

Name of Interviewee: Donato DiGeronimo

Google Drive Folder: Montclair 150: 2023 Update

Additional Materials: scanned personal photographs, maps, photos

Interviewer: Helen Fallon, MHC Trustee; Erin Benz, MHC Collections Manager; Nicholas Muller, MHC Collections Volunteer

Date: 09/08/23

Location: Clark House, 108 Orange Road, Montclair, NJ.

Introduction:

Donato DiGeronimo comes from a large extended family, particularly on the DiGeronimo side. He grew up in close proximity to many of his relatives in Montclair's South End – including homes on Willowdale Avenue and Orange Road -- in a diverse neighborhood with African Americans. Donato talks at length about the diversity of Montclair, or lack of it in certain areas, and his appreciation for the diversity and its positive impact on his life.

He attended Immaculate Conception Catholic School from kindergarten through sophomore year in high school, when he switched to Montclair High School so he could play football, because Immaculate had temporarily ceased its football program. As a youngster, he spent a lot of time exploring Bloomfield Center, because after school he would go to the bank on Bloomfield Avenue where his mom worked to complete his homework and then stroll around until his father picked them both up. He fondly remembers summer fun at the town and school playgrounds when young kids were so independent at an early age.

He went on to get a bachelor's degree from Montclair State and a Master's degree in Public Management from Fairleigh Dickinson University. Professionally, Donato started working in construction before joining the fire department in 1978 where he ultimately rose to the rank of Battalion Chief. He was also president of the Firefighters Union. He has long been very active in town politics, economic development and community initiatives, many of which implemented lasting positive changes in Montclair. (This includes the Montclair Business Improvement District / BID which he helped found in 2002-2003; co-author of Montclair's 125th Anniversary Book; long-time organizer of Montclair's 4th of July Parade; and Trustee of the Montclair History Center, among many other things.)

He has been a big promoter of local history, integral to many exhibits and sites that collect and share history including that of Italian Americans and African Americans in Montclair.

He also shares details of his family's heritage and many others of Italian descent in Montclair, whose relatives were originally from Lacedonia, Italy.

Summary Information:

Interviewee: Donato DiGeronimo

DOB: 4/20/1948

Parents:

- Father: Vincenzo D'Anunzio DiGeronimo, called James, nicknamed "Hip"
- Mother: Mary Pelullo
- Paternal grandparents: Rose Santoro/Sandoro and Donato DiGeronimo
- Maternal grandparents: Carmella Festa and Filippo Pelullo

Timestamps:

[0:00:00 - 0:03:28] Donato begins by talking about his large extended family, particularly on the paternal, DiGeronimo side, which is a name familiar to many in Montclair. His paternal grandmother Rose Santoro (more commonly recorded in later official documents as Sandora) and her twin sister Maria/Mary were born in Newark in 1894 and moved to Montclair in 1902. At age 15, Mary married Vincenzo DiGeronimo in 1916 and went on to have 15 children. Rose, at age 20, married Donato DiGeronimo, her brother-in-law Vincenzo's older brother, in 1914. Rose and Vincenzo had 13 children. Both families lived together in a house at 12 Willowdale Avenue. A cousin lived in a house at 10 Willowdale Avenue, and the family spread out a bit, and rented some of the space. Both houses were lost during the Depression, and they moved to 46 Willowdale Avenue until 1938, when Mary and Vincenzo's family moved to Montclair Avenue.

[00:03:29 – 00:05:39] His paternal grandfather Donato DiGeronimo was a shoemaker with a shop on Spring Street in 1910-1911; in 1912, he joined with his brother Vincenzo's tailor business – first at 68 Pine Street, then they bought and moved to the commercial building that housed 317-321 Orange Road, as well as the large house behind it, where paternal grandparents Rose and Donato's family moved. As the two sisters' families grew and had their own families, Donato recalls 13 related families, most living in multi-family houses – Di Geronimo's, DiCarlo's, Miscia's, etc. -- on one block as he was growing up, from Draper Terrace to Cedar Avenue on Orange Road. Donato was born at 325 Orange Road; his family moved to 15 Hilltop Place when he was four years old; later moves included 11 Claremont Avenue, living with maternal grandmother at 34 Gates Avenue; and then finally a purchased home at 25 Columbus Avenue.

