

MY COUNTRY

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Lowell Family

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THE LOWELL FAMILY

MASSACHUSETTS COLONY TO CIVIL WAR

by Lucie N. Spruyt

This is a story of a great family - eleven generations covering a period of more than 300 years - made famous by the many diverse talents that appeared and reappeared through the years, and were used to benefit the nation. It will be told in two parts.

Of all the families which arrived in this country early in the seventeenth century there are perhaps eight or ten which have produced many generations of true leaders, citizens of memorable quality. The first would be the great Adams family, which gave us two presidents, noted statesmen and ambassadors, writers, educators and historians. The second great family - the Lowells - has given us most notably James Russell Lowell. He earned a permanent place among our greatest poets and writers and was a successful diplomat. Two Lowells were important presidents of Harvard. Others were early civic and church leaders, outstanding industrialists, judges and lawyers, soldiers and philanthropists. One was a popular poetess and another a well-known astronomer. Besides its ability and versatility the family has had a consistent tradition of service to the cause of justice. From John Lowell who wrote "freedom and equality for all" into the Massachusetts Constitution in 1776, and so was instrumental in ridding the state of slavery in 1832, down through James Russell Lowell, whose Bigelow Papers were part of his anti-slavery crusade before the Civil War, to two more recent champions of academic freedom at Harvard, Lowells have set an example of liberal humanitarianism.

The author is the consulting editor to My Country.

THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS

It was in 1066 that a Lowle fought with William the Conqueror and so won a coat of arms. Later there is record of a William Lowle of Yardley in Worcestorshire, and thence down to Percival (1571-1664), whose education was similar to that of his contemporary Shakespeare, learning Italian as well as Latin and reading Ovid



ORANGE COUNTY CALIFORNIA
GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

in the original. He married well, moved to Bristol and became a wholesale exporter and importer until the increase of taxes became a great irritation. For this, among other reasons, he decided to sail to the new world. He was 68 years old when he arrived here with his wife, Rebecca, sons John and Richard with their wives and four children and his daughter, Joan and her husband. Also included in the group were his partner William Gerrish, his clerk Anthony Somerby with his brother Henry, and an apprentice Richard Dole; sixteen in all, plus two born at sea. They arrived on June 23, 1639 and settled in Newbury, Massachusetts, where they built houses and here lived the first two American generations.

John Lowell (1595-1647), Percival's oldest son, was soon made a constable and in 1644 a deputy to the General Court. He was the town clerk, and soon after that was selected to be justice of the peace, with authority to settle many civic disputes.

John Lowell second (1629-1694) and his brother Joseph decided to go to Boston, where they busied themselves as coopers, making barrels and casks for the export of salt fish or rum or other products for Britain or the Continent. It was probably at this time that the spelling of the name became Lowell. This John Lowell had 19 children by three consecutive wives. Of these we follow the line of Ebenezer, his 15th child by his third wife. Ebenezer became involved in importing fine Cordovan leather, which was in great demand for shoes. He was also a retailer of liquors and a member of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company. Although he died young (at 36) he left a valuable estate and his business was carried on by his oldest surviving son Ebenezer. This second Ebenezer became a man of means and ability and was long remembered as a "stately, refined, commanding looking person". But it was his younger brother John, first of the family to receive a college education, who would lead the long line of intellectually talented Lowells.

The Reverend John Lowell (1704-1767) entered Harvard at 13, where President John Leverett had shaken off the rigid Puritanism of the Mathers. In 1725, when he was 22, he married the cousin of a classmate and accepted a call to a new church in the town of Newbury. Here he became so popular that the church had to be enlarged. He had a good ear for music and the singing of hymns was much improved. He was blessed with a fine intelligent wife, and it might be said here that as a general rule, Lowells were fortunate in their choice of wives. Lowell character has been enhanced by marriage with daughters of Higginson, Cabot, Amory, Jackson, Gardner, Lawrence, Hale and Emerson to name but a few families

also known for intellectual achievements, importance, and good works.

