

## Recent Gift Reflects Early Morristown History

By Linda Ross

*The images in this article come from a variety of historical resources that are available at the North Jersey History and Genealogy Center, which provided a variety of information about the property on the corner of Washington Street and Western Avenue in Morristown, as well as the people, buildings, and organizations associated with it.*

A painting recently donated to the Morristown and Morris Township Library's History and Genealogy Center shows the 18<sup>th</sup> century family home of Major Daniel Phoenix, Jr. This property is the current site of the old Y.M.C.A building, now a commercial space known as the Courthouse Plaza, located across from the Morris County Courthouse.

### Residence of Daniel Phoenix



LATE RESIDENCE OF DANIEL PHOENIX.

**“The Late Residence of Daniel Phoenix”** This watercolor painting was purchased in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., by Reverend James Elliot Lindsley. The painting's creator and date are not known.

Major Daniel Phoenix was a local merchant, property owner and civic leader during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Daniel Phoenix, Jr. came to Morristown in 1776 at the age of 14 with his uncle, New York merchant Daniel Phoenix. The family was fleeing New York because of the British occupation there. Daniel's ancestors had emigrated from Scotland in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and lived primarily in Rhode Island. His great-grandfather moved to New York and the family remained there through

several generations. His father died while Daniel was still a minor, leaving him and a brother to the care of the uncle who brought them to Morristown. In 1783, after the war against the British was over, the uncle's family returned to New York, where the uncle soon became Chamberlain (treasurer) of the city, a position he retained until shortly before his death in 1812.

Daniel stayed in Morristown. In January 1784 he married Anne Lewis Phillips and late in 1785 the first of their ten children was born. At an undocumented time, he joined the New Jersey militia; by 1798 he had achieved the rank of major there.

Major Phoenix was apparently a successful entrepreneur. Various sources show him as the owner of Newfoundland Forge and possibly other forges, including interests in Jacob Ford's mining projects before 1799; a proprietor of Morris Aqueduct, Inc. in 1799; the first president of the State Bank of Morris in 1812; the occupant of a store building (probably dry goods) on Morristown Green in 1828; and the operator of a distillery in Washington Valley, thought to be the birthplace of "Jersey Lightning."

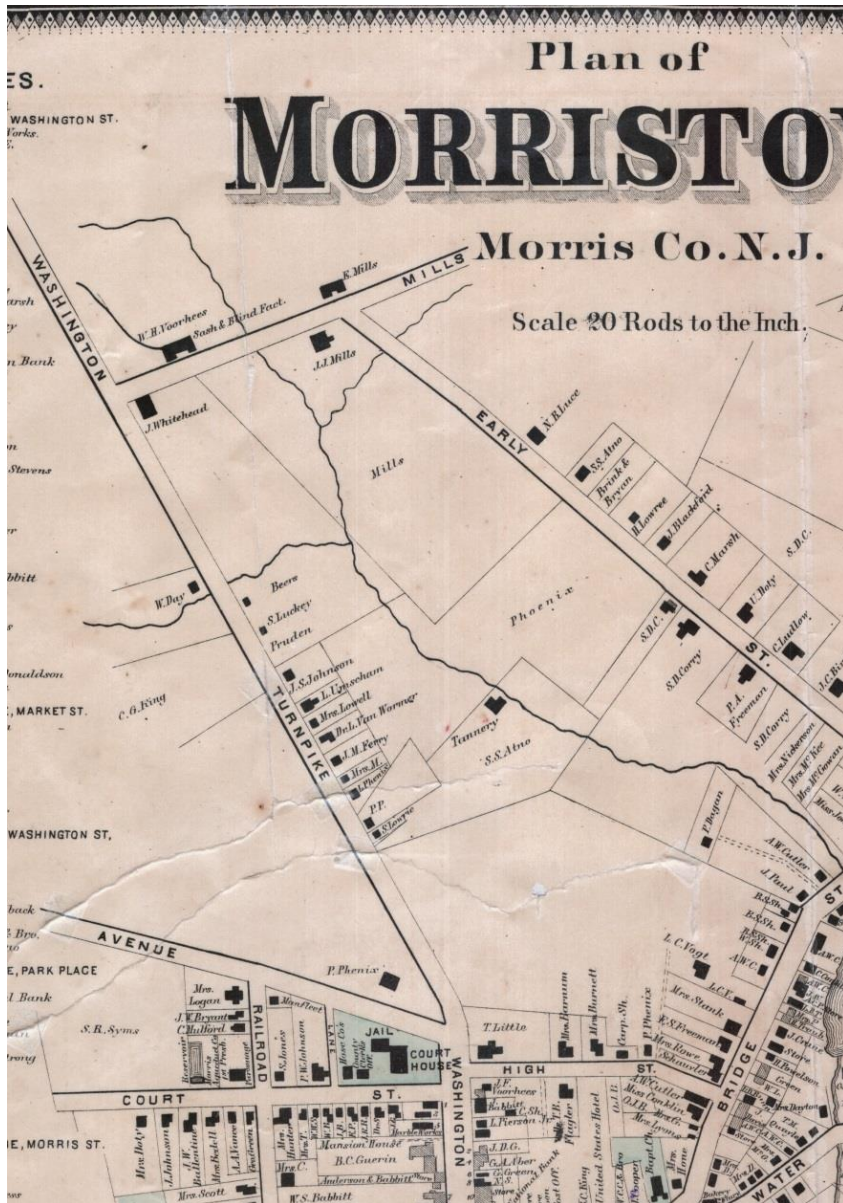
Beyond his commercial ventures, Major Phoenix was integral to the civic life of the town. He was a "half member" of the Presbyterian Church. In 1791 he and twenty three other residents chartered an association for promoting education in Morristown. They purchased land from the church and on it built a school that they named Morris Academy. Major Phoenix was the first treasurer of the school.

