

# Eclectically Crane

The Stephen Crane House in Asbury Park



The Stephen Crane House at 508 Fourth Avenue in Asbury Park.

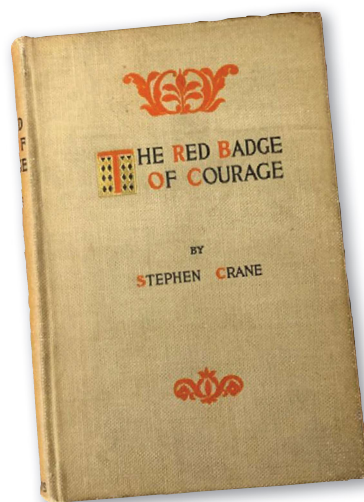
Susan Rosenberg

Nestled along Asbury Park's quaint, Victorian-esque Fourth Avenue stands a pillar of both local and literary history, The Stephen Crane House. A National and State Historic Site, and the headquarters of the Asbury Park Historical Society, the building has a long and rich background including its connection to the great American writer Stephen Crane.

## Crane's Early Years in Asbury Park

On November 1, 1871 in Newark, New Jersey, Stephen Crane was the last of fourteen children born to Christian temperance-activist Mary Helen Peck Crane, known as Helen, and Methodist Episcopalian minister Jonathan Townley Crane. Jonathan, who died in 1880, was involved in the founding of the Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association. In the summer of 1883, the widow Crane purchased the home in neighboring

Asbury Park at 508 Fourth Avenue and became its fourth owner in its first five years of existence and first year-round occupant. Known as the Arbutus Cottage during her owner-



The Red Badge of Courage (first edition shown) was written by Stephen Crane at the age of twenty-four. It is considered by many to be his most important work and one of the greatest American novels.

ship, she resided with eleven-year-old Stephen and his older sister, Agnes.

With the Asbury Park beach- es and boardwalk within eyesight, Crane's writing career would begin in the home by penning his first story titled "Uncle Jake and the Bell Handle" at fourteen years old. Crane graduated from the old Asbury Park High School before embarking upon a number of inconsistent stints at boarding schools and universities, but no matter where his feet might have stood, the Jersey Shore never left his bloodstream. In fact, Crane would always refer to himself as a "true Jerseyman."

According to Asbury Park Historical Society trustee and live-in curator/programmer, Tom Chesek, the future author of *The Red Badge of Courage* would return to his mother's home in Asbury Park every summer. Here he would pick up his first professional writing experience as a cub reporter covering the bustling boardwalk scene for the news service overseen by his brother, Jonathan Townley Crane, Jr. In the process of honing his journalistic skills and finding his unique literary voice, the youngest of the Cranes would make the acquaintance of vacationing authors and influential editors, while cultivating a playfully cynical perspective of Asbury Park's founder (and self-appointed moral guardian) James A. Bradley. It was a gig that lasted until the summer of 1892, when the explosive public reaction to one of Stephen's stories, coupled with the twenty-year-old's scandalous affair with a married woman, made headlines in its own right and served to effectively run him out of the place where mother Helen had presided over the local chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

After Helen Crane's death in 1891, property shares for the Arbutus Cottage were split among the remaining Crane children. Stephen would end up selling his share to his

brother, William, and use the proceeds to publish his first novel titled *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* under the pseudonym Johnston Smith.

### Crane the Writer

Crane lived the life of a bohemian in New York City for a time and composed his American classic novel *The Red Badge of Courage* while broke and living on the Lower East Side. His writing career led him to upstate New York, the American west, Pennsylvania's coal mine country, the Carolinas and Florida, the Caribbean, to Greece and Cuba, and then finally to the English countryside, where he settled with common-law wife, Cora Taylor Crane. There he wrote essays, short stories, poetry, and seven and a half other novels at a furious pace. "Even though he was a well-known novelist who socialized with a lot of the famous authors of his era, Crane continued to work as a war correspondent and journalist right up until his final days," Chesek explained. "But he actually preferred to be remembered as a poet and to call his works 'lines' rather than poems, since they pretty much dispensed with meter and rhyme, and really pointed the way toward the modern poetry of the twentieth century."