“The Old Judge” John Lowell (1743-1802) was born in the same year as Thomas Jefferson. He entered Harvard in 1758 and returned to Cambridge seven years later to practice law. In the famous year, 1776, he moved to Boston. General Knox had brought cannon from Ticonderoga which so strengthened Washington’s position that British General Howe embarked with his troops for Halifax. Many Loyalists accompanied him, and attorney John Lowell was appointed legal advisor to the commission set up to take over the Tory estates. During the last year of the war he was appointed one of three judges of appeals in Admiralty cases. Since the Bank of England could no longer be used as a central clearing house by merchants and traders, he and some other gentlemen were instrumental in founding the first Massachusetts bank (later the First National Bank of Boston.) Judge Lowell was sent to the State Constitutional Convention of 1776, where he advocated the phrase, “all men are created free and equal.” He represented Massachusetts at the Continental Congress of 1782 in Philadelphia, where he shared rooms with James Madison. He advocated a “free and equal” stance for the Confederation at that time and the U.S. Constitution later, but a court battle in Massachusetts turned on this key phrase in its Constitution and set free every man, woman and child then held slave in the Commonwealth.

The “Old Judge” accumulated wealth which he used in humane societies, agricultural organizations, immigration councils and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which he helped to found. Washington appointed him head of the District Court and Adams Chief Justice of the First Circuit Court (now Court of Appeals.) He died in Roxbury at his house “Bromely Vale” at the age of 59. Twice widowed, three times married, he had six daughters and three sons. The last son, Charles, became the father of James Russell Lowell.

LAW, INDUSTRY, RELIGION

John Lowell (1769-1840), the first son of the “Old Judge”, became known as “The Rebel”. He was a brilliant Harvard student, who was admitted to the bar in 1790. He was a most successful advocate and writer. He took time off for travel abroad, and returned to become president of the Massachusetts Agricultural Society. He was always interested in agriculture and built the first experimental greenhouses in the country at “Bromley Vale”. He be-

came involved in politics and, as a loyal Federalist, wrote various articles and tracts, such as "Peace Without Dishonour", "War Without Hope" and other warnings against the growing antagonism against England. He felt that Napoleon planned to invade Britain and that we should support England against France. He opposed "Mr. Madison's War" of 1812. As a banker, he instituted the Provident Institute for Savings, where the lowliest worker could put aside some part of his meager pay to gather interest, and invested in shipping lines. As a philanthropist he helped to build Massachusetts General Hospital, Phillips Academy, and the Historical and American Antiquarian Societies and was president and trustee of the Boston Athanaeum and a member of the Harvard Board of Overseers.

Francis Cabot Lowell (1775-1817) was the second son of the "Old Judge". He graduated from Harvard with the highest honors in mathematics. He was kept very busy after graduation attending to family properties, acquiring land and trading. In 1810 he took his family abroad and spent several weeks in the cotton mills of Manchester and Lancashire, standing for hours completely absorbed with the machinery and asking a thousand questions of owners and operators. Even after a winter in France, this Lowell not only could re-invent the complicated machinery from memory but improve upon it. With the help of an able associate, Paul Moody of Amesbury (a man of great mathematical and mechanical ability) he built the first modern textile mill in this country, in Waltham, Massachusetts. By 1817 this factory produced nearly 40 miles of cotton cloth daily and was paying dividends of nearly 20 percent. But in this year came his untimely death. Four years later, in December 1821, a group of wealthy and important men established the first cotton factory town, at the junction of the Merrimac and Concord Rivers. This new town of Lowell was laid out according to the plans and ideas of Francis himself. He had observed mill workers in England, and was determined to provide a better life for his employees. Community housing would be clean and well-run; there would be schools and a church or churches, a library, shops, and a hall where people could gather for lectures or other entertainments. Many young women came to Lowell from farms and towns all over New England, and paid off many a mortgage or helped a brother through college. That they were able to set aside so much of their earnings speaks well for the management during half a century, when their wages were 30 or 40 percent more than the usual pay of the time. But competition arose and a

wave of European immigration drove down wages. Economic depressions recurred and by the turn of the century the Lowell mills declined and soon afterward, they were silent and empty.

The Reverend Charles Lowell (1782-1861) was the youngest of the three sons of the "Old Judge". He returned from Theological studies in Edinburgh to become the pastor of the old West Church in Boston. Soft-spoken and rational, he preached "Grace and Good Works", believing that true religion is accompanied by good deeds. Indeed he became well-known in many a back alley where he brought physical and spiritual comfort to the poorest of this flock. Because of his liberal views he was denounced by the Puritanical Congregationalists as an apostate and heretic, just as his grandfather, the Reverend John Lowell, had been similarly criticized.

