

DOTTY'S DIMENSIONS: THE COLUMN Issue #16

Winter 2019

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Greetings! As I said in the last issue, starting this year, I'm not visiting the following cities on a regular yearly basis: New York City; Philadelphia; and Washington, DC. On the other hand, I will never say "never" on visiting them again, but it has to be for a special reason. In the meantime, I still plan to continue to visit different places in New Jersey, go to two three-day science fiction (SF) conventions (cons) a year, and take other occasional trips from time to time. For this issue, I'll be writing about six places I have been to in Union County, NJ, and about my attending the Philadelphia SF Conference or Philcon, at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Cherry Hill, NJ. If you would like more information about Union County, contact the following source: Union County Office of Cultural & Heritage Affairs, 633 Pearl St., Elizabeth, NJ 07202 (908-558-2550 or www.ucnj.org). Anyway, check out the My Blog section for my other writings, especially about my recent daytrips to Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

Saturday, September 14, 2019: Although the interior of the house at the Dr. Robinson Plantation Museum, 593 Madison Hill Road, Clark, NJ (732-340-1571 or drrobinsonmuseum.org) wasn't open, I did get a good view of the exterior of one of the oldest houses in NJ: built in 1690. Nevertheless, I have seen interiors of late 17th- to early 18th-century-styled rooms elsewhere. The day I was there, there was a vendor event going on at the property that included about 20 vendors selling many kinds of merchandise: jewelry, books, and toys, as well as cosmetics, clothes, spices, rocks & minerals, etc. After almost overdosing on history at the last few places that I visited in Union County, looking at vendors displaying their wares for sale was a nice change of pace. I didn't buy much, but I did make a donation toward the museum. As for the exterior of this 17th-century frame house, I noticed that it had two floors and a basement, red clapboard siding on the walls, diamond-paneled casement windows, and a steep roof. This house originally stood on a 700-acre farm that nowadays has been surrounded by suburban housing in this residential neighborhood. Different people lived in this house until 1973 when Clark Township acquired the house and grounds. The Clark Historical Society has

restored the house and opened the property to the public in 1978. In addition, the Historical Society has run events here during certain times of the year, including the event I went to on the date above. The house itself has been opened by appointment.

Sunday, October 20: One of the biggest annual events in Union County happened during the third weekend of October: Four Centuries in a Weekend! Here, many historical homes and museums were opened to the public for free. In addition, many staff and volunteers became re-enactors in period costumes as they acted as guides for whatever century they were representing: 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th. Some of these places were only opened a few times a year without an appointment. One of those places with limited opening times was the Cannonball House, 126 Morris Avenue, Springfield (973-912-4464). Parts of this farmhouse went back to around 1740. Then during the Battle of Springfield in June 1780, a cannonball accidentally shot by the Continental troops lodged into the side of the house—hence the name. Because the British used this house as a hospital, this became one of four buildings that they didn't burn down when they burnt down the rest of the town. Sometime in the 20th century, the Springfield Historical Society restored this place to the way it looked around 1780. On the ground floor, a few different guides dressed in 18th-century costumes showed me three rooms: living room, dining room, and kitchen with its displays of furniture, household items, and other items. They also explained to me details about the different former owners as well as the many uses this building served during the last few centuries before the Historical Society obtained it. Once I was upstairs, another guide directed me to one room exhibiting some military items from the Revolutionary War to World War II, including the cannonball that once lodged in the wall in 1780, and another room recreated an 18th-century bedroom.

Sunday, November 3: Unlike the Cannonball House in Springfield that was mainly located in a residential area, the Osborn-Cannonball House, 1840 Front Street, Scotch Plains (908-322-6700, ext.230—weekdays or 908-757-1885—weekends) has been located near downtown Scotch Plains. In addition, a small local town green nearby and the Stage House Tavern located in a building across the street, some of which dated to the 1700s, gave this block more of an 18th-century feel. (By the way, the food was good at the Stage House Tavern where I had lunch.) After lunch, I toured the Osborn-Cannonball House while two guides dressed in 18th-century styled clothing told me the history of this house, about the Osborn Family and others who lived here, and about the Battle of Short Hills in 1777. They also mentioned that this place was a private residence until 1972. Afterward, the Scotch Plains Historical Society took over the house and restored it. I also learned that as the Continental Army shot toward the British troops, a cannonball accidentally lodged itself into the side of the house. (This seemed like another friendly fire similar to what would later happen to that other Cannonball House in Springfield in 1780.) Anyway, I first saw a Victorian parlor displaying a Franklin stove, furniture & decorative items from the 1800s, and two mannequins dressed in Victorian dresses. The rest of the house looked like the way it might have looked in the later 1700s and early 1800s. In the bedroom, one of the guides showed me a rope bed with a straw mattress, a wooden baby cradle, and a hip-style bath basin, as well as a pitcher & wash basin, among other things. Then the kitchen included an open-hearth fireplace, beehive oven, and other kitchen equipment from the 1700s. Finally the living room presented two mannequins of a man and woman dressed in 1770s-styled clothing. Also in this room, I noticed 18th-century furniture, household items, and other exhibits, including a cannonball of similar size to the ones that struck the houses in Springfield and Scotch Plains. (Déjà vu?)

