



# Moorestown's Castle

**When Samuel Leeds Allen built his dream home** on Main Street in Moorestown, NJ, just a little on the outskirts, he intentionally had the architect design it to be on a crest of a hill and a few feet forward of the other nearby houses, so he could have an unobstructed view of all that surrounded him.

Breidenhart, he called it, after Sarah Breidenhart, his great-grandmother, who had emigrated from Saxe-Gotha, in what was then known as the Holy Roman Empire, to America in 1753. Allen was not loathe to harken back to old times, but he was a scion of the new—the industrial revolution of the late 19th century, and the standard of living its machines would give everyone just around the corner.

by Robert Strauss

## Despite the other 300 patents, Allen mainly became known in the community for his giddiest invention—that Flexible Flyer.

Allen had grown up at Ivystone, the farm his father, John, a prominent druggist, had bought just before Sam Allen was born in 1841. It sat on several acres in Westfield, now a part of Cinnaminson Township. The Allens were Quakers and sent young Sam to Westtown, the Quaker academy in the western reaches of the Philadelphia exurbs for training in, as the Quakers say, doing good and doing well.

Sam Allen saw the farm as an opportunity to tinker in the machine shop he had set up there. His Quaker ingenuity had him come up with a fertilizer drill and a potato digger,

year-round, started cranking the Flexible Flyers out in the early 1890s, as the first suburbs with houses near snowy hills popped up all over the Northeast and Midwest. The Flexible Flyers had steel runners and white-ash wood slats above, with a wood steering bar perpendicular to the blades, allowing the moveable front blade to go right or left.

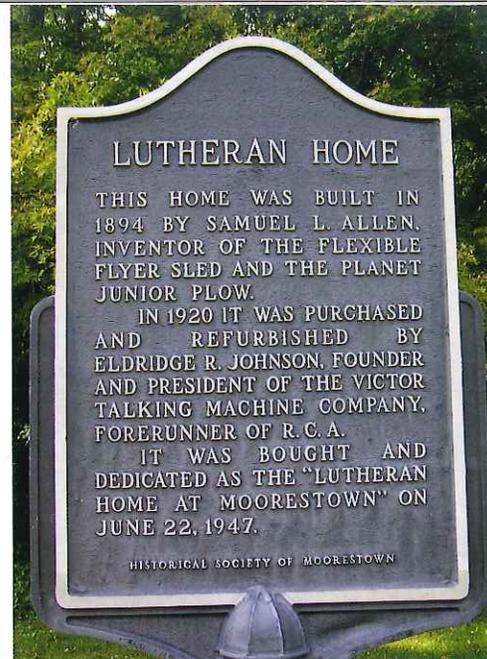
The wood-slat riding area had a graceful curve in the back and ornate painting on the top—with an iconic eagle logo in the middle. For only a few dollars, a middle-class father could buy his kids hours of pleasure for the current winter, and presumably winters to come.

Naturally, Allen aspired to live in the New Jersey Quaker Valhalla, Moorestown, and the bonanza from the Flexible Flyer phenomenon—he was to sell about 2,000 of them a day by the early 1910s—would allow him to do so.

In 1894, just as the Panic of 1893 had wound down and an economic upswing was on the way, Allen bought about a dozen acres of land from Dr. Jonathan Spencer. It included Stokes Hill, a sledding venue from that time to this.

There Allen had architect Walter Smedley design a Tudor-style gothic castle, at which he entertained constantly—the family name Breidenhart translating to “hospitality.”

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As the Great War—World War I—was winding down in Europe, Allen looked forward to a whole new cadre of families to buy his sleds when the doughboys returned home, but he was not to see it. He died in March, 1918, just a few months before the Armistice.

Soon after, his family sold Allen’s beloved Breidenhart to another industrial innovator, the chairman of the Victor Talking Machine Company in Camden, Eldridge R. Johnson. Johnson had invented and marketed the Victrola. Like Allen, who didn’t invent the sled, but modified it into a household item, Johnson did the same with the phonograph. It took him a dozen years, but his wax records, the type of grooves he cut into them, and the spring-loaded arm and playing mechanism he developed changed the way entertainment came into the home.

Breidenhart and its land cost Allen \$75,000, and 26 years later, Johnson bought it for \$95,000. He put \$123,000 in renovations into it, making it the grandest place in Moorestown. The final version had 26 rooms, six of them with fireplaces, and seven well-appointed bathrooms. The parlor was in mahogany and the bedrooms were in cherry or chestnut. Oak predominated in other rooms.

Soon after he died, his family donated Breidenhart to the Lutheran Ministries, which for the last 67 years has kept it as the Lutheran Crossings Enhanced Living senior home.

While the Victrola may be a thing of the past, the machine that brought Breidenhart into existence, the Flexible Flyer, is still sold. Most of the new sleds are made in China, but there is one American factory making them—in South Paris, ME, a town with small hills not all that different from what Sam Allen might have dreamed his steerable, wood-and-steel sled with the eagle emblazoned on it might slide down. ■

### FLEXIBLE FLYER

**THE SLED THAT STEERS**

With 1907-8 improvements. The swiftest, safest, strongest sled ever invented. The fastest sled for boys. The only sled girls can properly control. Steering without dragging the feet lets it go full speed—saves its cost in shoes the first season—prevents wet feet, colds and doctor’s bills. Made of second growth white ash and steel—built to last.

**MODEL SLED FREE.** Write for cardboard model showing just how it works; sent free with colored Christmas booklet and prices.

S. L. ALLEN & CO., Box 1101K, PHILADELPHIA, PA.



a furrower and a seed drill, a pulverizer and a grass-edger—300 patented machines in all.

His father had been “prominent,” but Sam Allen became rich. Dozens of workers filled his machine shop, except in the fall, when the farm-machine market was awfully slow.

One winter day, Allen was looking at the snowy field at Ivystone and the idea hit him. He had loved sledding, but basically, that meant making sure the straight-line path to the bottom of the hill was clear. If only he could figure out how to steer around the rocks and trees, making it curve and slalom, instead of a boring old line downhill.

On August 13, 1889, Allen got U.S. patent number 408,681—a steerable sled. He called it the Flexible Flyer.

His workers, overjoyed to have employment

magazine ad had Santa himself holding a Flexible Flyer, “the famous steering sled with the non-skid runners.”

The ad copy was cheery and self-congratulatory: “Goes faster and farther than any other sled and is easiest to pull up hill,” it read. “Saves shoes, prevents wet feet, colds and doctor’s bills because you don’t have to drag your feet to steer”—and then the frugal Quaker line in bold, “Outlasts 3 ordinary sleds.”

Soon the sleds came in differing lengths—from three feet long for the little tykes and five feet long for multiple riders. In the 1920s, stores could buy them for \$30-36 a dozen, no doubt selling them for as little as \$5 or \$6 a piece to make some profit. Allen had built a huge factory in industrial North Philadelphia at 5th Street and Glenwood Avenue to keep up with the demand.