

# The New York Times

REAL ESTATE

## *The Love for One Orange*

### Living In

By JILL P. CAPUZZO SEPT. 16, 2011



Strollers near Pete's barber shop at the heart of South Orange, which is also home to restaurants as various as Little Cuba, Cafe Arugula and Stony's Grill. The population, too, is diverse. And since 1996, the village has had a direct train link to Manhattan. Emile Wamsteker for The New York Times

WHEN asked what they like best about living in South Orange, residents almost invariably cite three attributes: the rich and varied architecture, the demographic diversity, and the easy commute into [Manhattan](#). The latter two have a lot to do with the fact that [New York City](#) is the point of origin for a high percentage of South Orange's residents.

“It’s like getting a city, with a backyard,” said Cherre Schwartz of Weichert Realtors in Maplewood, noting that most of her clients come from New York or the more urban parts of North Jersey, and that many work in the city.

Byron and Timicka Anderson are just such a couple. After living in [Brooklyn](#) for five years, they started a family and began looking for a suburb with an easy commute to New York. Friends directed them to South Orange, in Essex County around 18 miles west of Manhattan.

“We were assured we’d fit right in, that everyone would have their Brooklyn or Hoboken story,” said Mr. Anderson, who with his wife and three sons now lives in a 3,000-square-foot ranch on a quarter acre that they bought for \$637,000 in 2008.

A designer of retail space in Manhattan, Mr. Anderson, 39, commutes daily, using the New Jersey Transit Midtown Direct line into Pennsylvania Station. Ever since its inauguration in 1996, this line has been direct in more ways than one, providing an obvious boost to housing values in this town of about 16,200.

Marc Loeb, a former resident of the Upper East Side of Manhattan, also takes advantage of the 30-minute train ride into the city each day, having moved to the Montrose Park section of South Orange last year with his husband, Wolf Ehrblatt. For this couple, who nine months ago had a daughter through surrogacy, diversity is South Orange’s most appealing quality. Citing the mixed-race and same-sex couples who are neighbors, Mr. Loeb described Montrose Park as a “great cross section of society,” adding that “we’ve made more friends in one year in South Orange than in our 10 years in New York,” and that his daughter was “going to be exposed to all sorts of humanity, and that’s important to me.”

Adam and Debbie Altamore, who have lived in town since 2000, like it so much that they decided to stay when recently trading up to a larger house. “When we moved into the house, people came over with baked goods, and introduced their kids to our kids,” Mr. Altamore said. “It’s a sort of community feeling that has been mostly lost. I wasn’t so much like that myself, but they made me feel like I belonged.”

According to a recent census breakdown, 60 percent of residents are white, 31 percent are African-American, 5 percent are Hispanic and 4 percent are Asian. By comparison, the population of Millburn, another upscale Essex County town, is 89 percent white, 8 percent Asian and 1 percent African-American.

Yet even as residents cite village diversity as an asset, there have been times when it evoked very public ambivalence. One was about 10 years ago, when there was a move to change the village’s name to South Mountain, to distance it from the other Oranges, which are more diverse and less prosperous. The measure was too contentious to come up for a vote, but “we thought it made sense not to have Orange in the name,” said Roy Scott, a broker with Re/Max Village Square. “The street signs, the Yellow Pages all say ‘the Oranges.’ We never get defined as South Orange. There was too much negativity attached to it on the news,” he said of the measure, “but a huge number of residents wanted it.”

## **WHAT YOU’LL FIND**

South Orange is often linked to Maplewood, the equally diverse neighbor with which it shares a high school and some public services. But South Orange has larger lots and more notable architecture. Caroline Farnsworth, an agent with Keller Williams Midtown Direct, estimates that 85 percent of its houses were built from the late 1800s to the 1930s. “There’s a lot of charm and character here,” she said. “It’s not your cookie-cutter kind of place.”

Some of the most magnificent houses can be found in Montrose Park, an area listed on the federal and state Registries of Historic Places since 1997. Grand Colonial Revivals, Tudors and Victorians occupy deep, heavily landscaped properties, along streets lighted with gas lanterns. (South Orange lays claim to having more operating gas lights than any other city in the country.)

