

# North and South: Tales of Two Whiskey Men

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Special to *Bottles and Extras*

The Civil War was the greatest national cataclysm of American history. Not only did it cause the country's greatest number of war deaths, it disrupted the lives of millions. This is the story of two men caught up in the war, one a Southerner who went North and survived a death camp; the other a Northerner who went South and found prosperity. Both left notable legacies in the whiskey trade. The Rebel was George Shawhan; the Yankee was E.E. Dowham.

## The Southerner Who Went North

In late July, 1863, Confederate General John Hunt Morgan [Figure 1] brought the Civil War north to Indiana and Ohio. Morgan and his men on horseback pillaged and terrorized dozens of hamlets and towns, moving east from Indiana. A contemporary lithograph from *Harper's Magazine* depicted the attack by Morgan's Raiders on Washington Court House, Ohio [Figure 2]. The Southern horsemen ranged as far east and north as Steubenville. With them was a young giant with prodigious strength named George Shawhan.

Born in 1843, Shawhan joined the Confederate army in Kentucky in 1862 at the age of 19. He stood six feet five inches tall and weighed 250 pounds. This was at

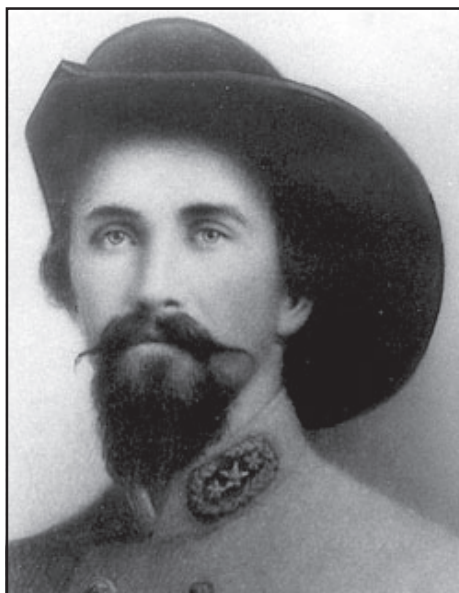


Figure 1: General John Hunt Morgan.

a time when American males averaged 5 feet, 8 inches, and less than 150 pounds. With most of Morgan's troop, Shawhan was captured trying to cross the Ohio River into West Virginia in August 1863. He was sent to Camp Douglas on the outskirts of Chicago, a prison facility known in the South as "Eight Acres of Hell." Of the 12,000 Confederate soldiers held there, more than 4,500 died. Shawhan was a

survivor.

After the war, he returned to Kentucky, got married, tried farming and quickly decided that making whiskey was a better way of life. It was an easy choice since his family had been involved in distilling three generations back. His great-grandfather, Daniel Shawhan, had a working still near Pittsburgh where he made "Monongahela Red." Chafing under increasing taxation, he headed out with his family for Bourbon County, Ky. There he is credited by some with producing the first "bourbon" whiskey.

Daniel was followed by his son, John, in the distilling trade and John's son, another Daniel, kept the tradition going for more decades and fathered George. The Shawhan Distillery later promoted a whiskey labeled "Shawhan Four Generation Rye," the label shows pictures of four distillery-owning Shawhans with dates: Daniel (1786), John (1826), Daniel (1854), and George (1904) [Figure 3].

## To Lone Jack, Missouri

Unlike his forebears, however, George Shawhan moved out of Kentucky, in 1872 transplanting his family and mother to a town in Missouri named Lone Jack. It was named for a large black jack tree that stood



Figure 2: Morgan's Raiders at Washington Court House.

