

AASLH

WINTER 2017 VOLUME 72, #1 \$10

HISTORYNEWS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY



The Many Voices of a Historic House

The Museum as Center
for **Social Innovation**

Opportunities in the
Aftermath of Disaster





Contents

WINTER 2017 VOLUME 72, #1



PAGE

26

Departments

3 On Doing Local History

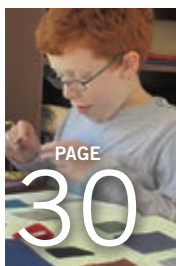
By Carol Kammen

5 The Whole is Greater

By Mónica S. Moncada

7 Value of History

By Jason Steinhauer



PAGE

30

30 AASLH Award Winner Spotlight

By Christine Ermenc, Christina Vida, and Scott Wands

32 Book Review

By Sally Yerkovich

35 AASLH News

Features

9 The Museum as Center for Social Innovation

By Jasper Visser

14 The Many Voices of a Historic House

By Jane Mitchell Eliasof

20 Embezzlement: Is it Our Dirty Little Secret?

By Max A. van Balgooy

26 Like a Phoenix: Opportunities in the Aftermath of Disaster

By Samantha M. Engel



ON THE COVER

The Montclair History Center reinterpreted its Crane House to more accurately reflect its rich and diverse history through the story of the African American YWCA that had used the house as its headquarters

from 1920 to 1965. The multi-faceted initiative celebrates the important role the YWCA played in the history of Montclair and in the hearts of its members.

Photo Jack Spear Photography, LLC

INSIDE: TECHNICAL LEAFLET

How to Find and Use Legal Records

By John A. Lupton

AASLH
HISTORYNEWS
THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

History News is a publication of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). *History News* exists to foster publication, scholarly research, and an open forum for discussion of best practices, applicable theories, and professional experiences pertinent to the field of state and local history.

EDITOR Bob Beatty | ADVERTISING Hannah Hethmon

DESIGN Go Design, LLC: Gerri Winchell Findley, Suzanne Pfeil

History News (ISSN0363-7492) is published quarterly by American Association for State and Local History, 2021 21st Avenue S., Suite 320, Nashville TN 37212. Periodicals Postage Paid at Nashville, Tennessee. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *History News*, 2021 21st Avenue S., Suite 320, Nashville, TN 37212.

Article manuscripts dealing with all aspects of public history are welcome, including current trends, timely issues, and best practices for professional development and the overall improvement of the history field, particularly articles that give a fresh perspective to traditional theories, in-depth case studies that reveal applicable and relevant concepts, and subject matter that has the ability to resonate throughout all levels of the field. For information on article submissions and review, see about.aaslh.org/history-news. Single copies are \$10. Postmaster, send form 3579 to *History News*, AASLH, 2021 21st Avenue S., Suite 320, Nashville, TN 37212. Periodical postage paid in Nashville, Tennessee. Entire contents copyrighted ©2017 by the American Association for State and Local History. Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the American Association for State and Local History.



2021 21st Avenue S., Suite 320
Nashville, Tennessee 37212
615-320-3203
Fax 615-327-9013
membership@aaslh.org
advertising@aaslh.org
www.aaslh.org

The Many



❁
A life-size portrait of YWCA girls welcomes guests to the 1940–1950 era Club Room, where visitors discuss de facto segregation and discrimination during that period.
❁

of a Historic

By Jane Mitchell Eliasof

Like many historic houses, the Crane House has long struggled with community relevance. Located in suburban Montclair, New Jersey, less than twenty miles from New York City, the Crane House was built in 1796 by Israel Crane, a prominent local businessman who envisioned a more populous, commercial Montclair than the sleepy community he and his ancestors had called home for more than a century. Although wealthy and locally important, Crane never served in office, did not sign the Declaration of Independence, nor fight in the American Revolution. Furthermore, the Montclair History Center, which had been stewards of the home for nearly fifty years, competed with a multitude of larger, better-funded historic houses within a twenty-mile radius. What made the Crane House different? What made it important to the community?

Voices

Jack Spear Photography, LLC

The site was renamed the Crane House and Historic YWCA to more accurately reflect its rich and diverse history.



Harry D. Mayo, III

preservationists ignored is the one that took place from 1920 to 1965, when the house served as a segregated Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) for African American women and girls.

