

FRANCIS EBENEZER MOLOCK JR.

A Walk Down His Road

By Nancy M. Lee

At the 2016 Black History Event, Lisa McAllister and I had the honour of sharing with the audience Frank Molock Jr's life story through correspondences that he had received. What started out to be (in my mind anyway), a fun genealogical research project that I was helping a friend with, turned into an amazing personal journey.

When Lisa first called me to discuss the possibility of working together on a presentation for the upcoming 2016 Black History Event, I asked her what ancestor would she like to do the

presentation on. Lisa didn't hesitate. She immediately said she wanted to make a presentation on Frank Molock Jr. She didn't exactly know why or over-think the fact that his name leapt out of her mouth. She just knew it was to be about her 2nd great uncle Frank.

Lisa is the guardian of an incredible and extensive collection of family memorabilia that spans over 150 years. Part of the Molock family collection are boxes of letters that were penned by Lisa's ancestral family members and their friends, providing our generation and those yet to come with an authentic and unsullied account of historical events.

Looking back, I think it was those wonderful ancestors of Lisa's who keep pushing her (as all our respective ancestors do), to continue to tell their stories. The family lore that had been passed down through the generations concerning Frank and his carousing ways wasn't always kind in nature. Lisa and I talked about Frank at great length as we waded through the letters that had been written to him and about him and slowly we began to understand why Frank needed his story to be set straight.



Nancy Lee shares the life of Frank Molock Jr. at the Grey County Black History Event, April 9, 2016

Before Lisa and I could even begin assembling a presentation, we needed to get to know Frank. We had to gain (even if in a small way), a sense of this man's character. We wanted to put together a timeline of events to learn (if possible) what Frank did and when; where he went, and with whom, during his lifetime. We ended up spending hours upon hours sitting at my kitchen table reading letters out loud to each other. These were private correspondences that were sent to Frank from others. There were also additional letters that were sent between members of his immediate family that mentioned issues concerning Frank. The latter letters were important for us to understand how his parents and siblings regarded him. Like most families however, even though they were acutely aware of his bad habits, they still worried and concerned themselves about his well-being. It was clear that he was well thought of and loved.

It was important to us that we did justice to Frank's legacy in our presentation. Lisa had related the family folk lore concerning Frank's personality flaws to me before we started reading through the letters. We realized as we began to read the letters that there was much more to him than what had been passed down through the years in the Molock family. We wondered how everything else about Frank had been forgotten and only the flaws in his character had been remembered.

Often after we read a specific piece of correspondence would we discuss how we thought the writer may have felt when they were writing to Frank. We began putting ourselves into the author's shoes and walked along with them down their road. Sometimes it became very clear that we needed to read between the lines to get the real gist of some of these heartfelt notes. Many of these letters were extremely personal and obviously very confidential. I am sure no one ever dreamt that their words would someday be read by anyone other than Frank. We dissected the contents of each letter in detail, re-reading the letter multiple times (always out loud to each other), line by line. We began trying to imitate the dialect that the letters were written in as we attempted to understand these late 19th and early 20th century letters.

The large looming question soon became, 'I wonder how Frank felt when he read this letter?'

With Lisa and I tossing our ideas and thoughts on that subject back and forth it was clear that we would ever be able to answer it. We would never know Frank's personal thoughts because we didn't have any letters written by him. We would never know with certainty how or what Frank really felt about a certain situation or person. We recognized that our mission wasn't to tell the audience how Frank felt. The task at hand was to give our audience a glimpse of Frank's life through the eyes and words of his family, friends, and in some cases his lovers, whose letters he had saved.

There were times that both Lisa and I were taken aback with the crass language that was being used, or the subject matter that was being discussed within the letters. It became obvious through these letters that Frank was truly a charismatic character who both men and women

found charming, kind, loyal, thoughtful and taxing. We also discovered that women in particular, wrote the majority of the letters in this collection.

Lisa and I felt great empathy for many of Frank's female admirers as it was evident from their declarations that their infatuation with Frank was not always reciprocated to the length or depth that they were hoping and asking for. Through these private communications, we gained an intimate insight into Frank's love life that would not have been possible otherwise.

Once we had read everything, taken photos of the letters and made notes regarding the contents, the next step was to put it all together. As I previously mentioned, the reason for the presentation was to introduce the audience to Lisa's 2nd great uncle Frank Molock Jr. I had become personally attached to this man, as well as to most of the people who had written the letters, and I truly wanted the audience to enjoy learning about Frank, his family and friends as much as I had. The letter collection was fairly extensive and each letter was important to unravelling Frank's life, so we needed to make certain that nothing was overlooked.

