



## IN THE NEWS

## Our New Look

The Madison Historical Society is pleased to announce our new look. For months a committee of the Society has been working with Kris Pfeifer of Pfeifer Designs on designing a new logo, website, and increasing our presence in social media. The new logo (See above) was inspired by the use of a similar window above the entrance to the east wing of the Hartley Dodge Memorial building where the Madison History Museum will be housed. The window represents the Madison Historical Society's role in providing a glimpse into the past and connecting the present with history. As a gateway to Madison's heritage, the window frames and showcases historical artifacts and stories, ensuring their preservation and legacy for generations. It also conveys transparency, accessibility, and community engagement, reflecting the Society's commitment to sharing historical knowledge and fostering public involvement.



**Society Branding Committee with mugs with the new logo.**  
Left to right: Kris Pfeifer, head of Pfeifer Designs, Blair Conley, Rebecca Fields, Herm Huber, Judy Seery, Doug Simon, Susan Simon, and Ginnie Laughlin

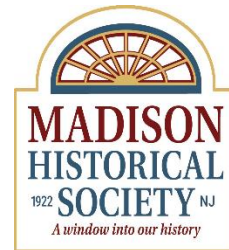
The color palette of colonial blue, deep red, and gold in our logo is inspired by the rich history and timeless charm of Madison. The colors evoke a sense of tradition, sophistication, and heritage. Colonial blue represents the town's colonial roots and historical significance. Deep red symbolizes passion, strength, and vitality, capturing the spirit of the community. It also serves as a nod to the town's history in the rose growing industry, which earned Madison the nickname of the Rose City. Gold adds a touch of elegance and prestige, symbolizing the town's achievements and the invaluable worth of its history. The new logo is generously used on the Society's new web site, stationary, the newsletter, slide shows, the new museum, and on various documents produced by the Society. A number of variations of the logo have been developed including the following:



### MADISON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In addition to the new logo, the society is announcing its new website with loads of new information, interesting links, new features, and news of the Society. Be sure and visit it. It is now up and running:

<https://www.madisonnjhistoricalsociety.org/>





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## Message From President Virginia Laughlin

Welcome 2024! What is in store for the new year? Somethings old and somethings reinstated. Our work continues on the Madison History Museum. While we await the renovation construction to begin on the east wing of the Hartley Dodge Memorial, we work on museum planning and exhibit content. The update of Madison's history book, called "Portrait of the Rose City" is complete and we are now in the process of securing a publisher. There has been renewed interest in our History Plaque Program offered to community residents living in homes built before 1900 and we are still searching for long-time residents who would like to share their memories of Madison.

What is to be reinstated is our annual membership meeting which was traditionally held every May but has been held virtually for the past 4 years! Plans are being made to hold the event in person this year. You will be hearing all about it as soon as we finalize the event. February is also the time of year when the Society must begin work on the new slate of officers and trustees for fiscal year 2024-25. If any member is interested in joining the board and getting involved in the very interesting work we are doing, I would encourage you to reach out and let us know.

We are still working in our temporary office space but you can reach us by email anytime, on our new and improved website!



MADISON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Monday, March 18, 2024 at 7:00 PM – Zoom Event

**“The History of New Jersey’s Movie Industry” with Stephen Whitty**



There is a rich history of movie making in New Jersey and who better to tell it than Stephen Whitty, former movie critic of the Star Ledger for many years and well-known lecturer. Join us for this look back at our state's major role in the movie industry and some of the New Jerseyans who helped shape it.

Mr. Whitty is a nationally read, award-winning journalist with more than 35 years’ experience. He has published numerous profiles, reviews, trend pieces, essays and fiction in the Star-Ledger, the New York Daily News, Entertainment Weekly, the Times-Picayune, the Plain Dealer, the San Jose Mercury News, Fortune.com and other publications. He is the author of “The Alfred Hitchcock Encyclopedia” (Rowman & Littlefield). He has been an instructor at NYU and

Baruch, lecturer at Montclair State and Rutgers, speaker at the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of the Moving Image. He has hosted Bryant Park and NY Film Critics series and special presentations by the Screen Actors Guild, Writers Guild and New York Film Festival. He reviews 200 movies a year.



Tuesday, April 16, 2024 at 7:00 PM – Zoom Event

**“Madison’s Lincoln Portrait” with Mallory Mortigliaro**

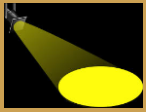


Although Abraham Lincoln was not 9 feet tall, his portrait in Madison's council chamber was. When President George H. W. Bush visited Madison in 1992, he was shown the Lincoln portrait, and quipped, "I have one of those where I live too." Join us when Mallory Mortigliaro, art historian and curator of collections for the Hartley Dodge Foundation, tells us about this famed and unique portrait, its history, how it got to Madison and where it is now.

Mallory Mortigliaro is nationally known for her rediscovery of the Rodin bust of Napoleon, hiding in plain sight in the Hartley Dodge Memorial Building. She has worked on various research projects for museums and organizations in the NY metropolitan area. With undergraduate and graduate degrees from Drew University, she is also a 6th grade language teacher in Summit.

