and for decisions by public bodies such as this Board. As the current Plan explains, decisions based on the Master Plan are difficult to challenge in court while those made in contradiction to it are difficult for a municipality to defend

In 1994 the Planning Board began its 10-year Master Plan re-evaluation. The Board recognized that the old plan bore little resemblance to the town that we love and that mismatch contributed to the loss of the William Biddle villa.



Lost: 307 Bank (1851 image coll. Porch Club of Riverton)

The Board resolved to replace the old plan completely.

After a whole-town postcard survey and a large public meeting at the Riverton School to determine goals and objectives, this Board undertook a full rewrite of the plan. Direction from our fellow citizens was unmistakable: *Rivertonians love their town the way it is.*

It adopted this new Riverton Master Plan in 1998 and that Plan remains the basis for all official land use public policy here (modified somewhat in subsequent re-examinations to keep up with current events).

The quality of the Master Plan garnered considerable recognition. Your professional group, the New Jersey Planning Officials (NJPO), honored this Master Plan with an award of excellence in 1999, and it appeared as a cover story in the League of Municipalities' magazine that year.

This Planning Board can be justly proud of its long track record.

As your history advisor, I naturally defer to the Board's Professional Planner on how the Plan's provisions should be interpreted when applied in practice. I quote here the basics from the Plan to provide context for everyone in the discussions which will follow.

With the loss of 307 Bank vividly in mind, the Master Plan makes preservation and enhancement of our history public policy in many places, notably:

- *Goal 1 Objective 6. Promote an appropriate stewardship by private property owners to preserve and enhance the exceptional **historic** and aesthetic qualities of the community and its buildings.*
- *Goal 3. Preserve and enhance the key distinguishing man-made and natural features that define Riverton's character as a **historic**, Victorian, riverfront community.*
- *Goal 3 Objective 5. Retain the **architectural integrity** of existing structures.*

The Master Plan contains a chapter entitled "Historic Element." Its wording has also prevailed, unchanged, through the two decennial re-examinations since. This Element gets to the heart of it in section "D – Planning Recommendations", opening with:

*The **history** of Riverton is so important to the character of the town that it must be considered during any development or redevelopment project.*

An important component of this application now before this Planning Board is the request to create new, infill construction within the Historic District. The Master Plan "Housing Element" addresses this head-on in section "C 3":

In Riverton, the houses are all very different. Rarely does one find two houses that are alike. Many homes have gingerbread, porches, roof

*details, unique windows, decorative doors or ornamental clapboards. Yards are filled with fences, small lampposts, benches, retaining walls and steps. **New construction should continue this intimacy.** ... Similarly, walkways built with pavers embody quaintness uncharacteristic of slabs of concrete or asphalt.*

Demolition Ordinance. The new Master Plan led to the passage of the Borough's Demolition Ordinance ([§ 128-50](#)), which provides important protections. It directs that the Planning Board "shall not" approve any demolition of an architecturally significant structure if it is for the purpose of subdivision. It is reasonable to infer the opposite order was also intended: to not approve any subdivision if it makes the ultimate demolition of the building more likely.

The ordinance also provides that demolitions can only be approved if the building is "uninhabitable" and "that it is not economically feasible to recondition the building to a condition wherein it is safe for occupancy or use."

Though the Application before this Board is not requesting demolition of the historic Groves Mansion, the Applicant requests the bulk variance for the express purpose of saving the Mansion. Ensuring that preservation happens is a vital part of these proceedings.

Why is a Historic District important? Many towns have individually designated historic structures, but a Historic District like ours is of far greater intrinsic, cultural value than the sum of its parts.

A Historic District is immersive: most anywhere you look, what you observe is from a time many decades ago. To work, its *integrity* must be steadfastly defended, both against loss of any part and against intrusive new construction which would distract from the completeness of the experience.

Specific to this subject application, the grounds surrounding any historic structure are often valuable to give it context. In a Historic District, those grounds are all the more important to the whole. Without them, the structures are just individual objects of curiosity.

