

# The Alexandria Chronicle

*A publication of monographs about historical Alexandria, Virginia.*

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Editor: Linda Greenberg

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## E.E. DOWNHAM AND FRANK HUME: WHISKEY MEN OF ALEXANDRIA

BY JACK SULLIVAN

Although one was a Yankee transplant to Virginia during the Civil War and the other a self-styled Confederate spy who founded a post-bellum business in the nation's capital, E. E. Downham and Frank Hume, both residents of Alexandria during their lifetimes, shared the same occupation: Both were whiskey men worthy of note.

During the Civil War and in its aftermath the consumption of spirituous beverages in the United States continued its steady increase for at least the next 60 years. In 1876 an Alexandria business directory listed five local merchants in the liquor trade and 11 saloons. By 1897 the numbers had risen to 11 liquor retailers and 34 saloons. Selling whiskey was a growth industry, especially in the vicinity of the nation's capital.

### Downham Arrives in Alexandria

An early Alexandria whiskey dealer was Emanuel Ethelbert (who preferred to be called E.E.) Downham. Census records indicate that a substantial number of American Downhams were in the liquor business and E.E.'s father, a native born American, likely was among them. Certainly the son, born in 1839, was versed in the trade when he arrived in Alexandria from New Jersey in 1862 at the tender age of 23 to sell whiskey to the occupying northern troops amidst a hotbed of southern sympathizers.

"Carpetbagger" merchants like Downham often were despised by the local populace. Local businessmen who openly sympathized with the Confederate cause could have their property confiscated by the Union's military authority. The locals resented interlopers. Downham seems to have overcome this handicap by ingratiating himself with Alexandrians quickly, perhaps because of

his evident promise as a businessman. Three years after arriving in town, despite being a Yankee, he married Sarah Miranda Price, the daughter of George Price, a leading Alexandria merchant. The ceremony took place



**E. E. Downham, Successful Liquor Merchant**

at the Price home, a mansion that still stands 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 at the lower end of Alexandria's King Street, and moved from one address to another as his needs for larger premises

occurred. In some of his merchandising he claimed to be a distiller. One account suggests Downham operated a distillery near the gas house on North Lee Street between Oronoco and Princess Streets. Whether he truly was a distiller, that is making whiskey directly from grain on his premises, remains open to question. A true distillery requires significant space and a constant supply of fresh, pure water. An example is George Washington's recently restored distillery at Mount Vernon. It seems unlikely that urban Alexandria was the setting for such a plant. More likely Downham was a "rectifier," someone who bought raw whiskey or grain alcohol from others, refined

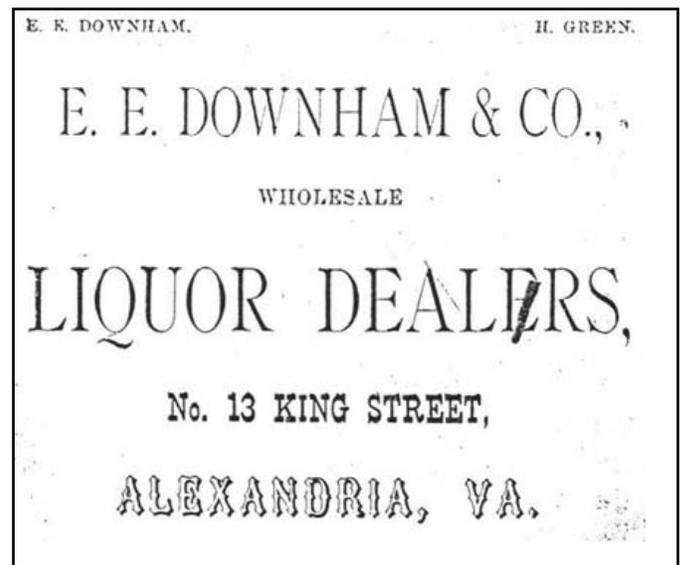


**Belle Haven Whiskey Quart Bottle**

it, mixed it to taste, added color and flavor, bottled and labeled it. The resulting liquor was sold both wholesale to saloons and retail to customers. E.E. and his early partner, Henry Green, also dealt in beer and wine.



