

Skip this Christmas Gathering: Family drama and dysfunction in early 20th century Morristown (NJ).

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By Cheryl Turkington, Assistant Archivist (retired), North Jersey History and Genealogy Center

On the complaint of her mother in November 1938, **Alice Leslie Hill** was arrested as a Disorderly Person following a disturbance at the family home on Franklin Street.

Police officers brought her to **Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital** where she spent the next two and a half years. Ms. Hill had built an uncommon life in Morristown, New Jersey, but this first hospitalization betrayed the frayed edges of that reality.

A political activist and feminist born in 1891, Ms. Hill was the oldest of three daughters of T. Olney and Bessie Fisher Hill.

Rife with contradictions, the Hill family had a reputation as unruly social climbers, desperate to attain upper-class status, all while struggling with financial chaos and personal conflict.

From this environment arose Alice Leslie Hill, an intensely driven woman who rejected the conventional sphere of marriage, home and family and focused her potent intellect and energy on political, civic and women's issues.

Alice's father, T. Olney Hill, came from a sometimes-prosperous Midwestern family whose fiscal instability left an indelible mark on him. A roommate recalled that Hill often talked in his sleep—but only about money.

Relocating to New York City by 1874, he began a career in banking. He found success at a Wall Street brokerage firm, until declining mental health and accusations of embezzlement and fraud forced his early retirement.

Bessie Muir Fisher, whose father was superintendent of **Greystone Psychiatric Hospital**, met T. Olney through friends and their relationship blossomed quickly. Letters first addressed to “My dear Mr. Hill” became “My one True Heart” only a month later, and they married in Morristown in 1890.

Three daughters followed, but the letters professing wifely devotion disappeared, replaced with harsh accusations of hoarding secret monies and failing his family. From outward appearances the Hill family reflected the model set by Morristown’s stylish upper class.

The children had an Irish nurse who cared for them—although it was Bessie who punished 18-month-old Alice Leslie by spanking and shutting her in a dark closet because she refused to kiss a visitor to their home.

After a relative bequeathed \$15,000 to Bessie in 1920, they purchased a handsome Victorian home at 30 Franklin Place. The family belonged to elite organizations such as the Morristown Field Club and Morris County Golf Club and their name appeared in Morristown’s Social Register.

Mrs. Hill occupied her time with business and benevolent organizations and the girls attended select private schools. Invitations to fashionable luncheons and parties insured that Bessie and her younger daughters received mention in local newspapers’ social columns.

Despite these upper-crust credentials, the family never climbed the gilded ladder because their behavior was not in keeping with the constraints of genteel society. There were public arguments in church and rumors of violence among family members.

Fabricated stories such as T. Olney acting as best man at Hamilton Twombly’s lavish wedding to Florence Vanderbilt, and boasting that Hill Street was named after the family were easily disproved.

Residents who knew the Hills dismissed them as status seekers who put on false airs, pretending connections and money they did not have, all while on the brink of poverty.

The family drifted from crisis to crisis, regularly asking relations or friends for loans. Stock market turmoil took a toll on T. Olney’s business, and his wife agonized over stacks of bills that he refused to pay.

Battled by internal demons and domestic hardship, Hill was institutionalized in a New York sanitarium for what his doctor described as a complete mental breakdown. His Wall Street firm dissolved. Then in 1901, his former partner sued him for misappropriating clients' funds for personal use.

In his diary T. Olney admitted to excessive drinking, taking opiates and behaving strangely, but accused his colleagues of taking advantage of his disturbed mental state. After two lengthy hospital stays, T. Olney retired from business and receded into the shadows of the household. He died in 1926 at **Greystone Hospital**.

Bessie Hill struggled to keep her family financially afloat by taking in boarders and renting farming properties. She had managed a small hotel before her marriage and her smart business sense surpassed her husband's.

Daughter Connie's clerical job in New York City provided a small source of income. Daughter Ursula had escaped the family by marrying a man who lived in upstate New York, and Alice contributed little to family finances—the business of good works seldom paid.

Perhaps influenced by her unconventional mother, Ms. Hill gravitated toward substantive issues. Her lack of voting rights—until the age of 29 when the 19th Amendment passed in 1920—did not deter her; she described her occupation as “activist” and that she was.

Acquaintances used similar words to describe both Bessie and Alice: Headstrong, intelligent, disagreeable, outspoken, willful. Nicknamed “The General” by her father, Ms. Hill's skill set meshed well with advocacy.

At only 25, she headed up the Morris County Schools Industrial Association, an innovative program focused on improving vocational and homemaking skills for young people. A passion for efficient government brought her to the New Jersey League of Women Voters, the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce and the New Jersey Women's Republican Club, where she quickly took an active role in promoting their agendas.

Writing political tracts to clarify election laws, organizing rallies to promote a leaner government, bullying legislators to support the adoption of voting machines, Alice Leslie Hill challenged the conventional view that women needed shielding from the vulgar business of politics.

During Herbert Hoover's successful presidential campaign in 1928, she toured the state as a popular speaker at political rallies. She recalled to a friend taking risky trips to Jersey City in an armored car to assist African-Americans and women to register to vote. Ms. Hill represented a growing number of influential women who understood that electoral politics was an ally, not an enemy, to social reform.

Through her many contacts, Alice Leslie Hill learned of a new organization in Newark, the New Jersey Birth Control League.

During the 1930s, government regulations prohibited women from gaining information about or gaining access to contraceptives. When she attempted to procure a medical manual regarding contraception from the Morris County Library, she was denied access; only physicians could view the publication.

Determined to assist women seeking support from the burden of repeated or unwanted pregnancies, she joined the Morristown branch of the League. With her own funds, Ms. Hill organized educational forums and clinics to promote family planning and research. And it was through this association that she befriended Margaret Sanger, the birth control pioneer.

Mrs. Sanger would hide out at the Hill residence whenever her illegal activities promoting contraception reform prompted New York City police to seek her arrest.

As Alice Leslie Hill increased the scope of her activities, difficulties at home escalated. Fiscal worries were a constant strain; she often badgered colleagues for money.

Allegations of assaulting a witness in a legal case, neighbors eyeing her berating her sister in public, harassing local politicians on the street, all pointed to a caustic, quarrelsome woman who had no patience or interest in social amenities.

On two occasions did her family commit her to **Greystone Hospital** for a combined period of almost five years.

In the 1920s, as secretary to the New Jersey Citizens' Committee for Institutional Development, Ms. Hill toured **Greystone** to investigate allegations of inhumane conditions at the facility. As a patient she surely learned in a more intimate way about life among the syphilitics, psychotics, alcoholics and other inmates populating the hospital.

According to a friend who met with hospital officials on Ms. Hill's behalf, the staff questioned her presence there.

She wrote, "Officials of the institute did not consider her as needing either treatment or incarceration in such a place. Their intimation was that her family had taken the authority to have her placed there and that was all they could do about it...she was perfectly capable of taking her place in normal society."

In 1946 she was officially released as "Recovered." Returning home at age 55, Alice Leslie Hill's work as an effective advocate for social and political change in New Jersey was over.

She retreated from public life and rarely left the house, although she created scrapbooks filled with news clippings—evidence of her lasting interest in current affairs. Whether the victim of a troubled mind or a woman punished for pushing the boundaries of proper feminine behavior in a less tolerant era may never be known.

Ms. Hill was 81 years old when she died at home alone on Christmas day, 1972. The contents of the family home were sold at auction and a developer bought the property, but plans for it stalled. A fire, determined by authorities to be arson, destroyed the house in 1977.