When setting out to tell someone's life story, it usually makes sense to start at the beginning and then move through their life, step by step. However, in the case of Frank Molock Jr., we decided to start our presentation at the end of his life. Frank never married and has no known descendants so we thought that his obituary¹ was a good place to start. It talked about the man that he was at the end of his life, describing him as a "well-respected and familiar coloured citizen in Owen Sound" who "was of a very gentle disposition.....almost to a fault".

Frank's death registration² noted his birthdate as June 3rd, 1873. However, we think he may have been a little older due to information that was gained from a letter written by his younger brother Charlie Molock. We also learned from Frank's death registration that he suffered from diabetes for a couple of years before slipping into a diabetic coma and dying on Sept 12th, 1921. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be until a few months later, in January, 1922, that the first successful insulin human trials were completed.

I personally believe that if a person likes someone and likes being around them, there is a good reason why they feel that way. You might be kind and charming, or maybe you're thoughtful with a good sense of humour, cheerful, etc. Perhaps you're a selfless, wise and loyal friend. Maybe it's all the above, or you possess a few outstanding character traits that simply draw people towards you. However, if someone emits negativity, that will translate into how others act and react towards that person.

¹ Source: Bruce and Grey Branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society Surname Collection; Owen Sound Sun Times, Sept 13th, 1921 Edition

² Source: Ontario, Canada, Deaths, 1869-1938 and Deaths Overseas, 1939-1947; Archives of Ontario; Series: MS935; Reel: 277

Maya Angelou once said, “When someone shows you who they are, believe them”.

Through the letters that were written to and about Frank, both Lisa and I felt like we had gotten to know him and had gained a sense of the kind of man he was. We grew fond of Frank after reading through the collection of letters. More surprisingly though, we also became emotionally connected to many of the people who had corresponded with Frank.

So, after starting our presentation with Frank’s obituary, telling the audience how people in Owen Sound felt about Frank at the time of his death, we needed to leap back to the beginning to see if Frank was always likeable and “was of a very gentle disposition...almost to a fault.”³

The letters that we found concerning Frank spanned 32 years and are dated from Feb 29th 1888 to January 28th, 1920. As we were introduced to the many interesting people who wrote to Frank Molock Jr., I took some time to research each of them, in an effort to uncover and understand any unknown ancestral relationships and connections. Unfortunately, we were unable to track down all the correspondents. Though, we did find many links and associations by blood, marriage and property to Lisa and in a few cases, to myself.

The first letter is from his younger brother Charlie. This was the letter that totally shocked Lisa and me. We learned from that letter that Frank was out of work and struggling financially and had reached out to his younger brother Charlie for some financial assistance. The language in this letter is ‘X’-rated as is the subject matter. Charlie wrote to Frank bragging about his good fortune concerning his job, money and women, then went on to lecture and berate Frank about his unfortunate situation. This letter gave us a distasteful glimpse into young Charlie’s personality. There was Charlie, working and eating well, obviously having a grand time and feeling the need to rub those facts into his unemployed and financially strapped older brother’s face.

The last letters that Lisa has in her collection addressed to Frank are from James Morton and his wife Neletia McGillivray dated Dec 17th, 1919 and January 28th, 1920 respectively. The Mortons at the time were living just outside of Chippewa Hills, Ontario with their children, raising chickens.

Neletia McGillivray’s ended up being a very interesting connection that Lisa hadn’t previously realized. Neletia’s father Neil McGillivray was raised on the farm next to my 3rd-great-grandfather, Francis Deadman, in Bentinck Township on the west side of the Garafraxa. Neletia also turned out to be Lisa’s 1st cousin, twice removed. Her mother Louisa was the sister of Lisa’s great grandmother Emily Ann Hall, and the daughter of the infamous John ‘Daddy’ Hall, town crier of Owen Sound. The second connection from the Mortons to Lisa came when her great

³ Excerpt from Frank Molock Jr’s. Obituary - Source: Bruce and Grey Branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society Surname Collection; Owen Sound Sun Times, Sept 13th, 1921 Edition

uncle George W. Molock Jr., married James Morton's sister Hannah's granddaughter Leona Bernice Scott, thus bonding the two families by both marriage and blood.

The tone of the Mortons' letters is on the opposite end of the spectrum compared to the first letter that we found written by Frank's young brother Charlie. The Mortons' letters are thoughtful, warm and funny. It was obvious from their words that they thought highly of Frank and greatly appreciated the financial assistance that he had provided them.