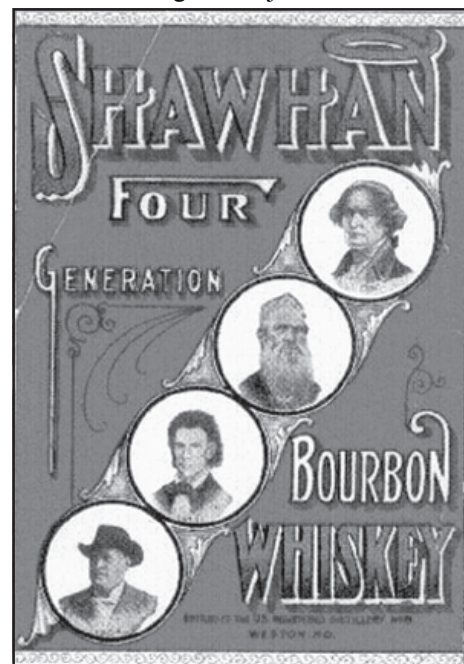


Figure 3: Four Shawhans on a whiskey label.

near the intersection of the Missouri and Osage Rivers. A Shawhan whiskey label later memorialized the tree. [Figure 4] The scene of a bloody Civil War battle, Lone Jack was noted for its good water and fertile soil. Shawhan bought a farm, built a pond, and within a year, completed his first distillery. Initially it had a capacity of two barrels a day, each holding 42 gallons. Figure 5 is an artist's conception of the Lone Jack distillery.

In Lone Jack, Shawhan's strength became legendary. It is reported that he could raise a 400 pound barrel of whiskey, hold it by the rim caused by the protrusion of the staves, and drink from the bung hole to test its flavor. On one occasion, the story goes, the tailgate of his wagon holding full whiskey barrels opened, spilling the cargo onto the street. Working alone, Shawhan corralled the big kegs and heaved them back onto the wagon. In the process he dislocated his shoulder and needed the help of two friends to force it back into place.

The whiskey business was flourishing when disaster struck.

In September 1880 while making applejack, a boiler coil became stopped up with apple mash. When pressure was increased to clear the coil, the boiler exploded. Instantly three of Shawhan's employees, including a father and son, were killed and six others seriously injured. Despite that setback the Shawhan enterprises grew steadily. He built three large barns where tobacco grown around Lone Jack was dried, graded and made into plugs, cigars and loose for rolling into cigarettes.

Shawhan also opened a saloon in Kansas City. The story goes that the same day the saloon set a record at the cash drawer, his daughter, who had married a man named Homer Rowland, gave birth to a son. Grandfather George decreed that the name of the newborn should reflect the family's business success. No one dared disagree him and the boy was christened "Record Rowland."

### On To Weston, Missouri

In 1900 disaster struck again. In January, around midnight, Shawhan's distillery caught fire and burned to the ground. His warehouses were spared. They held 800 barrels of whiskey at the time and provided a valuable financial resource. This time the giant distiller decided against rebuilding. Instead he moved to Weston, Missouri, and bought a distillery that had



Figure 4: Lone Jack Whiskey label.



Figure 5: Drawing of the Lone Jack Distillery.

been founded by stage coach magnate, Ben Holladay. Shown here is a postcard view of the distillery in more recent days [Figure 6]. The facility was located near a pure limestone spring and the quality of the water caused Shawhan to enthuse that with his whiskey formula he could "beat those Bourbon County fellows all hollow." He also was withdrawing whiskey from his Lone Jack warehouses and bottling it under the Shawhan Whiskey label.

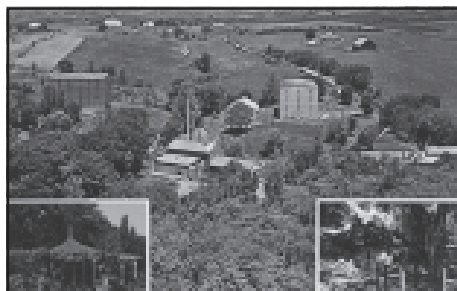


Figure 6: Postcard view of the Weston Distillery.

He began to advertise more widely including one ad that showed him on the whiskey label in his fedora hat [Figure 7]. He expanded his brands to include "1786 Shawhan Rye," "Double Stamp," "Four Generation," "Lone Jack," "Old Holladay Rye," "Old Stamping Ground," "Selected Stock," "Shawhan," "Shawhan White Corn" and "Stone River."



Figure 7: Shawhan Whiskey ad.



Figure 8: Shawhan advertising shot glass.