[00:05:40-00:06:36] Donato explains that at that time he was growing up, Italians and African Americans lived together in the Fourth Ward. When he was growing up on Orange Road, beyond Donato's family, the other residents were primarily African Americans, so he grew up going to Nishuane Park like many of the African Americans. As they were purchasing their Columbus Avenue home, his mother felt that she had been steered away from Upper Montclair, because Italians were not generally welcome above Watchung Avenue. Wildwood Avenue was the exception, as Italian Americans who owned stores or worked in Upper Montclair were clustered there. For African Americans, that "dividing line" was more likely Walnut Street.

[00:07:33-00:08:32] Returning to the presence of DiGeronimo relatives involved in township roles, he notes many firemen [as Donato was himself], policemen, and through an in-law, several became involved in the eyeglass field – selling and making frames. In the 1970s, his uncle Sonny DiGeronimo was a leader in the Republican Party in town, which Donato notes “was a very different Republican Party now” and shared a job that Donato has now done for many years: head of the Fourth of July parade committee! Donato recalled helping, with his father, the parade participants line up before the start of parade – something that Donato does to this day!

[00:08:50-00:12:43] On the topic of schools attended, Donato explained that when he was four years old, his mother began working as a secretary at National Newark and Essex Bank on Bloomfield Avenue, and he went to nursery school at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church, run by the Philippini nuns out of their convent located in the parking lot of the church, which had several classrooms. He did not like it! And he certainly did not enjoy the lentil soup they served for lunch every day, although as an adult he has changed his mind about lentils. He attended Immaculate Conception Elementary School.

He remembers taking the #64 bus from the South End on Orange Road to Bloomfield Center/Bloomfield Avenue. Because of his mother’s job, he would arrive at school about a half hour earlier than the other students; his mother would drop him off at Immaculate Conception School, instructing him to stay right there in the school hallway until others arrived. He dutifully complied, reading nearly every day a large plaque in the hallway with the words to Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address to pass the time. After school, he walked to join his mother at the bank, where he did his homework until his father picked them up at 4:30 or 5:00. He remembers getting the chance to help one of the younger bank workers with the big coin counting machine. He also spent a lot of that after-school time walking around Bloomfield Avenue, so he feels that he knows it very, very well.

Although the original plan was for him to attend Immaculate Conception from grades K-12 and play high school football there, when he was a sophomore, Immaculate dropped the football program briefly after a tragic accident paralyzed a player, so he transferred to Montclair High School in 11th grade to play football (halfback). He also played basketball in high school. He noted that while many of his cousins were already at Montclair High School, he had many friends – mostly Irish – at Immaculate Conception. The size of Montclair High School was a big culture shock for him – despite many family members attending there – after the more intimate size of Immaculate Conception High School.

[00:13:33-00:14:50] While Our Lady Of Mt. Carmel was the family’s parish, his attendance at Immaculate Conception High School also required him to attend mass and confession during school hours at Immaculate Conception Church. When asked about the diversity of Immaculate Conception, he notes that his high school class was not diverse: Out of approximately 90 students (60 women/30 men), there were two African Americans, a handful of Italian Americans (other Italians that had started with him in the elementary school had moved to other schools

by fourth or fifth grade), and he estimates that 80% of the class was of Irish descent. Donato considers his experience growing up to have exposed him to very diverse collection of schoolmates and friends, having grown up on Orange Road in the South End with a significant African American population he had a lot of friends from the neighborhood playground, he had Irish school friends, etc. As he said, “The differences were stark. When my aunt brought my uncle home [her future husband], he was Irish, that was a big deal.” Donato considers his ability to mix into different worlds so easily from a young age as a plus. He says, “It served me very well, actually. Later in my life...knowing all this diversity...because I became somewhat political over time, and that helped me a lot.”

