



The Historian

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FAMILIAR STRUCTURE – Generations of modern day Summit families came to know this building as Elkwood Playschool, but its history actually dates to 1875, when it was constructed on land that Clara Moller Barr inherited upon the death of her father, Nicholas Moller. It was called “Linda Vista.” Clara was born in South America in 1828. (From the archives of the Summit Historical Society)

Moller family planted deep roots in Summit

By Cynthia B. Martin

Accounts of Summit’s early days rarely fail to mention Nicholas D. C. Moller, who is described as a wealthy New York merchant who moved to town in the 1850s, bought up extensive acreage in west Summit and cut Kent Place Boulevard through his properties. Few other details are provided. Curious to know more about Moller (the house I live in was built by his son Frederick on land he inherited from his father), I delved into the Summit Historical Society archives, conducted extensive research online and sought the guidance of a historian at Mystic Seaport. Through these efforts I was able to uncover a lot more about Moller and his family.

Nicholas D. C. Moller was born on June 4, 1800, in Holstein. Today a part of Germany, in the early 1800s Holstein was a sovereign state and, after 1815, a member of the German Confederation. Economic conditions

within the Confederation motivated many to emigrate and seek better opportunities - most likely this is why young Moller left his native country.

It is not clear where Moller emigrated to or when, but it is certain that he lived in Venezuela for a time. His wife, Juana, was from Caracas, their daughter Emelia was born in La Guaira circa 1827 and another daughter, Clara, was born somewhere in South America in 1828. The Mollers came to the United States on the *Carolinian* from La Guaira, Venezuela, landing at Philadelphia on April 23, 1830. They eventually settled in New York City, where they lived in Manhattan from 1831-1838 and Brooklyn from 1838-1844 and welcomed five more children - Helen, Julia, Frederick, Clemencia and Isabella.

Moller was undoubtedly a player in the active trade network of La Guaira, Venezuela's principal port, and by the time he arrived in New York had established himself as a successful merchant in the highly profitable sugar and molasses trade with Puerto Rico and the West Indies. Operating initially as N. Moller & Co. at 69 Pearl St. in Manhattan from 1831-1834, in subsequent years Moller was associated with several different partnerships. From 1833-1839 he was with Moller & Oppenheimer, a firm described in Henry P. Waring's "Recollections of Old New York Business Men by One of Them" published in the June 14, 1844, Brooklyn Daily Eagle as having "... established the West India commission business, about fifty years ago, having come from Porto Rico [sic]. They were largely engaged in the importation of West India products."

While with Moller & Oppenheimer, Moller was appointed Consul for Venezuela in New York, a post he held from 1835-1839. It was by officially recognizing Moller as Consul that the United States formally acknowledged Venezuela as an independent nation on Feb. 25, 1835. As Consul he would have facilitated trade and travel between the two countries. This position confirms both Moller's prominence as a merchant and his Venezuelan ties. During this time he also served as a director of the Union Life Insurance Co. and became a naturalized U.S. citizen.

Moller next joined B. Aymar & Co., one of the largest importers of sugar and molasses from Puerto Rico and the West Indies. The firm was expanding its business and Moller provided them with valuable contacts. A contemporary, Joseph Scoville, observed, "Another partner [of B. Aymar & Co.] was N. D. C. Moller. At one time he was of the firm of Moller & Oppenheimer [sic]. They did immense Porto Rico business. The house failed, and Aymar took him as a corresponding clerk. Shortly after he was admitted a partner. He brought an immense business to the concern from his old West India correspondents. I think he was admitted about 1839. He was the Consul of Venezuela. Of course all his correspondents at Caraccas, Laguayra and Puerto Cabello were transferred to B. Aymar & Co. Mr. Moller is a very extraordinary person, and a clever merchant."

For unknown reasons Moller left Aymar & Co. around 1844 and went to Cincinnati. There is scant evidence of his presence there, but records show that while living in Ohio the Mollers had two more children, Alphonso and Teresa, and their daughter Clara was married to Samuel S. Barr. Moller evidently maintained his New York connections - his 1847 passport application noted he was about to leave New York for the West Indies and South America (and reveals that he was 5'11" with a high forehead, gray eyes, a straight and large nose, large mouth, round chin, dark hair, fair complexion and oval face).

