

George E. Dowling and his House

By Barbara Bedau Brow
White Lake Area Historical Society



Dowling house photograph courtesy of Laura Connell

George E. Dowling was born in Bayham Township, London, Middlesex, Ontario, Canada February 26, 1839. He was the oldest of five sons born to John Dowling and Phoebe Losey: William C (1841-1920); Henry Perry (1845-1908); Cassius D. (1851-1915); Melvin Thomas (1853-1932).

The family moved to Grand Rapids in 1849. At the age of seventeen, Mr. Dowling went to Grand Haven and began clerking in the general store of Ferry & Son. During 1857 and 1858 he was employed in the Chicago lumber yard of the same firm. He came to White River in 1859 and assisted Maj. N. H. Ferry in his sawmill business but the following year took a trip to Pike's Peak and then on to California.

After a year he returned to White Lake and assumed charge of Maj. Ferry's extensive business while the major entered the army. Upon the death of Maj. Ferry in 1865, the business was closed out at White River and Mr. Dowling moved up White Lake to the present site of Montague. The firm of Ferry, Dowling & Co. was formed and was composed of the Rev. William M. Ferry, and E. P. Ferry, with Mr. Dowling as resident managing partner. They platted the village of Montague and erected the first sawmills and store.

Mr. Dowling was later a partner in the sawmill firm of F. H. White & Co. and the mercantile firm of S. H. Lasley & Co. Ferry, Dowling & Co. also erected a large flouring mill and hotel. He also gave his time to banking and real estate. He organized the Muskegon County bank and formed a partnership with H. H. Terwilliger and C. H. Cook as associates.

Miss Annie Wilson was born in England on 2 October 1848. She immigrated with her mother, Catherine, brother Robert and sister Elizabeth "Libbie" around 1854, and joined their cousins in Kent County,

Michigan. Their father William had perished on an immigration ship that sank some years before. Catherine died in 1889 and is buried in Oak Grove Cemetery next to her son Robert who died in 1878.

George married Miss Anna Wilson on 10 April 1875 in Lansing. They had a son John William "Willie" in 1876. Unfortunately, he passed away in 1882 at the age of six years with something listed as malaria fever.

By October 1870 the first floor of George Dowling's three-story house was already finished. Located on high ground above the business part of the village, he had a view of the lake, railroad and most of the adjacent country.

The 14-room house has 4 fireplaces, one of which takes up part of a wall. The brick walls in the basement are covered with wainscoting and plaster. An interesting feature of the house is the beautiful woodwork throughout. To the untrained eye, many think that a variety of wood was used for the doors, trim and wainscoting. Actually, it is nothing more than pine. Skilled artisans painted on a veneer by a method known as "graining." The problem with graining occurs when the wood surface is scratched. Once the grain is nicked, it takes an artist to restore it to its original design.

There was also an icehouse and a carriage house on the property.

In 1876 George Dowling put up a new carriage gate which opened by the wheels passing over an iron bar. He also added a new fence and sidewalk in front.

In 1880 a gas machine was installed in the residence which enabled Dowling to manufacture his own gas to light his whole house.

George Dowling died in March 1896. Annie Dowling continued to live in the house following his death. She died on 2 Oct 1920 in a private sanitarium in Grand Rapids where she had been for 2 years.

The house still stands in town today. It has seemingly changed very little over all the years although it has seen several owners and several different paint colors.

Charles and Della Row purchased the house in 1922 from the Dowling Estate. The Row family was originally from Lansing and used the house as their summer home for several years before making it their permanent residence. He was a state agent for the National Fire Insurance company before retiring. In 1922 it was reported in the local newspaper that Annie Dowling's house was receiving a coat of white paint. In October 1929, George A. Hawley and Son of Hart were landscaping the former Dowling property. Della Row died in February 1950 and Charles Row died in April 1950. They were both 79 years old and are buried in Oak Grove Cemetery.

Elmer and Myrtle Buttleman purchased the house from the Row estate in 1950. They operated the house as a tourist home for the next three years, before selling the house in 1956 to Murray Burch.

Murray Burch purchased the house in April 1956. He was a duPont executive. He kept the carriage house which faced Grant Street and some of the land when the property was sold to the Stembols in 1962. The carriage house was renovated into a livable residence.

Theodore "Ted" Stembol and his wife Elaine purchased the house in 1962. They had six children at the time, so the house was a much better fit for them than their previous house in Maple Grove. The icehouse which remained part of the property was moved in alignment with the driveway and was converted into a garage.

In 1987 they decided to paint the house light grey with white trim. An article that appeared in the paper in May of that year indicated that they had used 65 gallons of paint the previous time when they painted the house green with black trim. They figured it would take at least that much this time.

Ted died in January 2012; his wife Elaine died in August 2017.

Ward & Carla Stembol Heaton are the current owners the historic George Dowling house.