Note: We knew from many of the letters that Frank was not a wealthy man, so we can only assume if he had lent the Mortons money, he did so because they were close friends.

The Mortons' letters indicate that they each individually enjoyed a close and amiable friendship with Frank. According to Frank's death registration⁴ he had been attended by his physician since August, 1919, so these last letters would have been written after Frank's diabetes diagnosis. We may also assume that the Mortons were not aware of Frank's illness at the time of their writing, as there is no mention of his health issues.

By the time we had finished reading the last of Jim and Neletia Morton's letters, Lisa and I were confident that Frank's obituary was a fairly accurate description of the man overall. From most of the letters it was clear that Frank was well thought of and respected by those who knew him. His male friends felt a strong comradery and respected him. Many of the female correspondents seemed to have fallen under some kind of magical spell that Frank had cast. Whether Frank was aware of his allure (to women), we will never be quite sure, but it was obvious that he definitely took advantage of it.

The collection of letters also cemented what we already knew historically concerning the Black community in Owen Sound during the mid-19th and into the early part of the 20th centuries. The BME congregation was more like a close-knit extended family, where everyone was referred to as brother, sister or cousin. Their social life had its nucleus within the church, offering spiritual, emotional and sometimes financial support to those within their community that may be in need. For the most part they treated each other the way they themselves wanted to be treated, with dignity and respect. But let us not forget that they had no problem speaking their mind as their letters often attested to.

For Lisa and me it was important to tell Frank's story the most honest way that we could and that meant with pitfalls, warts and all. Each letter not only told us a little more about what was going on in Frank's life at a certain point in time, it also pulled back the curtain a bit that surrounded the life of the respective author. Frank's admirers came from far and wide.

⁴ Source: Ontario, Canada, Deaths, 1869-1938 and Deaths Overseas, 1939-1947; Archives of Ontario; Series: MS935; Reel: 277

Working on the great lake steamships as a chef, he met people in every port and during the winter season, Frank often worked at hotels from New York to Michigan to northern Ontario.

The letters to Frank from his female devotees solidified the picture of him as a charming, charismatic man about town. Whether the author was a sister of a boyhood friend from Owen Sound, a friend or relative of one of his shipmates, an acquaintance he met while his ship was docked in one of the many ports along the Great Lakes shipping system, or a colleague he worked alongside at a hotel, there was one common theme. They had all fallen head over heels for Frank Molock Jr.

Through the letters, however, it did become apparent that at least a portion of the family lore that Lisa heard growing up regarding her 2nd great uncle Frank rang true. There were letters from shipmates reminding Frank that there was a job for him but that they were concerned about the 'trouble' from the season before. We found a couple of heartbreaking notes to Frank begging him to give up the liquor before he killed himself. One short letter from Frank's brother, George W. Molock Sr., hits the nail right on the head.

George had fallen sick while working for the winter in Hot Springs, Arkansas. He wrote to Frank asking for some financial assistance to pay doctor bills and living expenses. After describing in detail his malady, he signs off reminding Frank not to 'get on the drunk'. We found the concern of those around Frank regarding his drinking at its highest after 1899.

When we began our research into Frank's life we started sorting the many letters chronologically, to give us an historic time line concerning his life. We had already ascertained that many of the letters had been written by female friends, but then we realized that there were multiple cases where a series of letters had been written over a length of time by the same person. We then went back and re-sorted the letters by author, and then by date. Putting them together by author, then by date written or postmarked, gave us a clearer picture of the individual liaisons that Frank had. We were also able to more thoroughly understand the dynamics of some of these relationships as they played out along the same time line of other relationships.

Reading a series of letters from the same person also opened a door which added another facet to this project that we hadn't considered when we started. We were now able to match the handwriting from an individual author which assisted us when the letter was unsigned. The authors of the serial letters were no longer ghosts from specific times in history, they emerged as living breathing people telling us about what was going on in their daily lives. We found ourselves caring about them. We sympathized with their plight and could empathize with them emotionally.

At the same time, different dimensions of our feelings for Frank began to materialize because of these letters. We began to see Frank differently depending on the mood of a respective

author's letter. If the author wrote about warm memories of their time together with Frank, we too felt good things about him. However, when that same writer shared their feelings of abandonment, loneliness or even anger, we could definitely see Frank from their point of view too.

By using this sorting by author then by date technique, we discovered a long-lasting affair that Frank had with a woman named Emma McIntyre.