Saturday, December 7: Warinanco Park has been offering much for many people year round. This 210-acre Union County Park contained gardens, trees,

flowers, and other plants, as well as a lake for boating and fishing, and areas for those who liked taking part in sports. Some of the sports included baseball, softball, basketball, soccer, football, tennis, and so on. In other parts of the park, I saw pavilions, picnic areas, and playgrounds. The main attraction to the park, however, has been the Warinanco Sports Center, One Park Drive, Roselle (908-298-7849). This post-WWII, modern-looking building of brick, metal, and glass included a large ice-skating rink, TVs, a fireplace, a café selling snacks, and other rooms for certain events. One of those events was the reason I was there on the date above: Winter Crafts and Gifts Fair. Here, some vendors sold jewelry, accessories, and crafts, and others sold rocks, gems, and minerals, as well as feathers, oils, soaps, etc. Nevertheless, throughout the year, this sports center has played host to different events, both private and public. When I was there, I also noticed a Hanukkah menorah and some Christmas decorations: trees, wreaths, poinsettias, and so forth. Overall, this park proved to be a rural-looking contrast to the surrounding urbanized municipalities of Roselle, Elizabeth, and Linden.

Sunday, January 12, 2020: While the place I visited was not as famous as *The Little House on the Prairie*, The Little House on the Rahway (River) or the Crane-Phillips House Museum, 124 North Union Avenue, Cranford (908-276-0082 or cranfordhistoricalsociety.com) looked colorful painted in green with red trim. Back in 1840, Josiah Crane had this house built as a two-room honeymoon cottage for his son, Josiah Crane, Jr. In 1867, Crane, Jr. sold the house to Henry Phillips, brother of Charles Phillips. Charles invented Phillips Milk of Magnesia. Henry then expanded and enlarged the house to two stories. Once inside, I got a glimpse of how a middle-income Victorian family lived in the later 1800s. The formal parlor contained much decorative Victorian furniture, portraits and paintings on the walls, and other fancy items. Behind this room, a less formal living room showed plainer furniture from the 19th century, a bigger fireplace, and a china cabinet of many fancy Victorian knick-knacks. Next was the kitchen with its innovations for the 1800s: a sink with a pump next to it, a cast-iron wood-burning stove, and plenty of late 1800s household items. Some of those items included a collection of bottles, especially bottles of Phillips Milk of Magnesia. Upstairs, I saw two rooms, and one room looked like a girl's bedroom from around the 1870s with a bed displaying an elaborate headboard, a smaller sofa and chairs that were once a furniture-maker's samples, and some photos of people from about the 1870s through the 1890s. Finally, the room next to it exhibited many kinds of toys from the later 19th- to early-20th centuries. Some years after Henry Phillips died in 1911, the house passed on to the Cranford Historical Society. Throughout the year, the Historical Society displayed some temporary exhibits in this house, and when I was there, I noticed some items and hats from the American Civil War. In addition, nearby downtown Cranford is also a lively area for shopping and browsing, and it has been listed by different sources as one of the top ten downtowns to see in NJ.

Saturday, February 15: My final trip to Union County found me at Reeves-Reed Arboretum, 165 Hobart Ave., Summit (908-273-8787 or reeves-reedarboretum.org). Because it was a colder than usual day, I didn't stay outdoors for too long. Therefore upon arriving, I stopped into the Visitor Center where the staff left maps of the grounds and other literature. I also noticed touch-screen panels highlighting the attractions here, and I saw displays of potted plants. The Wisner House wasn't open on a weekend, but I did peek into the windows and looked at some of the temporary art exhibits there. Then on the walk to the greenhouse, I glanced at some of the layout of the grounds with its many trees, bushes, and other flora. (I'm told that in the warmer months, especially in the Summer, the grounds are very colorful with displays of different flowers.) Once inside the greenhouse, I observed many warm-climate plants being shown that were mostly from sub-tropical, tropical,

and desert areas. Throughout the property, Reeves-Reed Arboretum offered different woodland trails to walk through, and during the year, they played host to special events, such as concerts and guided tours. It all depended on what time of year you chose to visit. In the meantime, downtown Summit offered much shopping, culture, and restaurants; it usually made the list of "best downtowns" in NJ.

