

# Decoding a Cipher in Stone

CONTRIBUTED BY LISANNE RENNER

**R**AMBLERS ON THE Lenape Trail between Mountainside Park and Mills Reservation in Montclair often encounter a semi-circular stone bench set amid a thicket of overgrown rhododendron and yew bushes. It presents itself as a mystery in masonry: What is such a thing doing here, practically in the woods? And it taunts with a barely legible carved inscription, a cipher in stone.

People puzzling over this chipped and weatherworn structure have taken to calling it “the Al Capone bench” because some letters in the inscription kinda-sorta seem to spell that name. But someone much more respected than a gangster was being honored with this bench when it was dedicated in November 1956: C. Alexander Capron, or Lex to his friends.

The inscription along the upper rim of the bench, so hard to read now, was clear over six decades ago: “This place has been built by the friends of Charles Alexander Capron to commemorate the great talents, the unflagging energy and the generous spirit he brought to a life of service, A.D. 1956.”

Capron (pronounced KAY-prin and rhymes with “apron”) moved to Montclair in 1911, and his community service included a decade as chairman of the Montclair Planning Board, as well as time as chairman of the New Jersey Symphony and vestryman and former warden of St. James Episcopal Church. There’s much more. His obituary listed numerous organizations he helped lead and nurture: the Montclair Art Association, the Montclair Community Chest, the Laymen’s Movement for a Christian World, the Montclair Housing Authority, the Mountainside Association, the Downtown Association. And on and on. Hence “unflagging energy” and “generous spirit.”

The bench is in a southern crook of Mountainside Park, up the slope from the Presby Memorial Iris Gardens, just past where Warfield Street dead ends. From the vantage point of the bench, the Manhattan skyline spreads out in panoramic splendor. Capron worked as a partner in a law firm in Lower Manhattan, specializing in trusts and estates. And it was there, on Feb. 3, 1955, that he died suddenly when returning to his office from lunch. He was 68.

After the shock and the sadness, the Capron Memorial Committee – 92 Montclair heavy-hitters with their own letterhead – formed to build a memorial to their beloved friend in Mountainside Park, a spot Capron enjoyed that was also walking distance from his home at 41 Bradford Avenue. Committee members envisioned something both useful and beautiful, with a “far outlook” to convey Capron’s “rare personality and noble life.”



**The Capron Bench is up the hill from the Presby Memorial Iris Gardens. A Montclair History Center tour to the bench, in 2015 (left).**

The group chose to build a tribute in the form of a bench, designed by J. Lloyd Berrall, an architect, former town planner and friend of Capron’s. Berrall also drafted the inscription.

A circular terrace fronted the structure, and rhododendron, azaleas, laurel, dogwood, and holly were planted around it. Donations of around \$8,000 covered the cost, and

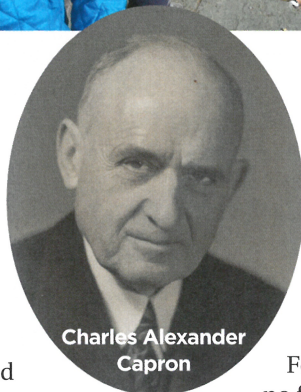
construction took about five months.

More than 100 friends and colleagues gathered for the dedication on Nov. 11, 1956. The Rev. Dr. Orrin F. Judd of St. James Episcopal Church gave the dedication prayer and benediction. The mayor accepted the bench and associated beautifications on behalf of the town. But what began as an intense outpouring of love and respect some six decades ago has evaporated to the point of amnesia. Few people these days have heard of Capron. He has

no family left in town. The bench is in rough shape, the shrubs overgrown. Graffiti mars the cracked stones.

Teenagers hang out there beyond censorious parental watch. Litter piles up. Yet passersby still stop, sit and wonder about the bench’s backstory. Jack Snyder and Vreeland Tobin, who both grew up in Montclair and are in their early 20s, are designing a T-shirt to commemorate the bench and, as they put it, “to capture the generations of memories that have filled the space ever since it was constructed.”

Historians have suggested installing an interpretive sign explaining its origins. Perhaps the township, scouts or a community organization, in the “generous spirit” of Capron himself, could take on improvements or restore this heartfelt park memorial. That would be not just an act of volunteer service honoring one man who embodied it, but a tribute to the very essence of the civic spirit -- the mortar that bonds a community. ■



**Charles Alexander Capron**

**The Montclair History Center invited Lisanne Renner, historian for Friends of Anderson Park, to contribute this article. More about Anderson Park is at [FriendsOfAndersonPark.com](http://FriendsOfAndersonPark.com) and on the conservancy’s Facebook page.**