Local writer celebrates Bridgeton history

Once a work appears in print, the writer doesn’t often get the opportunity to revise, correct and embellish. Print is final, indestructible—unless there’s a second edition or sequel.

Fortunately for Bridgeton’s posterity, there is Sharron Morita’s new version of its history, originally titled Bridgeton Impressions: 1686-1986 and first published in 1986 when she was commissioned to write a commemorative book for the city’s 300th anniversary celebration. The new expanded version, now called Bridgeton New Jersey: City on the Cohansey, a Cultural & Heritage Commission grant recipient, was recently published by the History Press of Charleston, S.C. It will be showcased at a book signing on Saturday, Oct. 20, at Frank Burton & Sons, 333 W. Broad St. in Bridgeton, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

“The first version had a short deadline, and I always wanted the opportunity to re-do it,” she said. “It was mainly a commemorative, with limited printing. “ So when Flavia Alaya, local owner of a cultural resource consulting firm, referred her to an editor at History Press, she lost no time in pitching the idea for her revision.

“When a book has been in print for 25 years, its errors take on the gloss of fact,” she writes in the introduction. “One aim of this work is to correct the errors of the first edition. For example, scholars have discredited the ‘Wallum Olum,’ thought to be the authentic creation story of the Lenni-Lenape.” She also points out that “there is no doubt about the error of a statement that worship services were held in local taverns in colonial Cohansey Bridge/Bridgetown. Before the town had its own church, residents attended services in

(Continued on page 2)
Author revises historical book

(Continued from page 1)

nearby churches, in the courthouse or even outdoors, but not in taverns."

Although short at 118 pages, the book runs the gamut from Bridgeton’s earliest times as a Lenni Lenape settlement through the challenges of the present day. Fascinating glimpses into the past are provided in such vignettes as that of an early 20th century woman physician, Dr. Mary Bacon, whose desire to become a doctor was considered a “scandalous choice” by her grandmother, and whose career lasted until the age of 77; in tales of those early Lenni Lenapes, described as “peaceful people at home in the woods and on the water” but mocked by the more warlike Iroquois as “the old women” or “grandmothers”; and the role of the less admirable side of the region, the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.

Background

The author is not a historian but was trained to uncover and interpret information as a journalism graduate of Syracuse University. Her interest in early history may have been sown at the university where local history was part of the curriculum, she said, and included a segment on the Iroquois connection. But when she came to Bridgeton she was surprised that the role of the Lenni Lenapes was largely ignored.

A native of the Finger Lakes region of New York state, she came to Bridgeton after graduation to work as a reporter and editor at the Bridgeton Evening News, hired by managing editor Ralph Brandt, who impressed her with his cordiality and kindness to the outsider. That was 47 years ago, and in the interim she met and married Dr. Paul Morita, a dentist, and remained in the area to raise their three children. She has also kept her hand in writing mode by freelancing for area newspapers and magazines.

Oh, and the reason why there are two “r”s in her first name? The doctor made a mistake on her birth certificate.

The book signing on Saturday at Burton’s will feature early photographs from past Burton exhibits, new images never exhibited before, and a few illustrations of Bridgeton by James Petit Cox.