

# Yellow Brick Palladian Palace at Park Street and Wildwood Avenue

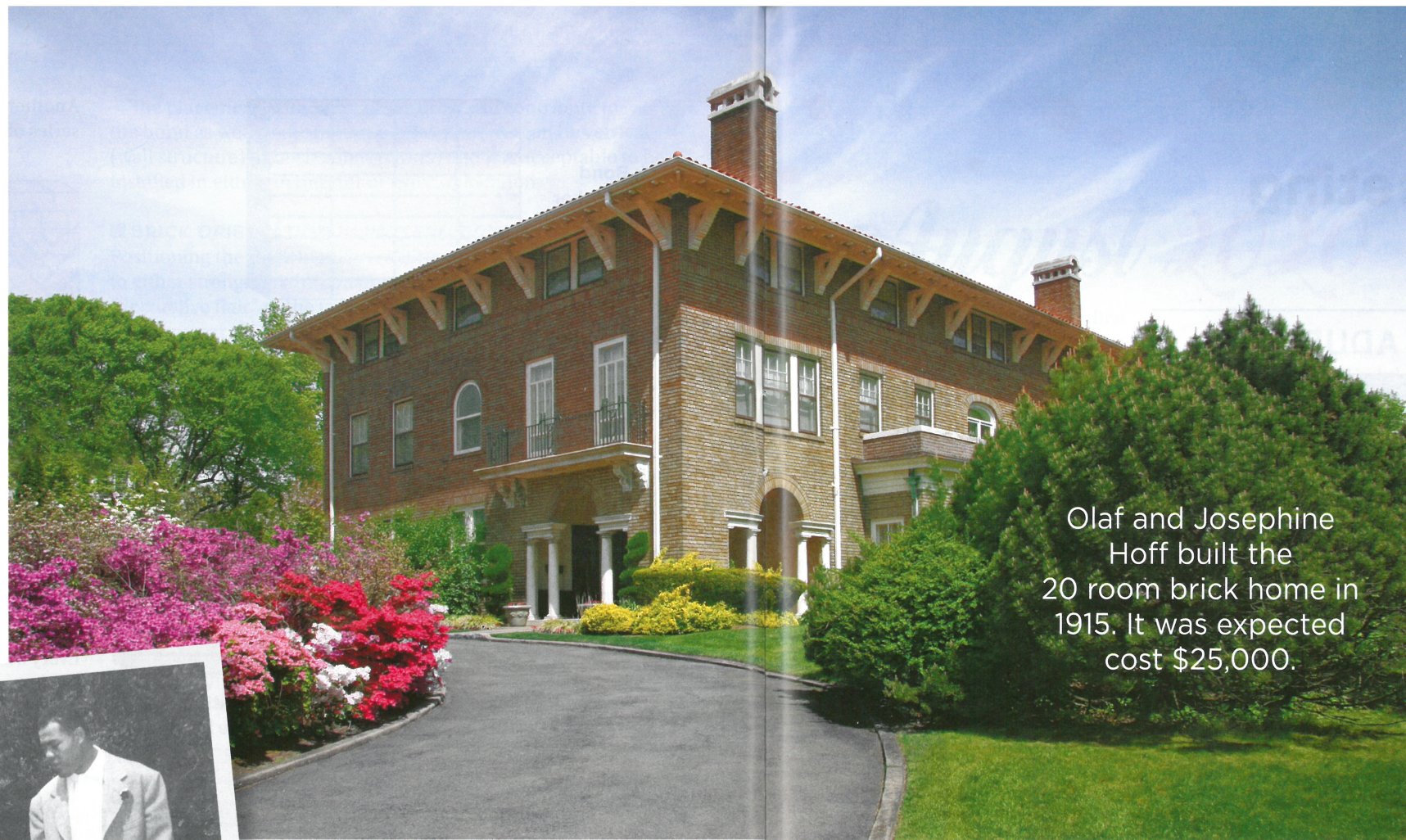
CONTRIBUTED BY MIKE FARRELLY, MONTCLAIR TOWN HISTORIAN, PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW WANDER

**T**HE LOT BELONGED to Walter R. Benton at the turn of the 20th century. It was purchased by Olaf Hoff, who applied for a permit to build a 20 room brick home in 1915. The home was expected to cost \$25,000. Construction was complete by 1916. According to an article written by Jean Noyes in the Montclair Times on April 26, 1979 the architect was Samuel Booth Snook. There is a possibility that the first owners, Olaf and Josephine Hoff, knew the architect before he designed their home. Olaf Hoff was a civil engineer who designed tunnels and bridges. He worked for the New York Central Railroad for many years and oversaw the construction of over 400 bridges. The Snook firm designed the Grand Central Depot, the predecessor of Grand Central Station, for the NY Central Railroad in 1871. Snook lived on Bellevue Ave. The Hoff family lived nearby on Bellevue Ave. before this house was built.