By 1920, the Crane family no longer lived in the house. After being rented out for a number of years, they offered the house for sale. Eight years earlier, Alice Hooe Foster, the first female African American graduate from Montclair High School, had started a YWCA in her living room on nearby Forest Street. She recognized the need for a space where black women could gather. By 1920, the YWCA boasted 600 members representing nearly one-third of Montclair's female African American population. The organization had outgrown her living room and, working with socially conscious white women from the community, she purchased the old Crane House as the new "Colored YWCA." It was one of about fifty segregated YWCAs in America.

The neighborhood around the Crane House had changed in the years since Israel Crane built it. A noisy, dirty railroad had come to Montclair, with a station almost directly across the street. African American migrants from the South and Italian immigrants had moved to the neighborhood. With its proximity to the railroad station and location in a neighborhood increasingly filled with immigrant and black families, the house was in a perfect location for a YWCA that was both a boarding house and a place for classes and social events. The women hung a sign, "YWCA for Colored Women and Girls," advertised in *Southern Workman* magazine, and began to offer rooms to let and programs for people in town.

Over the next forty-five years, the YWCA was a safe haven in the midst of a subtly segregated town. Even though Montclair was known for its diversity and integrated schools, African American girls grew up knowing which stores they could go into and those they could not, where they could buy a milkshake and where they could not, and which stores allowed them to try on hats and which stores refused. As Betty Livingston Adams, research fellow and adjunct faculty in the Department of History at New York University, said, "As more and more African Americans moved north, it was like Jim Crow got on the train and moved north, too."¹

At the YWCA, women and girls had opportunities unavailable elsewhere. Girls could take classes such as French and choir that they were excluded from at Montclair High School. They could serve as officers in YWCA clubs. Famous black activists and artists—Mary McLeod Bethune, poet Langston Hughes, and pianist Roland Hayes, among

House

The Untold Story

By 1965, Crane's home was slated for demolition. In response, local preservationists rallied, and moved the building to a new location in an astonishing six weeks. They founded the Montclair History Center, restored the house according to prevailing historic preservation trends, and re-created its early history (1796-1840) through decorative arts and stories of the family and early Montclair. They even interpreted one room as a colonial study room—despite the fact the house was built two decades after the United States ceased to be a colony! The story those early



❁

On the Opening Day, Elberta Stone, who was featured in the documentary, welcomed visitors to the Club Room and shared her own experiences of the YWCA.

❁

Harry D. Mayo, III

others—all spoke or performed at Montclair’s YWCA. The YWCA offered sewing classes, dance classes, and homemaking classes and it even held a prom for black students. (The public school allowed students of different races to study together, but not to socialize.)

The YWCA also served as an incubator where women of different races learned to work together. A white Board of Directors managed the finances and a black Board of Trustees was responsible for programming. Over the course of the four-plus decades in the house, the two boards learned to work together, trust each other, and ultimately merged to be a single board.

When the building was moved in 1965, the YWCA erected a new building on the site and continued to offer programs until 2002, when it finally closed its doors. As their foremothers had stipulated in one of the founding doc-

uments, the assets formed the Montclair Fund for Women, which today provides scholarships and funds programs for women of color.

When preservationists restored the Crane House in the 1960s, they did not tell the story of the YWCA and its members. Perhaps they omitted it because they did not consider it old enough to be history, or perhaps it was because histories primarily featured only white males. What is clear is that black women did not have a voice and the omission of the YWCA story was a source of heartache among the African American women who fondly remembered their time at the YWCA. The hurt persisted for decades and was very much alive when we undertook this project.

In 2011, the Montclair History Center’s Board of Directors committed to telling the story of the YWCA in a meaningful and permanent way. We embarked on an overall initiative to capture the history of the YWCA and the African American experience in the first half of the twentieth century. Our objectives were to explore and communicate the experience of African American girls and women in the first half of the twentieth century in a progressive northern city; recognize and celebrate the role of women—both quietly and through more overt activism—in fighting racism in the first half of the 1900s; and create a dialogue around the racial experience in this period.

The overall initiative would consist of three deliverables: a documentary based on the oral histories of the YWCA women; public programming related to civil rights, racism, integration, women’s rights, and empowerment; and a Crane House reinterpretation and new public tour that encompassed the Crane family years, the YWCA years, and the early preservationists’ efforts to move and restore the house. Over the course of the project, we expanded the deliverables to include school programs related to the YWCA period.

Former members of the YWCA cut the ribbon and enter the newly reinterpreted Crane House and Historic YWCA on October 5, 2014.