Friday, November 8, 2019: Similar to what I said about Shore Leave in the last issue, I did not go from event to event by the numbers—1), 2), 3), etc.—like I did in past years at SF cons. At this year's Philcon, I mostly stayed in one place. For Friday night, I spent a few hours in the Con Suite where I ate my supper via bringing my own sandwich and soft drink. This con, however, did provide snack foods and soft drinks in a living room setting. Meanwhile, I got into a bit of a conversation with the person who ran the Con Suite and a few other SF fans. In addition, I also had a chance to read my pocket program book, even if I wasn't going anywhere else that night. Nevertheless, Philcon did have plenty of tracks in its programming: art, costuming, and literary, as well as events & panels about media SF, science & technology, fandom, music, gaming, animation, and so on. There were also workshops on some of those subjects and a gaming area, as well as presentations and conversations by both the art and author guests of honor (GOH). If that weren't enough, the musical GOH put on some musical performances at different times during the con, and some SF fans played host to room parties at night. There was something for almost everyone!

Saturday, November 9: I started this day by visiting the Art Show where around two-thirds of the almost 30 artists displayed fine arts in paintings, drawings, and sculptures, and the rest showed decorative arts in jewelry, quilts, t-shirts, and so forth. About three-quarters of the artists exhibited fantasy art, and the others presented SF and space art. Some of the things that stood out in my mind were a very colorful quilt, two tiaras made of seashells, some pictures made of jewelry and glittery trims, and Heidi Hooper demonstrating her dryer lint art. (You have to see her pictures to believe them.) Then, I spent the rest of the day sitting at a table of the organization I've belonged to in order to recruit new members: National Space Society/Philadelphia Area Space Alliance (NSS/PASA). Therefore, in between reading my con program book, I talked to many people who stopped by our table and possibly got some new members for either NSS or PASA or both—if they lived in the Philly area, or I just people watched. From what I saw, about half of the people were either in costume or wore something that they wouldn't wear on a normal day elsewhere, and the others were in street clothes. I noticed that around five to ten minutes before the hour, it became more crowded as people walked and moved about from one room or section of the conference to another to go to whatever panel or event was on their agenda. Then within a few minutes after the hour, there were less people passing near the table. This proved what other people told me: Stay in one place at a SF con, and the con will come to you because almost everybody will stop by or walk past your table. (This was so true.)

Saturday night: The biggest event at this con was the Masquerade. Altogether, there were 16 entries in this costume contest and two of them wore SF costumes, the rest were in fantasy costumes. Philcon followed the International Costumers' Guild rules as they used the following categories: Young Fan for those under 13, Novice—for adults (anyone over 13) who never won in a masquerade, Journeyman—for adults who won in the novice category in past masquerades, and Master—for adults who won at past masquerades in the Journeyman or better level. First, the con allowed the young fans to enter on stage and gave the judges time to award them—so that the children could get to bed early. Then, the adult costumers entered the stage for their performances.

Afterward, the con offered a performance of someone usually doing a musical number before the judges gave their ruling and prizes. Before the stage presentation, however, while the costumers were in the green room, workmanship judges also looked over the costumes, and they gave their awards to the winners. So it was possible for a costumer to win awards in both workmanship and stage presentation. Anyway, at this masquerade, I saw some very glittery costumes, some funny skits, and some confusing skits, presentations, or costumes. Overall, I thought of it as a night at a variety show. If you didn't like what you saw, wait a few minutes, and the next entre might be better, worse, or funnier. Meanwhile, contestants could only do their presentation for a minute at most. (I'm glad because I remember years ago before that rule passed when some people hogged the stage and proved to be quite boring. In some cases, the contest would not be over until very late at night.)

Sunday, November 10: There was no doubt that Philcon was a literary-based SF con compared to Shore Leave being a media-based SF con because out of around 40 dealers in the dealers' room, about three-quarters of the dealers sold reading material in books, magazines, and fanzines. The remaining dealers sold other merchandise: jewelry, accessories, T-shirts, and costumes, as well as artwork, models, games, etc. (If you read the last issue of The Column, issue #15, Shore Leave only had a few dealers selling reading materials.) I bought a magazine, and I spent the next few hours sitting at the NSS/PASA table reading my magazine in between meeting more people and "people watching" in general.

Well, it's been a year since I changed my travel pattern. Nevertheless, I did have a good year traveling through NJ and PA, as well as attending Shore Leave and Philcon. Starting with Issue #17, I'll be publishing DOTTY'S DIMENSIONS: THE COLUMN four times a year for about four years. In each issue, I will be writing about visiting two counties a year in NJ, and in two of the issues each year, I'll also cover attending Shore Leave and Philcon. For most of 2020, I plan to visit Middlesex and Monmouth Counties in NJ. In addition, I also plan to see some places in PA, but those reports will show up in the My Blog section of my website. Goodbye for now!