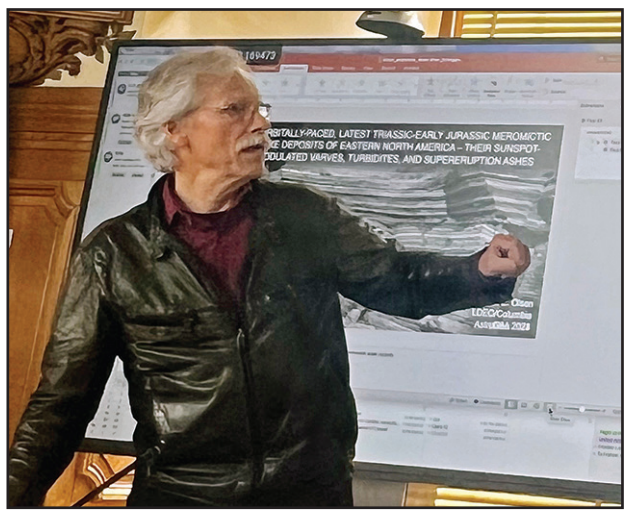
Shown here is Olsen in Xinjiang of Northwest China in 2024 pointing at dinosaur footprints on the roof of a coal mine that are of the same basic kind of dinosaur tracks found at River Hill. From a small herbivorous dinosaur, these tracks are from 165 million years ago (Middle Jurassic age) whereas the Roseland tracks are 201 million years old (Early Jurassic).



Olsen is shown here giving a lecture at the Paris Observatory in 2023 about paleo astronomy and extracting the motions of the planets 200 million years ago from the geological record of climate.

Where Is He Now?

Paul Olsen, Riker Hill Fossil Excavator, Now Paleontologist & Columbia Professor

Unbeknownst to him, former Livingston resident Paul Olsen started his career at just 14 years old.

It was 1968 and dinosaur tracks had just been discovered at Riker Hill. After hearing about the discovery, Olsen and his friend biked to the area.

"I remember quite vividly coming up over a little ridge and seeing the red rock exposed in this quarry," said Olsen. "There wasn't heavy machinery or anything around at all but there were some cars, and there were people collecting fossils there, and we wandered down and started talking to them, and they showed us some dinosaur footprints that they were collecting."

Olsen and his friend joined other amateur collectors conducting their own "excavations" and eventually found a mentor in local educator and amateur paleontologist, Robert Salkin.

"He took us under his wing and told us about the kinds of fossils we were finding," said Olsen. "We ended up working on and off for quite a bit over a few years."

By the time Olsen graduated high school in '71, they had "collected a huge number of dinosaur footprints" as well as a few fossil fish. He said that they had produced several large excavations by hand, some the size of a foundation for a small house.

Considering the many valuable discoveries, Salkin thought that the site should be preserved. He began a "grass roots kind of movement" with Olsen and his friend as the face of it.

They held many public meetings and lectures, wrote a letter to President Richard Nixon and eventually the movement caught the attention of LIFE Magazine.

This potential publicity opportunity enticed the owners of the property to donate the fossil-filled land to the Essex County Park Commission and in June 1971, the site was registered as a National Natural Landmark.

In fact, the Riker Hill Fossil Site is one of only two localities of major size along the Northeastern coast where large numbers of dinosaur footprints are preserved in its original place.

In response to Olsen's letter and efforts, Nixon gave Olsen and his friend a presidential commendation. At the suggestion of Salkin, Olsen gifted Nixon a fiberglass replica of one of the 200 million year old dinosaur footprints and it is now held at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum.

Olsen credits this early-life experience for kickstarting his interest in this work.

"I got super interested in why there were these alternations of layers with footprints and fish and that later ended up being very important to my intellectual development in my career," he said.

Despite being "a totally mediocre high school student," Olsen caught the attention of Yale University thanks to his unique opportunity at Riker Hill and a series of artistic works that landed him in art exhibits – ultimately earning him admission to the Ivy Lgjueague school.

Due to financial and academic reasons, Olsen took seven years to graduate from Yale with a bachelor's degree in geology.

However, this extended university experience granted him the opportunity to conduct further fossil research and by the time he had graduated, Olsen had already authored several articles, including two for the journal Science.

Olsen remained at Yale for graduate school, where he studied ecology and evolutionary biology.

During this time, he was introduced to Wallace Broecker, known as the 'grandfather of climate science' for being the first to coin the term 'global warming.'

To Olsen's pleasant surprise, Broecker told him "You're just the kind of person we like to have on faculty at Columbia."

With Broecker's support, and after a year-long postdoctoral stint at UC Berkeley, Olsen accepted a position as assistant professor of geological sciences at Columbia University in 1984.

Gradually rising through the ranks to professor, Olsen has remained a professor at Columbia ever since.

When asked about highlights from his time at Columbia, Olsen was quick to mention how much he enjoyed teaching.

"First of all, there's teaching, which I love doing and I get a lot of out of it, not just in terms of teaching undergraduates for the sake of teaching undergraduates, but for me, it enriches my intellectual life and makes me engage with subjects I would not engage with otherwise."

Olsen has been doing more than teaching though, he has also become successful and well known for his work on recovering the parameters of the solar system using the geological record of climate.

This, along with his work in paleontology, led him to be elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 2008.

