

# The Old Schoolhouse

CONTRIBUTED BY JANE M. ELIASOF, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MONTCLAIR HISTORY CENTER

**B**EFORE ANTHROPOLOGIE was on the corner of Church Street and Bloomfield Avenue, before there was a Presbyterian Church on Church Street, there was a schoolhouse.

The old schoolhouse was on property bordered on the northeast by the Turnpike Road (today's Bloomfield Avenue), on the south by the Old Road (today's Church Street) and, according to the records of a meeting held in March 1812, "on the west by Parmenas Dodd's garden fence."<sup>1</sup>

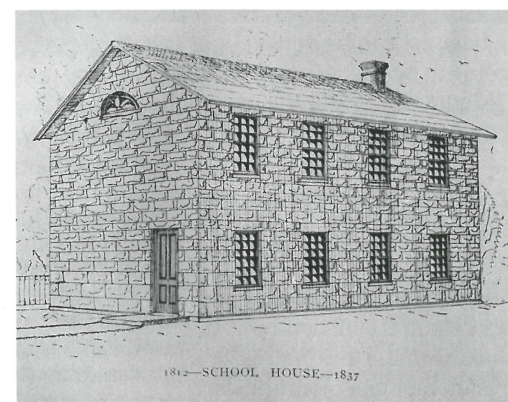
The new school was a two-story red sandstone building, 22 feet by 44 feet, according to Philip Doremus' book *Reminiscences of Montclair*, published in 1908. The first floor served as a one-room schoolhouse.

As Doremus says, it "was arranged with platform and teacher's desk at the north end, with continuous stationary desks on each side, the full length of the room, with benches painted lead color." In front of these desks, there was a row of smaller desks for the younger students. The classroom did double-duty as a local entertainment place, including Mr. Thomas Hastings' music school.<sup>2</sup>

A stairway near the entrance on the south end of the building led to the second floor, which was one large room with two rows of painted green permanent seats. They faced a platform and a reading desk on the north end. Rather than housing a second classroom, this space was often used for religious services. The services were frequently led by laymen, including prominent businessman Mr. Israel Crane, who had studied for the ministry but had never finished his studies. Doremus remembers "his striking face, his slightly stooping form and his peculiar accent as he read for us the long sermon of some good old preacher."<sup>3</sup>

The "Green" adjacent to the school was used as a playground and for exercise, although Doremus says, "I can remember in connection with the old Green was the plan of the teacher to fix the multiplication table in our young minds by marching us in a line about the Green with martial tread, repeating in concert 'twice one is two,' etc. etc."<sup>4</sup> Not exactly free play!

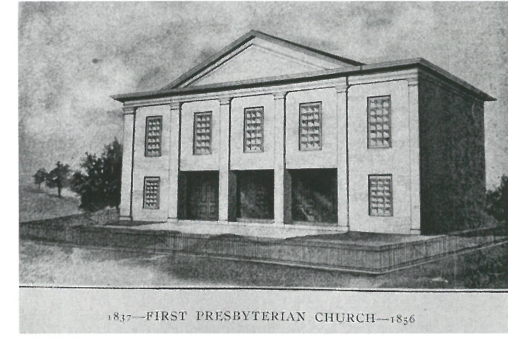
This was not the first school in



**A TEACHER'S SALARY IN MONTCLAIR, 1852**

**MALE TEACHER:**  
\$340 per year  
(about \$12,000 in today's dollars)

**LADY ASSISTANT:**  
\$200 per year  
(about \$7,000 in today's dollars)



The "new" schoolhouse, built 1812, was five times the size of the former one. It was located on the point where Bloomfield Avenue and Church Street intersect (left). The schoolhouse was repurposed to serve as the first home of the First Presbyterian Church (below middle). The First Presbyterian Church built a new sanctuary in 1856 (above).

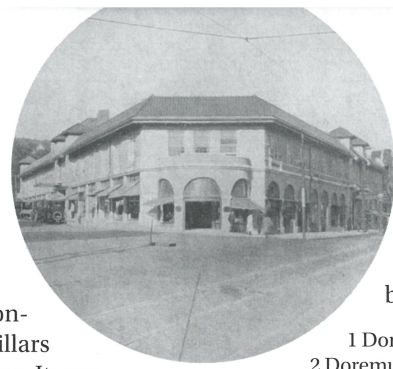
town. According to General F. H. Harris's pamphlet titled "Historical Sketch of Montclair," published in 1881, the first school was built around 1740 on the junction of today's Orange Road and Church Street, about 250 feet south of the Board of Education building. A smaller building than the second school, it was 18 feet by 22 feet and only one story high. Harris recalls it had a "large fireplace in one corner, flat desks or tables around the sides of the room, far enough from the walls to admit benches being placed between the desks and the walls. All the seats were slabs, bark-side down. At one end was an oval-shaped, elevated platform, known as the rostrum, for the teacher, with a trap-door in the center, through which evil-doers were occasionally sent into the cellar."<sup>5</sup>

When this schoolhouse was razed in 1812, its stones were used to construct the new building. The new two-story school served Montclair's budding scholars for about 25 years. In 1837, the West Bloomfield Presbyterian Society purchased the building and grounds and repurposed it as a church. Under the direction of architect Decatur

**The First Presbyterian Church, located where Anthropologie is today, burned down in 1921 (left).**

Harrison, they removed the second story, moved the green seats to the first floor and prepared it for use for "social meetings and Sabbath School."<sup>6</sup> The students moved to a new school just west of the new church.

