

Married to a Magnate: Peter Herdic's two wives

Williamsport Women



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Peter Herdic's rag to riches life story is legendary in Lycoming County. When Peter, the father of the lumber era,

came to town, the village had only 1,700 inhabitants and consisted of a few city blocks around Market, Third and Fourth Streets, surrounded by farmland and forests.

When Peter declared bankruptcy in 1878, there were more than 20,000 inhabitants, many of them working for Peter Herdic. Peter is responsible for the development of the city westward to what we now call Millionaire's Row — and he was one of those millionaires.

I wondered what life was like for the two wives and the children of the lumber baron. In many ways, Peter "owned" Williamsport. As his empire grew — he was mayor and he owned the newspaper, many of the business, and the utilities — he was frequently sued by his business associates.

He went bankrupt twice, and each time he managed to regain some of his previous wealth. Did the family have to cut back on their spending in lean times? Pull the children out of school? How was it to be such a public figure in the midst of such dramatic ups and downs?

Amanda Taylor

The Williamsport lumber baron was married twice and had three children. His first wife was Amanda Taylor. Amanda originally was from Smithboro, a small hamlet in Tioga County, N.Y., just north

of the Pennsylvania border on the Susquehanna River. Her parents were Foster Taylor and Abigail Parker, originally from New England.

One of Amanda's ancestors, Benjamin Taylor, fought in the American Revolution at the Battle of Bunker Hill. The sixth of their eight children, Amanda was born on May 27, 1829.

She was 20 and he was 25 when they married on Christmas day in 1849. For four years, Amanda and Peter's home was on a small farm

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PHOTOS PROVIDED

Shown are photos courtesy of the Lycoming County Historical Society. From left is the Peter Herdic Home, 407 W. Fourth St.; Amanda Taylor, Peter Herdic's first wife; Encie Maynard Herdic, Peter Herdic's second wife; and Florence Herdic, Peter Herdic's daughter by Amanda Taylor.

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along Lycoming Creek. Peter had a shingle business and then a sawmill. Amanda's sister Fanny lived nearby.

She had married Edward Heylman, whose family were part owners of the Crescent Iron Works along Lycoming Creek.

Their father, Foster Taylor, also settled in Lycoming County after his wife's death in 1851. As Peter expanded his business interests and accumulated wealth, the couple moved to Williamsport.

What would it have been like for Amanda to move from their small farmhouse and 154 acres of land in Cogan House to town? And then into the grand mansion that Peter built at 407 W. Fourth St.?

Designed by Williamsport architect Eber Culver, it was called the finest mansion in Williamsport. The grand home, built in Italian Villa style, was two and a half stories high, had 10-foot to 12-foot ceilings, and was graced with a cupola. Today that home, now the elegant Herdic House restaurant, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Daughter Flora

Little more is known about Amanda. Peter and Amanda had one daughter, Florence Louise Herdic, or Flora, born in 1855, after their move to Williamsport. Amanda and her father, were founding members of the First Baptist Church in Williamsport.

Foster Taylor was the church deacon. Peter later donated the land for a church building on the corner of West Fourth and Elmira Streets. The congregation was at first hesitant to accept Peter's offer of land.

According to One Hundred Years of Christian Service to the Community, a history of First Baptist Church, the land was "on the edge of a swampy farm and a worn-out nursery and was considered by many to

be way out in the country."

Church members said that Amanda Herdic was a constant inspiration to those who worked with her. She was described as "comely." In the photograph of her from the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society, she is young and attractive. She is dressed plainly. Her eyes seem sad and she has the stoic, resolute look of a woman who knows the hard labor of farm life.

Amanda died in December 1857, when she was 27. We don't know the cause of her death. She and Peter had been married 8 years.

She is buried in the Williamsport Cemetery on Washington Boulevard. Their daughter Flora was a toddler when her mother died. It would be interesting to know who took care of Flora after her mother died and before Peter remarried. It seems unlikely that Peter spent much time at home.

Encie Maynard

Several years after Amanda's death, Peter married again. It is reported that he engaged a dancing teacher and tutors to polish his social skills before his second marriage.

His wife was Encie Maynard, a woman from a well-established and respected Williamsport family. Her father was Judge John W. Maynard. Her mother, Almira DePui, traced her ancestry back to the Puritan minister Cotton Mather.

Encie Elizabeth Maynard was born in 1835 in Tioga County, where her father was practicing law. The young family moved to Williamsport a few years later.

The Maynard home in Williamsport was located where the Lycoming County Historical Society stands today. The home itself became the site of the Historical Society, but unfortunately the lovely building was destroyed by fire in 1960.