Olaf Hoff was in demand as a civil engineer. He was known to take on difficult problems. He tried to retire a few times, but was in such demand that he worked right up until his death in 1924. The Cunard Line begged him to come back and supervise the building of their piers in New York Harbor. He retired again a few years later, but the NY Central Railroad called him back to solve problems they faced when building the Castleton Bridge near Albany. Josephine was active in clubs and civic affairs. She organized many affairs for the Cosmopolitan Club and was a lifelong member of the Woman's Club of Upper Montclair. Olaf and Josephine's daughter, Olga, married the well-known lawyer, Charles Fernald.

The Fernalds didn't live too far away. They lived on Lorraine Ave. Josephine moved in with Olga and Charles when Olaf passed away. In 1925 H. Russ Van Vleck and his wife, Mary, moved into this house. H. Russ was the son of Charles and Carolina Van Vleck who lived in the Georgian mansion of North Mountain Ave.,



Olaf and Josephine Hoff built the 20 room brick home in 1915. It was expected cost \$25,000.

Young Bobby Van Wagner of 178 Valley Rd. with Joe Louis; probably taken at his training facility in Pompton Lakes

now known as The George, an upscale hotel. He was a businessman and inventor. Early in his career he made parts for the Dusenber racing team in his machine shop in Newark. He invented an automatic starter for airplane motors. He developed a device to prevent automobile horns from being too loud. He became the president of a fuel oil delivery company in Newark and invented an automatic delivery system to fill his trucks. He started a manufacturing

company which sold quite a few of the filling systems to other oil companies. He became chairman of the fuel oil company when his son, Peter took over as president.

Mary was involved in the Junior League and the American Red Cross. She was also interested in church and missionary work. The Van Vlecks planned to retire to the Rockcliffe Apartments on Crestmont Rd. Mary, who was listed as the owner of the house had tried to sell it to The Home for the Chronic Sick Corporation of Irvington so it could be used as a nursing home. There was a deed restriction on the property which said that it could only be used for a single family residence. The Board of Adjustment denied the sale. Mary then tried to get a variance to sell the house to the Bloomfield Baptist Church so they could use it as a dormitory for bible study students. The Board denied that application as well.

There was an amendment to the code passed in 1950 that would allow a single family house to be used as medical offices.

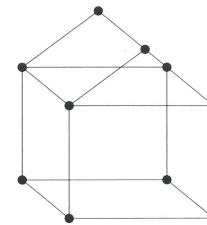
A group of doctors bought the house in 1952 and the Van Vlecks moved to the Rockcliffe. Various doctors used the house for their practices over the next 20 years. They rented out space. Others also used the house as offices; even as homes. Katherine Heyer and her children lived at the house in the late 1950s.

On August 16, 1951 the Van Vlecks confirmed to the Montclair Times that a "former world's boxing champion" had offered them as much as \$85,000 for the house. The article did not name the champion. At that time, 1951, there had only been three African American world boxing champions: Jack Johnson, who passed away in 1946, Ezzard Charles, who only lost the title in June and, of course, the great Joe Louis. Louis lived in Detroit, but trained in Pompton Lakes for several of his fights. He often visited Montclair in the evening after his workouts. He told John W. Cresbaugh Jr., the Times sports writer that "Montclair is one of the finest towns I have ever visited, and I love it" in a 1935 interview. Although the August article does not name the champion, my money is on Joe Louis; however, Joe did not buy the house.

Around 1974 the Trinity Church of the Nazarine was allowed to buy the house. They used it as their sanctuary, their offices and a home for their pastor, Rev. Jerry Davis and his wife, Janice. They appreciated the open spaces. Rev. Davis went on record as saying they loved the woodwork and leaded glass windows and went out of their way to preserve them. By the 1986 the Trinity Church had moved to Verona and the house reverted to single family ownership. ■

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.

Montclair Historic Preservation Award



SUSTAINABLE SANCTUARY HOMES

Montclair, NJ  
973-699-4347

## New Home Builder & Renovator

CONTACT US TO DISCUSS YOUR RESIDENTIAL CONSTRUCTION NEEDS

Visit Our Website to See Samples of Our Work

[www.sustainable-sanctuary-homes.com](http://www.sustainable-sanctuary-homes.com)

## Shoulder Pain? Knee Pain?

We have the world's most advanced healing technology.

Cold laser and PRP repair and restore without surgery.



Cold Laser • PRP • Physical Therapy • Chiropractic Sports Medicine • Medical Massage • Joint Injections • Trigger Point Injections • Custom Orthotics

**NJ SPINE & JOINT**  
PATHWAY TO HEALTH

Call for a free consultation. Phone consultations available.

973-433-0889 • [njspinejoint.com](http://njspinejoint.com)

870 Pompton Ave • Suite A-1 • Cedar Grove