He was a trustee of the Presbyterian Church in 1792 and was involved in the building of its second edifice. One source quotes from the managers' day book a record of his contribution to the project: "Daniel Phoenix, jr., cr. by 13 gills of rum furnished the hands this day, 2 shillings, 2 pence." Additionally, he was a director of the town fire association established in 1815 and an original subscriber to the Morristown Green.

Major Phoenix was a significant landowner in the area. An early residence for the family was at the corner of Park Place and Washington Street, with the property extending up to High Street. The site where the family lived longest was the home at the corner of Washington and Western. He owned "large acreage" there, on both sides of Washington and both sides of Western. The stables were on what became Phoenix Avenue.

Phoenix owned properties on Morris Street and Bridge Street (now Speedwell Avenue); part of a tract near Whippany; properties in New Vernon; meadowland in Hanover Township and in the Great Swamp; additional holdings in various parts of Morris County. In all, he is recorded to have purchased 51 parcels of land. His house and land holdings were left at his death in 1828 to his widow and surviving children. A grandson, Phillips Phoenix, eventually parceled and sold it all.

The Phoenix property along Western and Washington extended up the hill to Fort Nonsense. Phillips Phoenix divided it into 68 parcels, laying out Phoenix Avenue, Miller Street, Atno Avenue, Clinton Street and Prospect Street in the process. Chestnut, Plum and Cherry streets were later developed from Phoenix holdings.



A section of Morristown from the *Atlas of Morris County, New Jersey: from actual surveys / by and under the direction of F. W. Beers*, published in 1868. The Phoenix property on the corner of Washington and Western Ave., and other property owned by Phoenix can be seen here.

### Avenue House Hotel

Phillips Phoenix sold the homestead property to Jerome B. Stout in 1870. Stout built a three-story addition to the original house and ran it as a hotel called “Avenue House” for several years.

Much information about Avenue House comes from advertisements and articles that were published in local newspapers of the time. (These newspapers are reproduced at the library on microfilm.)

From *The True Democratic Banner*, an advertisement that appeared in issues from July through December 1873 describes the Avenue House as a first-class hotel, fitted with modern improvements, “including water closets and bathrooms on each floor, with hot and cold water.” There was a billiards room that was free to guests. The hotel had “gas throughout and a bell for each room.” It was newly furnished with “principally black walnut furniture”. A further enticement to lodge at Avenue House was the “good stabling” connected to it. The ad was targeted specifically toward persons attending court or in town or other business, but accommodation was offered to either permanent or transient guests.

This advertisement for the Avenue House appeared in the *True Democratic Banner* on September 11, 1873.

**AVENUE HOUSE,**  
(OPPOSITE THE COURT HOUSE),  
**MORRISTOWN, N. J.**

**THE** subscriber having purchased of Phillips Fier-  
six, Esq., of New York, the late Doctor Fier-  
six residence with 5 acres of land, and erected thereon a  
first class Hotel, containing 60 rooms, and fitted it  
up with modern improvements, including water  
closets and bath rooms on each floor, with hot and  
cold water, 2 billiard rooms with new taron tables,  
(free to guests of the house), with gas throughout,  
and a bell from each room, and furnished it com-  
pletely with new, and principally black walnut fur-  
niture, is now prepared to accommodate either per-  
manent or transient guests, at equal prices with  
other Hotels. The house was opened for business  
July 1st, and has been full during the season. Good  
stabling is connected with the house.

