

Montclair's Sesquicentennial

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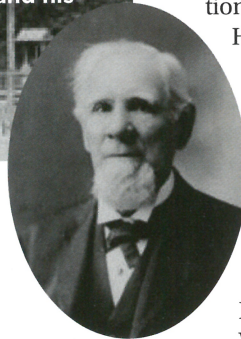
YOU MAY HAVE heard Montclair is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year. But what exactly are we celebrating? It certainly isn't the date the first colonists settled our land. That happened in the late 17th century.

Jasper Crane, one of the earliest European settlers in Newark, bequeathed to his sons Azariah and Jasper "land at the foot of the mountain." Azariah built a home on the site of 55 Myrtle Avenue in 1694. In his 1908 book *"Reminiscences of Montclair,"* Philip Doremus described that first home:

"It was a two-story house with double pitched roof, large hall in the center with rooms on each side. At the rear of the house stood a small building occupied in the early days by slaves and by their descendants as family servants through several generations. At the south end of the house stood the cut stone milk house built over the spring.... On the shelves of this cool room, I remember seeing the large pans of milk and rolls of new-made butter."



Philip Doremus in 1906 and his store



While the Cranes were settling what would become Cranetown and ultimately Montclair, the Speers was settling what would become Speertown and ultimately Upper Montclair. The Speer family first arrived in America in 1659, when Hendrick Jansen Spier came aboard the *Faith*. Whereas the English came through Newark, the Dutch came through Acquackanonk Township, established in 1693, and named after a Lenape tribe. Acquackanonk Township, which encompassed parts of Essex and Passaic County, ceased to exist in 1917, when Clifton, the last holdout, became a township. One of the earliest Speer homes is still intact today at 612 Upper Mountain Avenue.

So, no, we are not celebrating the anniversary of Montclair's first settlement. Nor are we celebrating the anniversary of Montclair's separation from Newark in 1812. That occurred when the leaders of Newark divided the town into three districts - the Newark, Orange, and Bloomfield Wards. In 1812, Bloomfield (named after Governor Joseph Bloomfield) broke away from Newark and became an independent township. Because Montclair was on the western edge of the Bloomfield, it became known as "West Bloomfield." Parts of Speertown became known as "Cliffside."

Over the next 60 years or so, the two communities continued to grow. In 1834, *A Gazetteer of the State of New Jersey* characterized Speertown as an "agricultural village of Bloomfield Township, Essex County, seven miles north of Newark, near the front of the First Mountain; contains 20-30 dwellings, one tavern, one store, a Dutch Reformed Church and School, surrounded by a country of red shale, carefully cultivated."

In contrast, West Bloomfield was a thriving metropolis. According to the same book, "The chief part of the town lies upon

the old road [Glenridge Avenue, Church Street, and Claremont Avenues], but part of it on the turnpike [Bloomfield Avenue]; it contains about 1600 inhabitants, about 250 dwellings, two hotels, an academy, boarding school, four common schools, twelve stores, one Presbyterian church, two Methodist churches. "

Then the railroads came to town. In 1854, the Newark and Bloomfield railroad line was chartered and two years later, West Bloomfield was connected. The transformation of West Bloomfield into a commuter suburb had officially begun. Speertown, which was still predominantly farmland, was a little slower to jump onboard.

In 1860, the year Abraham Lincoln was elected and just a few years before the Civil War broke out, the folks in Montclair wanted their own name to end confusion with Bloomfield Township. Although old-timers liked the name, newcomers found it inconvenient. As Henry Whittemore recalled in 1894, "Their letters [mail] frequently miscarried and either stopped at Bloomfield or went to West Bloomfield in New York State. Strangers visiting the village, thinking it part of Bloomfield, would purchase their tickets and check their baggage thereto."

They considered several ideas - Claremont (a rough adaptation of the French *clair mont* or clear mountain), Eagleton, and Hillside. When they looked on a map, however, they saw many townships with those names. Julius Pratt suggested reversing the words "Clare" and "mont" and making it "Montclair." Although Eagleton won the popular vote, the property owners preferred Montclair. In 1860, the Assistant Postmaster General officially changed the name of the post office from West Bloomfield to Montclair. Speertown became Upper Montclair.

So no, we are not celebrating the anniversary of Montclair's name.

We are, however, celebrating Montclair's independence from Bloomfield Township. After the Civil War, Pratt and others had become frustrated. They wanted a second rail line to run through Montclair and the Bloomfield leaders were not moving fast enough. As a result, Montclair seceded from Bloomfield in 1868, exactly 150 years ago.

"In 1868, by Act of State Legislature, we were set off from Bloomfield Township." wrote Doremus. "With the election of Town officers, the organization was effected and we became an independent township." Doremus was one of the original commissioners.

Chartered in 1867 and completed in 1872, the Montclair Railway ran through Upper Montclair all the way to Greenwood Lake, New York. The two railroads brought great change to both Upper Montclair and Montclair. Said Doremus, "With the conveniences of the two railroads connecting with New York, the town began a phenomenal growth, bringing to us an inflow of new citizens which has added largely to the material growth and beauty of this town. The fine churches, public school buildings, public library, Young Men's Christian Association building and the clubhouse are evidences of what these newcomers have done for the religious, social and educational advancement of the town, so that wherever we may be, whether in our own or foreign country, we are proud to say our home is in Montclair. "

One hundred and fifty years later, like Philip Doremus, we are still "proud to say our home is in Montclair."