Olsen's research has also taken him to China. Since 2006, he has periodically spent several months there, primarily in the country's northwest region, where he's made significant discoveries "combining the paleontology and ancient climate aspect" of his work.

One of his biggest discoveries was finding that this same part of Asia used to be part of the Arctic and had freezing winter conditions while dinosaurs were living there.

Olsen has plans to continue his work in China and was there this past June.

Additionally, he is in the process of proposing a project to the National Science Foundation, which would entail drilling a series of cores (cylindrical samples of Earth matter) in the Southwest region of the United States.

This project would look at the overall environmental history during the early ages of dinosaurs as well as how the geological history of that time period influenced groundwater.

With no shortage of work, Olsen has also been funded by the Heising-Simons Foundation to study the solar system where his work has "been able to map planetary motions in great detail 200 million years ago."

Overall, it's clear that since his early fossil discoveries, Olsen has made significant contributions to his field. According to Google Scholar, he has been listed as an author for 577 scholarly articles.

Olsen credits his Riker Hill experience for fostering his interest in scientific discovery.

"The thing that I see coming out of [Riker Hill]… was the excitement of discovery, not just in fossils, but of ideas," he said. "That's really the place that initially nurtured my curiosity to figure out why these things were changing and why they're happening."

He also discussed the future of Riker Hill.

"In terms of the park and Riker Hill, it would be nice if it were actually developed as an educational park at some point… but it would take quite an effort to do that, and a really large amount of money."

However, he also believes that a recent discovery at Riker Hill – tracks made by early members of the mammal group belonging to humans – could help advance this project.

Currently, access to the site is restricted and the small museum has not been maintained, though the Riker Hill Art Park is still open.

He said developing the property would help give people a "reality check."

"When you read about it in books, it's completely abstract. When you see the footprints in the ground, and they're so obviously dinosaur footprints. It really is a reality check," he said. "It's a way to connect with the ancient world that's completely different than just reading about it in books."

Olsen shared words of encouragement, urging young people to contribute to science.

"The sciences often seem very intimidating to people, especially to kids, especially if they're not doing that well [in school]," he said. "But you can make contributions to science when you're very young, if you're interested and you make an effort, that will get recognized."

Library to Host Senior Happening "Lecture-in-Song: Johnny Mercer"

The Livingston Public Library will host its Senior Happening event on Friday, Nov. 21 at 1 p.m. featuring "Lecture-in-Song: Johnny Mercer" performed by Fred Miller.

"Johnny Mercer's much-deserved place in the songwriting pantheon of great creative artists is based on his achievements as a major lyricist, a composer, a distinctive pop singer, and a recording executive," said Jessica Voitko, head of adult services and acquisitions at the library.

She explained that Mercer also co-founded Capitol Records and became a major commercial power in the music industry. Mercer's lyrics are his calling card: the trains, the rivers, the birds, the sights and sounds of the American landscape all repeatedly show up.

Fred Miller is the founder of the Copper Penny Players, a singing class for amateurs that has been operating for the past quarter century. He has experience in many different musical fields, including opera, comedy and piano music. There are now more than seventy Lecture-in-Song programs that he performs around New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

The Senior Happening is a monthly series that allows attendees ("seniors" or otherwise) to socialize during the first part of the program (noon until 12:45 p.m.) by bringing a bag lunch, while enjoying desserts and coffee served by the Friends of the Library volunteers. The program and entertainment then begins at 1 p.m.

Registration is required and may be done in person at the library; by telephone at 973-992-4600; or online at livingstonlibrary.org. Registration will be available beginning Nov. 3.

A pre-recorded video of the performance will be available on the library website, livingstonlibrary.org, for those unable to attend the event.

Senior Happening is made possible in part by funds from the Essex County Division of Cultural Affairs, a partner of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and through the support from the Friends of the Livingston Library.

Adopt These Pets!

Meet Matrix: Matrix is our stunning 1-year-old orange kitty, reminiscent of pumpkins and pies – perfect for the season! As soon as you approach her cage, she leaps from her cozy bed, eager for your attention. With charming chirps, she paces and rubs against the bars, poking her nose through the holes to encourage some pets. Matrix craves human companionship and will happily dance and make biscuits to get noticed. This spirited girl is far from a wallflower; she loves to make her presence known and is always playful and entertaining, ensuring there's never a dull moment. If you're looking for a lively and affectionate feline friend, Matrix is ready to bring some excitement and pizzazz to your home!

Meet Oaklee: Introducing our mischievous 1-year-old canine scamp, bursting with energy and enthusiasm! This lively boy thrives on human companionship and would prefer to be your only pet. Always ready for walks and adventures, Oaklee's bouncy stride is a testament to his enthusiastic nature. His expressive ears and large, attentive eyes convey a world of emotions, making it easy to see just how smart he is. With a beautiful brown/white Merle coat, Oaklee is a head-turner. Although he avoids having his tail touched – likely a remnant of some past trauma – he's eager for a fresh start. Oaklee is ready to find a family who will invest in his growth, helping him develop trust and a strong bond. Continued training and guidance will ensure a successful and happy transition. If you're seeking a loyal and grateful best friend to share life experiences with, Oaklee is up for the task

Mt. Pleasant Animal Shelter, 194 Rt. 10 West, East Hanover
973-386-0590 • www.njshelter.org