For more information:
Essex County website: www.essexcountynj.org
RHAP Association website: rikerhillartists.org
Facebook: www.facebook.com/RikerHillArtParkArtists/
Instagram: Riker Hill Art Park Artists

Essex County Riker Hill Art Park
284 Beaufort Avenue, Livingston, NJ 07039

Directions:
From Points East / Garden State Parkway:
Take Route I-280
West to Exit 4A (Eisenhower Parkway South). Turn Left onto Beaufort Avenue.

From Points West:
Take I-80 East to Exit 47A and merge onto I-280 East. Take Exit 4A (Eisenhower Parkway South). Turn left onto Beaufort Avenue.
The park entrance road is on the left. Proceed up the hill.

This publication was produced to celebrate Riker Hill’s 40 years as part of the Essex County Park System and its 35 years as the Essex County Riker Hill Art Park.

Meet One of Our Artists: Sue Sachs

Sue Sachs’ passion for teaching art led her to the Essex County Riker Hill Art Park. In 1981, Sue became one of Riker Hill Art Park’s first resident artists and founded the Riker Hill Artists’ Association. She has been teaching her craft at a number of schools, museums, and at Riker Hill for more than 35 years, bringing her love and expertise for metalwork jewelry to dozens of adults. The tradition of classes continues today thanks to the dedication of resident artists such as Sue Sachs.

A Legacy of Teaching

Art Centre at Riker Hill - Essex County’s oldest continuously operating art group

Sue Sachs’ fine metal and jewelry class

Ivan Ibratko’s adult sculpture from live model class

Carla Horowitz’s pottery class

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The Essex County Parks

The Riker Hill Nike Battery Control Area was decommissioned in 1974 and listed as surplus federal property. Essex County Parks entered a competitive application process for the land, and, in 1977, Essex County Parks purchased the 43-acre site for $1, finalizing the purchase with the recording of the deed. For the first few years, Essex County operated a geology museum on the site, showcasing the dinosaur footprints and fossils discovered at a nearby quarry. However, budget and poor attendance at the small and isolated museum resulted in its closure. However, the underused former military installation, with its squat cinderblock buildings, otherworldly half-deconstructed radar towers, and legacy of the Cold War, had inspired a different purpose.

Riker Hill During the Cold War

Amid the peaceful rolling hills of Livingston, Cold War weapons made casual neighbors to suburban sub-developments from 1954 to 1974. The United States Army’s Nike Air Defense System comprised a chain of anti-aircraft missile sites, none of which encircled major U.S. cities, designed to intercept Soviet transcontinental nuclear bomber aircraft. Each Nike site consisted of a radar tracking and a missile launch facility. Riker Hill’s elevation, one of the highest in the county, provided the optimal location for one of the project’s radar installations because it provided a clear line of sight for the defense of the New York Metro area. Dubbed Control Area, Nike Battery NY-80, the radar station was responsible, in the event of an air attack, for tracking enemy aircraft and transmitting guidance information to missiles after launch. By the 1970s, advances in weapons systems made countermeasures against bomber aircraft obsolete.

Riker Hill Continues to Evolve

In the decades that followed, Riker Hill Art Park has continued to present popular and creative events year-round, such as Jazz Under the Stars, astronomy sessions, Native American Pow Wows, public group visits, studio classes, and curated art shows drawing from a diverse regional network of craftspeople. Over 30 artists rent studios at Riker Hill and present a semi-annual Open House and Fine and Decorative Arts Sale. Their work represents more than a dozen distinct disciplines. Riker Hill has become a comprehensive and inspired art park.

History of Riker Hill

Riker Hill in western Essex County has a history rich with Mesozoic monsters, colonial-era witchcraft, and 20th-century defense. Two hundred million years ago, small dinosaurs roamed the area, leaving their footprints which were discovered in the late 1960s. In the middle of the 1700s, the place became a concern to local landowners when, as the tale goes, a squatter named Peter Riker and his mother, rumored to be a witch, occupied the wooded hill. Attempts to remove them from the land were followed by strange happenings. Whether or not the stories about the Rikers were true, today the hill still bears the family’s name.

Dinosaurs and Colonial Squatters

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Essex County Creates The Art Park

Local artists, in cooperation with the Essex County Parks Department, proposed the creation of a “self-sustaining complex of artists’ studios or craft facilities at Riker Hill.” In 1982, the Parks Department gave charge of Riker Hill to its Division of Cultural Affairs—but with no budget. Artists would self-support the Art Park by teaching classes to the public and selling their artwork. When the artists arrived, most of the buildings on the site lacked heat, water, electric, windows, or doors. A tremendous amount of resourceful work would need to be undertaken to transform the barren and ascetic facility built for destructive war into a lively place of creative expression.