By 1849 Moller had moved his family back to Brooklyn and joined



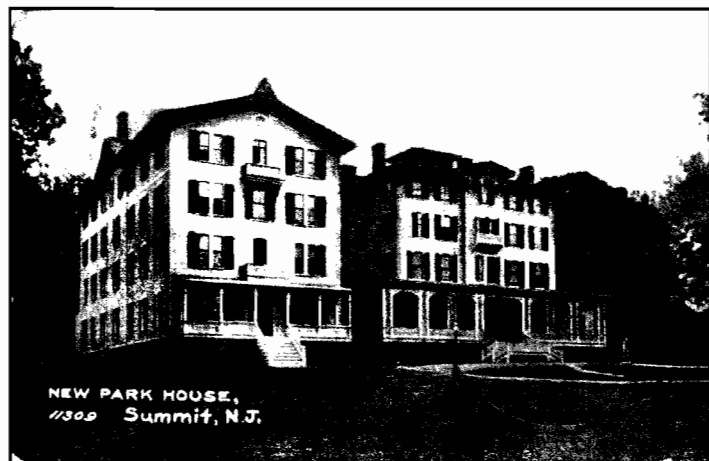
MELROSE COTTAGE – The home that stands today at 196 Kent Place Boulevard was built in about 1875 by one of Nicholas Moller's sons, Frederick, who resided there until relocating to Madison in about 1882. Nicholas Moller had moved to Summit with his family in about 1854, and built a large home where the Kent Place School campus is today. He was a merchant in the sugar and molasses trade, and at one point owned virtually all of the land from the "Kent place" west to the Passaic River. (From the archives of the Summit Historical Society)

with fellow merchant Christian H. Sand, to form Moller & Sand. In addition to importing sugar, molasses and other goods, the firm operated as agents for the Ocean Steam Navigation Co. and the Bremen & Southampton Line of packet ships carrying mail and passengers to various destinations. In about 1851 Jayme Riera, a merchant with ties to Puerto Rico and St. Thomas, became both Moller's business partner and son-in-law, and the firm became known as Moller, Sands and Riera. Riera was significantly older than his bride, Moller's oldest daughter Emelia. My guess is that his first wife died, leaving him with three young children (the 1850 Census listed James and Celina "Yeara" and three children, all born in St. Thomas, living with the Moller household) and he found it personally and professionally convenient to marry Emelia Moller. She ultimately settled in Paris with her children while her husband remained in the U.S. Moller's daughter Helen's marriage may also have served to strengthen business relations - in 1853 she married Justus Gruner, a commission merchant with Overmann & Gruner, a firm that had ties to Aymar & Co. and a business address next to Moller's on South Street in Manhattan.

Moller's business prospered during the 1850s and "Marine Intelligence" reports in The New York Times regularly noted the arrivals of ships carrying cargo and passengers for Moller & Sand; Moller, Sand & Riera; and, after Christian Sand left the firm around 1854, Moller & Riera. During the 1840s and 1850s more than half the sugar imported from Puerto Rico entered at New York and in 1855 Moller & Riera were the largest importers of this commodity.

In about 1854, Moller moved his family to Summit, following his purchase of the "Kent place" (previously owned by Chancellor James Kent and today the site of Kent Place School), and built a showplace home. Why the Mollers chose to move here remains uncertain. Perhaps they were influenced by the many publications of the period advocating healthy suburban living or drawn by the improved rail access between Summit and New York, or possibly Moller recognized an investment opportunity.