The Frederick Groves Mansion itself. This elegant 1901 home and its grounds enhance the Historic District, making a graceful presence on Lippincott Avenue, arguably our most elegant street.

It is of particular value both architecturally and socially, notable for the many stories it tells:

It is a historic house surrounding another historic house. Comparison of the values and dates on deeds indicates that a house was built in 1880 on the center lot (#411) by one Joseph A. Erwin, who promptly sold it.

The popular 1890 “birds eye view” lithograph of Riverton has our only known view of this house, a nice but not extravagant three-story Mansard. (Visible in the foreground is #407, clearly the same home that is today the residence of the Iannacone family.)



Coll. Historical Society of Riverton

By that time, the Groves family already lived there, having purchased it in 1885.

Then, we find in articles in the *New York Times* and the *Philadelphia Real Estate Record* of early 1901 that architect Frank T. Mercer has hired a contractor for “large additions and general alterations to the residence of F.S. Groves of Riverton, N.J.” The additions completely transformed the 20-year-old house.

Significant to this subdivision before the Planning Board, Frederick Groves simultaneously purchased the empty lots on either side as the proper grounds to enhance this expansive mansion he was building for himself.

It is a rarity in Riverton to know the date of construction, the architect, and the name of the contractor.

Steamboating and fortunes to be made. There is a continuing theme in Riverton’s Historic District involving steamboats and steamships. Not only was the town founded because residents could use the steamboats to commute to Philadelphia, a number of families made their fortunes in shipping. This is one of them.

Frederick Groves’ father Anthony founded the popular Baltimore and Philadelphia Steamboat Company in 1844, generally called “The Ericsson Line” and Frederick worked in the company his entire life. The line ran elegant overnight boats for passengers and freight between those two cities, using the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal. The boats were purposely built with a narrow beam to fit through the locks which that canal had at the time.



Coll. Roger Prichard

Frederick inherited ownership and the presidency of the line upon his father’s death in 1891, making him a wealthy man. The boats docked in Philadelphia at Pier 3 South (where today’s Penn’s Landing stands), just a few steps from where the Riverton steamboats such as the *Columbia* docked. Frederick was undoubtedly a daily passenger from our pier.

Wealth and social climbing. The increased wealth of the Groves family and the influence it created is fascinating to follow. This family developed connections galore.

Starting in the rough-and-tumble world of shipping and docks, by Frederick's time they were rubbing elbows with the elite of Riverton, the Fitlers, Biddles, and Dorrances, among others.

This socialite activity was capped in 1905 when Groves' namesake son, Frederick Jr., who grew up in this house, married the daughter of Arthur Dorrance, president of Campbell Soup, founded by another Rivertonian. Shortly later, Dorrance *also* became a Rivertonian, building himself a grand house on the golf course, 200 Park (today Paul Grena's house). Frederick Sr. had been one of the Country Club's founders in 1900.

This son, Frederick Jr., thus became extraordinarily wealthy, and he and his wife built a magnificent estate (no longer standing) where Cinnaminson High School now stands.

The African-American story. There are two interesting connections to Black history in this family and house.

The family's steamboats were used in at least two slave escapes. William Still's epic 1872 original history *The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narrative, Letters etc.*, notes that on two different occasions, slaves concealed themselves in crates in Baltimore, to be shipped through the canal to Philadelphia on Ericsson Line boats. (Of course, this was many years before the founding of Riverton.)

Less vivid, study of the Census returns for the family is notable, listing multiple servants living in the house from 1900 onward, all African American and all born in the South. It helps tell the story that the Great Migration from the South started considerably earlier than is generally recognized.



I appreciate very much the trust in me that the Mayor has shown by appointing me to represent Riverton's history. I hope that this statement will prove useful to the Planning Board.

Please know that I am always available for questions and welcome feedback.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Roger T. Prichard in blue ink.

Roger T. Prichard

Cc: Charles D. Petrone, Esq.
Michelle Taylor, PP, AICP
Jim Brandenburger, Applicant
William C. Brown Jr., President, HSR
Immediate neighbors