

The Past of Cruickston Park:

Scandalous Marriages, the Rich Families of New York and the Unsinkable Titanic

By Rachel Morgan Redshaw, Historical Researcher of the North Dumfries Municipal Heritage Committee



Cruickston Park is often associated with wealth, a vast expansion of land, elegant architecture and gardens. The various buildings on the property are rich in history and stand out amongst the blue sky reminders of days long gone. Fond of its past reputation for the rich and famous I had quite an interest to know more about them.

There is a sort of air that remains, lingering as one enters places like Langdon Hall, an air that envelops dignified social regimes and prestigious engagements. Cruickston Park has many stories that envelop such societal quos, those who followed as well as those who rebelled against them.

The land that now situates Cruickston Park was once an expanse of land that was crossed by natives and later fur traders. The first time a European stepped foot upon the virgin soil was in the late 1700's. Amongst thick brush, men ventured towards a trading post carrying amongst them furs of different sorts. One of these men, Nathaniel Dodge, was quite contented with the area and so he purchased a parcel of land and built upon it a cabin. It was noted that in 1816, the year when Honourable William Dickson acquired the land of Dumfries, William and his side kick Absalom Shade spent a night at Mr. Dodge's cabin. It was rumoured that where Dodge's cabin was once situated now rests the remains of him and his wife.

The land remained predominately vacant until William Ashton came over from England and bought 230 acres on the Galt-Blair Road in 1853 from John Thomson. He was a motivated gentleman hoping to raise cattle and operate a brewery by a small stream nearby. He named the land after the ship he came to Canada in Cruickston Castle, calling his place Cruickston Park. Unfortunately, troubled times hit and he was forced to sell the property. The Crimean war ended in early 1856 and prices paid for local cattle were unreliable and subsequently by 1858 Mr. Ashton had to sell out without even a roof being placed on his home having worked on it between 1853 and 1856.

In 1858, a man by the name of Matthew Wilks, a reverend's son from England, came along in hopes of buying the property. He was told by his physician that it would be an excellent decision for his health and well being, Blair being noted as an excellent destination for a healthy lifestyle. He intended to use it as a summer home.

Mr. Wilks soon bought the property and began completing Mr. Ashton's construction of the house with the help of a Frenchman from New York, Charles Platt, who designed many prestigious homes in New York City and on Rhode Island. The 'Big House' took over a total of 17,500 square feet. It envelops Gothic Revival architecture as well as a Victorian theme with a hint of 1870's New York architecture. Its steep roofs, bay windows, ornamental gables are only a few of its many elegant architectural details. The first floor and second floors were primarily used for the family's living quarters as well as rooms for entertainment and the basement kitchen and attic were designated for the servants. The completed result was a home that doubled its original size in 1873.

Mathew Wilks married Eliza Ashton Langdon in 1842, who was a granddaughter of a famous and quite wealthy man at the time John Jacob Astor of New York. John was a man of great demeanour and continued his accumulation of wealth through tactical connections and engagements.

John's daughter and Eliza's mother Dorothea (Dolly) aware of her father's strict rules but relentless to love found herself in quite a dilemma at a young age. In 1812, at the young age of 18, Dorothy fell deeply in love with Colonel Walter Langdon of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Unwilling to sacrifice her love for the man for her father's strategic marriages she persisted in getting married. Before her father could act upon the matter Dorothy and her beloved ran away and were secretly married.

Her father soon made the discovery of the scandal and was enraged by it. He had no wish to take part in her married life and rumours say he

never really forgave her for it. However, after years of little contact with his daughter on one particular day something quite interesting happened. He went to visit a friend of his and at the time it happened that there was a children's party going on. While he was at the home he spotted a very pretty girl. Asking her name she told him, "I am Sarah Astor Langdon", Eliza as a little girl and future wife to Matthew Wilks stood nearby. Mr. Astor soon found himself in shock and in shame for not caring for his daughter's family. Soon after, he gave his daughter Dorothy "a fine house, new wealth and an enhanced social position in New York".

This wealthy upbringing can be seen in the New York influenced architecture of the Big House influenced by Eliza and its incorporation with the British influences of Mr. Wilks. Together, Matthew and Eliza had seven children: Eliza, Matthew, Alice Eugenia, Charles, Annette, Katherine Langdon and Eugene Langdon who would later build Langdon Hall.

Eventually Matthew Wilks died in 1899 after many years on the property. Years later his wife Eliza was rumoured to having gone aboard on the 'unsinkable ship', the Titanic. Along with other prestigious families of the time she climbed aboard the majestic ship that was headed to her beloved New York and consequently her death. As the great liner sank into the frigid depths of the Atlantic Ocean so did the wife of Matthew Wilks and granddaughter of John Astor of New York.

