



# Diners

## New exhibit explores the the history of these Jersey icons

### 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](mailto:gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com)

#### Exhibition:

#### Icons of American Architecture: History of New Jersey Diners

Cornelius Low House

1225 River Road

Piscataway, New Jersey 08854

Tel: (732) 745-4177

TTY: (732) 745-3888

Closes: June 26, 2016

Admission: Free

Parking: ★★★

Kid-Friendly: ★★

Handicapped Accessible: ★★★

Exhibit: ★★★★★

Review by Gordon Bond

A few years ago, a friend and his wife moved from New Jersey to Florida to be closer to their son. While visiting the Garden State again, I asked if there was anything he missed from when he lived here. His answer was immediate and emphatic: "Diners!"

It is almost a cliché to say that the diner is among the most quintessentially "Jersey" things. Trivia webpages claim we have

## EXHIBIT PARKING RATING SYSTEM

★ Not enough parking.

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

★★★ Plenty of parking.

## 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 HANDICAP ACCESS RATING SYSTEM

★ Not accessible.

★★ Partially accessible or  
requires advance  
arrangements.

★★★ Fully accessible.

more of these sorts of restaurants than anyplace else in the country. Whether that's true or not depends on how one defines the term and it hasn't always described the same sort of restaurant. The history of these institutions is the topic of a new exhibit at the Cornelius Low House in Piscataway, NJ, on display through June 26, 2016.

The chrome and neon establishments we now think of as "diners" had a more humble beginning as horse-drawn lunch wagons that found brisk trade especially near factories, providing quick, convenient meals to shift-workers at odd hours when most other eateries would be closed. Later, the term referred to prefabbed buildings constructed in factories and trucked to a permanent location. The long, low, narrow shape of a classic early diner was owed to the need to fit it on the back of a truck for shipment and the need to clear overhead wires and overpasses. The similarity in shape to railcars has led to the myth that early diners were repurposes passenger train cars. While some may have been, most were always intended to be little restaurants. Later, as the clientele increased along with the menus, the buildings expanded as needed, but many retained the seating at the counter for individual diners on the go.

The first of the horse-drawn cart type diners is credited to Walter Scott of Providence, Rhode Island, in 1872. The idea spread through New England but took deep roots in the Garden State thanks to Bayonne's Jerry O'Mahoney, whose lunch carts proved successful enough in 1910 that he soon had a chain of seven and by 1913 began manufacturing and selling the structures themselves, modeled on the Pullman railroad diner cars. Limited by the practical restrictions to dimensions imposed by the means of delivery, diners were pretty standard architecturally until the mid-1920s when novelties like stainless steel and Formica allowed designers and craftsmen to create more elaborate and distinctive buildings—and ushered in what many aficionados consider the "Golden Age" of the diner in America. Mirrors and glass gave the illusion of being much larger and airier.

Almost as cliché as a diner in New Jersey is the image of a



diner owned by a Greek. Yet while diner-owners came from diverse backgrounds, a large number of Greek immigrants did indeed find good livings in the diner trade thanks to family connections and hard work. Political unrest in the 1950s and early 1960s caused a wave of Greek immigration and many New Jersey diners are still owned by their children and grandchildren.

The latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw increased fast food competition and the classical diners had to change with the

times and tastes. Many eateries that call themselves “diners” today are hybrids. They retain the chrome-n-neon flash and maybe the counter-seating. But the narrow dining space is expanded into a larger restaurant and the limited “comfort food”

menus now offer a wider array of sometimes sophisticated selections—as well as a bar. Yet the classic form of a Jersey diner never quite disappeared and many surviving examples have reaped the benefit of an increased nostalgia in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.



One of the many vintage images of diner history on display.

“Icons of American Architecture: History of New Jersey Diners” does an excellent job of telling the story and imparting a sense of the experience of a Jersey diner. That’s not easy in an 18<sup>th</sup> century Georgian mansion. It’s accomplished with such things as recreated booths, complete with realistic-looking fake cuisine, as well as an array of

artifacts from neon sign letters to vintage counter stools to the briefcase of a diner salesman. On the walls are many wonderful images of classic and modern Jersey diners, interspersed between text panels that provide enough in-depth information while never getting bogged down. The exhibition’s popularity has been helped by working with the nearby Somerset Diner, though the topic alone is one that will naturally appeal to many who call



**Reconstructed diner booth,  
complete with fake food!**

the Garden State home.

The one suggestion I would make would be to include a take-away sheet listing the locations of many of the extant diners mentioned in the exhibit for those inclined to take a Jersey diner road-trip.

