

# Researching Your Home's History

CONTRIBUTED BY DEBRA DAVID, RA AIA IN COLLABORATION WITH MONTCLAIR HISTORY CENTER, THE MONTCLAIR PUBLIC LIBRARY AND THE MONTCLAIR HISTORIC COMMISSION

**W**HETHER YOU GREW UP in Montclair or are a recent transplant, undoubtedly you have discovered that Montclair is a town rich in history. Have you ever wondered how old your house is or who lived there? Where do you start to begin research on its rich history?

## Montclair Develops into a Railroad Suburb

Montclair transitioned from a rural farming community and destination location to a suburban community by the introduction of two major railways: The New York and Greenwood Lake Railroad and The Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad. These railways created easy access to New York and other surrounding cities. Prior to the 1830's, most urban dwellers walked to and from their homes, shops, and workplaces, so they were tied to living in American cities. In the beginning, the two railroads linked the urban areas to allow wealthy city dwellers to leave the cities for a weekend in the country. However, over the years there became a more established permanent community and urbanites decided that they not only wanted to vacation in Montclair, but that they could build homes and establish roots in a beautiful setting. The railroads' links allowed people to branch out, not forced to being tied to be near their place of business.

Starting in the latter half of the 19th century, families started to construct their new primary residences along the face of the First Mountain as well as the three business districts: Uptown, Watchung Plaza and Bloomfield Avenue. This new transportation source was now readily available, along with the six railroad stations, with easy walking distance to the train stations located throughout the town.

By the early 1880's, Montclair had become a true suburb. People were willing to make large sacrifices just to own a detached single-family home.

Who were these people and is there a story behind the construction of your house? Is your house plan original and when was it built? Maybe you live in a house that has been in the family for many years. Where do you start researching?

There are many resources that are available locally to help you research your property and learn more about your neighborhood. Note: Every building in town has a story - whether built prior to 1880 or 1973. All resources listed below can be used to research your property.



This is the Clark House - the main location of the Montclair History Center. Dr. James Henry Clark, Jr. (1853-1945) and his wife Carrie Schenck (1859-1901) built the two and a half story Queen Anne style house at 110 Orange Road in 1894.

## THE MONTCLAIR PUBLIC LIBRARY

[www.montclairlibrary.org/services/local-history/building-research/](http://www.montclairlibrary.org/services/local-history/building-research/)  
Main Library: 50 South Fullerton Avenue, Montclair, NJ 07042

## JUNIOR LEAGUE SURVEY

Officially called Montclair, 1694-1982: An Inventory of Historic, Cultural and Architectural Resources (Preservation Montclair, A Project of the Junior League Montclair/Newark Inc., April 1982). They are located in the Local History Room at the Main Library. Use the index in Volume I to locate the street and number of the building. If there is no listing for a building, then the Junior League Books do not have information on that building. The listings usually include information such as:

Historic Name	Number of Stories	Siting, Boundary
Common Name	Foundation	Description
Location	Exterior Wall Fabric	Significance
Construction Date	Fenestration (Windows)	Original Use
Architect	Roof/chimneys	Present Use
Builder	Photograph	Physical Condition
Style	Map	References
Form/plan Type		

## CITY DIRECTORIES

The city directories are presently on microfilm in the Main Library, but will be digitized in partnership with Montclair History Center made possible by funding through the New Jersey Historical Commission. Most of these directories have been digitized and made available via Ancestry.com within their U.S. City Directories 1822-1995 database. Prior to widespread telephone use, these were a great way to find people by name, street address or even occupation.

*Please note: Ancestry.com is available for in-library use only, through either the public internet computers or the library's WIFI.*

**HISTORIC MAPS** The Main Library has several paper maps that show property ownership and buildings, including 1871 and 1901 maps, 1906 Essex County Atlas, and 1933 Atlas of Montclair and surrounding towns.

**MISCELLANEOUS NEW JERSEY MAPS** (online only)  
Dig in and explore! <http://mapmaker.rutgers.edu/MAPS.html>

**SANBORN FIRE INSURANCE MAPS** (online only)  
The Sanborn Map Company is the oldest mapping company in the United States. Starting in 1866, the company created detailed building maps of cities and towns across the country, primarily for use by insurance companies. These high-quality maps show ownership and building location and material. Maps of Montclair, NJ were issued in 1885, 1907 and 1934. These can be viewed online from the Princeton University Website: [library.princeton.edu/libraries/firestone/rbnc/aids/sanborn/essex/montclair.html](http://library.princeton.edu/libraries/firestone/rbnc/aids/sanborn/essex/montclair.html)

## TAX RECORDS

Tax maps (1900-1967), and tax and field books (1878-2010) are located in the first aisle of nonfiction on the second floor. To find a building in the tax records, first select the tax map for the year you want. Some of the tax map books have a map of all of Montclair in the front of the book. If the map book has a map in the front, you can determine which map page has the property you want. If the map book does not have this map, then you will need to look page by page to locate your building. Turn to that page and then locate the building in which you are interested. Record the map, block, and lot numbers. Select the appropriate tax duplicate book and find the entry for the property you recorded from the tax map.

Depending upon year the entry will have information:

Name of Owner	Houses	Soldiers Exempt
Street Number	Out Buildings	Total Valuation
Location and Description	Value Land	Poll
Map Number	Value Buildings	Total Tax
Block	Value Out Buildings	First Payment
Lot Number	Value Real Estate	Second Payment
Area	Value Personal	
	Household Exempt	

In addition, it is helpful to know the property's block and lot number during the earlier time period. There is a guide in the Local History Collection that you can use to convert the current block and lot number into the historic block and lot number.