POETRY AND INTELLECTUAL ACHIEVEMENTS

The senior and longer-lived branch of the Lowell family, in which business and civic leadership was carried forward, continued in "The Rebel's" only son.

John Amory Lowell (1798-1881) became the recognized head of the family as a successful banker and merchant treasurer of four large cotton mills, trustee of the Athanaeum, member of the Harvard Corporation and sole trustee of the Lowell Institute of Boston, an intellectual forum. With no fixed premises, this has been an intellectual forum of major magnitude since its foundation in 1839.

James Rusell Lowell (1819-1891) spent a weekend with a Harvard classmate and fell in love with his sister, Maria, a fine young poet and leader of a band of young people concerned with Transcendentalism and other ideas of the time. She was an active temperance advocate. All of the group wrote prose and poetry, and young Lowell was soon taking an active part. He was enrolled in Harvard Law School, but found time to publish his first book of verse, *A Year's Life* (since he had met Maria). It was printed in 1841, and yielded him \$400.00. On this he gave up law.

He married Maria and was offered a post on the *Pennsylvania Freeman*. His abolitionist poem, "The Present Crisis", had been loudly acclaimed. Later he moved to New York as the leading writer for the *Anti-Slavery Standard*. Their home base was Elmwood, where they occupied a third-floor apartment. Only one of their four children born there survived to adulthood, and Maria died in October, 1853. Some months later, James' cousin, John Amory Lowell, head of the Lowell Institute, invited him to give a series of lectures under its auspices. It would be about poetry, with

reference to the great English poets. This was a true remedy for depression. James always had a fine voice and a delivery to hold an audience spellbound. His lectures became so popular that many were turned away and even when repeated, great crowds would fill the hall. Because of his great success, he was elected to fill the Smith Professorship of Belles Lettres and Modern Languages at Harvard University. In this post he succeeded Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. As was the custom, he was given a year for preparation and travelled abroad, spending time in France and in Spain to perfect his knowledge of the literature, as well as the language he would be teaching.

On his return in 1843, in addition to his teaching duties, he edited the forgotten but highly remarkable magazine, *Pioneer*. The then little-known contributors whom he attracted included Hawthorne, Emerson, Whittier and Poe. Nevertheless, the publication failed after three issues. He was the first editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* and an assistant editor with the *North American Review* which printed many of his critical essays. He was a weekly correspondent to the New York publication, *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, and his first volume of *The Bigelow Papers*, (1848) a series of poems in New England popular dialect which are often considered his most influential writings, protested the Mexican War and Slavery. In the same year he published his memorable "Vision of Sir Launfel." When his first wife died in 1853, he married the governess of his only surviving child (of three) Mabel Frances Dunlap.

In 1868 he published *Under The Willow's and Other Poems*, which like others of his formal works, reflects his mastery of prosody and style.

In 1877 President Hayes appointed him to the post of Minister to Spain. His knowledge of the language and ways of the country were a revelation to the Spanish Court. In 1880, President Arthur acknowledged his success and transferred him to England. Here he proved to be a most popular orator and publicist, and one of the best ambassadors we have ever sent to our ancestral land. This distinguished American has an assured place as one of America's most distinguished critics and poets and left a deep impression on his generation in America.

James Russell Lowell was perhaps the best known of the Lowells to his day. But the excellence and usefulness of his family had not run out. Its record from the Civil War to our day will appear in the next issue of *My Country*.



Elmwood, Cambridge — Birthplace of James.

REMEMBERED MUSIC

by James Russell Lowell

Thick-Rushing, like an ocean vast
Of bisons the far prairie shaking,
The notes crowd heavily and fast
As surfs, one plunging while the last
Draws seaward from its foamy breaking.

Or in low murmurs they began,
Rising and rising momentarily,
As o'er a harp AEolian
A fitful breeze, until they ran
Up to a sudden ecstasy.

And then, like minute-drops of rain
Ringing in water silverly,
They lingering dropped and dropped again,
Till it was almost like a pain
To listen when the next would be.