

A Swiss Chalet Hidden Behind The Trees

CONTRIBUTED BY MIKE FARRELLY, MONTCLAIR TOWN HISTORIAN

A JULY 2, 1881 ARTICLE IN *The Montclair Times* said that Auguste J. and Evangeline “Eva” (Halsted) Varno were building a “Swiss Chalet” at the corner of Park St. and Bellevue Ave. The house is still there, hidden behind bushes and trees. The 1982 Junior League Preservation Survey calls it “Eastlake” and “Stick” style architecture.

Auguste was born in 1844 in France; Eva was born in Illinois. Auguste came to the United States in 1853 and lived in New York. He commuted to New York after he moved to Montclair. He was employed in different positions for several companies, all in New York. He ended up as a manager with the Henry E. Gourd Co. at 35 South William St. They imported wines from the Bordeaux Region in France. They were agents for Benedictine, a French herbal liqueur, and Vichy Water, a bottled water from the springs at Vichy, France, long thought to be a cure for upset stomachs.

Auguste was a major force behind Montclair’s volunteer fire dept. It became professional in 1914. He was a founding member



Photo courtesy Mike Farrelly

of Montclair’s Hook and Ladder Co. #1 based on Bloomfield Ave. in 1882. In 1888 a company was organized closer to his home. He became a member of Hose Co. #4 which had its headquarters on Cliffside Ave, which later became a part of North Mountain Ave. (much closer to his home). Auguste was foreman of Company #4 for several years. Later, when he was “exempt” and no longer went out to fight fires, he became the president of the Montclair Firemen’s Relief Association. The Relief Association was organized to assist financially troubled former firemen. Auguste collapsed on a train heading into New York and passed away in 1909. Somewhat ironically, Eva collapsed on a trolley and passed away in Great Barrington, MA a year later. Their daughter, Evelyn, had married Otis A. Edwards and continued to live in the house for a few more years. The Edwards did not stay married long and each moved away separately.

In 1916 Charles Patterson Montgomery and his wife, Alice D. (Maddox) became the owners of our featured house. Charles and Alice grew up in Virginia and married in 1896. Around 1911 they moved to Haddon Pl. in Montclair. Charles became chief of the Customs Bureau of the US. Treasury Dept. His main job was to make sure that importers didn’t undervalue goods. Import duties were one of the main sources of income for the US government before income tax became the major source (around 1915). It should be said that he often clashed with sugar importers. In 1911 Charles left the Treasury Department to represent the American Sugar Refining Co. (one of the world’s largest sugar importers) in customs related affairs. In the early 1920s Charles and Alice moved to another house on Park St. Their daughter, Virginia, graduated from War-Belmont College in Nashville and served in the Red Cross in England during WWII.

Around 1924 William L. Lyman and his first wife Edith (George) bought the featured house. Edith passed away in 1935. William married Mabel (Adams) in 1938; they continued to live in the featured house. In 1905 William’s father, John T. Lyman, started a wooden sash factory on Claremont Ave. near Pine St.; where the CVS is now and where (for older Montclair residents) the ACME Supermarket used to be. They manufactured wooden window frames, doors, and door frames. William succeeded his father as president of the sash company. During WWII, when William was president, the company made a variety of war materials and received a coveted “E” award for “excellence” from the Army and the Navy. William Lyman Jr. served in the Merchant Marine aboard the USS Timothy Pickering during WWII. He went

missing off the coast of Sicily during the Allied invasion in 1943. By the year 2000 the US Coast Guard had discovered his remains and was putting ads in newspapers across the country looking for surviving relatives. By 2000 William Sr. and Mabel had moved to Boca Raton, FL and had passed away.

By 1949 William and Mabel had already moved from our featured house. The house stood vacant for a couple of years. Benjamin P. and Elizabeth Davidson Sr. lived next door on Park St. with their sons, Benjamin Jr. and James. In 1951, after graduating from college, Benjamin P. and Mary E. (Drummond) Davidson JR. who met at the University of Virginia, moved into the featured house. Benjamin Jr. started to study engineering at UV, but his education was interrupted by WWII. He became a maintenance officer in the US Army Air Corps. (precursor to the Air Force). He finished his degree in 1946. Mary got a nursing degree from UV. Benjamin worked as a chemical engineer at Oakite and Merck.

Benjamin Jr. seems to disappear from local records around 1962. His 2013 obituary says he remarried and moved to Greenville, SC. Mary passed away in 1969. The kids moved in with “Uncle Jim” next door (Benjamin Jr.’s brother). James A. T. Davidson and his wife, Joanne, were still living next door in the home that had belonged to his parents. James was Mary’s executor.

About 1970/71 Gerald and Mignonne (Cripps) Gottlieb moved in. Gerald had a degree in Hospital Administration from Columbia and a master’s in education from NYU. He and Mignonne lived in our featured house when he was moving from an administrative post at the Strang Clinic in NY to a post at Englewood Hospital. The Gottliebs did not seem to live in our featured house long. ■

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, and several local libraries.

THE ARTS

Vanguard Theater Brings Broadway on Bloomfield Ave.

BY VALENTINA DI DONATO



JANEECE FREEMAN CLARK (left) is the Founding Artistic Director of the Vanguard Theater

moved to Montclair during the height of the pandemic. With a strong ethos of revising classic and contemporary musical theater stories in reimagined ways, this theater has found a perfect home in Montclair.

Freeman Clark has worked in the arts her entire life, and after many experiences as an actor in regional theaters across the country - she longed to create a space unlike anything she had experienced - where a diverse group of artists, creatives, and community members alike could share in something meaningful together - so Vanguard Theater was born.

“I’ve been in the arts my entire life. I worked for years as an actor but at a certain point became disillusioned with the culture of casting. After years of being placed in stereotypical “Black” boxes, I recognized that if I wanted to actually see change in the theater industry - I needed to do something about it. I like to say that Vanguard is being the change we wish to see in the theater world!”

The Vanguard Theater provides Broadway-caliber musical theater productions, “often featuring Broadway talent at a fraction of the cost! People call us Broadway on Bloomfield Ave! We also have a robust education program that provides high-level training and mentorship for both aspiring performing artists as well as theater artists interested in being on the other side of the table, directors, writers, producers, designers.”

Freeman Clark co-founded Vanguard Theater in 2015, but it officially moved to Montclair on March 1, 2020. “Yes, impeccable timing..Vanguard was founded with the goal of helping to push the boundaries of musical theater further into the 21st century. I wanted to create a safe space where actors, creative teams and audience members alike reflected the make-up of the diverse communities we live in,” says Freeman Clark.



Vanguard Theater’s 2022 Cast of Rent

“At Vanguard, we revisit classic and contemporary musical theater stories in reimagined ways that allow audiences to see new perspectives. Our focus on color and gender-conscious casting adds additional layers to narratives - allowing us to see stories through fresh lenses. We also present new works highlighting writers from underrepresented communities.”

The mission of the Vanguard Theater is challenging social and cultural narratives through professional theater dedicated to DREAM, explains Freeman Clark, which stands for “Diversity, Reciprocity, Education, Activism and Mentorship. Our philosophy stems from our mission. We believe we are all different, and that difference is something that should be celebrated and embraced. It’s my belief that without diversity of race, gender, class, experience and perspective - theater fails to exist. Art should reflect real life and should help us see perspectives outside of our own.” ■

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