It is possible Moller became familiar with Summit through his



association with the Thebaud family of Madison. In 1856 Edward V. Thebaud married Moller's daughter Julia. Her marriage, like those of her older sisters, appears to have served to enhance business relations, and in 1859 her husband's family firm, Edward Thebaud's Sons, merged with Moller & Riera. Five years later, when Riera went into the brokerage business, the firm became Moller & Thebaud. The Thebaud family's connections were originally with France but after merging with Moller their operations expanded to include Mexico, South America and the West Indies. Further cementing these family ties, Edward's brother Gustavius J. Thebaud, a lawyer, married Julia's sister Clemencia around 1860. While Julia and her husband settled in Madison, Clemencia and her husband lived in Summit where "Gus" became a prominent member of the community helping (along with Moller) to found St. Teresa's in 1864, playing a key role in Summit's establishment as a township in 1869.

During the Civil War years there is little evidence of Moller's commercial dealings, but tax assessments from this period show he was well off, with taxable assets that included horse carriages, watches, silver plate, a piano and a billiard table. After the war, The New York Times once again carried frequent reports of ships arriving with sugar and molasses and other goods for Moller & Thebaud. The 1870 Census valued

Moller's real estate at \$80,000 and his personal estate at \$40,000, up from \$13,000 and \$10,000, respectively, in the 1860 Census.

Both Moller and Riera invested the profits from their successful ventures in rapidly growing Summit. Riera bought up property in what is now the Woodland Avenue/Beechwood Road neighborhood. In 1871 he built the Park House, briefly one of Summit's leading hotels, and began an ambitious plan to develop the land around it. This did not go well, and he ultimately lost a fortune.

For his part, Moller bought up virtually all of the land from the "Kent place" west to the Passaic River and in about 1868 cut Kent Place Boulevard through his properties. The story is that he expected to profit when the newly formed NJ West Line (NJWL) passed through this area (requiring the railroad to purchase rights of way from him) and Kent Place Boulevard became Summit's main street. In 1870 Moller did in fact convey some property to the NJWL "...for the purpose of building a Railroad thereon..." subject to several conditions. However, even though the tracks were built from Gladstone to the intersection of High Street and Kent Place Boulevard in Summit and the right-of-way acquired through to Newark, the line was never completed due to financial difficulties.

Today one can still make out the old NJWL right-of-way in backyards on Kent Place Boulevard and Bedford Road.

While the marriages of the last of the Moller children to wed do not appear to have furthered any business connections, it is interesting to note that they did create additional family ties. In 1870 Frederick Moller married Harriet Blanche Morrison and the following year Harriet's brother John E. Morrison married Frederick's sister Isabella.



***PART OF HER INHERITANCE** – Upon the death of her father Nicholas, part of Isabella Moller Morrison's inheritance was Amber Lodge, at 107 Passaic Ave. (From the archives of the Summit Historical Society)*

Described by Joseph Scoville as "a fine family," the Mollers were closely-knit. As they married and started their own families, Moller's children often chose to name their offspring after family members and in later years relied on each other in various legal and business transactions.

Nicholas D. C. Moller died on Sept. 21, 1874, in Summit. One source contends that real estate speculation led him to bankruptcy, but I found no evidence to support this claim. Although just days before his death, he and Juana sold some property to William DeForest, the rest of his extensive real estate holdings and personal assets were divided, per his will, amongst his wife and surviving children. Years later his son Frederick's obituary noted, "Mr. Moller Sr. was accounted a very wealthy man as wealth was considered in those days and the family was for years one of the most prominent identified with this section of New Jersey."

After Moller's death his widow, two youngest, unmarried children, Alfonso and Teresa, his son Frederick and daughters Isabella Morrison and Clara Barr and their families continued to live in Summit for a time. All of his children held on to the properties they inherited for several years, but by 1890 they had either passed away or left Summit.

Today three houses associated with the family still stand. 196 Kent Place Boulevard (Melrose Cottage) was built c. 1875 by Frederick on one of the plots he inherited and served as his home until 1882 when he and his family moved to Madison. 199 Kent Place was built c. 1875 on a parcel inherited by Clara Moller Barr, although it is not clear that she ever lived there. 107 Passaic Avenue (Amber Lodge) was part of Isabella Moller Morrison's inheritance, although it also not clear if she and her family resided there.