

The Remarkable Esther Lowden

Esther Lowden, founder of the home of The Haviland Club in Charlottetown, was born Esther Full in Halifax in 1836. She married at twenty; bore three daughters, all of whom survived well into the twentieth century; lost her husband at twenty-eight and her home by fire two years later. And, in 1869, she had constructed the lovely Italianate structure at 2 Haviland



Figure 1: The Haviland Club

Street, the house now known as The Haviland Club, where she lived until her death in 1896.

No picture of Esther Lowden has been discovered (if anyone has one we'd love a copy!), and the newspapers of the day mention her not at all. She is believed to have been a small woman, five feet tall or less, yet features of the house and certain historical records suggest an individual of imposing strength.

Much more is known about her husband, George Fesh Crowe Lowden, whose middle names were family surnames. According to newspaper archives, George Lowden was a Justice of the Peace and one of the original investors in The Bank of Prince Edward Island. Born on February 28, 1819 in Pictou, Nova Scotia, George appears to have been involved in trade from a young age. We have his letter written from 'Charlotte Town' in 1851, on the eve of his thirty-second birthday, in which he reports on trade to a John Lowden, not his father, and complains of poor treatment:

"If you write me next week, forget to accuse me of every imaginary fault you think of because if you do your letters will not be finished and I will have my doubts of it being from you. Do not be alarmed. I will do my best for you."

In 1860, after a period in California that coincided with the California gold rush, George owned at least four ships, a barque (Rival) and three schooners (Ingram, Jenny Lind and Ada), all registered in Charlottetown. The Island Register for 1863 lists him as a

wholesale dealer in flour, tea and tobacco manufacturing. Information from other sources suggests he may also have built ships. His business was located on Water at Queen Street and his home on Water Street near Pownal. George Lowden died unexpectedly in July 1864. At the time *The Islander* reported:

“Died. Suddenly, at Charlottetown, on the morning of the 12th inst. Of Apoplexy, George F. C. Lowden, Esq., Merchant of this city, aged 41 years, leaving a wife and two small children (Author’s note: Esther was then seven months pregnant) to mourn the loss of a kind husband and affectionate parent. Mr. Lowden came to this Island some twelve or fifteen years since, and commenced business at Crapaud; he afterwards left for California, and on his return to this Island, about eighteen months afterwards, established himself in business in Charlottetown, which he successfully prosecuted to the day of his death, having acquired a handsome competency...”

George died intestate. As executor, Esther, then twenty-eight years of age and with three small children (the youngest was born two months after George passed), was forced to sue a number of merchants to recover monies. From 1865 to 1870 there are records of fourteen different suits at the Supreme Court, including a successful suit against George’s brother Morin for £1,400, an immense sum. The cost to build 2 Haviland is not known, but the United Services Officers bought it in 1944 for \$4,000 in dollars. It would seem reasonable to assume that £1,400 in pounds, eighty years earlier, may well have been sufficient to construct it.

Then came the great fire of 1866, two years and three days after George Lowden passed, which consumed the Lowden family home



Figure 2: After the great fire, July 16 1866

“Four blocks in the most business part of the city, extending in one direction from Dorchester to Water Street, and in the other from Pownal to Great George Street, and comprising upwards of one hundred dwelling houses and places of business have been destroyed, with the exception of nine buildings...” The Herald, July 1866

Now thirty, Esther responded by purchasing two lots of what had been barracks land in the area that became known as the Dundas Esplanade (only the home across Water Street, constructed in 1879 and shown below, now bears that name.) She contracted with architect David Stirling of Halifax to build a grand home on the southerly of the two lots, and moved in with her young children in 1869.



Figure 3: Haviland Club and Dundas Esplanade

The Haviland Club has three large rooms on the main floor, a ballroom, a large parlour and a smaller room that may have been dining room. There is a kitchen and access to storage in the basement and servants' quarters on the second floor. Upstairs there are two bedroom suites on the north side of the building and a third encompassing the entire south side. The southern suite of rooms is panelled, which distinguishes it from the rest of the house, although the officers who purchased the house in 1944 installed panelling in the bar (now called the taproom) as well.

Having the finest views and with wooden panelling, these rooms were clearly those of the owner, Esther Lowden. The northernmost would have been the bedroom, its window having an unblocked view of the harbour when the house was constructed.

There is a narrow middle room, most probably a dressing room, and a southern room that looks directly out the mouth of the harbour, which would have been a private sitting room. Also in this suite is a hallway (since closed off) leading to the servants' quarters at the back of the house, and the sole access to the third floor and the lovely belvedere.



Figure 4: In the time of the US Consul General

This last point seems significant. The house is situated in a direct line from the mouth of the harbour. It has a belvedere, or widow's walk (now a widow's watch, as there is no outer balcony), an ideal place from which to watch for returning ships, the only access to which was in the owner's personal suite. Therefore, the belvedere was under the control of the owner.

We know that at his death, George Lowden owned a small fleet of ships. We suspect that Esther continued with the business afterward. The situation of the house and limited access to the belvedere suggest this to be true. More cannot be said, except for the word of a psychic, who believes Esther later fell in love with a bearded captain of one of her ships and continued to watch from the belvedere long after he was lost at sea.

In the census of 1881, Esther, age 45, is shown living with her three daughters, now 20, 18 and 15. She is listed as Wesleyan Methodist. Also in the household lived 50 year-old S. W. McMurray, a merchant, with his wife and two daughters. The census also lists in the household eight members of the Whelan family, including two seaman, likely brothers, and their wives and children. It seems probable that the Whelan women were family servants, while the men worked at sea, possibly on Esther's fleet of ships.



Figure 5: Daughter and nephews

Esther Lowden was not a large woman. Although we have no image of Esther herself, we do have a photograph of a daughter. The picture at right is or either Alice or Georgina, as the boys are Dorothy's sons and the note with the picture describes the woman as their aunt. Note the slight height and proportions, which we presume Esther shared. The house's low doorknobs and banisters, 28 inches above the floor, suggest that she was less than five feet in height. At the very least it is fair to say that the house was not built for a tall person: the officers who later bought the house raised the floor above the stairs several inches to avoid bumping their heads.

Esther Lowden died November 7, 1896. She lies buried in Sherwood Cemetery, apart from her husband, as George was buried in the Old Protestant Burying Ground, which closed in 1866. At the time of her death Esther owned four properties, the Haviland Club building at 2 Haviland Street as well as properties on Sidney Street (234), King Street (129-131), and a building then known as the Lowden building at 15 Queen Street, and since demolished.

With her passing the house at 2 Haviland Street was leased and occupied as the US Consulate of Prince Edward Island, and sold in 1944 to the United Services Officers Club, which became the Haviland Club in 1997.

A small woman; married at twenty; widowed at twenty-six while pregnant with her third child and the others still very young; who lost her home to fire two years later; who met the challenge by hiring an architect to build an innovative, stylish home that remains a Charlottetown landmark almost 150 years later; a small, young woman who very probably oversaw the operation of a fleet of ships and the men who sailed them.

It is a remarkable story.



Figure 6: Esther's Monument, Sherwood Cemetery, where she lies with daughter Alice