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**■ FIND YOUR BLOCK AND LOT NUMBER**

If you do not know the current block and lot number, visit "New Jersey Association of County Tax Boards" website: [www.njactb.org/](http://www.njactb.org/), go to dropdown menu, find Essex County, Montclair. Then fill in the address in Location field, then hit Submit Search. Your tax information along with lot and block number is listed on this website.

**■ BIOGRAPHY AND SUBJECT VERTICAL FILES**

If you find the name of a homeowner or architect, or want to browse through newspaper clippings of architecture, houses, maps, and more, request to view any files the library might hold.

**■ MONTCLAIR HISTORIC IMAGE DATABASE**

(online only) Images of people, places or things around Montclair. Searchable database using subject, person's name or address. <http://www.digifind-it.com/Montclair/home.php> Need additional help at the Montclair Public library? Schedule an appointment with Chelsea Dodd, 973-744-0500.

**■ THE MONTCLAIR HISTORY CENTER**

<https://www.montclairhistory.org/> Library/Archives located in the Clark House at 108 Orange Road, Montclair, NJ 07042

**■ VISITING THE HISTORY CENTER LIBRARY**

Schedule an appointment to use the research library during their office hours, Tuesday through Friday 8:30 AM - 4:30 PM. They ask that a \$5 donation be made to the Montclair History Center to support their ongoing work of preserving Montclair history. Members may use the research library for free.

**■ ALBERT P. TERHUNE ARCHIVES AND LIBRARY**

• Collection of tax and county maps ranging from 1899-2008



112 and 114 Park Street houses were built around 1897.

- Old and new Montclair history books
- Photographs of Montclair homes and families searchable by address and subject
- Architect Dudley Van Antwerp photograph collection
- City directories (precursor to telephone books) dating from 1897-1969
- School yearbooks from early to late 20th century Montclair
- New Jersey Archives collection
- Oral history collections
- Crane family genealogy
- Montclair Postcard collection
- Scrapbooks and files on 20th century Montclair
- African-American history

and scrapbook collections

- Vertical Files on Montclair people, businesses, organizations, churches and more.

The Montclair History Center also offers online finding aids that will guide those interested in their library's holdings from home! Finding aids list available archival materials, books, maps, and newspapers. Parts of the Montclair History Center's photographs, postcards, and map collections have been digitized. For more information on included digital collections, continue to check the Montclair History Center's website as they make more content available for online use.

If you are unable to visit the Montclair History Center archives and library, staff will be happy to perform the research for you! Research requests include detective work in their archives, utilizing online resources ([ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) and [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org)), recommendations of other organizations to contact, a summary of findings, and any relevant paper or digital copies of materials found. Visit the website to download a research request form and for additional information on this service at [www.montclairhistory.org](http://www.montclairhistory.org). Schedule an appointment with Angelica Diggs 973-744-1796 [mail@montclairhistorical.org](mailto:mail@montclairhistorical.org).

**■ MONTCLAIR HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION Historic Preservation, Planning Department Township of Montclair**

Municipal Building, 205 Claremont Avenue, Second Floor Montclair, NJ 07042

**■ INTERACTIVE MAP OF MONTCLAIR TOWNSHIP'S HISTORIC INVENTORY** (map courtesy of the Department of Planning & Community Development).

This map can be accessed from the Montclair Township's website. This web mapping application displays historic resources located within Montclair as identified in the Historic Preservation Element of the Township Master Plan, as adopted in May 1993. In addition, it shows properties that have been designated local landmarks and local landmark districts. There are links to zoning information and links to listings found in the Junior League Books (online as part of the Montclair Public Library Resource) are also discoverable.

These links can be found at: <http://www.montclairnjusa.org> In the left-hand column, go to "Boards and Commissions", then



48 Walnut Crescent, the Lawrence Earle House, was built in approximately 1850.

to "Montclair Historic Commission". On that page, there is a link: "View an Interactive Map of Montclair's Historic Inventory", which will take you to the inventory map. Explore turning the informative layers off and on. Enter the property address in "Find your address" - but make certain that you include "Montclair" in the box.

Not all properties were included in the Junior League Survey, but perhaps a neighboring property is part of the resource.

Need additional information on this resource? Schedule an appointment with the Historic Preservation Office, Graham Petto, 973-509-4955. [gpetto@montclairnjusa.org](mailto:gpetto@montclairnjusa.org).

Once that you discover who lived in your house when it was built, you might want to sign up for access to Ancestry.com or Newspapers.com (both of which require a subscrip-

tion). Often you can find out more about individuals and families who lived in your residence through census records, obituaries or social articles published in local and regional papers. At the time of this printing, "The Montclair Times" has not been digitized, but you might find interesting information in "The New York Times" or the neighboring newspapers that have already been included in the database.

Want to learn more about how to research your House? Sign up for a free workshop that will assist you researching the history of your Montclair home and property using all of the local resources listed above. Workshops are scheduled approximately every other month. For more information on the next scheduled workshop and to reserve a seat (required), call 973-744-0500 ext. 2235.

Register through the Montclair Public Library at [montclairlibrary.org](http://montclairlibrary.org).

Presented by the Montclair Historic Preservation Commission, Montclair History Center (formerly known as the Montclair Historical Society), and Montclair Public Library. All sessions will be held at the Main Library, 50 South Fullerton Avenue, Montclair, NJ.

Space is limited. Registration is required. It is a fascinating journey - enjoy!

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