

# The Summer Retreat That Gave Gordonhurst Avenue Its Name

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The Wilbur's summer villa, at the northeast corner of Valley Road and Gordonhurst Avenue in October 1887.



The Wilbur family at their villa around 1890: Far left, Martha Wilbur; center, Dr. J. G. Wilbur; and far right, Mary Gordon Wilbur DeForest.

**A**S ROADS GO, Gordonhurst Avenue is short – just four blocks long – but its story travels back more than 130 years. Its origins hinge on a villa that no longer exists, a woman who never set foot in Montclair, and, of course, a family that came from Brooklyn.

Today, Gordonhurst Avenue runs arrow-straight from Brookdale Park to Park Street, then makes a dogleg jog slightly northward to its western end at Valley Road. That block-long dogleg is where Gordonhurst first emerged.

In 1886, when Valley Road was dirt and traversed by horse or foot, Dr. Joshua Green Wilbur and Martha, his wife, decided to make Montclair their summer getaway from the bustle of Brooklyn. The Harvard-educated doctor served as a surgeon during the Civil War, then settled in Brooklyn, where he worked as a medical examiner for insurance companies. Martha took on benevolent projects, such as founding a Home for Aged Men.

The Wilbur's were drawn to Montclair by their daughter, Mary, and son-in-law, Ezra DeForest, who had discovered the town two years earlier. The DeForests lived in a stone Dutch house, now 471 Valley Road, and the Wilbur's became their seasonal neighbors in a house immediately to the south, at the northeast corner of Valley Road and Gordonhurst Avenue. Except Gordonhurst Avenue had no name yet, and almost no residents.

The Wilbur's' summer home was a capacious two-story clapboard affair with dormers, louvered shutters and a porch with a rocking chair, all set amid several acres. They bought more land over the years, and their strip of property eventually stretched from Park Street to what is now North Mountain Avenue. In a family album, an 1887 photo labeled the home "Wilbur Villa." Sometimes it was called "Valley Villa." By 1895 it was "Gordonhurst." "Hurst" is Old English for a hillock, small wooded area or thicket. But why "Gordon"?

Several hundred Montclair residents now live on Gordonhurst Avenue instead of, say, Wilbur Avenue probably because of one woman: Martha Wilbur's grandmother, Mary Gordon (1786-1854). She was born and buried in Massachusetts, died before Montclair even existed as a township, and most likely never set foot in New



Dr. Joshua Green Wilbur, circa 1890s.

Jersey. But Mary Gordon must have been revered: The Wilbur's bestowed her name on their only child, Mary Gordon Wilbur DeForest. Then two more generations carried on the Gordon name.

The family may have named its summer getaway in her honor, too, perhaps after the death of Martha Wilbur in 1894. When Dr. Wilbur passed away six months later, in 1895, *The Montclair Times* reported that he "died at Gordonhurst, his summer residence on Valley Road." Four years later, Gordonhurst appears named for the first time on a map along the southern border of the Wilbur property, between Valley Road and Park Street. Meanwhile, the railroad's arrival was fueling development in Upper Montclair. Big plans were afoot to the east of the Wilbur estate, as the road ran between Park and Grove Streets. A real estate developer had named that section of road Park Place, and subdivided the land along it into 75 housing lots. But by 1903 it was still described as "unfrequented," and it took about a decade for houses to sprout on those lots. In 1908 the developers, by now the Associated Investors Company of Newark, petitioned the township to change the name Park Place to Gordonhurst Avenue. Having Park Place intersect Park Street was just too confusing! Now, fully christened as Gordonhurst Avenue, the street ran for three blocks. Eventually, it would extend one more block east to Brookdale Park.

Within the next half-century, suburbia surrounded the Wilbur's country retreat. The old villa sat on valuable property. Around 1957, descendants of Martha and Joshua Wilbur demolished the villa and its barn to create DeForest Estates, comprising about a half-dozen ranch houses. Ferguson Dental stands roughly where the villa's front yard once sprawled. A great-grandson with an interest in antiques saved the barn's weathervane. But otherwise, a family's summer idyll lives on only in a street name. ■

The Montclair History Center invited Lisanne Renner, historian for Friends of Anderson Park, to contribute this article. More about Anderson Park is on the conservancy's Facebook page and at FriendsOfAndersonPark.com.