

Dr. William Henry King – The Codrington Connection

By Dan Buchanan

The pile of leaves under the chestnut tree was growing by the minute. The rhythmic scratch of a garden rake was a traditional sound of fall cleanup around these parts. The Buchanan farm straddled Number 30 Highway just north of the village of Codrington. My job that sunny fall morning was to gather up all the dead leaves under the big chestnut tree at the corner of our front lawn and carry them over to the ditch at the end of the drive barn.

It was 1965 and I was a teenage farm boy who knew these jobs well and gladly helped the rest of the crew with whatever chores were on the list. My Grandfather, Lloyd Ames, was working up in the shop preparing machinery for winter storage and my dad, Charles Buchanan, was busy ploughing the front garden with the big Massey Ferguson tractor and a 6-furrow plough.

As I raked the leaves I listened to the revving of the tractor engine as Dad performed the delicate dance of big machinery in a small place. Suddenly, there was a loud crash and the tractor stalled. For a few seconds there was total silence, then, as I swung around to see what was up, I could hear my Dad's voice rising in anger.

The sight that greeted me across the lawn was bizarre, to say the least. The rear wheels of the tractor appeared to be mired down in the soft brown earth but the rear end of the plough was pointed toward the tops of the pine trees that formed a green wall along the west side of the garden.

Dad was climbing off the tractor as my teenage legs sped me to the scene. I yelled at him before reaching the garden "What happened?", but he did not answer as he walked to the rear of the tractor. As I approached, I could see that there was a large stone jutting out of the ground and wedged between two of the plough points. In effect, the plough was resting on the stone.

We both knelt down and tried to wipe dirt off the stone and the plough so we could see better what we had. It didn't take long for Dad to exclaim loudly that he knew what it was. Before I could inquire further, Grandfather came striding across the garden, having heard the commotion from the shop. The two men conferred for a time. Grandfather lit his pipe, which he always did when he had something to think about. Dad dug some of the dirt out from around the big stone which was the centre of their attention.

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Last Revised: September 8, 2009

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I often looked back on that scene and wish I had not been a typical teenage boy more interested in baseball than family history. But, alas, we are what we are. Dad and Grandfather managed to disengage the plough from the stone and the job of ploughing the garden was completed. I recall that there was talk of this stone being a grave stone but I don't recall anything being said to indicate exactly who might be buried there. Unfortunately, the importance of this event was lost on me at the time.



Several decades later, I tried to draw the story out of my Grandfather. We had some wonderful chats during many visits to his home in Codrington until his death in 1993. He was reluctant to discuss anything about the Dr. King story but would warm up to it if pressed. By that time Dad had confirmed for me that this was the grave stone of the notorious Dr. William Henry King who had murdered his wife and was hung in Cobourg. Grandfather was very sensitive about the whole story since it cast a shadow on his family's honour.

Lloyd Ames' mother was Linnie King who was a niece of William Henry King; her father was David Nelson King, younger brother of William. Grandfather was always annoyed by the many magazine and newspaper stories that popped up regularly over the years. He would have been happy if nobody mentioned it again – ever.

When I asked him what had become of the grave stone, he told me that the encounter with the plough had broken the stone in half and they had moved the pieces off the garden into the lilac bushes at the south east corner of the garden. As children we played in those lilac bushes, wearing paths between the clumps to play hide and seek.

Sometime later, when the entire family was at church, he drove his jeep back to the farm and parked beside the lilac bushes. He pulled both pieces of the stone out of their hiding place and onto the garden. Then, using his favourite sledge hammer and taking great pleasure in the act, he proceeded to pulverise the stones into small pieces. After he was done, he tossed the pieces into the back of the jeep and drove up onto "The Hill" where we pastured our beef cattle. There he

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buried the lot in several well hidden sandy graves. He made it very clear that for him this had been a profoundly satisfying accomplishment. He was finally rid of that horrid story!

This was the extent of what I knew about Dr. King's grave stone until one day in 2007 when I was visiting Dad at his home in Belleville. We were looking at some of his large collection of slides. During the 1950's and 1960's Dad had been an avid photographer. He had purchased decent equipment, learned the technology and took it very seriously. As a result, our family is blessed with a wonderful record of life on the farm as the four kids grew up together amongst all the dogs and cats and cows.