[00:14:56-00:16:40] Donato fondly remembers the role that playgrounds played in summer fun. “We still talk about it on all the Montclair social media sites. It was the greatest thing. You could go to almost every playground in Montclair...they had hired teachers...men and women teachers and they would run the playgrounds, like Nishuane. Every playground in Montclair – big ones, small ones. And you could just come there anytime you wanted....I was eight years old, and we could just walk there as a group.... Most of the time your family didn’t even know where you were...maybe we’d go home for lunch. There were games and things to do all day long. It was just the best thing ever because you were just so independent.” He acknowledged that parents weren’t heavily involved in kids’ activities, unlike today, and that children preferred it that way when he was growing up.

He mentions that his friends currently working in recreation explained that the risk of liability would never allow that loose system today.

[00:16:43-00:18:07] He mentions that both grandparents on his mother’s side (Carmela Festa and Filippo Pelullo) came from Lacedonia, Italy in the province of Avellino. His paternal grandfather also hailed from Lacedonia. So three of his grandparents were from Lacedonia. His paternal grandmother’s family hailed from Basilicata, a little south of Lacedonia.

[00:18:29 – 00:24:00] Then Donato details his work and career history. He began working construction as a laborer, for his mother’s older brother, Michael Pelullo while he attended Montclair State University, then called Montclair State Teachers College. He’d also gotten into Rutgers, Seton Hall and Wagner, but the \$75 tuition for a semester at Montclair State was hard to pass up. Many other family members in his father’s generation had also gone to Montclair State and played football there. His father’s youngest brother, Junior, advised him to take math and become a math teacher, but he soon realized that wasn’t for him and he switched to business and accounting, which he didn’t enjoy and realized he’d never teach that subject. He realizes now that Physical Education or History were really of more interest to him at the time. Because he had transitioned to working full time in construction, he did not graduate in 1970 as scheduled. From 1970-1975 he worked full time as a construction worker on the Mountainside Hospital Schuman Pavilion, “making good money and I loved it.” He graduated in 1974 as a 1972 graduate. After graduation, he worked with his cousin Ray Festa, who owned Ray’s Luncheonette on Walnut Street. Ray Festa also had purchased the Marlboro Inn [corner of

Grove Street and Watchung Avenue, now the site of homes on Christopher Court], which was an old inn that he was trying to revitalize, and Donato worked there as a chef for a year. When that venture didn't continue, Donato joined the fire department in 1978. At almost 30 years old, he was older than most of the other new hires.

When asked why he chose the fire department, he responded with a chuckle, "Because I didn't know what else to do." He goes on to say, "But it was one of the best things I ever did. I loved being on the fire department. He took and scored highly on every promotion test available to him, rising after only six years to Lieutenant, "cooking his way out of" the resentment that any older veterans may have felt towards him as an upstart. He became Captain in 1991. He feels that he was denied the title of Deputy Chief as retribution for his role as president of the [firefighters'] union, but ultimately after legal action against the town, "we settled on Battalion Chief." He concludes, "It all worked out well."

In his 32-year-career with the fire department, over the years he was assigned to the Upper Montclair Station, headquarters, and Cedar Avenue, but was never assigned to the Walnut Street Station [which is no longer a station, at the time of the interview, but the home of the Montclair Volunteer Ambulance unit].

While he was President of the union for 12 years, he also returned to school and got a Master's degree in Public Management from Fairleigh Dickinson University, which was relevant to many things he was involved with professionally in the union and arbitration. These were the times – 1997, 1998 --that convinced him to get more involved in the things happening in town, specifically the merchants.

[00:24:29 – 00:26:00] The interview delves into the many local organizations in which Donato has been actively involved and, in many instances, in leadership or founder roles. It started when Gloria Falzer, a Montclair realtor but also an actress involved with 12 Miles West Theater in town, asked Donato, the Police Chief, and the Fire Chief to read a part in the production of *A Christmas Carol* the theater was doing, as a promotion to build up the audience. Donato ended up on the Board of Directors of 12 Miles West Theater.

