

## River of Joy: Cranford's River Carnivals

*By Vic Bary*

### Before the Regattas & Carnivals

The Rahway River has loomed large in the lives of all peoples who have lived in the area which became Cranford. The first to live here were the Unami tribe of the Lenni Lenape nation. Also known as the Delaware Indians because their permanent winter residence was on the Delaware River, they used the Rahway (which they referred to as “Wahakewany” – ‘the place where eggs are found’) as part of the Minisink Trail. They used the Trail to take them each spring to the Shrewsbury Inlet where they fished and harvested shellfish through the summer. For them, the Rahway was part of a highway system which furnished food along the way on their annual trek to the shore and return to the Delaware River at the end of the fishing season.

When European settlers from Elizabethtowne first came to this area to develop their 100 acre plots, they saw the Rahway as a source of power. In an era in which most work was accomplished by either animal or human power, rivers provided a third source of power which was “free”, to those able to harness it, and operated 24/7 without ever tiring. The Cranes established mills on either side of the River at the site of today's Sperry dam starting in 1716. Eventually Cranford would host up to nine mills along the Rahway.

The completion of a railroad bridge across Newark Bay in 1864 allowed New Yorkers and Brooklynites arriving by ferry at the Jersey City terminal to catch trains directly west to bucolic Craneville and its meandering, clear-running river. The first to arrive on these trains were land developers like Sylvester Cahill, Alden Bigelow, and Phineas P. Lounsbury. With its excellent train transportation to New York, and a lovely river, the potential of local farmland to become suburban tracts and for the Rahway River to become a source of recreation for suburbanites was obvious to these visionaries. The river thus evolved from a highway and source of food, to a power source for mills, and lastly to a source of year-round recreation.



**CNJRR Terminal**

### River Regattas

As Cranford (the name it would be incorporated under in 1871) became suburban, its citizens – especially its young men – discovered the recreational opportunities the River afforded. Canoe

clubs (and hockey clubs for winter sports) began to spring up along its banks. The Cranford Boating Club and Association instituted the first River Regatta in 1879 – an event confined to swimming contests and boat races. Regattas followed each year thereafter.



**Crowds watch First Regatta**



**Titling Match**

### River Carnivals – 19<sup>th</sup> Century

The notion of a River Carnival featuring decorated boats judged by categories seems to have been inspired by a river outing by Holly Street resident Santiago Porcella. Porcella, a sugar broker who built three large riverside residences at 203, 207 and 209 Holly Street, decided one mid-1880s summer evening to decorate his boat with a string of Japanese lanterns strung from a wire and took his children for an outing. According to Larry Fuhro, “several of Mr. Porcella’s neighbors exclaimed over the beauty of the lighted craft. It was not long before an evening was set aside for an excursion of lighted boats on the mirror-like stream.”

In 1886, the newly organized Cranford River Improvement Association planned four events to focus attention on the beauty of the River and the importance of protecting it. Remembering Mr. Porcella’s lighted boat, they scheduled an August 1 “River Carnival” featuring lighted boats which would parade from the new Union Avenue dam up to Fannie Bates’ “Hampton Hall” (now the site of Hampton Park) and back again. Twenty-five decorated canoes paddled this 3-mile course, accompanied by a marching band. Roselle resident William Sulzer (who would become Governor of New York in 1912) compared the event to a “night in Venice”.

Cranford soon began referring to itself as the “Venice of America” (later changing it to a more modest “Venice of New Jersey”). Houses along the parade path strung lights in their back yards

and hundreds gathered to view the passing boats. The event was so successful that plans were made to hold a River Carnival each summer thereafter.



**Awaiting start of Carnival 1888**

Sponsoring organizations changed over the following years but the one constant was that attendance would grow and floats would become increasingly complex and topical. Because of newspaper coverage and River Carnival programs donated to CHS, we know a great deal about the succeeding Carnivals.

1890: This River Carnival was the first opened to float entries from surrounding towns and the public from outside Cranford was invited to attend. The Bound Brook brass band provided the music.