Persons attending Court, or being in Town on  
other business will find it a very convenient and  
desirable place to stop at. A share of the public  
patronage is solicited.

**JEROME L. STOUT, Proprietor.**  
Morristown, Sept. 1st, 1873. 18-1y2d pg

The Jerseyman frequently carried notices and reports of local civic and social groups meeting there.

July 7, 1874: “There was a fine display of fireworks at the Avenue House consisting of set pieces, rockets, etc. The rain at one time threatened to stop all the fun, but it proved to be but a smart sprinkle, and Young America rejoiced thereat.”

From August 3, 1875: “The Liberty Cornet Band serenaded the Avenue House on Friday evening and were asked in by the proprietor.”

From February 19, 1880: “Mrs. Richard King, while dancing at the ‘German’ at the Avenue House last Friday evening, slipped on the floor and badly sprained her ankle.”

From 1930 to 1943, local resident and historian Aldus Pierson regularly published articles of interest in the *Morristown Daily Record*. His well-researched articles on Morristown's history were pasted and assembled in to scrapbooks about 60 years ago. The article below on the **Avenue House Hotel** was published April 25, 1942, and tells details about the property.

**Hotel On Site Of YMCA  
Popular Many Years Ago**  
*Record*  
Avenue House Advertised Baths, Gas In Rooms,  
Billiard Tables, Good Stabling—Opened 1873  
*Apr 25/42* By ALDUS H. PIERSON

A popular hotel which enjoyed a fine clientele for about 14 years was the Avenue House on the site of the present YMCA. It was Phoenix property early the home of Daniel Phoenix Jr., which formed the basis of the hotel.

The proprietor tells the story in an advertisement which appeared in *The Jerseyman* under the date of September 1, 1873.

"Avenue House (Opposite the Court House,) Morristown, N. J.

"The subscriber having purchased from Phillips Phoenix, Esq. of New York, the late Dr. Phoenix residence with five acres of land and erected thereon a first class hotel, containing 60 rooms and fitted it up with modern improvements including water closets and bath rooms on each floor with hot and cold water, two billiard rooms with new card tables (free to guests of the house), with gas throughout and a bell from each room, and furnished completely with new and principally black walnut furniture, is now prepared to accommodate either permanent or transient guests, at equal prices with other hotels. The house was opened for business July 1st and has been filled during the season. Good stabling is connected with the house. Persons attending court or being in town on other business, will find it a very convenient and desirable place to stop at. A share of the public patronage is solicited. Jerome L. Stout proprietor."

That the hotel was also a place of meeting is shown in a copy of *The Jerseyman* in September, 1875 in which was reported a meeting held at the Avenue House on August 31 for the purpose of forming a rifle club. J. L. Stout stated the object of the meeting and A. W. Cutler was elected chairman, and L. O. Stiles secretary. Dr. Parker asked if the club was for off-hand or long range shooting and Dr. Swan and Mr. Stout advocated both methods.

Mr. Waterbury coincided with the views expressed and Mr. Cutler explained the laws of New Jersey on the subject.

**Sportsman Club Met Their**

The Morris County Sportsman's Club met at the Avenue House on September 6 Frank Harrison, Fred W. Merrill and H. C. Ohlen were elected members. W. H. Howell, A. P. Paulmier, F. L. Lundy, E. P. Haslin, Edwin E. Wills, C. H. Dalrymple, H. W. Miller, John Hone Jr., William Kennelley and Mr. Butterworth were proposed for membership.

Mr. Bryce reported that the committee appointed to purchase young trout had paid a visit to Dr. Slack's fish breeding establishment but the price asked was \$30 per thousand, greatly in excess of the price fixed by the club.

Mr. Raymond stated he had purchased trout at Honeoye Falls last Spring and placed them in streams in the vicinity, paying but \$15.

Mr. Stout became involved with his neighbors for at the September meeting of the Common Council Mr. J. Norris, on behalf of the residents of Phoenix avenue spoke of the nuisance of Mr.