The interviewer then reads from a list of more than two dozen local committees and organizations in which Donato has been involved:

- Parking Advisory Committee
- Co-author, Montclair 125th Anniversary Book
- Martin Luther King, Jr. Day seminars
- Montclair Optimist Club
- Fundraising role for various organizations
- Organizer of multiple festivals
- 4th of July Parade
- Montclair African American Heritage Foundation Parade and Festival

- Montclair High School reunions
- Trustee, Montclair History Center
- 100 Club; Donato was the Honoree of their 52nd Annual Dinner in 2017
- Friends of the Howe House Fundraising Committee
- Montclair Business Improvement District, or BID
- And many more

[00:26:35 – 00:28:22] Donato’s involvement in the BID, formed in 2002-2003 timeframe, was further explained. He notes he got involved at the end of the development of it. The Montclair Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) had been pushing to start the BID for some time; Donato was involved in a group called the Montclair Downtown Alliance, which comprised all the merchants (he had noted a few minutes earlier in the interview his growing connection with the retailers in town.) He provides details on the meeting at which it was decided that the MEDC would not be in charge of the BID, and instead an entirely new BID board started – and the BID organization continues today.

[00:28:25 – 00:30:09] Donato’s role in the development of the *Montclair-opoly* game was explained. In 1992, when he became President of the Firefighters Union, there was a lot of controversy in town with the town manager and with promotions denied within the fire department, including to two African American firefighters. The union accumulated big legal fees, he developed the *Montclair-opoly* game as a way to raise much needed legal funds. He walked around to every business with a woman, Lenny Flaster, getting businesses involved in the game. While that venture raised only about \$5,000, they had other fundraisers and eventually raised the money the union needed to stay viable. [Note that the Montclair History Center has a *Montclair-opoly* game in its archives.]

[00:30:45 – 00:31:49] Donato explains that when he was growing up, Montclair was considered a conservative town. Politically, it was heavily Republican, which he observes is quite the opposite of the town’s political reputation today.

[00:31:54 – 00:35:55] He mentions a 2004 project he was involved in, through COPCE (sp?), with funding through Montclair State University for two initiatives around the Montclair Connection train area [where two separate train lines in Montclair were literally connected via new track that had a major impact on streets in the Pine Street area as homes were demolished and streets reconfigured to accommodate the new track]. The project concentrated on the area near the actual train connection where the homes were to be demolished, speaking to the neighbors – African American, Hispanic, some of the Italians that were still left in the historically Italian [Pine Street] neighborhood. While not initially well received, the group ended up helping residents in that neighborhood get mortgages for homes they would relocate to, they did an assessment of the area, and that was also the impetus for the designation of the Pine Street Historic District. Donato was involved with gathering the Italian American history of the neighborhood. MSU Professor Leslie Wilson was involved with the African American story of the

neighborhood. Marisa Trubiano of MSU, who was involved in the Italian American project with Donato, arranged with a previous Montclair Historical Society Executive Director, Alicia Schatteman (sp?) to host an exhibit in the basement of the Crane House Museum; Donato presented the exhibit two additional times at the Montclair Public Library in subsequent years. He recalls that it may have been the first “ethnic” program that the Montclair Historical Society did.

The first part of the African American exhibit, displayed at the Crane House in 2006, focused on the history of Montclair’s churches and was extremely well attended.

Donato’s involvement in the Italian history exhibit led to his involvement in other Italian history projects in town, including an Italians of Montclair website and Facebook page and group. Many photographs have been donated to the Montclair History Center archives.

[00:35:58 – 00:36:40] He’s still involved in Montclair’s St. Sebastian Feast and Carnival committee; there used to be a Lady of Mt. Carmel Feast in July and a small Saint Donato Feast. The very first feast in Montclair was in 1919 and only lasted until the 1930s, for St. Rocco who was from his grandmother’s hometown of San Fele, Italy.

[00:36:42 – 00:36:59] Donato explains, “I’m more involved now with the African American community than I’ve ever been. They are what’s left of “my Montclair” now. Whereas many of the Italian neighbors may have moved out, many in the African American community have remained, despite difficulties to do so given increased redevelopment and gentrification. He mentions the current proposed redevelopment of the Lackawanna Plaza area, which has had vocal opposition by some/many.

