

Flora Herdic: A tumultuous life

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

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The life of Florence "Flora" Louise Herdic is shrouded in mystery. She was Peter Herdic's daughter by his first wife, Amanda Taylor Herdic. Flora Herdic was born and raised in Williamsport, but at a certain point in her life scandal enveloped her and she essentially disappeared.

Flora Herdic's story, of course, intrigued me. Details about the life of this almost forgotten daughter began to emerge thanks to a team of "history detectives," including Joan Knight of the Lycoming County Genealogical Society and genealogist Todd A. Farmerie.

Together we studied census records, cemetery records and newspaper stories. We spent time in the basement of the Lycoming County Court House with Peter Herdic's estate and bankruptcy records and in

the Prothonotary's office where divorces are recorded. Scott Sager of the Lycoming County Historical Society located photographs. The story is not complete, but this is what we have discovered so far.

Herdic's birth

Florence Louise Herdic was born in November 1854, most likely in her parents' newly constructed mansion on West Fourth Street — which today houses the Herdic House restaurant. Her mother died when she was just three years old. Four years later, Peter remarried. His second wife was Encie Maynard, and they had two boys — Peter and Harry.

As a young lady, Herdic seemed to follow in the footsteps of her mother and stepmother. She was involved with her church and was a founding member, along with her step-mother Encie, of the Home for the Friendless (now the Williamsport Home). She served on the Industrial Home and Social and Educational committees. In 1874, she signed the Temperance Pledge of the Women's Crusade in Williamsport.

Her wedding

Herdic made headlines twice. On Oct. 15, 1874, at 19 years old, she married William Jones McClary, a carriage builder from a distinguished Delaware family. According to the coverage in the Williamsport Daily Gazette and Bulletin, the wedding was the "social

event of the season." It was said that the political elite of Pennsylvania attended the wedding, held at Trinity Episcopal Church, the church that her father had donated the land and \$80,000 to build.

After the ceremony, the wedding party "departed to the residence of the bride's father," where the guests danced "until a late hour." "In another room," the article continues, "the gas shed a perfect flood of light upon the bridal presents arrayed upon tables." The list of bridal presents fills several paragraphs and includes the groom's gift to the bride, a "solid gold neckchain and cross, massive and beautiful in design."

Herdic and McClary moved into a home that Peter Herdic had built on Millionaire's Row, just below Fifth Avenue. They had two children: Samuel, born in 1877, and Thomas, in 1880.

The elopement

Herdic's second headline was in the Sept. 26, 1886, edition of the New York Times. The very dramatic story, worthy of today's tabloids, was discovered by Todd Farmiere in his research on the Williamsport Haswell family. The headline screams, "After a Faithless Husband: An Eloping Couple Found after Five Years," and the article provides details of Herdic's elopement with Alfred M. Haswell, a Williamsport upholsterer, who was married and had four children.

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Haswell had been doing some work in the McClarys' home. There must have been more than upholstery going on, though, because on April 12, 1881, the illicit couple left town. According to the Times story, Herdic took her sons, the family silver, linens and \$300.

Just before the elopement, there was a catfight. Frances Haswell, suspecting her husband of wandering, followed him from their home on Locust Street and discovered Herdic and her husband meeting. She attacked Herdic, and Alfred pulled her off.

After their elopement, Herdic and Alfred Haswell were living a quite ordinary life as husband and wife in Rockford, Ill., when, according to the news story, a man from Williamsport happened through the town, recognized them, and telegraphed the news home to Frances Haswell, still living in Williamsport with her only surviving child, Alfred Jr.

Arrest

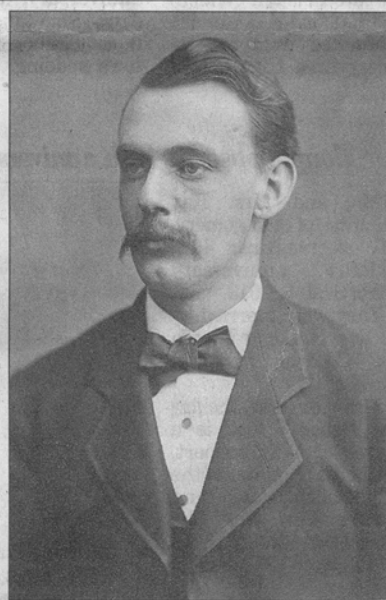
At the behest of Frances Haswell, Herdic and Haswell were arrested and charged with adultery. Neither was tried — Herdic skipped bail and the charges against Alfred were eventually dropped. Reportedly, Peter Herdic was also in Rockford and Chicago and met with Herdic.

William McClary, who had entered into the lumber business in Williamsport like his father-in-law, left town shortly after Herdic deserted him, returning to Delaware. The following year he was granted a divorce. He died in 1918, apparently still single.

Alfred Haswell never returned to Williamsport. Two children in Chicago, where Haswell died in 1903.

Peter Herdic died two years after he met with Herdic in Illinois, and there is no indication that she attended his funeral in Williamsport. But diligent research by our "history detectives team" has uncovered more about her life after Alfred Haswell.

Her second and



PHOTOS PROVIDED

At top, is the home of Florence and William McClary at 942-944 W. Fourth St. Above left is a photo of Florence Herdic, taken at the time of her wedding to William McClary. Her necklace was a wedding gift from her husband. Above right is a photo of William McClary taken at the time of their wedding. All photos courtesy of the Lycoming County Historical Society.

Third marriages

Herdic married twice more. In the courthouse records for Peter Herdic's estate settlement, Joan Knight discovered an 1894 affidavit from a "Mrs. Florence Fanning," who identified herself as the daughter of Peter Herdic and therefore entitled to part of his estate.

In May 1900, Herdic received the last \$147.55 remaining in the estate. It was designated "the relief of a daughter of Peter Herdic by his first wife who, although married, unfortunately was led astray and is now in actual want" (Susan Q. Stranahan, *Susquehanna: River of Dreams*, John Hopkins, 1993).

Census records for 1900 find a 45-year-old widow named Florence Fanning, a dressmaker, living in Philadelphia with her two sons, Samuel and Thomas, then 23 and 19. Her husband, John Fanning, had died in 1895.

Both sons married and had children. Samuel attended Cornell University and the University of Pennsylvania Medical School and was a noted cancer specialist. Thomas was a merchant and the proprietor of the McClary Seafood Market on 74th Street in Philadelphia.

In 1903, Herdic married again. Her third husband, Edouard Benac, was a widowed professor

of French who had been born in Paris. They lived just outside Philadelphia until his death in February 1911.

Sad ending

We think, but cannot prove at this point, that Herdic died in Westport, Conn., and is buried in the town's Willowbrook Cemetery. A "Florence Benac," buried there in July 1911, had been a patient in McFarland's Sanitarium, a private hospital for the insane.

The birth date of the unfortunate woman matches that of Florence Herdic. If indeed this is our Herdic, it was a sad ending to a turbulent life.