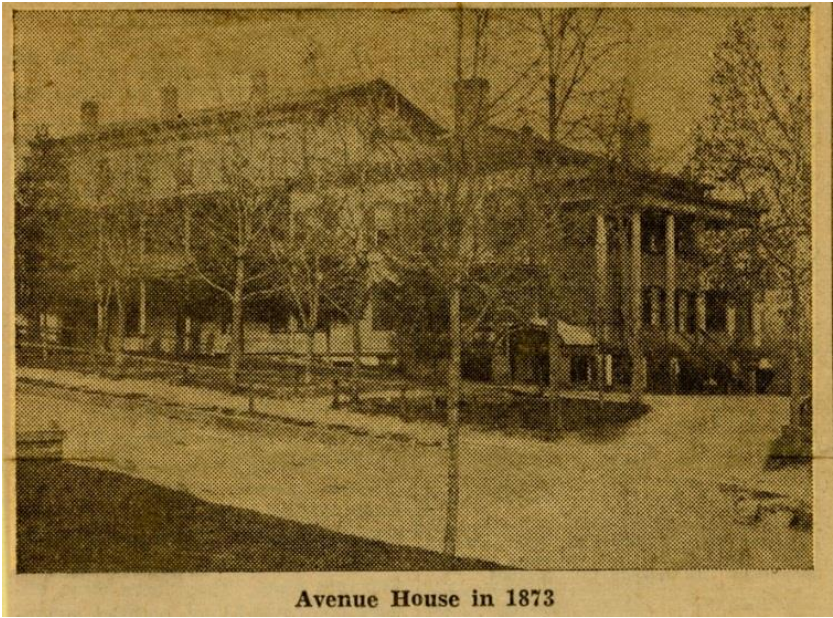
Stout's pig sty and gave some particulars as to its condition. By report of the Health Inspector it appears that Mr. Stout had been notified several times to abate the nuisance and had not done so. The Corporation Attorney was instructed to prosecute him immediately under the ordinance. A communication was later received from Mr. Stout asking that his premises be examined before any thing was done in the matter, claiming that his yard was in good order and had been except in wet weather; that under direction of the health inspector he had sprinkled lime over it; that the whole matter grew out of prejudice against him, that he had removed the hogs and closed by wishing all kinds of good luck to the complainants."

**Council Does Not Act**

"The residents were heard again and stated that the hogs had been shut up under the barn very lately. The council was of the opinion that everything had been done that was necessary on their part and the matter was left in the hands of the Attorney." The hotel stables were close to Phoenix avenue.

The property passed in 1880 to Ellen E. Duncan. Duncan was a well known local name in the hotel and boarding house field. She sold in 1886 to representatives of the St. Hilda School, then located in rented quarters. The school enclosed the property in a high board fence, built a chapel extending almost to Western avenue and later a three-story frame building near Washington street connected to the main buildings by a covered passageway. The YMCA bought the place in 1909, razed the buildings and built the present structure. The school was moved to Mendham.

The Phoenix avenue frontage has all been sold. At that same September meeting in 1875, residents of Western avenue petitioned for the grading, curbing and paving of the sidewalks on Western avenue from Washington street to Ann street on the south side of the street and to the residence of P. H. Hoffman on the north side.



Avenue House in 1873

The pillars of the Phoenix House can be seen in the above photo of the hotel, originally taken in 1873.

According to the *True Democratic Banner*, in February 1880, the Avenue House was leased to Mrs. Nellie (Eleanor) Duncan for a period of a year with privilege for five years. “No one doubts her ability to make it a superior haven of rest and comfort for those who desire a residence here by the year or for a brief season.” Records indicate that Mrs. Duncan purchased the property outright in 1882.

Four years later it was sold to St. Hilda’s School.

### St. Hilda’s School

St. Hilda’s school was an exclusive school for girls. It was conducted by deaconesses of the Episcopal Church and operated in the location from 1890 until 1910. The school sold the property to the YMCA in 1909 and relocated to Mendham in 1910.



ST. HILDA SCHOOL.

(39)

Photogravure image of St. Hilda School, published locally by businessman William Muchmore, in 1895. In the above image of St. Hilda’s school, the columns and windows of the original Phoenix house can be seen. The chapel at the left was added to the front portion of the building.

## The Morristown Y.M.C.A

The YMCA razed the frame structure and erected a new Georgian Revival style building in 1912. It had a gymnasium, a swimming pool and could house 30 residents. YMCA occupied the site for almost 70 years but eventually outgrew the building.



Picture postcard from of the YMCA building, 1920.



The addition of YMCA signage at the Washington street entrance can be seen in 1935 photograph by Frederick Curtiss.

## **Courthouse Plaza - 60 Washington Street**

In the 1980s, the Y.M.C.A was sold to a development company, 60 Washington Street Partnership, who renovated and expanded it. The creation of a second floor from the former vaulted ceiling gymnasium and a third floor allowed for additional modern office space while preserving the character of the building. It was opened to commercial tenants in 1982 and continues to function as commercial space, known as Courthouse Plaza. The heating and cooling systems were refurbished two new elevators were added. The renovation project received the 1983 Award of Excellence from the Builders Association of Somerset and Morris.



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