[00:37:00 – 00:37:19] Donato confesses that he played in the Crane House “all the time” when it was empty and boarded up on Glenridge Avenue prior to its move in 1965 to its current location on Orange Road! It was his first involvement with the Montclair History Center – “illegal as it was,” he notes with a chuckle.

[00:37:42 – 00:41:20] When asked how he became involved in the Montclair History Center, he recalls that it was soon after his retirement from the Fire Department in 2010 that he showed up at the Clark House offices of the Montclair Historical Society to inquire about volunteering, offering his computer skills and interest in history. Alas, to his (and our!) dismay, he was never called! Then around 2016 another Montclair History Center Trustee, Helen Fallon, asked him to consider becoming involved on the Board. Donato speaks favorably of the way the Montclair History Center has changed.

He says, “Even now, I marvel at the ...timeline... in the Crane House, and I just wish everybody could see it because that just tells the story. Now...you’re telling me ethnic history, you’re telling me African American history, which...really, in this town, would have been talking about diversity – that was it. And that’s what this town was really about for so many years.”

As a board member, he is frustrated with how difficult it is to get the word out about all that the Montclair History Center is doing. So many only recall the Montclair Historical Society of bygone years which as Donato recalls, "Growing up, this place was not for anybody ethnic."

But he does remember the August 1965 day the Crane House was moved from its original Glenridge Avenue location to its current Orange Road location. He was working at Mack's Drug Store and everyone ran out of the store to watch the house roll by down Bloomfield Avenue. He mentions that his Aunt Molly DiGeronimo DiCarlo (age 104 at time of interview), who worked at Madison's on Bloomfield Avenue, also recalled seeing the house pass by on Bloomfield Avenue.

[00:41:45 – 00:44:59] The conversation turned to businesses and restaurants in town. In 1998, Donato was involved with the BID and 12 Miles West Theater. He and others were trying to get the theaters and the emerging restaurant scene in Montclair to work together. He concedes that the efforts of his group were not as successful as they'd hoped. He cites the 1996 *New York Magazine* article about Montclair being named "the new Upper West Side" as a major impetus for Montclair's surge in popularity.

As for restaurants in town when he was a youngster, he says, "...there was no place to eat!" He names the few options: Wedgewood Cafeteria on South Park Street, the Three Crowns located on the level below the Clairidge Theater. Charlie Browns came in around 1972-73 (located in Upper Montclair Plaza behind the Bellevue Theater) and that was a big deal because it had a liquor license. But generally, he recalls 8-10 restaurants along Bloomfield Avenue that all had soda fountains and were small-scale diners. "They were everywhere." He spent a lot of time on Bloomfield Avenue because after school he was at the bank there where his mother worked, and he was familiar with the Woolworth's and the Kresge's that were just a few doors down from each other on Bloomfield Avenue east of South Park Street – they both had soda fountains. And the drugstores on Bloomfield Avenue – including Whelan's, Petty's – they all had soda fountains. He added, "Now, everything is a fancy restaurant."

Interestingly, his family chose to eat Italian food when they ate out, and they would go to restaurants in Orange, Newark, Bloomfield, or Totowa. They still do!

[00:45:03 – 00:45:25] Donato had commented earlier that, "It's a different town than where I grew up." When asked to elaborate on that, he recognizes the "great energy" but he notes that some of the new people who come to Montclair and are vocal about loving it also want to change it to be more like the place they moved from (frequently Brooklyn)!

[00:45:55 – 00:47:10] He talks about an intangible that he and his friends feel they benefitted from growing up in Montclair that people in other towns don't seem to experience– the diversity of classmates and teammates that came together for sports, etc. Even if you went home "back to your corner," you created and maintained connections to a diverse group of people you grew up with. He notes that children of his friends comment on the lack of diversity at some of their colleges. Donato notes "the learning curve" he witnessed first-hand among

firefighters who were not raised in Montclair. He suggests that Montclair “is losing that [diversity] a little bit now.”

