

Filmmaking attorney reveals secrets of local historical home

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ROSELAND - What happens when a lawyer with a knack for research and a passion for filmmaking buys a 245-year-old house in Roseland, restores it, and then lives there with his family?

What attorney Jack A. Gordon did was listen to four founders of the Roseland Historical Society, Adele Rall, Everett Leonard, retired Professor Robert Bush and retired Judge George A. Flammer, and to what they had

to say about who once lived in his new home, the Bond Force Home at 88 Eagle Rock Ave.

Their tales suggest betrayal, bigamy, abandonment, excommunication and a destroyed reputation that somehow gets restored 30 years later. Their stories compel Gordon to hunt down old letters, photos, tax receipts, court records, banking transactions and the ledger of a church, including the inscription in its stained-glass window. Almost everything he finds corroborates their memories.

What's more, Gordon claims to have put to bed speculation long buzzing among local historians.

Through an 1882 church ledger, he says he's nailed down the true identity of the Jonathan Force III who grew up in the Force Homestead in Livingston – now home to the Livingston Historical Society – that sits between the municipal oval and St. Philomena's Catholic Church. He really is, Gordon says,

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Fateful Meeting

Peter Engart Dietz and Alexandra Gordon stand outside the apothecary in Waterloo Village, Standhope, as they prepare for the re-enactment of the meeting of Jonathan Force III and Susan Amanda Baker in the late 1870s. Shortly after they met, Force married Baker in Livingston, despite the fact that he already had a wife and two small children in neighboring Roseland. (Photos published with permission of Bumble Bee Productions.)

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the same Jonathan Force who married Dorina Bond in Roseland and thereafter destroyed his family.

Documentary Aids Historical Society

After five and one-half years, working part time on the project, Gordon has just finished a one-hour-and-20-minute film documentary about his findings. He released it on DVD through Bumble Bee Productions, an independent production company he and his wife, Anna Kleshelskaya Gordon, formed in Roseland.

A portion of the proceeds from the sale of each DVD (\$14.99 plus \$4 shipping) will go to the Roseland Historical Society's Centennial Celebration Fund, which Everett Leonard and his son, former Roseland Mayor and Councilman Richard N. Leonard established, to celebrate Roseland's 100th Anniversary in 2008. All four founders of the society appear in the film, relating their memories.

Gordon says it took him as long as it did to complete the filmed project because of his daytime job as managing partner of Kent, Beatty, & Gordon, a Manhattan-based law firm.

The title he gave the film, "The Bond Force Legacy," when paired with the litany of unsavory events associated with the house, raises the question: What legacy?

In one of several sidebar features on the DVD, Robert Ivry, senior staff writer for The Bergen Record, puts that query to Gordon in the living room of the Bond Force House.

The attorney tells him that brother and sister Frank and Annie Force, who lived in the house their entire lives, could have become embittered and eccentric recluses in response to their father, Jonathan Force III, abandoning their mother, Dorinda Bond Force, when they were not yet teenagers, and absconding with their mother's hefty dowry to marry a woman



First Wife

Dorinda Bond, Jonathan Force III's first wife, is shown just before her death in 1882. She had just turned 40.

20 years his junior, Susan Amanda Baker, in an illegal Baptist Church ceremony in Livingston.

Despite having a thieving father who impoverishes his abandoned family and becomes a betraying bigamist to boot, coupled with what the film refers to as their mother's "mysterious" death at age 40 while Frank and Annie were still young, at least they don't become embittered Gordon tells the interviewer. But eccentric? Perhaps.

Instead, he says, they're eventually able to support themselves through enterprising uses of their house and land, presumably with an initial boost from a maiden aunt, Delia Bond, who remained in the house with them. They become good citizens, and they love Roseland, Gordon declares, and Annie, the sole survivor of

the hapless clan, died in 1963 at age 95, leaving a bequest to the Borough of Roseland for what is now the nine-acre, Bond Force Park on Eagle Rock Avenue, next to the firehouse.

Motorists traveling east on Eagle Rock Avenue from the center of Roseland climb a steep rise once called Choctaw Hill. About halfway up on the left, set back 200 feet from the road, is a pristine, yellow farmhouse. An engraved wooden marker hanging from a post near the curb identifies the place, along with its vintage. The film notes that the sister of Frank and Annie, who died in infancy, is buried in an unmarked grave somewhere behind the house.

In another of the DVD's sidebar features, the attorney's 19-year-old daughter, Alexandra Gordon, a sophomore enrolled in the Scholars Program at the



Bond Force House

Residents relax in the front yard of the Bond Force House in about 1877. From 1895 to 1909 Frank and Annie Force and their Aunt Deal took in boarders for \$7 a week.

University of Maryland, stands at the curbside marker to begin her guided tour of the land and the house in a sequence filmed in March this year.

Gordon says Alexandra traveled from Maryland to North Jersey late last winter on Amtrak so she could have time not only to study his tour script, but also the other script he had written for her, the one with which she portrays “the evil home wrecker, Susan Amanda Baker,” as he mischievously refers to the role.

To play the part of the infamous Jonathan Force III, Jack Gordon enlisted a fellow student from his college filmmaking days in the 1970s, Peter Engart Dietz, who is now a Delaware real estate developer. Before Gordon got his law degree from New York University in 1986, he graduated in 1981 with honors in both filmmaking and American literature from Boston University.

On Location

To approximate the 19th-century period, Gordon took his crew to historic Waterloo Village in Stanhope to film the fateful first meeting between Jonathan and his par-amour-to-be, Susan Amanda in a Livingston Apothecary shop, using a similar historical establishment

preserved at Waterloo.

And to provide all the re-enacted scenes in the production with an aged veneer, Gordon shot them in black and white with sepia tint. He also added visual imperfections, such as traveling thread lines to give the re-enacted portion of his work the aura of an early 20th century silent film.

Gordon hired voiceover narrator, Tony Call, whose dramatic delivery has been heard in many documentaries on The History Channel and in television commercials. Composer John Califra’s musical scores likewise have accompanied many television productions on PBS and HBO. Califra wrote an original piano and orchestral composition for Gordon that hauntingly graces the film’s soundtrack.

Sitting in the living room of the house he bought in 1998, and from which he and wife Anna have ripped all vestiges of the modern era that the previous owners had installed, Gordon describes to his interviewer the denouement of Jonathan Force III’s life.

He’s listed in several New Jersey history books, the attorney says, as a prominent citizen of Livingston, possibly purchasing that status after parlaying his first wife’s stolen dowry into a fortune.

As Adele Rall in the film remembers, despite excommunication for bigamy from Livingston’s Baptist congregation in May 1882, years later he becomes the superintendent of its Sunday school. And, after he dies, wife Susan Amanda Baker Force, has a stained-glass window dedicated to his memory.

That window, engraved with his name, still is filtering light into what is now The Federated Church of Livingston, in the center of that township, at the corner of Livingston Avenue and Mt. Pleasant Avenue.

Gordon declares in the interview that Jonathan Force III ends up, on earth anyway, “a great guy!”

When he started the project, Gordon explains that he originally hoped to enlist students at West Essex Regional High School as his “crew” who, in the process, could discover that citizens of the past had problems similar to people living today.

But, he said, the nature of the information he was uncovering justified a more professional approach to this slice of local history.

Gordon’s final product illustrates, nevertheless, that the good old days – at least in the deviant ways some people attempted to pursue happiness – were no different from our own.