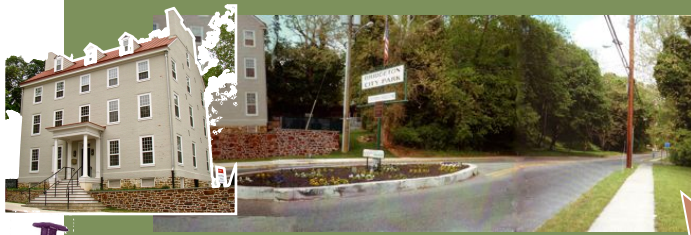


THE STORY OF BRIDGETON'S NAIL HOUSE



Looking North from the entrance to Bridgeton City Park at Commerce St, arrow indicates the location of the Nail House (photo inset). Note its closeness to the New Jersey Trust-restored David Sheppard House/Ivy Hall (now the Rutgers University Cousteau Center) on the left. Commerce Street and downtown Bridgeton are just off camera right, to the East.

The Cumberland Nail Works and the surprising kickstart of nationally-important industry in Bridgeton

People call it the **Nail House** or the Nail Mill Office, or the Nail Mill Office Museum--a plain little one-story structure with sand-colored wood clapboards, shingled roof and green shutters sitting slightly back from the road at the main South entrance to Bridgeton City Park and the historic bridge the original "Bridgetowne" was named for.

You might almost miss it going by.

And yet the foundations of this little building were laid in 1815--over two centuries ago. **And it still tells a huge story.**

The **Nail House** takes its name from the **Cumberland Nail Works**, founded by Benjamin and David Reeves, a pioneer industrial complex that soon sprang up around it to become the **first industrial heart of the whole region**, hammering out tons of cut nails and iron for the new American century.

As Bridgeton grew, the Works soon dominated both sides of the river. By the Civil War the riverfront was a vast, noisy, smoky, industrial park (see map other side). Yet out of all those original structures only the **Nail House** still stands as a recognizable part of the industry, its small voice speaking for the rest, still telling the story of this once powerhouse industry and the truly critical economic and social role of nail and iron production in the new nation. **It remains one of the few structures left for interpreting Bridgeton's vibrant role in the early history of industrial America.**

But there is even more hidden history here.

The Works shipped their products on barges from what was still the navigable edge of the Cohansey. But to bring fresh water to the production site they purchased rights to a system Smith Bowen, another early entrepreneur, had developed upstream. It included Tumbling Dam Lake (now 'Sunset Lake') and the canal we now know as the "Raceway."

Slowly, over the years of the 19th century, this upstream greenway became the whole city's treasured playground. Ironic? Even as many other industrial cities were pushing the 'green world' farther and farther away, a Bridgeton "maker" was actively preserving an open space within the city where ironworkers and iron-masters, glassmakers, shopkeepers, farmers, servants and students, too--men, women, girls, boys, young, old, Sundays and holidays--could freely enjoy the trails, woods and lakes of this company park, strolling, swimming, skating, boating, birding, hiking, or just taking in the beauty of a natural woodland "preserve."

Above, the Nail House to the right and the Sheppard House to the left of the entrance to the Bridgeton City Park. Below, a front view of the Nail House.



But as the nineteenth century ended and the Cumberland Works closed, unable to meet the new challenges of the industrial metalworking industry, the City, in an incredibly wise and foresighted act, was persuaded **to preserve the land entire as a public park.**

Over a thousand acres--originally saved from development because they were needed for an industrial machine operation--almost magically reclaimed, whole and intact, for future generations because they were also healthy and beautiful. And so it happened that what we now know as **Bridgeton City Park** still sprawls invitingly northward...above the Nail House...along Mayor Aitken Drive to the Cohanzick Zoo...on to Sunset and Mary Elmer Lakes (and all the walks and trails and reaches beyond into the upper Cohansey watershed)...still providing "green" and recreational resources *vital to Bridgeton's future sustainability.* (more info other side)

Over the years, local historians have continued to link the survivor Nail House structure to the state's big industrial history. Until about 2006 the building housed a collection of city and industry memorabilia under the auspices of the Bridgeton Antiquarian League. After it was closed to the public except for special events, the need for repairs and upgrade soon made it unusable.

But it hasn't been forgotten.

And that's why you are reading this now.

Community-based efforts to "Bring Back the Nail House" and put its potential to use again as a gateway to the historic City Park have been ongoing. They formed the basis of an Historic Preservation Trust Fund planning grant in 2010, and now of another grant provided by a partnership between the 1772 Foundation and the NJ Historic Trust. This will fund a collaboration between the City and Bridgeton's Center for Historic American Building Arts [CHABA] to start the process of historic restoration and interpretation in 2015-16. (more-->)

Early recreational boating, Bridgeton City Park....



What makes the Nail House so important...

...to History?...

The Nail House was the "counting-house" hub--the managers' office--for the Cumberland Nail & Iron Works, operating here continuously from 1815 till 1899.

Its 1815 foundation makes it among the earliest survivors of large-scale industrial development in the entire nation.

It is one of the reasons the State granted a charter to Bridgeton's Cumberland National Bank in 1816, only the second such charter in the state.

It was later owned and run by several generations of Bridgeton's Buck family, who also founded the City Fire Department and the original Cumberland Insurance Co.

In 1889, this vast complex of steam-driven Cumberland millworks spanned both sides of the river, still producing such vast quantities of cut nails, pipe and wrought iron for the Victorian building boom that historian Isaac Nichols ranked it as "one of the great manufactories of the State."

An incubator of industrial talent, the Works launched their most celebrated "graduate"--genius inventor Oberlin Smith--who went on to found his own Ferracute Machine Company in the 1860s, and moved the center of South Jersey industrial innovation only a mile away--to East Lake--for the next century!

... but also Right Now and for the Future ? ...

When the Works almost symbolically left Bridgeton in the last year of the 19th century, they created what must have been one of the great redevelopment challenges of the American industrial story. The reputation of a city recently dubbed the "Metropolis of the South" seemed at stake.

At last, urged by its own farsighted genius Oberlin Smith and relying on the Cumberland Bank's willingness to accept half what they'd paid for it, Bridgeton **reclaimed the entire 1100 acres** to create its City Park--larger than New York's Central Park and among the largest urban parks in the state.

This dynamic story links industry and nature, economy and ecology, past and future. It is part of a bigger story of environmental respect and nurture that we must now understand to survive, and MAKE MORE VISIBLE TO STUDENTS AND VISITORS.

A restored, fully-interpreted Nail House is vital to bringing this future to birth. Community support for preservation efforts means we can finally unpack the natural and cultural history of the Nail House at this critical moment in its life, and explore together how to make it a true gateway, interpreting the past and harnessing fresh, new ways to tell the stories of Bridgeton and South Jersey.



Together with early operations in Paterson in northern New Jersey--now core of a National Historical Park honoring the founding of American industry--Bridgeton's Nail Works represents the key role of southern New Jersey in launching the American industrializing strategy proposed by Alexander Hamilton after the American Revolution.

Barges and sailing ships plied the Bridgeton riverfront when the massed industrial structures of the Cumberland Works dominated the cityscape of 1886.

(Map by O.H. Bailey. The inset arrow points to the Nail House.)



The Nail House's unique two-sided Whitehead clock kept owners & workers in sync.

Saving a natural resource was the city's visionary challenge of the early twentieth century. Preserving and interpreting it within its changing cultural/ ecological context has become the challenge of our own.



WANT TO KNOW MORE? GET INVOLVED? Call: 856-369-1300 or email: centerhabarts@gmail.com