[00:47:39 – 00:49:17] Donato was asked if he experienced prejudice directly due to being Italian. He reminds the interviewers that he went to a school [Immaculate Conception] that was attended primarily by Irish Americans, so “there was always a little banter back and forth.” And he notes that intermarriage between Irish and Italians was only just becoming more common at that time. He recalls that his mother was steered away from looking at homes in Upper Montclair, and Upper Montclair was considered “waspy” and wealthy. He adds, “We would go to parties there sometime, but you can feel not wanted.”

[00:49:22 – 00:53:02] Donato refers to pictures of Glenfield School from the 1920s that reflect an integrated school of Black and Italian students. He expresses disappointment with some of his Italian and Irish friends who grew up intermingling with each other and Black friends and had great memories, but who now have distanced themselves from that experience. But he continues to feel fortunate to have grown up with a diverse experience. He tells a story about his mother’s youngest sister bringing her Irish boyfriend to meet the Italian family on Christmas Eve, and what started out looking like a disaster turned out well.

He refers to two Federal civil rights audits conducted in Montclair – circa 1947 and 1964. The 1947 audit touches on redlining, and notes that Italian Americans had a bit more mobility than African Americans because they had access to more employment options.

[00:53:12 – 00:55:45] Looking back on his upbringing as a Catholic, he notes that while he’s not particularly religious now, he still appreciates the feasts and their historical significance, although he’s a little conflicted about religion. He notes that the Italian church in Montclair was threatened with closure and continues to fight to stay active; he notes his family’s role in physically building the church [Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church].

“Montclair has been an interesting town...It had two enclaves..they had the enclave in the Fourth Ward around Pine Street. You can see those buildings were definitely built by the Italians in the Italian way. And we lived towards the South End, which was different, and some of those buildings were built by the Italians. And then there was Forest Street, which now is becoming kind of a renaissance with businesses and everything. But that was an Italian and Black neighborhood, also. There was a proliferation of Italian clubs on Forest Street and in Montclair...men would play cards and gamble in there.”

He notes that his friend Nancy Carnevale, an MSU professor, wrote a book about the interaction of the Italians and Blacks in Montclair versus the interaction of Italians and Blacks in Newark, although the book ultimately concentrated on the Newark experience. Donato had given her tours of both locations. She first wrote an essay on the topic [which is in the archives of the Montclair History Center]. The difference noted in the essay is that in Montclair, Italians and Blacks grew up side by side, “in each other’s houses and birthday parties” as opposed to Newark and other inner cities where there are non-diverse enclaves.

[00:57:22 – 00:59:39] He is asked again about the time when his cousin Ray owned the Marlboro Inn. Donato explains that Ray Festa owned Ray's Luncheonette on Walnut Street (which is now owned by other owners, with a menu that retained some of Ray's standards and has added Hispanic items and is worth a visit!), the Marlboro Inn, and that he opened the Marlboro Bakery on Grove Street. The inability to get a liquor license for the Marlboro Inn contributed to his cousin's bankruptcy; Donato considers that very unfortunate because his cousin Ray had plans to make it quite an elegant destination. He notes that the Marlboro Inn was then owned briefly by others before being demolished and redeveloped into multiple single-family homes.

[00:59:40 – 00:xx:xx] An interviewer notes that other than the Upper Montclair area, which Donato had described as "waspy," the other ethnic groups mentioned were primarily Italian, Black and Irish. The interviewer specifically inquires about Polish, Eastern European or Slavic communities in town. Donato notes that there were residents of those backgrounds but not in great numbers. He specifically remembers the first Polish person he ever met, a classmate of several years from Immaculate Conception; Donato remembers going to the classmate's house and being exposed to unfamiliar smelling foods.

Donato recounts the town's population peak of 43,000 and its low of 38,000. Now rising again due to all the recent building, once the population reaches 39,000 the town can sell another liquor license (given the state law of one liquor license per 3,000 residents); the town's auction of liquor licenses is very lucrative for the township coffers since the licenses are in such high demand and the last few auctions have netted the town over \$1 million each. The population, though still less than the peak of 43,000, feels different to him. Because back then the families were larger and each family had a single car; now, every person seems to have a car – there are many more vehicles per family.