### On the Market



#### 460 HARDING DRIVE

A five-bedroom 1933 stone and wood colonial with three full and two half baths, listed at \$599,000.  
(973) 216-3900



#### 334 WARWICK AVENUE

A five-bedroom four-and-a-half-bath 1908 colonial in the Montrose Park section, listed at \$675,000.  
(973) 762-3300



#### 461 LENOX AVENUE

A three-bedroom 1930 Tudor with two full and two half baths, listed at \$539,000.  
(973) 762-5400

A number of the town's public buildings are also on the historic register, as well as houses in a second, smaller historic district around Prospect Street, in the southwest corner. Smaller early 20th-century houses can be found in the southeastern Tuxedo Park neighborhood, which borders Newark and backs up to Seton Hall University, with its 58-acre campus serving 9,700 students. Near the center of town are condominiums and rental apartments, including the Church Street Commons luxury apartments near the train station.

The town occupies 2.8 square miles on the eastern slope of South Mountain. On the hills climbing up the mountain are some of the more modern houses, some of which have stunning views of the Manhattan skyline. This neighborhood, known as Newstead, is primarily a mix of ranches and contemporaries.

The newest homes — and the only new construction in recent years in South Orange — are on the site of a quarry in a mid-2000s [Pulte Homes](#) development called the Manors at South Mountain, which has 62 luxury town houses and 6 detached homes. Five years ago, Sherry and Stephen Weintraub sold their colonial on Harding Street and moved into the Manors. “It’s like living on top of a mountain,” said Mrs. Weintraub, 66. “You think you’re in Vermont.”

## WHAT YOU'LL PAY

In early September, there were 103 houses on the market in South Orange, ranging from an 1890 three-bedroom fixer-upper, listed at \$164,900, to a six-bedroom custom-built house on 0.75 acres with a lagoon-style pool, listed at \$1.299 million. Neither reflects the typical market here. According to the [Garden State Multiple Listing Service](#), 109 houses sold from January to the end of August, at a median price of \$524,900, up from \$507,000 for the 116 homes sold in the same period in 2010. Mr. Scott of Re/Max ascribes this rise to the fact that sellers are finally getting realistic about pricing. Still, he notes, “you get a lot of house for your money here.

“The huge majority of houses in South Orange were built in the time frame when there was the best construction in America,” Mr. Scott said.

This is how Mr. Loeb views the 1942 brick colonial on 0.25 acres that he and Mr. Ehrblatt bought last summer for \$610,000, before it was officially listed. Mr. Altamore, too, feels he got a great buy on his center-hall colonial on an acre. Built in the 1920s, the 6,000-square-foot house has a green tile roof, and a three-car carriage house with a legally deeded apartment, and cost the Altamores \$1.1 million in July 2010.

“I have friends paying that for an apartment in the city,” Mr. Altamore said. “For that, maybe they get an extra half bath or a couple of extra closets. Then they come out here and see this and say, ‘Where do I sign?’ ”

## THE SCHOOLS

South Orange has two elementary schools: Marshall, serving 450 students in prekindergarten through Grade 2, and South Mountain, serving 628 students in kindergarten through Grade 5. The South Orange Middle School has 674 students in Grades 6 through 8. [Columbia Senior High School](#), in Maplewood,

has 1,854 students from the two towns. SAT averages last year were 540 in math, 528 in reading and 524 in writing, versus 520, 496 and 494 statewide.

## **WHAT TO DO**

Opened in 2006, the ultramodern [South Orange Performing Arts Center](#) offers live performances in its 415-seat auditorium, as well as a five-screen movie theater. Outdoor activities include: a community pool that charges residents just \$20 a year to join; the Orange Lawn Tennis Club, which was founded in 1880 and has 10 grass and 10 artificial-turf courts; and hiking and biking trails in the [South Mountain Reservation](#), a 2,000-acre preserve that also has a dog park run by the county.

The town center has a mix of eclectic restaurants and one-of-a-kind stores. Also, the recent addition of an upscale grocery store, Eden Gourmet, has quelled some grumblings over the slow redevelopment of a site that once housed a ShopRite supermarket.

## **THE COMMUTE**

South Orange is served by two New Jersey Transit train stations on the Morristown line; the trip to Penn Station takes 30 to 40 minutes and costs \$6.75 per ride. For residents of outlying neighborhoods, there is jitney service to the train station. The 107 New Jersey Transit bus line also provides direct service into the city, taking 48 minutes to get to the Port Authority and costing \$6.50 per ride. During noncommuting hours, the drive into the city, via Route 280, can take as little as 25 minutes.

## **THE HISTORY**

The village of South Orange was included in a tract that Newark's founder, Robert Treat, bought from the Lenape Indians in 1666. It was part of Maplewood until 1904. Although its government structure makes it one of only four municipalities in [New Jersey](#) run as a village rather than a township,

it was officially accorded township status in 1981 so it could qualify for federal aid.

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