

The Biggest House In Montclair?

CONTRIBUTED BY MIKE FARRELLY,
MONTCLAIR TOWNSHIP HISTORIAN

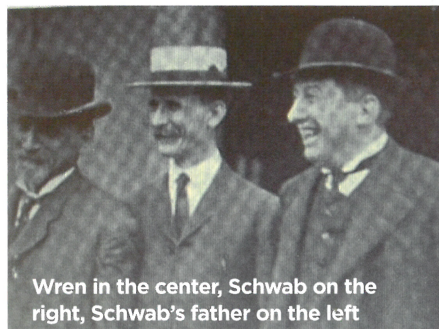
ONE OF THE BIGGEST HOUSES ever built in Montclair was built on Harrison Ave. at Llewellyn Rd. in 1904. It has long since disappeared. It may, or may not, have been the biggest house ever built in Montclair, but it dwarfed all the grand homes around it. It was built by Oliver Wren (not the famous English architect), and his wife, Florence. The driveway that ran in back of the house is now Curtis Terrace.

Oliver Wren was the private secretary to Charles Schwab, the man Andrew Carnegie chose to clean up the mess caused by the deadly Homestead Steel Plant Strike which occurred in July of 1892. Three people were killed during the strike. Seven more eventually succumbed to their wounds. Wren did not take dictation, or type letters. He was more of an aide, or an advisor. Schwab was the main negotiator when Carnegie sold his company to J.P. Morgan in 1901. Morgan merged Carnegie Steel with Federal Steel, National Steel, and a few other companies, to form U.S. Steel, the largest producer of steel in the world.

Schwab was the first president of U.S. Steel. Schwab put up an aura of mystery around himself, especially when he left U.S. Steel to create his own steel company, Bethlehem Steel, in 1904. The press was in a frenzy to get information about the formation of Bethlehem Steel, which ended up being the second largest steel producer in the world. Schwab wanted to stay away from the press. Oliver Wren became his spokesperson. However, Wren was more than a spokesperson. As the deadline approached,

Schwab scrambled to arrange financing for Bethlehem Steel. He had promised J.P. Morgan \$7,200,000 to purchase Bethlehem Steel Co. from U.S. Steel. Up to that point, Bethlehem had been a relatively small ship building company. The \$7,200,000 was to be deposited with the New York Security and Trust Co. A few days before the deadline, Wren borrowed \$2,000,000 from the NY Security and Trust Co.

Shortly thereafter, Schwab's balance went up by \$2,000,000. This smacked of financial impropriety, but the bank managers explained that Wren was a worthwhile risk. Nobody could really question how he used the money. Besides being Schwab's spokesperson, Wren was a special partner in the brokerage firm of Ball & Whicher and a director in Bethlehem Steel, the Union Iron Works of San Francisco, the Chicago Pneumatic Tool Co., the Montgomery Shoshone Mining Co. and several shipbuilding companies. He was also one of the largest shareholders of the Hotel Montclair (Built in 1906 - torn down in 1939). The Rockcliff



Wren in the center, Schwab on the right, Schwab's father on the left

Apartments occupy the site now.

In 1903 Wren hired architect, Maurice Herbert, to design an 18 bedroom, 4 bath house on Harrison Ave. It was to be a French Colonial in the style of Louis XVI. The kitchen and servant's quarters were built as an extension and did not figure into the calculation of rooms. It appears as a completed house on the 1906 map. It is visibly larger than W.I.L Adams' nearby 8 bedroom, 5 bath

home, "Irvingcroft". Irvingcroft is no mean house. It still exists at 32 Llewellyn Ave. Irvingcroft was bigger than the houses around it.

Oliver Wren's house makes it appear small. It must be noted that Herbert, the architect, designed a 75 room house for Charles Schwab on Riverside Drive in New York City, which made both Montclair houses appear small. Wren's "monster" house on Harrison Ave. featured a special garage for Wren's 40 HP Mercedes Benz, a very powerful car for the time.

In Montclair, Wren was an active supporter of the annual Horse Show. He was a member of the Montclair Club and the president of the Montclair Riding, Driving and Automobile Club. An article appeared in the New York Times on May 25, 1904. It gave everybody a good laugh and kept reappearing for several months. Wren's car was seen speeding at the breakneck speed of 30 mph. The police chased the car from Bloomfield to East Orange. The ticket was issued by the Bloomfield police. Wren was to appear before the Montclair Police Court and pay a fine of \$20 plus costs of \$6. Wren walked in with several of his neighbors, a court stenographer from the New York Times and James Dill, one of Charles Schwab's high priced lawyers. The officer who had issued the ticket forgot to sign it. The lawyer, Dill, argued that Wren was not obliged to pay. Dill cited an obscure regulation that made it appear as if the court had to pay the costs. Wren ended up paying \$18. On his way out of court, he overheard the Bloomfield police chief, who had been called in as a witness, talking about needing to go to Trenton. Wren offered the police chief the use of the Mercedes. The car sped off. Wren called the East Orange police dept. and told them to watch out for a speeding red car. They stopped the car and detained the occupants.

Oliver sold his large house to lumber magnate, Arthur Tuxbury, in 1910 and bought a 200-acre estate in Maryland. The house was torn down in 1929. There are at least 8 houses on the site now. ■