No matter where Crane wrote, though, the Jersey Shore continued to inspire him. His short stories, "The Pace of Youth" and "The Reluctant Voyagers," along with his essays, "The Wreck of the New Era" and "Ghosts on the New Jersey Shore," were set in and around the Asbury Park area.

**Teen Crane.** *Although there are many photos of Stephen Crane taken at later points in his life, there exists only one photo of him that we can be sure was shot in Asbury Park. This portrait of Crane was taken at the downtown studio of photographer William Stauffer. Crane is dressed in the uniform of Claverack College, the military-style academy that he attended between January 1888 and spring 1890, which would make him somewhere between sixteen and eighteen years old. Although he was away at school during the academic year, he returned each summer to his home in Asbury Park, which remained his official place of residence during this time period.*

### The Arbutus Cottage

The Arbutus Cottage would remain in the Crane family until 1900, when the last of the Crane relatives sold it shortly after Stephen's untimely death from tuberculosis at the age of twenty-eight in a sanatorium in Badenweiler, Germany.

Throughout the Twentieth Century, the Fourth Avenue structure passed

through a string of ownerships and a litany of identities, with the deed changing hands at least fifteen times before 1950. Owners included an attorney, a retired pastor, a grocer, a garage owner, a boarding house owner, a fertilizer salesman, and a bookie. The home itself survived a close call with a nearby fire, offered

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lodging to vacationers, and housed soldiers from nearby military bases. Newark couple Florence and Archie McCorkendale then purchased the home mid-century and transformed the building into the "Hotel Florence," one of Asbury Park's many popular seasonal inns, although they never resided there full time.

As misfortune struck Asbury Park, the structure transitioned into a boarding house, then a subdivided apartment house, and by the early 1990s, the eldest McCorkendale daughter was the sole occupant of the house before her transfer to a nursing home. Years of neglect resulted in severe deterioration of the building, and by the mid-1990s, the dilapidated, boarded-up flophouse for homeless and animals alike was slated for demolition.

### Rebirth and Restoration as a Museum

Enter New Jersey Natural Gas executive Thomas Hayes, who purchased the property, including the rear carriage house and barn, for a grand total of \$7,500. Hayes then embarked upon a massive restoration of the

cottage, and with help from his wife, Regina, and community volunteers, The Stephen Crane House opened its doors in 1996 as a museum dedicated to Crane's life and works.

Hayes' friend, former school teacher Frank D'Alessandro, purchased the property in 2001 and continued to restore the venue through monies raised by donations, including a sizable gift from Bruce Springsteen.

Over the past twenty years, The Stephen Crane House has transformed into a notable and respected venue for history and programming including film screenings, spoken-word events, writers' workshops, and meetings of civic groups including the Asbury Park Historical Society, of which D'Alessandro was a board member.

Visitors to the house have included respected Crane academics, United States Congressmen, award-winning actor Bryan Cranston, and 1950s cult-movie star Norma Eberhardt. In 2014, D'Alessandro announced his plans to donate The Stephen Crane House to the Asbury Park Historical Society to use as its headquarters.

In February 2015, years of research



Jill Orcone

*The Lecture Room Theatre, a "black box" performance space and screening room with seating for approximately forty people.*

and upgrades by the Historical Society resulted in The Stephen Crane House/Arbutus Cottage gaining recognition by being entered into the New Jersey Register of Historic Places. The following August, the house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The rear carriage house was completely renovated and converted into a private residence by D'Alessandro in the first decade of the new century.

### Inside The Stephen Crane House

Many of the rooms inside are included on tours and used for public events. The entrance foyer leads to a front parlor where portraits of Crane, his common-law wife Cora Taylor Crane, and his family adorn the walls. The period furnishings and wall treatments create an authentic, nostalgic ambiance. One of the most striking artifacts in the room is a picture of Crane as a member of the baseball team at Syracuse University, the college co-founded by his uncle, Jesse T. Peck. "Stephen was a great baseball player and scouted by professionals. He was a catcher and caught fastballs bare-handed. He only spent one semester at Syracuse, but all



*The front parlor has an authentic, nostalgic ambiance.*

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of his papers are archived there,” Chesek said.

A nineteenth-century coal stove stands in the house’s original kitchen with stovepipe holes still visible in the walls.

