

Homer Hall...

Josiah Crane reborn



When driving around Cranford, have you seen a tall man with bushy sideburns down on his hands and knees on the sidewalk, surrounded by children? He is neither a preacher nor the Fled Piper, but a Trustee of Cranford Historical Society on a walking tour with fourth grade students from our Cranford schools. Dr. Homer Hall, by name, is in the process of recreating old Cranford from an historic nap tacked onto a giant window shade roll that can be spread on the sidewalk at

"I liked your walking tour. It was very interesting. The only thing that didn't match your outfit was your digital watch."

-a 4th grader's letter to Josiah Crane, a.k.a. Dr. Homer Hall

the strategic points along the annual spring tour. He is impersonating an early resident, Josiah Crane, whose home stood where Gray's Memorial is, and whose two mills were on either side of the river above the dam. "Josiah" tells the children where the roads ran, where the houses of his friends stood, and other facts about old-time Cranford. The children love it!

In real life, Homer is a research chemist who worked for Exxon from 1935 until 1976. Since 1977 he has been Visiting Research Professor of Information Studies at Rutgers University. Born in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, he graduated from Marietta College with a double major in Biology and Chemistry, and won his Ph.D. in Chemistry from Ohio State University.

Homer and his wife Carrell came to town in 1941 and lived first in the Bigelow house which stood where the Lutheran Church stands today. In 1949 they moved to their present commodious home on Prospect Street. He became interested in Cranford history when he discovered that his wife was related to the Cory family which built the famous house which stood on North Avenue, East. That early house had an underground escape tunnel used by soldiers in the Revolution and by runaway slaves in the underground railway of the Civil War. Homer researched the family, which is part of the family in Westfield of Miller-Cory fame, and he wrote a brochure entitled "The Cory House and Cranford's Secret Tunnel". When the paper was read to the Cranford Historical Society in 1951, he was promptly invited to become a Trustee, then the youngest ever.

In the period 1954 through 1961, Homer spearheaded building fund drives for the "new" United Methodist Church and its Sunday School. He first wrote a history of the church and, subsequently, a tabloid history to celebrate the Centennial of the Sunday School, which was printed in *The Citizen & Chronicle*.

Homer coordinated work of the Junior League and other sponsors to add a wing to the Museum as a part of the celebration of New Jersey's Centennial. He was responsible for publication of "300 Years of Crane's Ford" and for a river carnival dramatic presentation based on twelve chapters of Cranford's history for which he wrote the dialogue and also played the role of "Father Cranford". This work was notable for collaboration with the Cranford Dramatic Club and for involvement of children.

In 1971 Homer helped with another river carnival to celebrate Cranford's Centennial as an incorporated township. He grew a beard as part of a local beard-growing contest and he impersonated Josiah Crane at the Bicentennial Banquet of Union Junior College.

Homer's present activities include Presidency of the Union County Cultural and Heritage Advisory Board, which is currently surveying all of the historical assets of the towns in the County with a view toward preservation. It also sponsors county-wide art shows and contests.

Homer's latest project is the indexing for a permanent record of Belding's Map, one of the first available maps of the area, which shows the names and locations of homes of early residents. This map covers all of the area now known as Westfield and Cranford, part of the area which subsequently became Union County in 1857. The project involves seven students from the Americana Club (formally The Jerseymen) in Cranford and their counterparts in Westfield, together with their teachers. The students are using their own computers to facilitate the organization of the material. Correlation with other maps is developing. Our own Ron Spinella,

famous Cranford history teacher, together with Ralph Jones, President of the Westfield Historical Society, and Westfield teacher Al Lantis, form a cadre of advisors.

Homer is the son of a minister. Ministers being the earliest of our teachers, it is not surprising to find him directing teaching projects which span fourth graders in Cranford through high school here and in Westfield, and graduate students in New Brunswick. The vast scope and interrelating strands of history seem to have suggested to his analytical mind the need and desirability of interweaving the efforts of people from all walks of life – political, educational, social and cultural. We are proud of this Trustee's ability to carry out his ideals in his daily living.

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