If you've lived in New Jersey for any length of time, chances are sooner or later you've eaten at a diner or at least had your eye caught by a roadside gem. Whether a teenager looking for a late-night post-concert food fix, a trucker in search of a hot meal at an odd hour, or a senior taking advantage of an afternoon blue plate special (and the exhibit

explains the phrase!), the diner experience remains a fond part of Americana, and quintessentially "Jersey."

#### **Book:**

#### **Images of America: Craftsman Farms**

Written by Heather E. Stivison

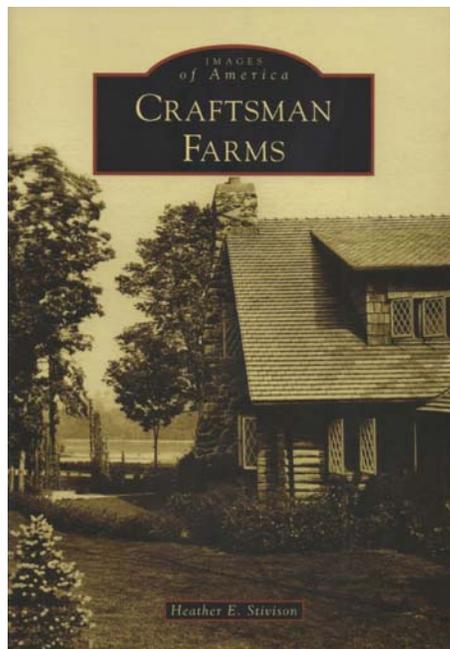
2014: Arcadia Publishing, Charleston, SC

ISBN: 978.1.4671.2205.4

Softcover, 127 pages, black and white

Review by Gordon Bond

★★★★



History is full of examples of utopian visions. From national revolutions to local planned communities, people occasionally embrace ideologies that they believe will create a new and improved society if only everyone would embrace their vision. New Jersey has been home to a fair share of such enterprises of varying degrees of longevity—the 1869 Methodist “camp meeting movement behind the establishment of Ocean Grove; the Civil War-era progressive/artist colony of Perth Amboy’s Raritan Bay Union; Union Township’s early 20<sup>th</sup> century answer for homelessness in the Self-Master Colony; etc. The Garden State was also home to one of the more interesting, if abortive, visions for a more healthful, morally uplifted, and industrious America.

The Arts and Crafts Movement was rooted in England but

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 / or graphics / typography.

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matured throughout Europe and North America as a reaction to an increasingly industrialized, urban, and impersonal Western civilization. More and more people, it seemed, lived in unhealthy crowded tenements and toiled as unfulfilled drudges tending mechanized factories. Starting in 1880, there was a counter-movement that emphasized traditional craftsmanship to make by hand things like furniture, based on simpler forms incorporating medieval, romantic or folk styles of decoration. Embracing this ascetic, it was believed by the movement's fans, communities would engage in healthful, useful, and fulfilling endeavors. This was for them more than a design fashion, but a holistic means of social and economic reform that the working class and poor seemed to be in desperate need of.

Perhaps the movement's greatest disciple and proselytizer in the United States was Gustav Stickley (March 9, 1858–April 21, 1942). Born to German immigrants in Osceola, Wisconsin, Stickley would find his life's calling as a manufacturer of furniture rooted in the Arts and Crafts style and a business model incorporating its reform-minded goals. This was more than just making pretty furniture, but the trappings of an Arts and Crafts *lifestyle* he hoped would catch on in America. Between October of 1901 and December of 1916, his magazine, *The Craftsman*, promoted the idea of better-living aided by Arts and Crafts design sensibilities.

In 1905, Stickley had moved his headquarters and showroom to Manhattan, but was eyeing across the Hudson River as the location for perhaps his most-ambitious project. His vision settled on a school for boys to be built in the woods of Morris Plains (now Parsippany-Troy Hills). The goal was to bring up a new generation of young men in the principles of his Arts and Crafts paradigm. They would combine classroom work with hands-on handicrafts, feed themselves with the produce of the farm they worked, and become useful citizens.

Craftsman Farms, as it would be called, was a collection of buildings on 650 acres where boys would attend school, grow their own food, and learn handicrafts as trades. It was to be an entirely self-sufficient community, with gardens for vegetables



**Gustav Stickley**

and flowers, orchards, dairy cows, and chickens. It would support itself financially, in part, by both using the produce in a restaurant operated in his Manhattan furniture showroom and department store. Among the buildings constructed were craft workshops, stables, a dairy barn, chicken coop, other farm buildings, and three cottage dwellings. But the centerpiece was a fine main “Log House” designed to be used as a club house, dining hall, and place for students and guests to gather. Construction started in 1910 and the Stickley family lived on the property while buildings were completed and farm production got under way.

