



Early photos of teen groups at the YWCA, courtesy of the Montclair Public Library Local History Collection

The Rest of the YWCA Story

By Jane M. Eliasof

Montclair residents are familiar with the Crane House on Orange Road. If you went to Montclair Public Schools, you most likely visited in third grade. Many of our third-grade visitors today are the children of children who visited when they were in school.

You may remember that Israel Crane, a descendant of the early English settler Jasper Crane, built his home in 1796. He was a prominent businessman, starting up the first general store, opening the Newark-Pompton Turnpikes (roughly today's Bloomfield Avenue and Route 23), owning rock quarries, textile mills, cider mills, and earning the nickname "King Crane." His house stayed in the family until 1920.

By 1920, the Crane family was no longer living there. After being rented for a number of years, the house went on the market. Eight years earlier, Alice Hooe Foster, the first female African-American graduate of 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, or 29 percent of Montclair's female African-American population. The organization had clearly outgrown Foster's living room.

Working with socially-conscious white women from the community, they purchased the old Crane House. It was one of about 50 segregated YWCAs in America.

The neighborhood around the Crane House had changed

in the years since Israel Crane had built the house. A noisy, dirty railroad had come to Montclair, with a station almost directly across the street from the Crane House. African-American migrants from the south and Italian immigrants had moved into the neighborhood. With its close proximity to the railroad and location in a neighborhood that was increasingly filled with immigrant and African-American families who had moved north in the Great Migration, the house was a perfect location for a YWCA that was both a boardinghouse and a place for classes and social events.

The women hung a sign reading, "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 45 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 which 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.

At the YWCA, women and girls had opportunities they were excluded from elsewhere in town. Girls could take classes, such as French and choir, they were excluded from at Montclair High School. They could serve as officers in YWCA clubs. Famous black activists and



The Crane House, circa 1937, from the Historic American Building Survey.

artists—Mary McLeod Bethune, poet Langston Hughes, pianist Roland Hayes—spoke or performed at the YWCA, providing role models. The YWCA offered sewing, dance and homemaking classes. A prom for African-American students was held at the YWCA because although the public school allowed students of different races to study together, it did not allow them 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 45 years in the house, the two boards learned to work together, trust each other, and ultimately merged to be a single board.

After the Crane House was moved, the YWCA erected a new building on the site and continued offering programs until 2002, when it finally closed its doors. As their foremothers had stipulated in one of the founding documents, the assets were used to form the Montclair Fund for Women, which provides scholarships and funds programs for women of color.

When early 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 it was not "history" or perhaps because "history" back then primarily featured white males.

Today, if you visit the renamed Crane House and Historic YWCA, you'll hear a complete story of the house's history. Recognizing that "it takes a thousand voices to tell a single story," you'll hear about Israel, his wife Fanny, their children, and the people who worked for them, including at least two enslaved people.

You'll hear about Israel's son James, his wife Phebe, their children, and the Irish immigrants who worked for them. You'll hear the stories of the YWCA era, from 1920 to 1965, from the perspective of the female boarders and those who came for the day-to-day programs, camps and classes. Finally, you'll hear about the early preservationists, who sought to preserve history and the choices they made.

Each weekend this fall, we'll have tours or programs at the Crane House and Historic YWCA. Check www.montclairhistorical.org for more information.

Jane M. Eliasof is Executive Director of the Montclair Historical Society.

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