Among Shawhan's merchandising efforts were a series of shot glasses [Figure 8] and other giveaways to important customers. Throughout the late 1890s and early 1900s his whiskey business continued to grow. In 1898 Shawhan built a large home in downtown Weston for his family. It is considered a classic example of "steamboat architecture" and survives today as a Victorian style bed and breakfast [Figure 9].

In 1907 Shawhan branched out, purchasing the Spring River Distillery at Verona, Missouri, and installing his son-in-law as manager. He sold his Weston



**Figure 9:** Shawhan Weston mansion.

distillery and the Shawhan brand name in 1908 to the Singer family who operated the distillery until Prohibition. Shawhan continued to be involved in the Verona operation until his death in 1912 at the age of 69. He is buried near Kansas City in Lee's Summit Cemetery.

### The Legend Lives On

Shawhan's name was perpetuated by the Singers and their successors in their whiskey labels for years [Figure 10]. Although Prohibition interrupted



**Fig. 10:** Bottle of Shawhan Whiskey.

production, the Old Shawhan brand name emerged after Repeal and eventually was sold to the Darling Distillery Company of Jefferson County, Kentucky. Advertised as a "Kentucky Pioneer Brand," it depicted a man in a coonskin hat rather than Shawhan's fedora [Figure 11] and ignoring the brand's Missouri roots. Old Shawhan whiskey continued to be sold into the 1970s.

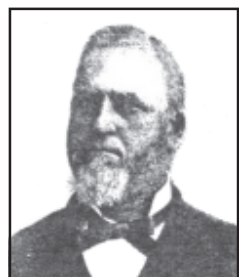


**Figure 11:** Post-Pro Old Shawhan label.

ran a full page feature story about him entitled, "Distiller Matched Brew's Power," referring to George's legendary strength. The reporter interviewed grandson Record Rowland who declared: "Grandpa was a person that always watched his temper, but he was a very powerful man. He drank only three toddies a day and nobody could make a toddy like he could."

### The Northerner Who Went South

As Alexandria, a Virginia town with strong Confederate sympathies, suffered under Union occupation during the Civil War, a Yankee lad of 23 arrived in 1862 from New Jersey to sell whiskey to the thirsty troops. Five years later he would instigate a historic Supreme Court case against local officials. Despite this problematic start, he became Alexandria's mayor and a leading citizen while founding



**Fig. 12:** E.E. Downham.

a liquor business that prospered until the advent of Prohibition. His name was Emanuel Ethelbert (he much preferred "E.E.") Downham, seen here in maturity [Figure 12]. Downham is a fairly common English name, although our E.E. may also have had some German ancestry. Census records indicate that a substantial number of American Downhams were in the liquor business and his father, a native born American, likely was among them. Certainly E.E. Downham, whose natal year was 1839, was versed in the whiskey trade when he arrived in Alexandria to set up shop amidst Yankee-hating Southern sympathizers.

E.E.'s promise as an "up-and-comer" must have been evident very early. In 1865, despite being a Northerner, he married Sarah Miranda Price, the daughter of George Price, a leading Alexandria merchant. The ceremony took place at the Price mansion that stood at the northeast corner of Fairfax and Cameron Streets. The couple would be married for 56 years and produce four sons and a daughter: Henry, (1868), Francis, known as Frank (1870), Horace (1874), Robert (1876), and Maude (1878).

Downham's early business locations were on the lower end of Alexandria's King Street. Whether he truly was a distiller,

