

De Witt Cottage or Dumont House? Using Available Resources to Answer Historical Questions

By Vic Bary

Frank T. Lent was a noted East Coast architect at the turn of the 19th century who executed a number of commercial projects and private homes in Cranford in the 1890s, and lived here with his wife, Sarah, for a decade. Among his commercial projects which have been lost were the Opera House Block (1892 – 1912), the first Casino (1892 - 1896), and Fanny Bates' Hampton Hall. The Jahn Building (on North Avenue at the intersection with Union Avenue) is a Lent commercial project which still stands.

Lent also designed a number of Cranford residences, many of which still exist. Among them are a large house at 9 Claremont Place executed for James Rodgers - business manager for the Roosevelt Manor development begun in 1894, the John W. Banker house at 16 Madison Avenue, the Nix House at 105 Holly Street, and two nearly identical houses found at 104 Cranford Avenue and 21 Hamilton Avenue.



104 Cranford Ave



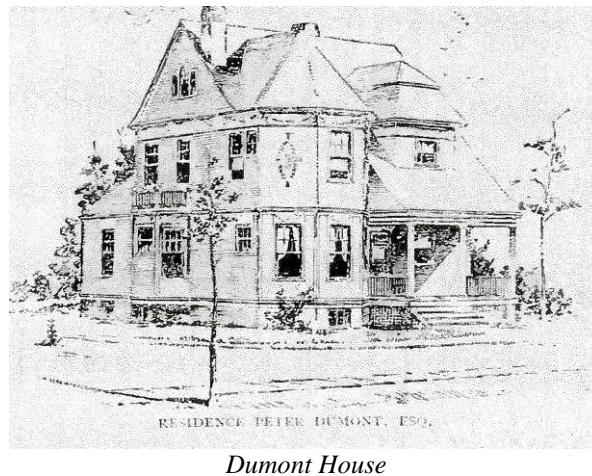
21 Hamilton Ave

It is towards these latter two nearly identical houses that we will deploy historical resources to answer a question. The question we will seek to answer arises from the way Lent chose to identify his line drawings for what appear to be the same house in two separate publications.

Lent first published Sound Sense in Suburban Architecture in 1893. On page 3, a line drawing appears (with floor plans) of what is described as the “De Witt House, Cranford, NJ.”



In Lent’s Souvenir of Cranford of Cranford New Jersey Illustrated, first edition 1894, the same image appears on page 1, now described as the “Residence of Peter Dumont, Esq.”



These line drawings and floor plans also appear on page 28 of the 1894 Roosevelt Manor promotional brochure, where they are simply described as a Frank T. Lent house which can be built with all modern improvements for \$4,000. (Frank T. Lent and H. Galloway Ten Eyck were the two Roosevelt Manor approved architects.)

The house currently at 21 Hamilton Avenue looks exactly like all three sets of line drawings, whereas the house currently at 104 Cranford Avenue looks almost the same, except for the fact that the front porch (across half the front in the line drawings) now extends across the entire front. So which is the De Witt House, and which is the Peter Dumont House? Did families with one of those names ever reside at either address?

The answers are to be found in old issues of Cranford newspapers (abstracted in the Burditt files – cranfordhistory.org/explore-cranford-history/burditt-index-main-page; and online at the Cranford Public Library Archives - www.digifind-it.com/cranford/home.php) and in Cranford City Directories (also on line on the Cranford Public Library Archives, and in hardcopy at the Cranford Historical Society).

The Cranford Chronicle is available online through the Cranford Public Library Archives starting with 1894 issues. The March 28, 1894 issue records that “Peter Dumont of New Brunswick, who some months since purchased the De Witt cottage on Cranford Avenue from architect Lent, will reside there after May 1st. The house meanwhile is being papered and painted under the supervision of Phillip Jahn.” (Suggesting, perhaps, that the house hadn’t been previously occupied.)

Cranford City Directories were published starting in 1901, and each directory from that date through 1918 shows Peter Dumont residing at 104 Cranford Avenue. There was no 1919 directory, but the 1920 directory lists L. B. Mason and Carl Mason at 104 Cranford Avenue, and lists Peter Dumont at 701 Orange Avenue. The March 6, 1919 issue of *The Cranford Chronicle* contains a brief entry that “L. B. Mason bought the Cranford Ave home of Peter Dumont.” So that would confirm that Peter Dumont lived at 104 Cranford Avenue from 1894 into 1919, and then moved.

But then what are we to make of the earlier March 28, 1894 *Cranford Chronicle* statement that “Peter Dumont of New Brunswick, who some months since purchased the *De Witt cottage*” (italics added for emphasis) “on Cranford Avenue from architect Lent”. Was there a family named De Witt already living there? If so, why would architect Lent be involved in a real estate transaction between the De Witt family and Peter Dumont?

A review of Cranford City Directories shows no family named De Witt residing at either 104 Cranford Avenue or 21 Hamilton Avenue. There are no local newspaper articles about a De Witt family at either address. Then where did the “De Witt House” name come from?

It seems most likely that “De Witt House” was a marketing name Lent used in 1893 for the line drawings of a house he had designed, but which had not yet been completed and sold. And why De Witt? Well, we discover from the following two *Cranford Chronicle* entries that De Witt was Sarah Lent’s maiden name:

1/1/1894 – “Dr. David De Witt and family of St Paul, Minn. are transient residents of Cranford this month. Dr. De Witt is a brother of Mrs. Frank T. Lent.”

7/11/1894 - “Professor Theodore De Witt of New Brunswick, and father to Mrs. Frank Lent, is in town.”

How then do we explain the full front porch on 104 Cranford Avenue? It’s possible that Frank Lent departed from his own design when the house was first constructed, but I find this somewhat unlikely. More likely, the front porch was modified after the house was first constructed. The following 3/28/1912 *Cranford Chronicle* suggests that the hand at work in this change could actually have been Peter Dumont’s:

“Peter Dumont contemplates making extensive improvements to his house on Cranford Avenue.”

Of course, the changes to the front porch of 104 Cranford Avenue might also have been made subsequent to Peter Dumont's ownership.

I recognize that you may conclude that this article reveals a great deal of attention being devoted to a very minor question. But I also hope you conclude that there are a wide range of resources readily available at your fingertips to answer Cranford Historical questions thanks to the Cranford Public Library, the Cranford Historical Society, and the wonder of the internet.