



Classic House On The Hill

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

THIS MONTH'S featured house on South Mountain Ave. is one of the better-known homes in Montclair. It has probably been written about more often than any other house in town. Both the architect and original owners (at least the husband) were known nationally. It was designed in 1902 by mid-western architect, George Washington Maher, a major proponent of the Prairie Style, for Frederick T. (Taylor) and Emma (Cahoon) Gates. The interior of the house was designed by local architect, Joseph Van Vleck, using only the finest materials supplied by Tiffany and Co., including "blazing" wood panels and intricately carved acorn and oak leaf details. The house was complete by 1904.

G.W. Maher started his career as a draftsman at the Chicago office of the Joseph Silsbee firm, where he worked with another budding architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. In 1888 he started his own firm in Kenilworth, Il. (a Chicago suburb), where he continued to develop the Prairie Style which mixed traditional features with simple, but high quality "Craftsman Style" features. Prairie Style houses often give the appearance of being flat and

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low, even if they aren't. They are usually marked by large overhanging eaves and symmetrically placed windows. A partial list of the houses Maher designed that are considered landmarks would include: The Farson House (aka "Pleasant Home") in Oak Park, IL., The Colvin House in Chicago, The Arthur B Leach House in South Orange (built 1900 - demolished) and The Martin Baldwin House in Glen Ridge, NJ.

Rev. Frederick T. Gates spent a great deal of time in the Mid-west and would have been familiar with Maher's work. Fred and Emma came east in 1902 and bought the old Henry Nason Estate on South Mountain. They also bought the house next door, which had been part of the original estate. They lived in the house next door while they knocked the main house down and had this house erected.

Church in Racine, Wisconsin, where he met and married Emma Cahoon in 1886. A parishioner asked him to raise money for a Baptist academy in Owatonna, Minnesota. He was so successful raising money that he was invited to join the board of the newly formed American Baptist Education Society.

The Society was formed with large donations from oil magnate, John D. Rockefeller, a Baptist, who was trying to re-organize a new school from portions of the (old) University of Chicago, which was established by Baptist educators in 1856. The school became what we now call the University of Chicago. Rockefeller tapped Gates to oversee many of the projects that went into creating the University. He had an eye for natural talent and asked Gates to join him in the offices of the Standard Oil Company in New York as the manager for all his charitable concerns. Gates did indeed have a natural talent for raising money and managing projects. He became one of Rockefeller's most important financial advisers. His office was right next door to Rockefeller's office.

When Rockefeller decided to consolidate his charitable works into one foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, he asked Gates to be on the board of trustees. There were only five people of the board. John D. Rockefeller Sr., John D. Jr and three people from Montclair: Gates, Starr Murphy, a lawyer, and Charles Heydt, who had been Rockefeller's stenographer. Rockefeller was an expert in recognizing talent in the people around him. Gates suggested and managed projects. Murphy made sure that the contracts were correctly drawn up and Heydt was a genius at real estate transactions.

Frederick T. Gates passed away in 1929. Emma passed in 1934. The house remained in the hands of the family until 1941 when they offered the house to the town for use as a library. The town passed on the idea, claiming that it would be too expensive. The house then went through several private owners, none of whom lived in it. In 1953 it was purchased by Charles Manuel "Sweet Daddy" Grace for use as a home and as a church. Grace was the founder of the United House of Prayer Church. Sweet Daddy lived in it for a while. He was a flamboyant personality who dressed and acted accordingly. When he got into his Rolls Royce and was driven to the shops in Montclair Center, calls went out with friends telling friends to "get down to the Center quickly" to come see Sweet Daddy walk around like a duke. The house was used as a church, also as a factory to make cosmetics which would be sold to support the church. Sweet Daddy moved to California after a few years, but members of the church continued to live in the house until 1980.

In 1980 Audrey Debiak, who lived on Lloyd Rd., bought the property. She wanted to tear the house down and sub-divide the lot. The Planning Board rejected the idea. She and her business partner, Sy Zubatch retained the MacLeod Corp. of Clifton to renovate the house with the intention of dividing the house into condominiums. After a great deal of discussion the Planning Board rejected that idea too. She sold the house to Charles and Swantje (Daaschur) Sartvigchet. Charles was a filmmaker. Swantje was an architect and interior designer. They started to restore the house. In 1992 they sold the house to Fred and Jenny Randall, who undertook major renovations, not the least of which was removing all the paint that the United House of Prayer applied to the woodwork. The Randalls brought the woodwork back to its stunning original patina. ■

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.

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