

Two For The Price Of One

CONTRIBUTED BY
MIKE FARRELLY, MONTCLAIR
TOWN HISTORIAN

THIS MONTH'S FEATURED house is actually two houses joined by a breezeway (also called a dog trot) on the second floor. The houses were not always connected. That didn't happen until the 1980s. They are both on Valley Rd. near Tierney's Tavern.

The first house (the south house) was built around 1895 by George Pryor and his first wife, Maria (Harris). George later lived there with his second wife, Della. George, Maria and Della were all born in Virginia. They came north during the early stages of the Great Migration, when hundreds of thousands of former slaves and their dependents left the "Jim Crow" south. George's occupation is listed as "scavenger". A scavenger was someone who collected garbage intending to go through it (looking for things he could use or sell) and dumping the rest. He later advertised himself as a "truckman". He moved things for other people in his horse-drawn wagon. Della was a dressmaker. Della moved to Maple Pl. when George passed away.

Around 1932 Floyd and Marion (Durden) Branch moved in. Floyd was a janitor who worked for the town. He cleaned up at the combined town hall/police dept./fire dept. at the corner of Bloomfield Ave. and Valley Rd. It is primarily police headquarters now. He had a side business repairing and installing windows. The Branches stayed in the house until 1958 when they moved to Port Jervis. The next owners were Landis E. and Lillie M. (Walthall) Franklin. Landis served in the (Army) Quartermaster Corps during WWII. He was employed in various factory jobs over the years. Lillie opened a beauty shop, The Versatile Beauty Shop. She operated it out of her home originally. She later opened branches on Forest St. and Willowdale Ave. Landis and Lillie split up. In 1962 she married James H. Connor who was a supervisor at a correctional youth camp in New York State when they got married. She continued to live in the featured house and she continued to run the beauty parlors. She opened a branch at the (former) Overbrook County Hospital in Cedar Grove. But she isn't famous for the beauty parlors. She is far better known as "Mother Connor" who devoted her life to programs meant to help disadvantaged kids.

Lillie M. (Walthall) Connor was born in Pittsylvania County, VA to George Washington Walthall and Pency (Gregory) Brown Walthall. According to the (Richmond) Statesville Record and Landmark, Jan 10, 1999, and the Montclair Times, Jul 18, 2013, "Partner Wash", Lillie's father, was born free but his parents had been slaves. Lillie's father was a sharecropper. He and Pency are reported to have had 22 children. Lillie came to Montclair when she was 14. She immediately became a stalwart at the Union Baptist Church and involved herself in most of their charities. She



is famous for founding the Kennedy Human Relations Center on Talbot St. in 1960 which ran after school programs for disadvantaged kids. It became part of the Kennedy Human Relations Project for Youth. Then, finally in 1978, it became the Hollow Day Care Center. The part of town the daycare center was in is affectionately known as "Frog Hollow". Lillie wrote an autobiography entitled *A Lillie Blooms, Mud Between My Toes* published in 2000.

She passed away in 2013. Lillie owned the southern house until James V. Tosone bought it in 1984. The daycare Center closed in 2012. There have been several concepts for its reuse. To my knowledge none of the plans have been finalized. Which brings us to the second house. The northern house was built around 1930. There had been a house on the northern lot as early as the mid-1890s. Peter Klee's meat market was on the first floor of that house. Dr. Winfred and Carrie (Moses) Baldwin bought that house around 1927 and knocked it down around 1930. They put up another house with retail space on the first floor and apartments on the second (the current building).

The Baldwins never lived in the new building but continued to own it until the late 1950s. The Baldwin's daughter, Nellie, married William Boag, a pharmacist. The retail space was home to Boag's Pharmacy or Valley Pharmacy, as it was sometimes called, for years. Various tenants rented apartments on the second floor. Valley Pharmacy moved to another location on Valley Rd. in Upper Montclair around 1955.

Around 1959 James V. Tosone and his wife, Rose (Santucci), bought the northern house. James was an electrical contractor who had a shop and store in Little Falls. He moved his shop to the building in Montclair. The retail space on the first floor was home to Tosone Electric until just a few years ago. James bought the southern house around 1984. He put the second-floor breezeway between the two houses. The 1935 Montclair Building Code mandated that all apartments have at least 2 forms of egress. If the store owner in the northern building did not want to let people into the (store) space, and locked it up, the people who lived in the apartments on the second floor would have only had 1 form of egress (the backstairs). James Tosone built the second-floor breezeway between the two buildings to provide the apartment dwellers the required second form of egress (through the southern house). A more common way of dealing with the problem would be for the retail space to give up some footage and have a separate staircase, with a separate entrance, installed. That just wasn't the way the builder did it in this case. ■