

Discovering the Story of My House

By Cynthia B. Martin



Curious to know more about the history of my home at 196 Kent Place Boulevard and its owners, several years ago I started exploring the archives at the Summit Historical Society and was fascinated by the wealth of information I found there. Maps, real estate records and city directories helped me determine who lived in the house when; obituaries and local newspapers provided clues about the personalities and activities of previous owners. I then followed the trail to other relevant sources of information about these owners and their families. It was fun and rewarding to do this research and I encourage others to give it a try!

I traced ownership of the property to Nicholas D. C. Moller, a wealthy New York merchant, who came to Summit with his family in 1854 after purchasing the "Kent place" (previously owned by Chancellor James Kent and today the site of Kent Place School). Subsequently Moller bought up virtually all the land from the "Kent place" west to the Passaic River including the piece my house was built on. In about 1868 he cut Kent Place Boulevard through his properties anticipating, according to one story, his investment would pay off when a proposed railroad line passed through this part of town. When Moller died in 1874 his will directed

that his extensive property holdings be divided among his eight surviving children: Emelia (Mrs. Jaime Riera), Clara (Mrs. Samuel Barr), Julia (Mrs. Edward Thebaud), Frederick, Clemencia (Mrs. Gustavius Thebaud), Isabella (Mrs. John Morrison), Alphonso, and Teresa. 196 Kent Place Boulevard was among the parcels Frederick inherited.

The first evidence of a house on the property is an 1879 map of Summit showing a house identified as "Melrose Cottage" on the site with "FW Moller" as its owner. I believe Frederick built the house in about 1875 shortly after inheriting the parcel. The 1880 U. S. Census lists "Fred Moller", his wife Harriet, adopted daughter Alexandria Prokopiada, and two servants residing there. Moller did not own the property long, perhaps due to financial difficulties. According to the 1880 census he was not employed and records show he obtained a mortgage in 1882. The July 27, 1912 *Summit Record* notice of his death reveals - "'Fred' as Mr. Moller was known to young and old was interested in those days principally in extracting all the fun possible out of life..." After selling Melrose Cottage in 1882 to William H. and Fanny N. DeForest the Mollers moved to Madison, New Jersey.

On March 27, 1884, William J. Curtis purchased the property. I found his story, that of a young man from Brunswick, Maine, who became a prominent New York lawyer, fascinating and became literally obsessed with tracking down information about him!

Reading Curtis' memoirs in the library at Bowdoin College, his alma mater, I learned that after studying law he wanted to practice in a large city and got a job as a clerk in New York. He joined the prestigious New York firm of Sullivan & Cromwell in 1880. The following year he visited his friend Augustus F. Libby in Summit

...and was so much charmed and delighted with it as a place of residence that I made up my mind that after my marriage I would live there. In anticipation of this event

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I arranged with Mr. George W. Allen, who was then a member of the firm of Fred Beck & Co., and a resident of Summit, as well as a large land owner, to build me a small house on Springfield Avenue in front of the Blackburn House.

After his marriage to Angeline Sturtevant Riley in Augusta, Maine on June 13, 1881, Curtis made good on his promise -

After our wedding we came at once to New York and went to the Blackburn House in Summit to live. Late in the summer the house which Mr. Allen built for us was completed... We continued to live in this house for several years... I later purchased a house at the end of the Boulevard, owned at that time by William H. DeForest, but formerly occupied by N. D. C. Moller. Here we lived for a number of years until I built the house on the property which I bought on Summit Avenue and which was afterwards known as "Fairfax."

When they moved into their home on the "Boulevard" the Curtis' had one infant daughter, Katharine. Their other children were born while they lived there - Helen in 1884, Lena in 1885, Mildred in 1889 and William Jr. in 1891. Fittingly, they nicknamed the house "The Nest." Daughter Katharine recalled, "It was a rather small nest then but it was added to three times before we moved to Fairfax on Summit Avenue."

Named a partner at Sullivan & Cromwell in 1887, Curtis was instrumental in getting legislation passed in New Jersey in the 1890s that allowed the formation of holding companies and ultimately permitted the creation of many of the great corporations of the 20th century. He was involved in the organization of the National Tube Co., the incorporation of the U.S. Steel Co. and the resolution of legal matters relating to the construction of the Panama Canal. His success as a lawyer led to significant personal wealth and social standing - at the time of his death in 1927 the *New York Times* reported his estate was worth more than \$1,000,000.

In Summit the Curtis' supported many local charities and were frequently mentioned in the social columns of local newspapers as well as the *New York Times*. William Curtis actively promoted the construction of Summit's public water and sewer systems, helped organize the town's first bank and drafted the Board of Health's first sanitary code.