1891: The Carnival was covered in the *New York Press* in an article entitled “As Though in Fairyland”. “A water parade began at 8 PM.” (August 15). “Dozens of decorated canoes, small barges, shells, gigs, sculls, skiffs and rowboats set out from the reviewing stand at Bookhout’s water pavilion near the Union Avenue dam led by ‘Commodore’ Abry and his family in the ‘Gladys’.” The flotilla included boats named “Wiggly-Wag”, “Evangeline”, “Primrose”, “Max”, “Flirt” and of course “No Name”. Music was provided by Bartow’s Bound Brook Band.”

A 500 square foot sheet had been spread across the River at the Union Avenue Bridge, and at 9 PM Eugene Austin projected magic lantern slides of local, national, and European points of interest.

1892: The “Grand Venetian Carnival” was held Saturday evening August 6. Music was provided by Drakes Celebrated Band of Elizabeth and by the Roselle Band.

1893: Sponsored by the Cranford Boating Association (which had sponsored the Regattas), the 3 PM August 26 event included boat and swimming races (as had been the case with the Regattas) as well as the Carnival boat parade with music again provided by the Roselle Band.

1894/1895: In both years the Carnival was entitled “A Mid Summer Night’s Dream”. The event held August 11, 1894 included a general illumination of houses as well as boats and included two processions of boats and two full bands. The August 3, 1895 event followed the same format.

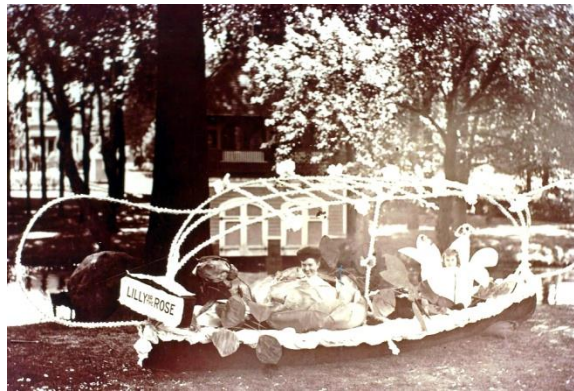
1896: The eleventh annual Venetian Carnival was held Saturday evening August 22. Attendance was estimated at 8,000, four times Cranford’s population. In preparing for the event, the sponsoring Cranford Boating Association stressed the need for adequate funds to be raised to prevent attendance from falling behind previous records. They were successful.

1899: Advertised as “The Great Carnival of Venice, A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, it was held Saturday evening August 19, 1899. The musical program was provided by W. N. Bartow’s Military Band, which received \$100 for the performance.

### River Carnivals - Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century to 1920

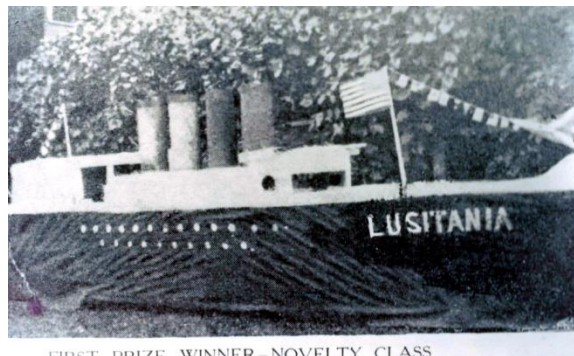
1900: This Saturday evening August 11 event was oddly described in its program as a “Venetian Carnival to Mark the End of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century”. (It would seem to have ended the prior year.)

1905: The program from this July 15 event recognized what appear to be multiple sponsors, including the Echo Lake Gun, Canoe, Hockey and Baseball clubs. It also lists all 73 participating boats in their order in the procession.



**“Lilly or the Rose” - 1905**

1907: One of the floats in this year’s procession was a representation of the newly launched “Lusitania”, which won first place in the Novelty class. The Lusitania would be sunk eight years later by the German submarine U-20 with the loss of 1,119 lives.



FIRST PRIZE WINNER - NOVELTY CLASS

**Lusitania - 1907**

1908: Under the sponsorship of the Cranford Canoe Club, the procession of one hundred decorated canoes started at Porcella’s boat house and moved up river to Hampton Hall, then down river to the Sperry dam. Here it turned around upriver to the Eastman Street Bridge, ending at the boat house where it began. Over 3,000 lanterns decorated the banks of the River. Music was provided by the

7<sup>th</sup> Regiment New York National Guard band playing on the grounds of the Cranford Casino. A concert was also held at the Sperry dam by the James Elizabeth Band. There were 78 participating boats.