The flaw with Stickley’s vision, however, was that its economic engine depended on sustaining the popularity of his Arts and Crafts designs. While it may have been a long-term lifestyle to Gustav Stickley, to many of his customers, it was a fashion, vulnerable to being pushed aside by the next big thing. Indeed, demand for his furniture dropped and took his plans for Craftsman Farms with it. By 1915 he had filed for bankruptcy and two years later the Craftsman Farms property was acquired in a bankruptcy sale by Major George and Sylvia Wurlitzer Farny. Fortunately, the Farnys maintained the Arts and Crafts style of the buildings and landscape, occupying the property until 1989.

The social reformation Stickley desired to bring about would, of course, fail to materialize. Yet the Arts and Crafts style has maintained enough of a fan-base that, with no small irony, examples of Stickley furniture are now highly collectable, selling for large sums. Indeed, he left enough of an impression on American decorative arts history that when the Craftsman Farms land was threatened by the development of 52 new townhouses, a grassroots movement rose to encourage the Township of Parsippany-Troy Hills to obtain the remaining 26 acres through eminent domain. The remaining grounds and buildings have been restored as the Stickley Museum at Craftsman Farms, operated by the Craftsman Farms Foundation.

The rollercoaster ride of Craftsman Farms’ history has been captured by former Foundation executive director Heather E. Stivison in her contribution to Arcadia Publishing’s Images of America series, “Craftsman Farms.” Combing through archives

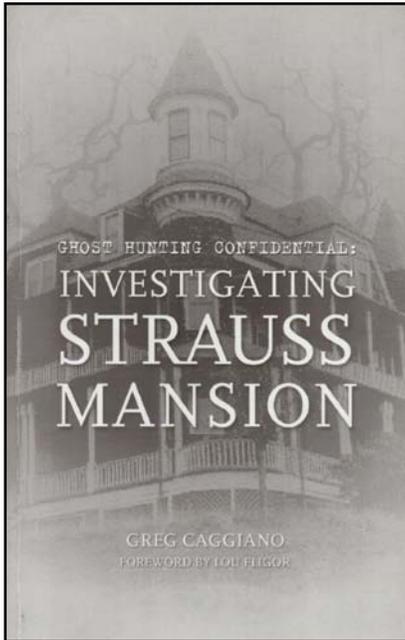


The Log House at Craftsman Farms

and private scrapbooks, she put together an impressive collection of images and ephemera that manages to cover the full breadth of the story. The book is divided logically into the chapters: Gustav Stickley Pursues His Drams; Landscape and Buildings; The Log House; The Stickley Years; The Farny Years; Rescue and Rebirth. The photos of the Stickley and Farny families are especially interesting since it shows how the spaces were intended to be *lived* in as well as well-designed.

The inclusion of maps showing how the grounds changed during the different periods are a nice touch. The introductory texts and captions do a solid job of putting the images in context.

Anyone familiar with the property, interested in Stickley and the Arts and Crafts Movement, or just learning more about a fascinating aspect of New Jersey's role in both decorative arts and utopian community history will find much worthwhile in this book.



**Book:**

**Ghost Hunting Confidential: Investigating Strauss Mansion**

Written by Greg Caggiano

2014: The Strauss Mansion

ISBN: None

Softcover, 60 pages, black and white

Review by Gordon Bond

★★★

Historians often have a love/hate relationship with the “paranormal.” Serious historians are often loathed to be associated with such pseudoscience. Yet it is hard to ignore the much-needed dollars a good “ghost hunt” can rake in for historic house sites. Back in September of 2012, I wrote an article for GSL exploring the intersection between “real” history and such nods to pop-culture, “Perils of Popularization” ([http://gardenstatelegacy.com/files/Perils-of-Popularization\\_Bond\\_GSL17.pdf](http://gardenstatelegacy.com/files/Perils-of-Popularization_Bond_GSL17.pdf)).

In the interest of full disclosure, I do not personally believe in ghosts or the so-called paranormal. But I am at least sympathetic to historic sites who feel compelled to indulge in it. And, when done in proper measures, it *can* be an effective means of introducing members of the public to history who might not otherwise think to walk through the doors of a house museum.