My favorite story involves the founding of Kent Place School. It was exciting to learn that the school literally got its start in my house! In his account of the history of the school Frank L. Crawford related how -

In 1893, Mr. William J. Curtis, then a resident of Summit invited me with others to a dinner at his house, to consider plans for establishing a more satisfactory private school for girls at Summit. All of those invited had girl children.

Out of this meeting, in the course of another year, grew the organization of the Kent Place School.

In his memoirs, Curtis had this to say on the subject - The necessity for a private school for girls was very apparent. A number of feeble efforts had been made by individual teachers to build up such a school, but they were not sufficiently well qualified to inspire confidence nor to encourage much hope of ultimate success. Hamilton W. Mabie, Dr. Risk, D. Somers Howe, and a few others, including myself, determined to meet the situation, and organized the Kent Place School, which took its name from the place occupied, which was the residence originally owned by Chancellor Kent, and subsequently owned and occupied for many years by William H. DeForest. The house was large and roomy, the grounds attractive, and the site a very desirable one for the purpose. This school is now a very prosperous and successful institution, and has fulfilled its purpose in every respect.

When Kent Place School for Girls opened in 1894 the Curtis girls were twelve, ten, nine and five years old and most likely among the first students to be enrolled. A visit to the school's archives confirmed that Katharine and Helen Curtis were Kent Place graduates.

In 1897 Curtis moved his family into Fairfax, an impressive mansion (no longer standing) he built on a large tract of land at the corner of Summit Avenue and Ridge Road. He retained ownership of 196 Kent Place Boulevard and often rented it out. In 1906 he sold both houses and the family moved to New York City.

On May 24, 1906 Jessie B. Knevals became the new owner of 196. An announcement of the sale in the *Summit Herald* noted "Hicks Brothers have also sold the former residence of William J. Curtis, on the Boulevard, to Mrs. C. P. Knevals of New York, a sister of the new owner of the Page place - Mr. and Mrs. Knevals expect to make Summit their permanent home, and will remove here early next month." Only four years after they moved in, Charles died. The notice in the April 9, 1910, *Summit Herald* states simply, "Charles Philip Knevals died on Tuesday at his home, 196 Boulevard. Mr. Knevals had been a resident of Summit for the past four years and was engaged in the real estate business in New York." On September 30, 1910, his widow sold the property to Julia B. Russell.

Julia and her husband Robert evidently moved to Summit to be closer to her sister. The 1910 U. S. Census lists Julia B. and Robert M. Russell residing with William B. Demming and his wife Louisa (Julia's sister) on Norwood Avenue in Summit. Less than two years after moving into 196, Robert

Russell died. As recounted in the 3/9/1912 *Summit Herald* - Mr. and Mrs. Russell were entertaining guests at dinner on the evening of the accident, and he fell when returning from the cellar with some wood for the replenishing of the log fire. When more than half way up the stairs he fell backward striking his head on the cellar floor. He was unconscious when picked up by his man, who was in the cellar at the time, and never regained consciousness. He was taken immediately to Overlook Hospital... Mr. and Mrs. Russell came north about two years ago, and on coming to Summit purchased the old Curtis house, at 196 Boulevard.

After her husband's death Julia continued to own the house until 1934 sometimes renting it out while she boarded at the Beechwood Hotel. She died in 1936 at her niece's home in Ashville, North Carolina. Her obituary in the July 23, 1936 *Summit Herald* noted, "Mrs. Russell, who was 74 years old, greatly regretted having to leave Summit and the many friends she had made here during the years."

Robert L. and Ethel Y. Pryor purchased the house in December 1934 and probably never expected that family members would live there for almost 40 years. Pryor was an architect who achieved modest acclaim early in his career by preparing drawings for Laurelton Hall, Louis Comfort Tiffany's showplace home on Long Island. In a biography

of her father Ethel Pryor Maves wrote that Pryor lost almost everything including his Orange, New Jersey home in the crash of 1929 but managed "...to scrape enough together to buy an old home in Summit, New Jersey, once owned by Curtis, who was responsible for the purchase of the Panama Canal."

During the Depression it was hard for any architect to find work and Pryor was no exception. His daughter noted, "He would not take lesser jobs than architectural work, studying to improve himself until the jobs started coming again." Perhaps Pryor continued to struggle financially - on June 28, 1955, records show he sold two rear parcels of the property.

In 1957 the Pryors' daughter Ethel married Vallery Maves who then also became a member of the household. Ethel Maves described the house as "a happy home and great for entertaining." She and her husband continued living there after the deaths of her parents. But by 1971 when they sold the property to Gerard and Josephine Harris the house was so deteriorated that it was almost torn down to make way for a development. The property changed hands again in 1975 and 1988.

But perhaps the best part of its story is that today, thanks to all its owners, Melrose Cottage still graces the Boulevard with its charming presence and stands ready to welcome new generations of homeowners.