Dad showed me a group of slides he had picked out, thinking I might use them to support my research into the history of Codrington. There were the usual pictures of the house and the barn and the dog and the kids, but then, one slide came up that stunned me. It was a picture of a grave stone lying flat a few inches below the ground. The next slide came up quickly and it was even more stunning. This was a close view of the grave stone of William Henry King! It was in wonderful shape since it had been buried for decades. I couldn't believe my eyes! The letters and numbers were all perfectly clear, right down to the signature at the bottom to indicate that the stone was a product of Moore's of Belleville.

I asked if this picture was taken at the time of the episode with the plough and Dad said no, this had been taken several years earlier when he and Grandfather had dug up the stone which they knew to be buried just at the south east corner of the house. Apparently they were planning to change something in that immediate area so they wanted to move it out of the way.

Of course, being the avid photographer that he was, Dad fetched the camera while the stone was visible and took these two pictures before they pulled the stone out of its resting place and buried it again in the middle of the garden only a few yards away. What an amazing stroke of luck!



Much has been written about the crime and punishment of Dr. William Henry King. The story has become part of Brighton local history. We see articles published on the topic occasionally and we hear comments about the story in our conversations with friends. A full description of the Dr. King story will have to wait for another day, but the recent increase in publications about local history for Brighton Township suggests that a few words about Dr. King's story and his connection with Codrington would be useful.

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Of course, any discussion of the Dr. King story would be incomplete and possibly in poor taste if we did not make it very clear that this story revolves around a brutal murder. The victim of that murder was Sarah Ann King, the wife of Dr. William Henry King. Sarah died on November 4, 1858, at the age of 25, after what the court found to be arsenic poisoning. It was determined that she had died from arsenic hidden in medicine prescribed by her doctor who was also her husband, and administered by her mother who acted as her nurse.

William and Sarah had been married January 31, 1853, in what we might imagine to have been an atmosphere of joy and anticipation. She was the daughter of John M. Lawson and Elizabeth Jane Lynderson of Lawson Settlement, south of Smithfield. She was a middle child of seven from a prosperous United Empire Loyalist family who were among the first settlers in the area south and east of Brighton. William was the first child of George King and Henrietta Jenkins who had a thriving farm about ten miles north of Brighton at a crossroads where the village of Codrington would begin with the establishment of a post office later in the same year. Here was a match of two local young people from prosperous and respected families.

A year after the marriage, a son, George Henry King, was born to the young couple. However, the child died after two months on March 18, 1854. By most accounts, Sarah herself was not well much of the time. During the next few years, William pursued his medical education, first in Toronto and then in a prestigious Medical School in Philadelphia. He practiced for a time in Hamilton but by March of 1858 he had set up a medical practice on Sanford Street in Brighton.

Stories suggest that Sarah had left William in Hamilton due to marital problems and come back to Brighton to live with her parents. Her husband later joined her and the couple reconciled. It was soon apparent, however, that the young Dr. King was not satisfied with home life. He did not try very hard to be discrete about the fact we was seen regularly with a pretty young girl named Melinda Vandervoort.

The events that follow



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were well documented in the trial and the many newspapers of the day. Dr. King prescribed medicine for his sick wife and her mother worked diligently to administer it as the Doctor ordered. Within a few weeks Sarah was dead. The sordid story led to a sensational trial and the ultimate conclusion for Dr. King was found at the end of a noose outside Cobourg Court House on June 9, 1859. It would have been clear to George King that his son could not be buried in the family plot in Warkworth Cemetery so they were forced to bury the body on their own property. They picked a spot at the very south east corner of the new brick farm house that George King and his sons had recently built on the west side of the road.

My Grandfather told me that his mother had been very upset by the presence of the grave stone that still stood in plain view at the corner of the house while he was growing up. Apparently people driving by on the road would stop in front of the lilac bushes and point up towards the house. In the late 1920's, when Linnie Ames could stand the embarrassment no longer, she asked her sons Lloyd and Kenneth to hide the stone from public view. The boys lay the stone flat and buried it where it had stood, just a few inches under the grass. After several decades of rest, it would meet its own fate.

Today, Dr. King's memorial is long gone but these pictures provide a rare glimpse into an episode in our past. We may not want to have a skeleton in the closet but this is real history, whether we like it or not.



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