**Porcella's Boathouse**



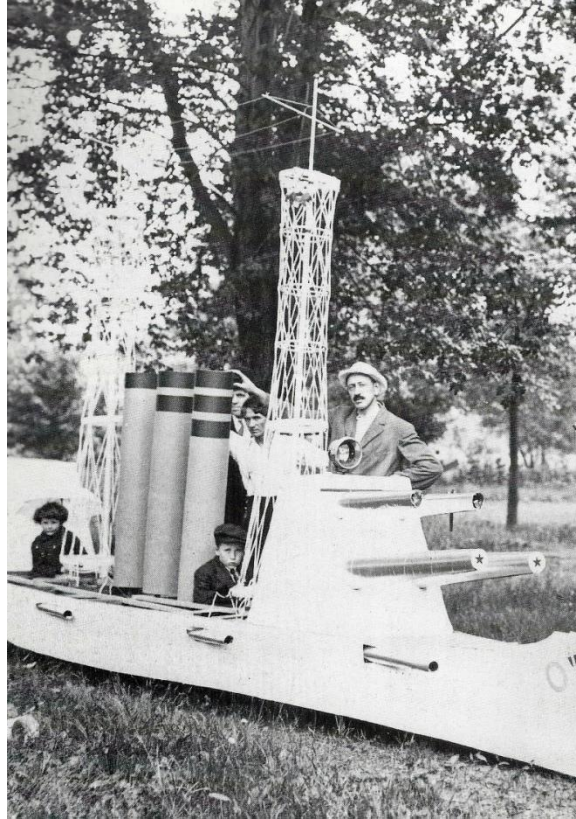
**1908 Program**

1909: This year's Carnival saw 114 entries in various classes. Triumphal arches of lanterns spanned the River and an illuminated bomb announced the start of the parade. The 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment New York National Guard again furnished the music, as did another, unnamed, military band.

1911: Sponsored by the Cranford Canoe Club and held July 8, 84 entries were named in the Carnival program.

1913 - 1917 According to Larry Fuhro, "Between 1913 and 1917 the Carnival faced increasing handicaps presented by the County's construction of new lower and heavier steel girder bridges across the Rahway to accommodate the automobile.... Yankee ingenuity prevailed, however, as floats were now designed with hinges and raising and lowering devices to get under the new bridges. One Chinese lantern-lit float did not quite make it under a bridge. The jostled lanterns burst into flame and the float burned to the water."

In 1914, with Europe at war, military themes appeared. Floats included a Battleship Texas and a Battleship New Jersey; we are fortunate to have several photos of Albert Lewis' Battleship New Jersey.



**Battleship New Jersey – Albert Lewis**

Carnivals Become a Victim of their own Success 1921 – 1928

1921: This year marked Cranford's Golden Jubilee, and to celebrate, a three-day affair was scheduled with the River Carnival held July 3. Cash first and second prizes were awarded to the best historical floats. Prizes were also awarded for the Most Beautiful Canoes, Most Novel Canoes, Best Decorated House, Best Decorated Store, and Best Decorated Lawn on the River Carnival Route. Three bands provided music. We have a number of photographs from the Jubilee Carnival in the CHS photo collection. Included were the Cranford Fire Department's submission of a scale model of Cranford's downtown in 1871, which won the Mayor's Grand Prize.



**Cranford 1871 – CFD**

Boy Scout Troops 3 & 4 presented a float illustrating camp life.



**Boys Scout Troops 3 & 4**

A novel entry was offered by Fire Captain Carl Pederson, who carried a submarine on his shoulders while walking the River underneath clad in a bathing suit and breathing through the conning tower. Deemed neither a canoe nor a float, judges liked it enough to create a special prize for it.