The centerpiece of the house’s public area is the Lecture Room Theatre, a “black box” performance space and screening room that has recently been fitted with enhanced lighting and expanded seating for approximately forty people. While the normally busy schedule of readings, plays, free film screenings, and lectures was postponed during the Covid-19 pandemic, plans are to once again phase in a slate of public offerings in 2021. The house is a “best kept secret” venue that has hosted theatrical works that have gone on to successful Off Broadway runs, and in 2019 hosted the New Jersey debut of the award-winning, one-man play *An Evening with Stephen Crane*.

The second-floor library, which was extensively renovated, contains antique volumes from Crane’s era and an illuminated bookcase showcasing various volumes of Crane’s works as well as period furnishings that belonged to one of Asbury Park’s early prominent residents, businessman Uriah White. A rare Stephen Crane autograph and framed portrait also hang on

the library’s walls. In addition, an archive room featuring access to maps and historic documents is among the second-floor areas currently open to the public. The Society is in the process of renovating another room into what will become part of the house tour as “Stephen’s Bedroom” upon its completion.

Inside the archive room is an ironing board discovered in the cellar during renovations that dates back to the late 1800s. “We like to think that this could have been Mrs. Crane’s actual ironing board,” said Chesek. “Although Helen was a busy woman

who lectured and traveled a lot on Temperance Union business...I bet she made Agnes do the ironing!”

While the old cottage’s attic, cellar, residential rooms, and office are not open to the public, that only makes the house more intriguing. “Although there’s a lot of interest in Stephen Crane and the general history of Asbury Park, we get just as many inquiries as to whether the place is haunted,” said Chesek. “I tell them yes...by me, since I’m here just about all of the time!”

### Today at the Museum

Prior to the COVID-19 health emergency, The Stephen Crane House regularly hosted group tours for schools, clubs, and other historical societies, as well as for year-round drop-in visitors that have included history buffs and teachers from as far away as Hawaii, Australia, and numerous European countries.

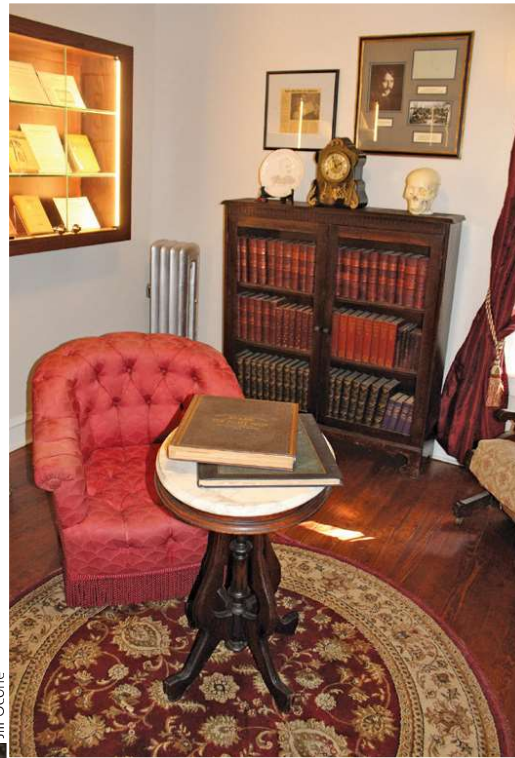
The house reopened for individual and small-group tours in the summer of 2020. Updated information on group tours and public-welcome events is available at the Asbury Park Historical Society’s website or by following The Stephen Crane House on Facebook.

Crane’s involvement in many a controversy may have led to his infamous reputation as a rascal, but his literary, poetic, and journalistic talents transcended his shenanigans. In fact, his notable contributions to the literary world and to the history of New Jersey were finally recognized in 2020 as he was posthumously inducted into the New Jersey Hall of Fame.

The Stephen Crane House remains a living Jersey Shore landmark that celebrates the poet/author’s life and legacy along with his enduring place in literary, local, and cultural history.

—Jill Ocone

*The Stephen Crane House is located at 508 Fourth Avenue in Asbury Park. Open house tours are offered on Sundays from 12:00 PM - 2:00 PM or by appointment. For more information, call (732) 361-0189 or visit [www.aphistoricalociety.org/history/welcome-to-the-stephen-crane-house](http://www.aphistoricalociety.org/history/welcome-to-the-stephen-crane-house).*



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