

One of the Oldest Houses In Montclair

CONTRIBUTED BY MIKE FARRELLY,
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MOST PEOPLE who pass this house on Valley Rd. instantly recognize it as an old house. It is constructed from dressed red sandstone, doesn't face the road and doesn't conform to the normal setback. In fact, the original portion was built around 1786 by Daniel and Jane (Powelson) Sigler. Some records say that David Sigler was the builder, but many more indicate that the builder's name was Daniel. Daniel was born in 1756. Jane was born in 1761. They would have been married in the mid-to-late 1780s. 1786 would have been about the right time for them to build a house. The house they built was the smaller two room section at the east end of the lot. The larger section (closest to Valley Rd.) was built around 1817 to accommodate their growing family. A stone with the date of 1817 was found on the property. It is believed that it was intended to have been the cornerstone of the addition. Like almost everyone else in the vicinity, the Siglers were farmers. The original lot would have been part of a 70-acre farm. It extended east to the other side of Grove St. and south to what is now Bruce Rd.

On Jane Sigler's death in 1832 the house passed to her oldest son, Joseph, and his wife, Mary (Garrabrant). Joseph's brother, Isaac Sigler, got the southern half of the farm (the part that extended to Bruce Rd.). Joseph and Mary got the remaining acres and the house. When Joseph passed in 1860 his son, Clement, inherited the house. Clement was judged "incompetent" by the County court so his sister, Mary Jane Sigler, became administrator of the house and farm. Mary Jane (Sigler) married Isaac Kierstead. They built a house at the other end of the farm, close to Grove St. That house is gone now but their children, Albert and Girard Kierstead, were builders and converted their barn into the current 400 Grove St.

In 1886 Dr. Joshua G. Wilbur, who had been a surgeon with the Massachusetts 18 th Regiment during the Civil War, his wife, Martha (Plummer) Wilbur, their daughter Mary G. "Gordon" (Wilbur) DeForest and her husband, Col. Ezra Deforest started spending summers at our featured house. The Wilburs (and the DeForests) lived in Brooklyn during the winter and traveled here in the summer by carriage with their cow, "Carrie", tethered to the carriage. In 1891 Dr. Wilbur bought the house and the western part of the farm from the Kiersteads. He rented part of the house to Patrick and Delia (Coffey) Burke. The Burkes became the caretakers for the Wilburs. The Wilburs built a house for themselves just south of the featured house, along what is now Gordonhurst Ave. Ezra and Mary occupied the featured house.

When the Wilburs passed away Ezra and Mary moved from the featured house into her parent's house and Mary started making it her own. Mary called her parent's house "Gordonhurst". A *hurst* is a small hill, so "Gordonhurst" would be a small hill belonging to someone named Gordon. No one knows why Mary used her middle name to name the house she inherited. The house



(Gordonhurst) no longer exists. It was torn down in 1957 and replaced by several single-family homes. The DeForest children continued to live in the featured house.

Col. Ezra DeForest was long associated with the 23 rd Regiment of the NY National Guard. He was an agent for the Penn Mutual Life Insurance Company which had offices on Broadway in Manhattan. Mary was one of the founding members of the Upper Montclair Woman's Club. She served for 25 years as its first treasurer. She was also the treasurer of the NJ State Federation of Women's Clubs. Their daughters, Dorothea and Helen, lived in the featured house after Ezra and Mary moved into Gordonhurst next door.

Some histories indicate that the famous radio pioneer, Lee Deforest, lived in this house. He does not seem to have been closely related to Ezra and Mary Deforest. There is no evidence that he ever lived in the house.

Helen DeForest was passionate about music and the theater. She was a prominent supporter of Unity Concerts since their inception in 1920. She was a member of the Opera Club, the Dramatic Club, the Glee Club and the Music Club. She passed away in 1965. Her sister, Dorothea, lived in the featured house until she got married. She married Charles E. Cole, who founded the Montclair Beach Club on Grove St. near the Clifton border in 1931. Dorothea (Deforest) Cole continued to own the house. However, she and Charles lived on Lorraine Ave and in Florida. The Deforest/Coles rented the featured house to George and Viola Jordan in 1952. George was a financial consultant. He started his career as a personal secretary to Thomas Cochran, a senior partner at the J.P. Morgan Co. George finished his career with the Frazier Jelke Brokerage (New York offices). George and Viola are remembered for a substantial contribution they made to the Red Cross of Montclair which enabled the Red Cross to establish a communications center for the blind (braille typewriters and a braille copying machine)

The Cole family continued to own our featured house until 2021. However, not many family members actually lived there. Roger Q. and Madeline (Halpin) Cole were the last (Cole family) owners and they did live there (and in Florida) for several years. Roger was the grandson of Charles E. and Dorothea Cole. He was the great grandson of Mary and Ezra Deforest (great-great grandson of the Wilburs). Until recently, Roger was the third generation of his family to run the beach club founded by his grandfather. ■

If you'd like to see more images of Montclair homes, they are featured in the book, *Stately Homes of Montclair*, which can be found at Montclair Booksellers, several local libraries and the Stately Homes of Montclair Facebook page.