Harry D. Mayo, III

Research

Recognizing that a project of this magnitude was not possible within existing staff capacity, the Montclair History Center engaged Claudia Ocello of Museum Partners Consulting, LLC, to act as researcher and project director for the “YWCA initiative,” as we had named it.

She went through records from the Montclair YWCA that had been boxed up and stored in the public library’s archives when the YWCA closed in 2002. She pored through old newspapers and books, visited Smith College where the national YWCA archives are housed, and reached out to predominantly African American churches in town for their institutional archives.

We also looked at other historic sites telling diverse stories in different ways—for example, Cliveden, near Philadelphia, the Tenement Museum in New York City, and the Aiken-Rhett House in Charleston, South Carolina.

The greatest challenge, however, was finding women who had belonged to the YWCA in the first half of the twentieth century who were willing to speak with us, particularly on camera for the oral history documentary. Their hesitation stemmed from decades of distrust that began fifty years ago when the newly formed Montclair History Center had

“whitewashed” the history of the house. In the intervening years, small attempts had been made to set up programs or exhibits about the period, but they were temporary and fell short of expectations. Simply put, the black community didn’t trust the Montclair History Center.

In all, we were able to interview eight women on camera; one other woman provided us with an oral history but did not want to be recorded. The interviews became the cornerstone of our research, guiding all of our programs and reinterpretation, and they were the foundation for the documentary.

We convened a panel of scholars to review our research and solicited advice on themes, further areas and avenues for research, and programming.

Community Input

We wanted to engage the community early in the project development, to incorporate their ideas into the vision of the project, and to begin to rebuild trust. We enlisted the help of Dr. Clement Price, a local African American scholar and university professor, to act as the moderator for a charrette to which we invited community leaders and representatives from churches, schools, and African American sororities and social groups. Approximately thirty-five people attended the meeting, held at the public library because it was neutral territory. At that meeting, we presented our ideas and welcomed input on all aspects of the project, including how to overcome the negative feelings in the African American community towards the Montclair History Center. They advocated persistence, acknowledging that time and a continued commitment to telling the story in a sensitive, meaningful, and compelling way might ultimately help us heal the wounds. Persistence and quality have both proven to be key.

The Documentary: A Place to Become

We engaged Allison Shillingford, an oral historian and documentarian, to interview the women and produce the fifty-minute documentary, which premiered at the Montclair Film Festival in May 2014. It features the oral history recollections of eight women who participated in the YWCA when it was located in the Crane House. Titled *A Place to Become: Montclair through the Eyes of the Glenridge Avenue YWCA 1920-1965*, the documentary has been shown many other times and is available for purchase at our museum shop and online. Audio sound bytes from the oral histories have been incorporated into the public tours of the house, sparking dialogue and discussion with the audience in tours where there previously was none.

Public Programming

The second deliverable is ongoing public programming about issues relevant to the YWCA period—racism, women’s rights, empowerment, and civil rights. In 2014, the Montclair History Center was one of 425 organizations nationwide that held four programs developed by the National Council for Humanities. The series, *Created Equal:*

❀
New Jersey State
Senator Nia Gill, a
former member of
the YWCA, welcomes
people to the re-
opening of the Crane
House and Historic
YWCA.



Kevin Cooney

America’s Civil Right’s Struggle was held at the Montclair Public Library, with free admission. A humanities scholar hosted each program, providing an intro to a film segment and leading a Q&A.

The next three years, we sought outside funding, retitled the series *The Price of Liberty*, and followed the same format that had been successful in the *Created Equal* programs. The programs have met our objective of creating a dialogue about racial experiences in the twentieth century. It also provided us with another forum to showcase the documentary.

Reinterpretation of the Crane House

We unveiled the reinterpreted Crane House and Historic YWCA on October 5, 2014, with a ceremony and ribbon cutting attended by representatives from local and state government, funders, and women who attended the YWCA. To unify the stories of the Crane family, their domestic help, the YWCA women, and the early preservationists who saved the house, we chose a theme of “it takes a thousand voices to tell a single story.” This theme provides us with an opportunity to explore other voices in the future, thereby opening a window not just for the YWCA women, but for potential expanded interpretation.

We have developed a *Many Voices* docent-led tour. Visitors begin independently at the timeline in the center hall, which also serves as a waiting room for tours to begin. As docents lead visitors through the house, they use visual prompts through artifacts and laminated copies of primary sources (census records, journals) to encourage discussion and bring the voices to life.

