

Wondering

By Jim Alexander



Ely Hall, 40 N. Main St., Medford, NJ, today

Wondering how they found timber big enough for the large joists ten feet above me in the cellar of this magnificent 1844 home on Medford's Main Street.

Wondering that the bricks, which I had thought were just a façade, actually extended down in the cellar to the rubblestone foundation. Wondering whether that wood-planked bunker was ever used to store firewood for the fireplaces upstairs before later holding coal for the central furnace that came later.

Thinking about what went on over the decades upstairs in the doctor's office and the living quarters. Dr. H. P. Ely had built the home for his new bride, Mary Reeve. Mary had been raised in the "Locust Shade" mansion on the family farm at what came to be called Reeves Station Road in upper Medford. Following his graduation from the

University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1834 where his dissertation was on "intermittent fever," the young Quaker from Bucks County had moved to Medford to set up a very successful practice. Later he was recalled as "a beloved and public-spirited citizen," in "the community of which he was a prominent member." In noting his passing, fellow business partners had written: "Having been harmoniously associated with him for a number of years, in his death we realize the loss of a genial companion, an excellent executive officer and a valuable citizen."

The home seemed to mirror the man.

In January 1873, at age 60 and just over three years after the opening of the Mt. Holly, Lumberton and Medford Railroad of which he was President, Ely had been felled

by a stroke, and was partly paralyzed for several days, then succumbing upstairs. Recalling learning that in his last days, with frustration and difficulty, he had executed his last will and testament, witnessed by his long-time friend, community leader, and fellow railroad board member, Isaac Stokes.



Ely Hall features plaster walls, high ceilings, impressive stair

Wondering at the detail of the will, which left most of his considerable possessions to Mary; his medical instruments to his nephew Dr. Josiah R. Reeve, Mary's nephew who he had trained and who joined the practice; small stipends to family members; and \$50 to Sarah Smith, "a young woman who has lived with us for many years." The 1870 U. S. Census disclosed that in the home had been three house servants and a hostler. Some probably lived on the less-

finished third floor and used the small back stairway in the course of their duties. His estate sale of personal possessions held several months later included: "2 brown mares, suitable for work or driving, one a superior Patchen mare; 2 cows, one three-quarter bred Alderney. 2 one-horse carriages, one a good doctor's wagon; one-horse open wagon and harness, 2 sets of good single harness, good saddle, lot of other harness, one and two-horse plows, harrows, cultivators, grain fan, corn sheller, horse rake, &c. Also, 3 tons of good Timothy hay, 150 bushels of corn, lot of cider and vinegar by the gallon, pork by the pound; lot of lumber, and many other articles too numerous to mention." Not to mention his extensive land holdings.

In terms of finances and community leadership, this Quaker had done well.

How many townspeople had crowded into the front parlor above for his funeral, and later for the estate sale?



Current view, first floor parlor

How many dignitaries had crowded into the home in 1869 when the first train from Mt. Holly carried local residents and dignitaries on their first exciting ride to Medford. The multitude had been welcomed at Branch

Street by the ladies of Medford with refreshments at the original site of the Allen School, while those of greater stature were invited down the street to the mansion which even today is one of Medford's most imposing structures. Even the President of the Camden & Amboy Railroad, one of the economic and political powers of the state, had been there that day, which represented such a major advance in the development of the region.

Thinking about how H. P. and Mary had been married in the Medford Quaker meeting house, only to be disassociated from the meeting in 1864 after joining with Mary's farmer folks to embrace the Hicksite movement. Yet upon their deaths, being allowed to be buried in the Meeting graveyard – commemorated with typical simple Quaker headstones -- along with their beloved Reeve relatives. And musing over the absence of children in the household, wondering of the significance of a cryptic notation of an unnamed Ely birth and death in the 1840s.



Somewhere upstairs there, Ely had contacted a southern slave owner in an effort to allow Peter Still, brother of the famous Doctor of the Pines, James Still, to purchase the freedom of his enslaved family. And later had written to Peter to counsel him on how to handle some

financial challenges so as not to “loose (sic) the interest of thy best friends and injure the cause of freedom for the slave.” And Mary had corresponded with her cousin Rebecca who had travelled from Tennessee by flatboat and then by wagon train to California in 1849, sharing their experiences by uncertain mail for decades.

Following Ely's death, his nephew had arranged for a smaller but substantial home to be built for Mary nearby on Main Street, where it eventually overlooked the second railroad to reach town; her home there also remains. Following a fire in the original Ely home in 1883, its first roof was replaced with the current impressive mansard, wondered about that. And then, the building had been lovingly restored by a later owner, maintaining much of the original. I had reached out to the current owner in the faint hope that there might be a painting or some documents about Ely in the attic, and although this was not the case, it did lead to an invitation to tour the mansion, which brought me eventually to its cellar.

Wondering about the small room upstairs that may have been the first indoor water closet, the narrow stairs at the back that perhaps the servants had used, the magnificence of the high plaster ceilings.... My musing was interrupted “... and in this corner, you can keep wine, the temperature is perfect for it.” It was time to climb the steep stairs back up to the main floor, and to say thank you and good bye. Passing out the back door which is now the business entrance, I thought that this was likely the part of the building that reportedly dated back to the late 1700s.



Locust Shade, Mary's childhood home on the
Reeve farm

Stepping down to the magnificently landscaped back yard, I couldn't help wondering where the well had been, where the outhouse was, where Ely's doctor's coach had been kept with the horses, how much larger the parcel had been then.... As I left town heading for Lumberton, I found myself driving up Fostertown Road, thinking of the two farms that Ely had purchased across the road from the Reeve farm where Mary had grown up, and the marl pits on the property that were later so productive, and wondered how that came about.

Straining without success to hear the whistle of the long-gone trains that had once traversed the farm, wondered how many times Ely had come up this road in his good doctor's wagon. So much yet to learn....

NOTE: 40 North Main Street came to be called Ely Hall in the early 1900s. The Bonner family who owned it for a number of years performed diligent restoration, as did Van Sickle and Roller, LTD, later owners. Special thanks to Michael Woloshin, Managing Director of Woloshin Investment Management, which currently owns the building, who graciously provided a full building tour which included the visit to the cellar. Two doors north, Ely's nephew Dr. Josiah Reeve's home remains, as does Mary's widowhood home three doors farther along. All are impressive, but none more than Ely Hall.

Written in conjunction with research on the history of the Mt. Holly, Lumberton and Medford Railroad. This PDF may be retrieved at <https://jimquest.com/wp-content/uploads/Wondering.pdf>. Additional writings by the author available online at <https://jimquest.com/writ-intro/>.

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