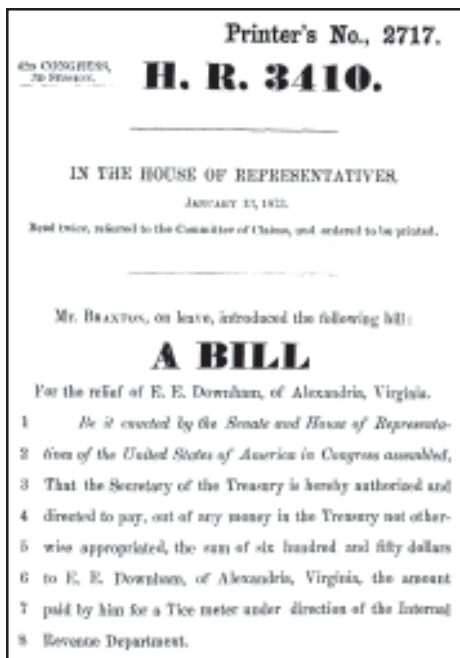
making whiskey directly from grain on his premises, is open to question. More likely he was a "rectifier," someone who bought raw whiskey or grain alcohol from others, refined it, mixed it to taste, added color and flavor, bottled and labeled it. The resulting liquor was sold at both wholesale and retail. E.E. and his early partner, Henry Green, also dealt in beer and wine.

### A Historic Lawsuit

In 1867, in the wake of the Civil War, the Alexandria City Council, seeking to raise additional revenues, put a series of taxes on alcoholic beverages imported into the City from outside the state, thus discriminating in favor of Virginia-made products. When the young upstart Downham refused to pay the tax, the Alexandria City Council sued him and won. He appealed lower court decisions all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. At issue was an early test of the Interstate Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution. While the Court refused on a technicality to rule in favor of Downham, it asserted its right to hear the case, disputed by Alexandria, and claimed jurisdiction to overturn local taxes that violated the Commerce Clause. As a result *Downham v. Alexandria (1869)* became an important legal precedent, frequently cited in cases up to the present day.

Despite losing his suit against the city, Downham's political clout in Alexandria was growing. In 1868 Federal authorities issued a controversial decree that all distillers and rectifiers should purchase a standard hydrometer, a device called the Tice Meter, to measure the alcohol content of their products. (Mark Twain called it "a ten million dollar swindle.") Downham was one of a handful of liquor merchants who complied. When it was discovered that the Tice Meter often was highly inaccurate, the IRS rescinded the requirement. Downham induced his congressman in 1873 to introduce a special claims bill for \$650 to repay him its cost [Figure 13]. Although the bill died in committee, its introduction alone testified to his influence.

The following year, 1874, Downham sought and won election from Alexandria's Third Ward to the same City Council he had sued seven years earlier. He served there for two terms before seeking office on the Board of Aldermen and was elected there for five two-year terms. Following the sudden death of Mayor Smoot by heart attack at Christmas 1887, the Board met to

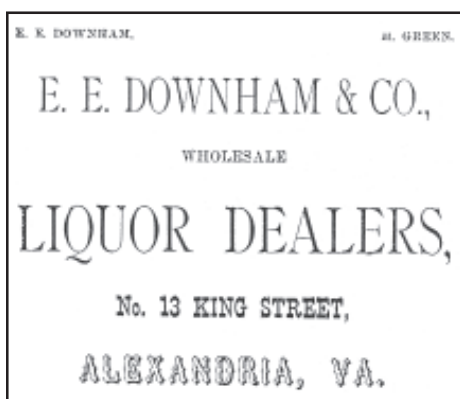


**Figure 13:** Downham's claims bill.

select an interim mayor from among their number. On the sixth ballot, Downham was chosen. He was reelected in his own right in 1890, serving a total of four years, and then permanently retired from public office.

#### Downham's Whiskey Trade

Throughout this period Downham continued his business in downtown Alexandria, beginning at 9 King Street and by 1881 moving to 13 King Street. Shown here is an 1885 ad with the latter address from E.E. Downham & Co. Wholesale Liquor Dealers. [Figure 14]. Four years later the firm moved to 107 King. It featured a menu of whiskey brands, among them was "Old Mansion," which used an illustration of Mount Vernon on the label and on back-of-the-bar decanters [Figure 15]. Others were "Old Dominion Family Rye," "Crystal Maize-Straight," "Old King Corn," "Mountain Corn" and "Old Triple XXX Maryland Whiskey" [Figure 16].



**Figure 14:** 1883 ad for the Downham firm.



**Fig. 15:** Belle Haven "Mount Vernon" decanter



**Figure 16:** Maryland Triple XXX Whiskey bottle

The flagship brand was "Belle Haven Rye," with a well-designed label featuring heads of grain. [Figure 17].