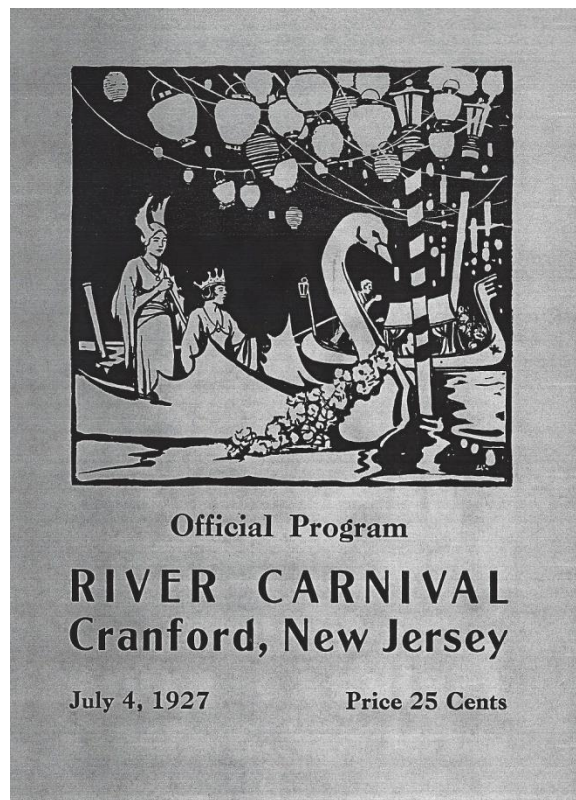


**Carl Pederson's Submarine**

1922-1927: As attendance of Carnivals surpassed 10,000 attendees and approached 20,000, increasing complaints came from homeowners along the banks of the River about unruly crowds trampling lawns and shrubbery and showing little regard for private property. We have a surviving photo from the 1927 Carnival of Harry Heins' tribute to the "Lone Eagle" – Charles Lindbergh.



**Harry Heins “Spirit of St. Louis” – 1927**



**1927 Program**

1928: Unfortunately, the public did not respond to requests for greater respect for private property, and home owners complained vigorously to the Cranford River Pageant Association. The Association would continue to meet yearly through 1935, but the 1928 “River Pageant” would be the last Carnival for several decades. River Carnivals were now perceived as “old fashioned”, and then a Depression, World War and the materialism of the Eisenhower years intervened.

### More Recent Carnivals

As the 1960s dawned, old-fashioned was having something of a resurgence (remember Granny Gowns and Edwardian jackets?). The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original River Carnival was 1961. To



celebrate, the Jaycees sponsored a River Carnival on June 4, but as a daytime event held in Nomahegan Park. Its purpose was also to celebrate Cranford's 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as "Cranford Days". Three groups of floats sponsored by various organizations took to the lake. There were also baton twirling and canoe handling exhibitions.

River Carnivals (in Nomahegan Park) as part of "Cranford Days" were repeated in 1962 and 1963. 1964 was New Jersey's 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the State of New Jersey included 14 scenes from Cranford's history displayed on land and water.

Cranford's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary was celebrated in 1971 with another Jaycees-sponsored River Carnival. To celebrate Americas Bicentennial in 1976, a Jaycee-sponsored River Carnival was held at Nomahegan Park. It attracted 15,000 people. The Cranford Girl Scouts float "Salute to America" won first prize, besting 13 other entries.

In 1986, the River Carnivals centennial was celebrated. As part of the festivities, a sheet was stretched across the Rahway just above the Union Avenue North Bridge upon which magic lantern slides were projected – just as Eugene Austin had done in 1891. A more modest Carnival entitled the "Cranford River Regatta" was held late September, 1987, and a "River Heritage Celebration" was held September 17, 1988.

Are there River Carnivals in Cranford's future? Hard to say, but at least one Township Committee member has expressed a strong interest in seeing this happen.

Sources:

1. CHS River Carnival Photo Collection
2. Fuhro, Larry, "Down by the Old Mill Stream ..." The Cranford River Carnival at 100", Cranford River Carnival Program, 1986
3. Hall, Homer, 300 Years at Crane's Ford, Cranford Historical Society, 1964
4. "As Though in Fairyland", *New York Press*, August, 1891
5. River Carnival Programs, various