By 1947, the estate included seven houses. The management of the property passed to the youngest daughter Katherine Langdon Wilks who guided the farm until 1948 at the age of 94. While she operated the farm great changes transformed the Cruickston farm forever. She changed from breeding fine cattle to fine horses. Soon she found herself famous for her fine steeds winning "over 1,000 ribbons and 50 cups including the Kentucky Futurity".

After WWI, she bred heavy black horses called Percherons which were strategically used for work on the farm until her death in 1948. She never married and so the farm was passed over to her nephew, Matthew Wilks Keefer. He was born in Galt in 1891 and was the son of Alicia Eugenia and Surgeon Major William Napier and grandson of the first president of the Welland Canal.

He was a well studied man and had a special interest in law later traveling to England. There, in 1939 he married Margaret Scott and eight years later he returned to Canada a year before Katherine's death to help out on the farm. At the time one tractor and 18 Percherons were doing a thousand acres of farm work.

After Katherine's death, Matthew modernized the farm switching breeding back to the fine bred Hereford cattle; they reached their peak in 1958 with 232 head of cattle.

Matthew and Margaret had no children and so when he died in 1971, most of the land went to University of Guelph who took over the management of the farm in April of 1973. Their two sisters remained on the estate, their acreage included the huge main house built by Ashton and later enlarged by Matthew Wilks. In 1990, the wife of Matthew Wilks Keefer passed away which meant that the forty-two acres, the big house and additional buildings fell into the hands of the University of Guelph. In 1996, the university sold the mansion and acreage to Jan Chaplin and Mark Fretwurst.

In 2000 Jan and Mark acquired the remaining lands of Cruickston Park. They envisioned it as a place of environmental and agricultural learning. On February 13th, 2002, 370 hectares of land at Cruickston Park was sold to Cruickston Charitable Research Reserve (CCRR) a non-for-profit organization by Jan Chaplin and Mark Fretwurst so that the land can "be preserved for future generations".

Langdon Hall was added in 1898 by Eugene Langdon Wilks. Eugene Langdon Wilks, who was the youngest son of Matthew and Eliza, was married to Pauline Kingsmill. It was interesting to find out that she was the great-granddaughter of Hon. William Dickson the founder of Dumfries. That year they bought one hundred acres. Soon after they had obtained the land they began constructing what today we know as Langdon Hall.

The original drawings that were performed by Edward Lee Young who was an architect of New York were altered by Eden Smith an architect from Toronto. By using Young's drawings, Smith was able to create a structure of American style however that was simpler and clean-cut than what Young had been planning. It was completed in 1902 and became a comfortable and suitable home for the sportsman and horseman that Eugene was.

Unfortunately, his wife was diagnosed with cancer. She decided to go on



Cruickston Park Farm

a quest to Europe for a cure. Her Swiss nurse, Marguerite Briquet tended to her needs until her death in 1914 which left Eugene with no heir.

The next year Eugene married her nurse, Marguerite Briquet of Geneva, Switzerland in France and together they had three children: Catherine, Anne and Marion who lived in both Langdon Hall, New York and a chateau near Tours, France.

In 1934, Eugene passed away at his chateau in Tours and was buried in Cheltenham, England. During WWII, the French army took over their chateau and so the family had to return to Canada to Langdon Hall as a permanent residence.

Marguerite, Eugene's beloved wife, died in 1961 and was buried in Galt. Both gone Langdon Hall passed into the hands of Catherine their eldest daughter. Catherine and her husband moved into the house until the following year when it was bought by Dr. Rudy Wensel and his wife Gabriele. It was at this point on that the property was removed from the family.

A few years later the property was sold again to Dedi-care group which had dreams of transforming into an elegant hotel however possible alterations and changes to the property were greatly opposed and so the property was sold yet again in 1987 to William Bennett, a Toronto architect, and Mary Beaton. His aspirations for the home also were to change the house into a small luxurious hotel, which came to be after eighteen months of



Matthew and Eliza Wilks

to offer excellent service and is a common stay for celebrities and politicians when visiting in the area.

The exquisite building was designed in the Federal Revival Style which is inspired by the Georgian and Classical traditions. The hip roofs, end chimneys, balanced facades, central door, classical details with the Ionic columns and pilasters and a great transom form an entrance denoting a sense of great wealth and prestige. As I drove up to it one day for an appointment I could not help but be awed by its grandeur. Hidden amongst the forestry terrain of the park it is truly a gem in North Dumfries.

Today, Cruickston Park continues to benefit the community in education and tourism. It has assisted our community in multiple ways and continues to enrich the people of today and tomorrow.