**These programs are free and open to the public. Email the Madison Historical Society at: [historyspeakerseries@gmail.com](mailto:historyspeakerseries@gmail.com). for registration. Send the email no later than 2pm on Monday, March 18 for the Stephen Whitty talk and by 2 pm on Tuesday, April 16 for the Mortigliaro talk to receive the link to join the Zoom presentation.**





# MADISON’S “DARK HORSE” OF A DIFFERENT COLOR

- Herman Huber

*“My father is not afraid to try anything. He’s curious, and has a great ability to imagine and visualize [what others cannot]. I believe he knows more about the internal combustion engine than anyone else in the world.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Mark Richard DeBiasse, December 15, 2023*

Richard (“Dick”) DeBiasse is 90 years old this year, all of it spent in Madison (in one way or another). In 1934, he was the youngest and the first child in a family of six children to be born in a hospital. And that was just the beginning of his unique, colorful, journey through life. Cowboy, inventor, civic gadfly, mechanical genius, owner of patents, race car builder, self-taught engineer, sought after mechanic by many a car company and racing team, loquacious, dyslexic, and unable to read – all describe the atypical man who owns the “Dark Horse” machine shop at 10 Central Avenue.

Richard’s father, Lewis, was born in New Jersey in 1895 and his mother, Madeline, born in 1899, emigrated from Sorrentino, Italy. They married in 1919. For 50 years Lewis owned and operated (along with his sons) his own plumbing business near the intersection of Main Street and Park Avenue. For many years, he was the borough’s water agent (also for Florham Park). Madeline died in 1977 and Lewis in 1970.<sup>2,3</sup>

Apparently quite the kidder, Lewis described to a Madison Eagle reporter in 1933 that as he was driving through Mount Freedom going west to Chicago, “...a cow took a violent dislike to the DeBiasse automobile.” The cow “... jumped out of some bushes... and suddenly threw herself into his car. She then arose and, with a look of offended dignity and reproach, ambled off...” He explained to the police that he was blameless, and sheepishly blamed the unrepentant cow. The Madison Eagle suggested, therefore, that the Morris County Traffic Safety Committee, in order to reduce road casualties, had the option of either educating all the cows in Morris County, or asking drivers when in rural areas to have cow catchers on their automobiles. The option chosen has never been revealed.<sup>4</sup>



**Richard DeBiasse, cowboy**

Though his interest in tinkering was powerful as a child, Richard had enormous difficulty learning the basics of reading. This was further compounded by the fact that he did not get a pair of needed glasses until the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. He eventually diagnosed himself with dyslexia and to this day relies on resourceful work-arounds to get by. At times people read to him, he dictates text to others, and he uses speech-to-text dictation software.<sup>5</sup> He has written several stories this way.



**Soon to be wife, Judi Reynolds, in the Corvette built by Richard, 1957**

After graduating from The Oratory Preparatory School in Summit in 1952 (another alumnus was actor Danny DeVito), Richard joined the Army in 1957 and received basic training at Fort Dix. He was then assigned to the Headquarters Company of the 48<sup>th</sup> Transportation Group at Fort Eustis, Virginia.<sup>6</sup> He served 2 years in Germany, where he was the go-to guy to fix all manner of military vehicles.<sup>7</sup>

At Lusardi's Confectionary store in Madison, Richard met an attractive young woman named Judi Reynolds. They married in June 1959<sup>8</sup> and had 2 children, Mark and Michele. In 1968, the family moved to Chatham, though Richard spent nearly all his days in Madison. Judi was a successful realtor and passed away in 2009 at age 70.<sup>9</sup>

Remarkably, Richard had virtually no schooling after high school nor any formal training in mechanical engineering. Despite his severe reading disability, he is entirely self-taught! But he had a profound curiosity about how physical objects worked, and could take apart and rebuild almost anything. He had a prodigious gift – the ability to visualize objects and imagine systems in space - brilliant spatial relations skills. But what to do with all that?

He was always fascinated by the adventurous cowboy mystique and life. For years he went to his cousin Bernie's horse and cattle ranch, where he and the other cowboys worked as drovers and wranglers in Utah and Wyoming. But these were wonderful diversions. As a 14-year-old, he had his first machine shop and that has always been his love.<sup>9a</sup>



**The Dark Horse emblem**

So, in 1962 Richard opened the Dark Horse machine shop, in the very buildings that were once the old livery stable and blacksmith shop on Central Ave. Its logo is a wild, dark horse with a torn rope around its neck,



**Exterior of the Dark Horse**



**Interior of the Dark Horse**





symbolizing Richard's uncompromising drive to be free of constraints and compromises and to have free rein. It is also painted on his pickup truck. In that shop he built his life's work. There he built race cars, the Buick Grand National Motor Car, and hotrods. When owners of Ferraris, Porsches, Lamborghinis needed engines rebuilt, many of them came to him.<sup>9b</sup>