The center hall now features a timeline that explores the periods evident in the house from 1796 when it was built to 1965 when it was moved. It includes interpretive text, artifacts from the era, first-person quotes, and a timeline of what occurred in Montclair, the state, and the nation. As visitors walk through the four rooms on the first floor, they progress through the periods of significance in the house. In all of the rooms, primary and secondary documents are available to deepen the visitor experience.

The two rooms dedicated to the Crane family occupation (1796-1840 and 1841-1902) now tell a more inclusive history of the people who lived in the house during that period,



Kevin Cooney

❖

The YWCA Club Room includes magazines and other ephemera from the 1940s and 1950s that guests, like Margaret Reese and Davida Harewood, browse through.

❖

including the enslaved people who worked there, the women of the family, and domestic servants. Two rooms are dedicated to the YWCA years. One is interpreted as a boarders' dining room (1920-1937), where docents lead discussions about the Great Migration, boarding houses, and the founding of the YWCA. The other is interpreted as a clubroom (1940-1957), where docents facilitate conversation on integration, segregation, and race both in the past and today using audio tracks from the documentary. Conversation can be lively, and participants often draw parallels with racial tensions today.

The second floor has not changed, and through its "colonial" bedrooms tells the story of the mid-twentieth-century historic preservation efforts. The working hearth kitchen continues to be a space for hearth cooking demonstrations; however, discussions about the enslaved people who might have worked there are more common.

School Programming

To help us develop our school programs, we convened a panel of history teachers who reviewed lesson plans and provided input on the best ways to present the material. We developed three high school level, in-class lesson plans. Onsite, we continue to offer tours for preschool and elementary school children that focus on early American life. In addition, we have piloted a high-school program that features a hands-on activity using a redlining map of the county, a tour of the house, and an exploration of primary documents related to segregation, the Civil Rights Movement, and the YWCA period. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, with one teacher noting on the evaluation, "What a learning experience!" The students—jaded seniors about to graduate—were animated and engaged.

Results

Statistically, the reinterpretation has been a success. Attendance has grown steadily, increasing approximately 30 percent in the first year after the reinterpretation. People who visit the house often spend five or ten minutes in the 1940s club room after hearing the first-person audio clips

from the documentary. Conversation revolves around segregation in the twentieth century, awareness of it (which varies greatly depending on the visitor's race and ethnicity), and where we are today in terms of racial equality and integration. The dialogue often includes their personal experiences and current events.

We have had increased community interest, demonstrated by an increase in the number of requests from community groups for lectures and discussions. Additionally:

- In August 2015, the New Jersey Amistad Commission held a workshop for about seventy-five teachers at our site, a first for the Montclair History Center.
- Our media coverage is also improving, including an article on the YWCA initiative that appeared in the *New York Times* in June 2015.
- In a survey fielded six months after the reinterpretation, most people responded that the Montclair History Center was "educational," "relevant," and "interesting."
- A woman noted on her evaluation of a *Created Equal* program, "It was the most relevant program I've seen come out of a historical society."

Despite the overwhelmingly positive feedback we have received, there have been some people who complained, "We've ruined the Crane House" and "History isn't something that happened during my lifetime."

The most profound response is the healing that has taken place in the community. Although this is much harder to document, it is evident through improved relationships with predominantly African American groups as well as conversations we have with visitors. An African American visitor told us she had visited the museum when it had first been restored (forty-plus years ago) and was disappointed. Although hesitant to come again, she wanted to see what we had done. After the tour, she said she was so pleased she planned to bring her mother back so that she, too, could see the changes. She felt her story had been honored at last. Additionally, as word continues to spread, we have seen an increasing number of visitors who had family members who were part of the YWCA.

The healing was not something that could happen overnight. As predicted at the community charrette at the outset of the project, it took time and continued dedication to institute high-quality, permanent changes. The multifaceted YWCA initiative demonstrates and celebrates the important role the YWCA played in the history of Montclair and the hearts of its members. ●



Jane Mitchell Eliasof is Executive Director of the Montclair History Center, assuming that role in 2010 after several years working as a volunteer docent and assisting with communications and grant development. Jane holds a Bachelor of Arts from Drew University and a Certificate in Historic Preservation, also from Drew University. She can be reached at jane@montclairhistorical.org.

¹ Betty Adams, *A Place to Become: Montclair through the Eyes of the Glenridge Avenue YWCA Women 1920-1965*. Documentary (Montclair, NJ: Montclair History Center, 2014).