Attempting to leave my skepticism aside, Greg Caggiano’s *Ghost Hunting Confidential: Investigating Strauss Mansion* does a reasonable job of straddling the two communities. The foreword, written by Atlantic Highlands Historical Society board member Lou Fligor, gives a brief history of the 1893 Adolph Strauss mansion through a dozen different owners to its becoming rundown in the 1970s—so much so that it caught the eye of a location scout for a grade-B horror movie, “Don’t Go in the House.” That seems to have set the tone among neighborhood kids for it being “haunted.” It was rescued from neglect and demolition in 1981 when the Society bought it for \$26,000 and set to work over the next five years with restoration, opening floors to the public as a museum between 1986 and 1996.

Saving it from its reputation as “haunted,” however, was

**Caggiano has written this book as much with the skeptic in mind as the believer. He includes examples of false positives as an acknowledgment not everything that goes bump in the night is a spirit.**

another matter. The Society allowed it to be used for a successful 2008 “scary lantern tour” fundraiser for local high school band. It proved so popular that the Society adopted it as an annual event for themselves ever since. Like any old house, there are tales of seemingly spooky experiences by volunteers on lonely nights. The Society was soon faced with the decision many such groups come against eventually—should they turn away from the “haunted house” reputation and the money and popularity it could bring to the Mansion or embrace it? They selected the latter, and to use it as a tool to introduce people to the real history.

Caggiano opens with “A Brief History of Ghost Hunting,” broadly tracing interest in the paranormal from early religions through the Spiritualist Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the fraudulent Fox Sisters, Harry Houdini’s crusade to expose the tricks used in séances, spirit photography, to the modern application of video and sound recording and other devices. He is candid that these days some ghost hunting groups engage in competitive egotistical efforts to one-up each other, even manufacturing or embellishing “evidence.” Caggiano claims to be more evidence-driven, whether one wants to attribute that evidence to a spirit-world or more prosaic causes.

His description of the “Four People You Meet on a Ghost Hunt”—The Skeptic Who Believes Nothing, The Skeptic With an Open Mind, The Believer Who is Skeptical, The Believer Who Believes Everything—is aided by some cute illustrations of each, as is “How Not to Behave on a Hunt.”

To his credit, Caggiano also lists some of the “misidentifications” such as reflections, noise pollution, the power of suggestion, etc. It is often frustrating to see how many folks post images of “orbs” on Facebook when they have long since been explained as the out-of-focus reflection of a camera flash on a piece of dust floating in front of the lens or an insect.

Much of the first chapter deals with ghost-hunting in general, methods, equipment, and broader themes. The second gets down specifically to the Strauss Mansion, describing three sessions, one in August 2013 and two in May 2014. I won’t go

Even if one is  
an ardent skeptic  
as I am, it is  
nonetheless  
entertaining.

If you're interested in seeing this  
stuff for yourself, contact  
Greg Caggiano through  
[Facebook.com/ghostsonthecoastnj](https://www.facebook.com/ghostsonthecoastnj)  
or  
[ghostsonthecoast.wordpress.com](https://ghostsonthecoast.wordpress.com)

into detail as to what they claimed to find or their explanations. Suffice to say my skepticism was not shaken, though the stories are entertaining enough whether you believe in it or not.

Caggiano has written this book as much with the skeptic in mind as the believer. He includes examples of false positives as an acknowledgment not everything that goes bump in the night is a spirit. I know the author and some of his team from another house museum and am certainly not prepared to accuse him or them of lying. I don't doubt that they experienced the things they claim. Where I do differ is in causation. The origin of every noise or breeze or glint of light is not always going to be immediately apparent. That in itself, however, doesn't justify leaping to the conclusion that it must be a ghost or "paranormal."

My wife works as an architectural historian and conservator. A while back she was conserving plaster at a Manhattan house museum. In order to ease the strain on the plaster of a ceiling, they pulled up the floorboards of the floor immediately above. Between the joists were several contractor bags' worth of dirt, dust, desiccated rodent feces, rodent remains, insects, and other debris that had gathered over the decades. Aside from the weight, how did this mass of organic material react to changes in temperature and humidity? Did it move? Outgas? Expand and contract? Most old buildings likely also have some degree of such material hidden behind their walls or under their floors. Yet how many of us—let alone "ghost hunters"—would even think of that as a possible yet hidden source of odd noises in the walls? Just because the cause isn't readily obvious doesn't mean it is necessary to evoke the supernatural. Instead of the tortured spirits of the dearly departed maybe it's really dried-out rat poop.

All that aside, *Ghost Hunting Confidential: Investigating Strauss Mansion* is a slim volume, but well-laid out and illustrated. Even if one is an ardent skeptic as I am, it is nonetheless entertaining. And, in keeping with the economic pragmatism that inspires many historic houses to embrace the "haunted house" image, all the proceeds from the book go to support the Atlantic Highlands Historical Society.