**The Trans Am Z-28 racecar that Richard built for Lake Underwood, which raced in the Daytona 250 in 1967**

When world renowned race car drivers such as Lake Underwood and Mark Donohue needed their racing cars to have improved suspension systems or steering or more powerful engines, they came to Richard, and he became their chief mechanic.<sup>10</sup> The Trans Am Z-28 racecar that he built for Lake Underwood, which raced in the Daytona

250 in 1967, was listed in 2010 for sale at \$138,000.<sup>10a</sup> He is credited with helping the Underwood team establish Porsche as a winning race car in the U.S. He also adapted Porsche disk brakes by making them lighter, a distinct competitive advantage.<sup>10b</sup> Native son Mark Donohue of Summit, winner of the 1972 Indianapolis 500 and 3-time Trans Am Champion, found Richard to be expert at building and modifying his engines.

As if this were not enough, his imaginative abilities invented a new, lighter type of piston, rod, and ring technology. This clever departure from the traditional shape and structure of the piston increased power and efficiency with lower pollution. He created machinery to make the pistons more precise in their movement. For these innovations and others he was awarded a number of patents, some with stirring titles such as, "Piston ring employing elastomeric sealing member within the ring groove" (1995) and "Lubricating means for pin connected relatively rotatable engine part and method of lubrication" (1991).<sup>10c</sup> He also was lauded in major car enthusiast magazines, such as *Car Craft*, where he explained to a likely dazed reporter, "Mathematically speaking, we know that the amount of kinetic energy sapped from the engine's horsepower output to turn the engine over at a fixed rpm is equal to one half the mass of the reciprocating weight times the square of the velocity of that reciprocating weight. It follows that..."<sup>11</sup> His innovations are still present in many cars today.



**Some of Richard's piston inventions**

There is an anecdote that says a great deal about Richard. When his son Mark married in 1999, his father built the couple a beautiful and extraordinary oak bed. Perhaps worthy of a king and queen. It took 7 months for him to finish it, because it was built to such exacting standards, with each piece perfectly fitting with other pieces. Mark asserts it will last for at least 10 generations. Yet, Richard had never done woodworking before and loved figuring it all out.<sup>12</sup> It seems Richard is truly a horse of a different color.



## References

1. Phone interview with Mark Richard DeBiasse by Herman Huber, December 15, 2023.
2. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/111698482/lewis-debiasse>, accessed December 19, 2023.
3. Lewis DeBiasse Named Florham Park Water Agent. *The Madison Eagle*, December 2, 1927, p.4.
4. Lafey Education A Real Task. *The Madison Eagle*, September 1, 1933, p. 4. Also see: Cow Crash Hampers De Biasse Expedition. *The Madison Eagle*, August 25, 1933, p. 1.
5. In-person interview with Richard DeBiasse by Herman Huber, December 2, 2023, at Dark Horse shop.
6. Richard DeBiasse At Fort Eustis. *Madison Eagle*, June 13, 1957.
7. See Mark DeBiasse interview.
8. Former Judith Reynolds. *Madison Eagle*, June 25, 1959.
9. Obituaries, Judi Lyle DeBiasse, 70, esteemed Realtor, enjoyed helping clients. *Madison Eagle*, October 29, 2009, p. 12.
- 9a. See Richard DeBiasse interview.
- 9b. Ibid.
10. See Mark DeBiasse and Richard DeBiasse interviews.

## Remembering Lafayette

The Borough Council of Madison recently approved the location for a Lafayette Trail sign marking his then Bottle Hill visit on his Farewell Tour in 1824 and 1825. The location of the marker will be on Waverly Place side of the corner of Waverly and Main Street where the Chase Bank is now situated and where the Madison Inn and Bottle Hill Tavern once stood. The initiative for this effort comes from The Lafayette Trail, Inc., a non-profit organization incorporated in the state of Maryland with the mission of documenting and marking Lafayette's footsteps during his farewell tour of the United States.



**Washington and Lafayette at Valley Forge. Painted by John Ward Dunsmore**

Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette was a French aristocrat and military officer who joined the Continental Army, led by General George Washington during the American Revolutionary War. He was commissioned an officer at the young age of 13 and became convinced that the American cause was noble. At the age of 19 he was made a major general but when he initially joined the revolutionary forces, was not given American troops to command. He was wounded at his first battle at Brandywine. After his recovery, he returned to the field and served at Washington's encampment at Valley Forge and engaged in numerous battles.

In 1824 Lafayette returned to the United States and began a farewell tour of some 24 states. The tour was part of the nation's upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. Travelling with him was his son, Georges Washington and his secretary Auguste Levasseur. His reception was glorious with major cities like New York, Philadelphi and Boston trying to outdo each other in putting together their celebrations. On July 15, 1825 he arrived in what was then Bottle Hill and was greeted at Madison House by Rev. Dr. John G. Bergen, pastor of the Presbyterian church and thirteen young girls dressed in white who presented Lafayette with a poem which focused on the close ties between he had forged with General Washington.



**MADISON**  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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