One of the first letters that we came across when we first began this project were two unsigned, undated letters to Frank. The envelope has no stamp and is addressed to 'Mr. Frank Molok [*sic*] S.S. Athabasca, O.S.' We know that the Athabasca was often anchored in Owen Sound. Since there is no stamp, we surmised that the author was also residing in Owen Sound at the time of the writing of these letters. It's a poignant heartfelt plea to a man who is obviously much loved by the author and clearly by many others too.

We had kept the letters aside throughout the weeks that it took to read and re-read through all the other correspondence. Eventually, we realized that we knew who the author of these two unsigned letters was. We not only identified the handwriting, but we recognized the words too. Each of us has a specific way of talking, writing and expressing ourselves. We got to know the writers of these letters intimately after reading them over repeatedly. We had definitely identified the author of the two letters.

We believe that these two heartfelt letters to Frank were penned by Emma McIntyre. The writing styles match, and most significantly (to me), her pleading matches that in her other signed letters. Emma was a woman that we believe had a deep emotional attachment and relationship with Frank over many years. We first were introduced to Emma McIntyre back in 1898 when both she and her sister Ethel sent Frank notes of affection.

I believe that we are lucky that any letters from Emma ever survived as she reminds Frank in one of her later letters to destroy the letter as promised. I believe that Frank ignored her pleas because both the letters and Emma held a special significance to him.

The first unsigned and undated letter is a loving and heartfelt appeal to Frank to stop his drinking. Emma wrote, "I am sorry you hurt yourself Saturday night. I was not surprised at all. I fully expected to hear you had fallen in the river and was drowned. Dear friend what are you trying to accomplish taking slow poison?"

In this sad letter, Emma told Frank how they "dread Saturday nights and that she listened for his foot-steps to hear if he is alright." We also realized that she must have either lived in the same house, or in very close proximity to Frank. We think that Emma wrote this letter to Frank after his mother had died. (Now we had a time line of after May, 1905). We also have a letter from Emma dated April 17th, 1912, where Emma says, "I hope that you are keeping your

promise and not drinking.” However, Emma doesn’t mention this ‘promise’ in her letters after she moved to Washington, D.C. in 1913.

We think that Emma was older than Frank and that Emma married someone else during the years that she knew Frank and that she had at least one child. We also know that she loved Frank very much. For some reason I always got the sense that Frank probably loved Emma too.

The second unsigned and undated letter written, we believe, by Emma, opens as follows;

“Dear Kind Hearted Frank, I saw you were trying last week to please God because it was right and to please me just a little too. Dearest I want to see you tonight...” She wanted to tell him something and asked to meet him “opposite Dr. Brown’s office at 8 tonight when I am coming from work...” Unfortunately, we know that Frank wasn’t able to stay away from the drink, not even for Emma.

As we know, Frank remained a steadfast bachelor throughout his life. He worked as a cook in hotels and on many of the best steamships that sailed the Great Lakes from the late 1880s until his untimely death in 1921.

Admittedly, we wondered if we were intruding into the private feelings and words of some of these authors. They wrote poetry, they spoke of hardships that they were enduring or health issues that they were suffering through, they shared their dreams, goals and achievements in their letters to Frank. Some of them professed their love for him.

We knew that it would have never crossed any of the authors’ minds that their private letters to Frank Molock would someday be made public. The question that became a point of discussion for Lisa and me was this: was it proper to bring these very personal letters to the forefront knowing that there would be at least a few descendants of those who wrote the letters in the audience? We believed that their story also needed to be told. These letters were insightful and noteworthy historical documents that we felt obligated to share.

As we all learned from the letters, Frank Molock Jr. did indeed struggle with his demons. Lisa’s collection of Frank’s letters did attest to the old family legend that he was a hard-drinker, but they also told us much more about this man. We learned that Frank was a kind-hearted, hard-working, loveable, loyal and charming guy. We also discovered that he could be inconsiderate, insensitive and reckless. Numerous women found him to be physically attractive and captivating. However, most importantly to those that loved Frank - (and there were many) - he was simply a son, a brother and a friend.

Lisa and I were overjoyed with the response that we received from both our audience and members of Lisa’s family during and after the presentation in April, 2016.

For me personally, researching and discovering the individual histories of the people who had crossed paths with Frank during his lifetime only added to this wonderful adventure. I will be forever obliged to those ancestors of Lisa's who made the decision not to discard Frank's letters after his death. Lisa McAllister's family has left her with an incredible legacy and I owe her a deep debt of gratitude for inviting me to share a part of her journey as she tells their story and sets the record straight.