The Presbyterian Society enlarged the second floor to accommodate a growing congregation, supporting the extension with pillars that created a large open porch and entrance. It was dedicated on August 9, 1838 with the Reverend Samuel Fisher, as its first pastor. It served as the First Presbyterian Church until 1856 when a new church was built on the point where Church



**Christopher Hinck built this building on the site of the First Presbyterian Church. This photo was taken around 1925.**

Street and Bloomfield Avenue join. That church burned down in 1921, leaving property available for Christopher Hinck to erect a California mission style building that defines the corner today. ■

- 1 Doremus, Philip. *Reminiscences of Montclair*. Montclair, NJ. 1908.
- 2 Doremus, Philip. *Reminiscences of Montclair*. Montclair, NJ. 1908.
- 3 Doremus, Philip. *Reminiscences of Montclair*. Montclair, NJ. 1908.
- 4 Doremus, Philip. *Reminiscences of Montclair*. Montclair, NJ. 1908.
- 5 Harris, F. H. *Historical Sketch of Montclair*. Montclair, NJ. 1881.
- 6 Doremus, Philip. *Reminiscences of Montclair*. Montclair, NJ. 1908.

## Kick Off the Fall Season at the Library

CONTRIBUTED BY ANDREW NG

**N**OW IN ITS SEVENTH YEAR, Open Book / Open Mind is the Library's live conversation series featuring top authors discussing their new books and the important events of our time. The series transitioned to a webcast format in 2020 and will remain entirely virtual through fall 2021.

As a webcast, Open Book / Open Mind has drawn up to 750 attendees from 35 states outside New Jersey as well as Canada, the Caribbean, Europe, Thailand, and New Zealand.

The fall season will include several New York Times bestselling authors and Pulitzer Prize winners. From deep dives into timely topics such as the coronavirus pandemic and inequality, to the latest works of fiction from beloved authors, Open Book / Open Mind will offer a wide range of conversations. Interviewees are also accomplished professionals in their own right from the fields of journalism, publishing, medicine, and more.

To register for upcoming programs, or to see an archive of past programs with YouTube recordings, visit [montclairlibrary.org/obom](http://montclairlibrary.org/obom).

- Thurs., September 9, 7pm** Lawrence Wright, *The Plague Year: America in the Time of Covid*
- Sun., September 19, 4pm** Mary Roach, *Fuzz: When Nature Breaks the Law*
- Thurs., October 14, 7pm** Alice Hoffman, *The Book of Magic*
- Sun., October 24, 4pm** Sandra Cisneros, *Martita*,

## LIBRARY CORNER

*I Remember You*

- Thurs., November 11, 7pm** Andrea Elliott, *Invisible Child: Poverty, Survival, and Hope in an American City*
- Thurs., December 2, 7pm** Gayle Jessup White, *Reclamation: Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson, and a Descendant's Search for Her Family's Lasting Legacy*

**SEPTEMBER IS NATIONAL LIBRARY CARD SIGN-UP MONTH** Since 1987, the American Library Association has held an annual campaign to encourage Americans to register for a library card.

Your library card gives you free access to collections, premium online resources, technology, and much more. Signing up for a library card is easy—the first step can even be done online.

Go to [montclairlibrary.org](http://montclairlibrary.org) and click on "Library Card" for information on card eligibility and a link to register.

In addition, Library staff will be visiting several locations in town to help new patrons sign up in person. Keep an eye out for a sign-up table at the locations and dates below. Additional locations may be announced on the Library's website and social media.

- Fri., September 10 & Thurs., September 23** Edgemont Park
- Sat., September 11** Montclair Farmers Market
- Sat., September 18** Montclair Jazz Festival
- Sat., September 25** Montclair Art Museum Art Fest ■

**ABOUT THE LIBRARY** The Montclair Public Library is located at 50 South Fullerton Avenue (Main Library) and 185 Bellevue Avenue (Bellevue Avenue Branch). The Library's mission is to change lives every day, through words, ideas, and community building. Its vision is to provide unlimited opportunities for lifelong learning, discovery, and community engagement. Visit [montclairlibrary.org](http://montclairlibrary.org) for current hours of operation and services.

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