Gothic house anchors storybook street

Close-knit Montclair area once was home to famed architect

BY PHILIP READ
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

For a short time, architect Effingham R. North lived in Montclair's only stone Gothic manor, which had pillars that served as an entryway to his "Belmont Lawns."

There, shortly after 1900, he began constructing cottages along the new road, Bellaire Drive. Its entryway on busy Valley Road today turns the heads of passers-by wondering whether North's old haunt was simply a gatehouse.

"It looks like it was once a great estate, and it really wasn't. There never was a bigger house. That was the big house," said Mike Farrelly, the town's historian.

Down at the road's far end is the home of Helen Dimoff.

"I call it a Victorian bungalow," Dimoff said of her circa 1906 home, which is not without its own striking features. "It has a turret and a porch with columns."

The anchor of "Belmont Lawns," namely the medieval-looking, 1850-built house North once called home, today is the abode of Sally Ross and her family.

"It's a very quirky house," Ross said. Its walls are 2 feet thick.

"There were no showers in the house when we bought it," she said of her 2001 arrival. "There was one bathtub and sinks in all the bedrooms."

Needless to say, Ross — a designer and construction manager by trade — embarked on a rehab of the wiring, plumbing and heating.

"I converted a screened-in porch, which might have been lovely in 1850, but on Valley Road in 2005, is not too livable. I converted that into a sunroom."

Still, the storybook nature of the house turned it into a Disney Channel moment.

Not long after she moved in, it was the setting for the filming of a station identification, she said. It depicted the eye of a firefly that flew over a landscape of twinkling lights and zeroed in on the little light of her daughter's window, a la "Never Never Land."

The production crew hung a full moon as a prop, and neighbors gathered.

"My son sold lemonade out front and made $15," Ross said.

Speaking of children, there's no shortage in "Belmont Lawns."

"This is actually a place where kids go out and play." Ross said. "We always know where they are. There are about four houses that trade packs of kids back and forth."

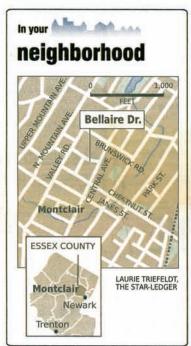One of Bellaire Drive's longtime homesteaders is Charles Kuhlman. He moved in 20 years ago.

"We had a back yard in Park Slope (Brooklyn) that was 10 feet by 10 feet, and we needed space for growing tomatoes," he said of landing at "Belmont Lawns."

The Kuhlmans raised their family in a circa 1907 home that has its own set of amenities.

PHOTOS BY MITSU YASUKAWA/THE STAR-LEDGER

This stone Gothic manor on Bellaire Drive in Montclair, at the center of the Belmont Lawns area, was the home of architect Effingham R. North shortly after 1900.

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Sally Ross, the present owner of the Gothic manor built in 1850, stands in the living room of her home. It includes the original fireplace.

"We have front porches that allow us to socialize back and forth," he said. Then, there's the view. "It backs up to Montclair Kimberley Academy, so we have this open space in back. That used to be the Montclair Athletic Club years ago."

One of the neighborhood's firmly entrenched people can be found on Belvidere Place, which has a set of entryway pillars all its own. There, Harry Murphy has lived 55 of his 59 years. The neighborhood has been close-knit, said his wife, Gail.

"Our wedding party, of the six groom's men, his brother-in-law was the only friend who was not from the neighborhood," she said.

Back up the street, Ross said it was the history of the house that drew her there from her old home on Montclair's Wilde Place, where she moved from Manhattan's Upper West Side in 1986.

Besides North, one of the other noted occupants was the fiery abolitionist and suffragette Lucy Stone Blackwell, who is credited with converting Susan B. Anthony to the cause of women's suffrage. Her perceived radicalism enflamed opponents, who tore down her posters and pelted her with prayer books.

As for North's career in architecture, his handiwork can be seen in the Valley Road firehouse in Upper Montclair Village, and in houses at 100 Upper Mountain Ave., 77 Park St. and 90 and 153 Union St. His work was characterized by sweeping roof lines and encircling verandas and, of course, turrets.

"Belmont Lawns," however, apparently wasn't terribly successful.

"It just didn't take off," said Farrelly, the historian. "North didn't own it long, and people started buying the lots separately and putting up houses.

"So as a development, it wasn't very successful."

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