Shown here is a giveaway cork-screw with the slogan, "Pull for Downham Whiskey," [Figure 18]. The instrument also cited prices. The cheapest drink was Old King Corn at \$2 a gallon. Mountain Corn was \$2.50 and Crystal Maize, \$3.50 a gallon. Old Mansion sold for \$1 a quart or \$11 for a case of 12. Downham promised to pay the freight on any order over \$2.50.

The whiskey business proved lucrative and Downham moved his family into a home at 411 Washington Street, the city's most fashionable. It was a double house and he appears to have owned both sides [Figure 19]. His residence is the one with the white door.

#### Civic Pipe Dreams and Prohibition

Within time, E.E. Downham brought sons Robert and Henry into the business as he progressively became involved in other activities. In 1899, for example, he participated in a scheme to honor George Washington in Alexandria with a giant equestrian statue. The project required raising money around the entire United States. Citizens elsewhere apparently were not convinced of its need and the statue was never built.

In 1907 Downham involved himself in another grandiose project. He became an officer in an organization that aimed to turn Alexandria's Mount Vernon Avenue into "an Apian Way and a Westminster Abbey combined." It called for the street to be sectioned by blocks representing each State in the Union. The States thus honored, in turn, would finance buildings on their blocks that would feature their agricultural and manufactured



**Figure 17:** Belle Haven Rye bottle.



**Figure 18:** Downham corkscrew.



**Figure 19:** The Downham home.

products as well as state heroes. Hugely dependent on outside funding, once again Downham and his Alexandria booster friends got nowhere.

By 1915, E.E. Downham's principal occupation was president of

the German Co-Operative Building Association, a building and loan organization at 615 King Street. The Association boasted of its founding in 1868 and of being “thoroughly mutual and cooperative in its workings.”

In 1917, despite his German connections, he was chosen as one of three Alexandrians serving on the local draft board for World War I. Meanwhile, with E.E.’s financial backing, son Robert bought the Lee-Fendall mansion, the birthplace of Confederate General Lee, which still stands as a major Alexandria tourist attraction. Robert and Henry Downham by now were responsible for the daily operations of the liquor business. By 1915 they had moved the company to 1229 King Street.

In 1918, Henry Downham died at age 50, leaving a grieving mother and father. In 1920 National Prohibition closed down E.E. Downham & Co. forever. Downham himself died a year later at his Washington Street home, age 82. His obituary in the local newspaper stated that his “long life of usefulness entitled him to the esteem and affection” of all Alexandria citizens.

During Prohibition, with liquor banned, his son Robert turned to a new business as a clothier, hatter and haberdasher to the town. Robert’s enterprise does not appear to have succeeded and several years later he was recorded working as a clerk in another store. In 1936 the Lee-Fendall house was sold to John L. Lewis, the famous head of the United Mine Workers. In 1937 E.E.’s wife, Sarah, died of the complications of old age at 92, still living at the family’s Washington Street address.

#### **North and South United**

No evidence exists that Shawhan and Downham ever met, but their lives bear similarities. Both got their start during the tumult of the Civil War. Both found prosperity in the whiskey trade in the post-war period. Both became recognized and respected figures in their respective communities. Both businesses they built by dint of hard work and dedication were killed by National Prohibition. Finally, both whiskey men have left us with a legacy of collectable items to remember them and their remarkable stories.

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**Reference Notes:** Material on George Shawhan was drawn principally from a family Internet site that contains informative articles by Ronald Shawhan and Robert Francis. The site also contains several of the illustrations that appear here. The shot glass photo is courtesy of Robin Preston of *pre-pro.com*. Information about E.E. Downham was gathered from a number of sources, using the Internet and the Alexandria, Virginia Public Library. The pictures of Downham and his Washington Street home are courtesy of the Library. The pictures of the Belle Haven Rye bottle and corkscrew are through the courtesy of Dr. Richard Lilienthal. Portions of this article previously have appeared in the *Ohio Swirl* and the *Potomac Pontil*.

