

A Tale of Two Villages

or 'The Founding of Montclair'

By Jane M. Eliasof

In 1666, Robert Treat, Jasper Crane and a group of English men and women left Connecticut to find a new home. They had come from England earlier in the century as part of the Great Migration, when thousands of English immigrated to the New World. By the 1660s, philosophical differences about religion and civil liberties had surfaced and, under the direction of Treat and Crane, a small group sailed to New Jersey to start a new settlement.

When these colonists arrived in Newark Bay, the Lenne-Lenape (or "original people") were understandably unhappy. They had not received the proverbial memo stating colonists were planning to settle upon land they'd been using for generations.

Nonetheless, the colonists struck a deal that gave them title to the land between Newark Bay on the east, the foot of First Watchung Mountain on the west, the Passaic River on the north, and Elizabeth on the south. For this wide, and now quite valuable, swath of territory that today encompasses Newark, Orange, Bloomfield, Belleville, Glen Ridge, Montclair and Upper Montclair, the Lenape received 50 double-hands of powder, 100 bars of lead, 20 axes, 20 coats, 10 guns, 20 pistols, 10 kettles, 10 swords, four blankets, four barrels of beer, 10 pairs of breeches, 50 knives, 20 hoes, 850 fathoms of wampum, two ankers (about 32 gallons) of liquor, and three troopers' coats.

A twist on pronunciation

They named their new settlement Newark after their minister's hometown, Newark-on-Trent, in Nottinghamshire, England. Although many people believe the name refers to the "New Ark of Covenant," the English town for which our Newark was named was known as "Newerche" ("new work") to differentiate it from the nearby "Aldwork," ("old work"), hence the pronunciation "new-work" instead of "new-ark."

Crane and his compatriots settled in, building houses near Market and Broad streets in Newark. You can even still find Crane Street right in that neighborhood. Jasper's offspring, however, moved west to the foot of First Mountain. Nathaniel and Azariah Crane were the first Englishmen to build homes in what is today Montclair. In a weird stroke of fate, the Montclair Historical Society's Crane House and Historic YWCA (circa 1796) was moved in 1965 to the land owned by those first Crane settlers. As families back then were quite prolific, the Crane family name soon dominated the town, which became known as Cranetown.

On the other side of town, a different settlement was



The Munn House and Tavern was for many years a popular spot in Cranetown. Here, students of Miss Bryant's public school class pose for a portrait. Photo courtesy of Montclair Public Library Local History Collection.

springing up. Dutch families had begun to move into the area north of Watchung Avenue. They purchased 10,000 acres along the Passaic River, which today includes Little Falls, Paterson, Clifton and parts of Passaic.

As Elizabeth Shepherd and Mike Farrelly note in their book *Legendary Locals of Montclair*, "Johannes Hendrike and Maritje Speer, original purchasers, built a house near today's Great Notch. Their children and grandchildren started buying land in nearby Montclair (part of Newark in those days)."

Just as Cranetown was named after the predominant family in town, the north end became known as Speertown after that founding family.

The two villages – Cranetown and Speertown – coexisted for many years, growing at their own pace and in their own ways. Although both were predominantly farms, the people of Cranetown developed a commercial center (today's Bloomfield Avenue). The Dutch in Speertown were content on their farms throughout much of the 19th century. In time, Valley Road was constructed to connect the two villages.

Drive through Montclair and Upper Montclair today and, although somewhat hidden, you can still see vestiges of these two settlements. One of the earliest Speer homes still stands on Upper Mountain near Great Notch.

The former Montclair Reformed Church, on Mount Hebron Road, was likely built by the Dutch descendants in 1901. The adjacent cemetery is filled with old Dutch names, such as Speer and Van Ryper. Cross Watchung Avenue, and you've passed into Cranetown and the oldest homes reflect the early English building style. The stores on Glenridge and Bloomfield Avenues pay homage to those Cranetown residents who opened shops and taverns on those streets. Note Munn Tavern, built in the early 1800s, tucked behind the former Evangelical Covenant Church on Valley Road.

Several organizations in town, including the Montclair Historical Society, offer walking tours through Montclair and Upper Montclair. Held in the spring and fall, these walking tours can help you discover the architecture, history, and famous people who have made our community what it is today.

Jane M. Eliasof is Executive Director of the Montclair Historical Society. To learn more, visit www.montclairhistorical.org.