By all accounts, Encie Maynard was the belle of the ball in Williamsport before her

marriage. Col. Thomas Lloyd, in a 1926 article in the Williamsport Gazette and Bulletin, called Encie "one of the leading lights of the social set that graced the village" and "a woman of high intellectual attainments and an accomplished musician." Most likely she attended one of the "ladies' schools" that had sprung up in Williamsport in that time period and received private music lessons.

Encie was not only a fine pianist and sometimes the church organist, but also a composer. Her music has been lost, except for one piano piece, "Berceuse," published in Williamsport in 1888. A copy of that score hangs in the Herdic House restaurant today; another is held by the library of the University of Virginia.

Looking at her very formal photograph, we see a fashionably dressed young woman, with beautifully styled hair. She has deep-set eyes, porcelain skin, full lips and a square chin. She looks very sure of herself and her place in society.

The wedding of Encie Maynard and Peter Herdic took place on January 12, 1860. Encie was 25 when they married; Peter, 33. The wedding was most likely celebrated at Christ Church, the Episcopal Church that the Maynard family was associated with.

Later Peter would donate the land for another Episcopal church, Trinity, on West Fourth Street, in the new section of town he had developed, Millionaire's Row, nearer both to his home and to the grand Herdic House, the hotel that stood at the corner of West Fourth and Campbell Streets.

Charitable activities

The town of Williamsport had been growing quickly since the 1850s, when Peter first came to town. The lumber business was lucrative; mansion after mansion was built on Millionaire's Row. But the growing population put strains on the social fabric of the city. Injured workers needed a hos-

pital, and a working parent who lost a spouse found it hard to take care of the children.

Encie Herdic was one of the city churchwomen who stepped in to help. She was a founding member of the Women's Christian Association, which became the Home for the Friendless, an agency that provided a home for needy children and older women. She was one of the first board chairs of that organization and served for well over a decade.

In 1874, she signed the temperance pledge of Mother Mussina and the temperance crusaders, who were concerned that city men were spending their money on drink, not their families.

Ironically, the crusaders made Peter's Herdic House one of their first stops. Mrs. Peter Herdic is listed as a donor to many other charitable organizations, including the Young Women's Christian Association, which served female mill workers in Williamsport.

Social scene

Encie Herdic was at the center of the social scene in Williamsport and entertained in a style befitting the wife of a lumber baron. According to the New York Sun article "Story of Peter Herdic" (March 4, 1877), "she added grace and beauty to his mansion, and charmed his home life. She filled his house with rare books and articles of virtue, and from the abundant means of her husband, dispensed an elegant hospitality."

Peter and Encie had two sons. Peter Herdic, Jr., was born in 1865, and Harry Maynard Herdic was born in 1869. Also in the family was Flora Herdic, Peter's daughter from his marriage to Amanda Taylor.

The world must have changed for Encie and the rest of the Herdic family when Peter went bankrupt in 1878.

He had stretched his credit to the limit. His bankruptcy stemmed in part from the "Panic of 1873," a national and

international financial crisis that sent many into bankruptcy. Peter's holdings — on paper, worth two million dollars — were auctioned off in 1878.

Fortunately for Encie, her father, Judge Maynard, who had backed Peter financially, bought the house and the furnishings.

He also bought two hotels, the Herdic House and Peter's splendid Minnequa Hotel in Canton, along with many of Peter's other holdings. Encie continued to live in the home after the bankruptcy, and even after Peter's death 10 years later. Encie was with Peter when he died at the Hotel Glenham in New York City. She had been staying there for the winter.

Encie's second marriage

The pink mansion on West Fourth Street continued to be Encie's home until she married prosperous businessman Henry Rawle, two years after Peter's death, when she was 55. They moved into the Rawle Cottage, called "Fairfield," off what is now Lycoming Mall Road in Fairfield Township.

Nine years later, Henry Rawle died, and Encie moved from place to place, living with one son and then the other. Her last years were spent living in an elegant suite of rooms in the former Herdic House, once owned by Peter.

Encie died in March 1919, in the "83rd year of her life," according to the Gazette and Bulletin. Her funeral was held at Trinity Church, the church Peter had built. Her two sons and a granddaughter survived her. Encie Maynard Herdic Rawle left her personal affects, clothing and jewelry to her granddaughter and namesake, Encie Herdic Rowe.

There was no mention in the obituary of Amanda Taylor's daughter and Encie's stepdaughter, Flora Herdic. Flora led a tumultuous life and will be the subject of next month's "Williamsport Women" feature.