**"Giveaway" Corkscrew  
"Pull for Downham's Whiskey"**



**1885 Business Directory Advertisement**

### **"Troublemaker" and Politician**

Downham was a "troublemaker." In 1867, the Alexandria City Council, seeking to raise additional revenues to repair the damages of the Civil War, placed a series of taxes on alcoholic beverages imported into the city from outside the state, thus discriminating in favor of Virginia-made products. Downham was bringing in much of his raw whiskey from Maryland and Pennsylvania but refused to pay the tax, triggering a fight with City Hall. The Alexandria City Council sued him and won in the local court. Stubborn and undeterred, Downham appealed adverse 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 high 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. Thus *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 were required to purchase a special hydrometer, a device called the Tice Meter, to measure the alcohol content of their products. (Mark Twain called the Tice Meter "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 federal government rescinded the requirement. Downham induced his congressman, in 1873, to introduce a special claims bill for \$650 to repay its cost. Although the bill died in committee, its introduction alone testified to his influence.

The following year, Downham sought and won election

from Alexandria's third ward to the same City Council he had sued seven years earlier. City Council was a familiar career path for many liquor dealers and saloonkeepers. Their occupations kept them abreast of local affairs and their names in front of the public. Downham served on council for two terms before seeking an office on the Board of Aldermen and was elected there for five two-year terms. Following the sudden death of Mayor Smoot, felled by a heart attack at Christmas 1887, the board met to 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.

Among the issues with which Downham the politician would have had to wrestle were rebuilding Alexandria's economy, damaged in the Civil War, dealing with the draconian effects of Reconstruction and accommodating the many African-Americans who had sought refuge in the city during the conflict and stayed.

### Merchandising Whiskey

Throughout this period Downham continued his business in downtown Alexandria, beginning at 9 King Street and by 1881 moving to 13 King Street. Shown on page two is an 1885 ad with the latter address for E.E. Downham & Co. Wholesale Liquor Dealers. Four years later the firm moved to 107 King Street. Downham 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. Others were "Old Dominion Family Rye," "Crystal Maize-Straight," "Old King Corn," "Mountain Corn" and "Old Triple XXX Maryland Whiskey." The flagship brand was "Belle Haven Rye" with a well-designed label featuring heads of grain.

Downham provided favored customers with a giveaway corkscrew bearing the slogan, "Pull for Downham's Whiskey." Although whiskey today comes in bottles with screwtop caps, in the 1800s most whiskey containers came with a cork. Downham's corkscrew 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. The company promised to pay the freight on any order over \$2.50.

As the whiskey business proved increasingly lucrative, Downham moved his family into a home at 411 Washington Street in the city's most fashionable residential neighborhood. It was a double house and he appears



**E. E. Downham Home, 411 Washington Street**

to have owned both sides. His residence, still standing, is the one with the white door.



**The Downham Family on the lawn of the Lee-Fendall House, circa 1920. E. E. is seated at the right with the dog.**

### Grandiose Schemes

In time, E.E. Downham brought sons Robert and Henry into managing 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.



**Frank Hume, Soldier**

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. Each state thus honored, in turn, would finance buildings on its block that would feature its agricultural and manufactured products as well as honoring state heroes. Hugely dependent on outside funding, the scheme once again went nowhere for Downham and his Alexandria booster friends.

By 1915 Downham principally was occupied as president of the German Co-Operative Building Association, a financial institution located 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, Downham was chosen as one of three Alexandrians to serve on the local draft board for World War I. Meanwhile, with E.E.'s financial backing, son Robert bought the Lee-Fendall mansion at the corner of Washington and Orinoco Streets, 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 day by day operations of the liquor business. By 1915 they moved the company to 1229 King Street.

In 1918, Henry Downham died at age 50, leaving a grieving mother and father. In 1920 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 *Alexandria Gazette* stated that his "long life of usefulness entitled him to the esteem and affection" of all Alexandria citizens.

During Prohibition, with liquor banned, E.E.'s son Robert turned to a new business, a clothier, hatter and haberdasher. His 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, then 92, died of the complications of old age. She still lived at the family's Washington Street address. Thus ended the saga of a Yankee whiskey peddler who won the heart of a southern belle and eventually a southern town.

### **Frank Hume: From Spying to Selling**

Shown here as a soldier and on page five in maturity, Frank Hume led a life that included service purportedly as a Confederate spy. Later he became the largest grocer and purveyor of liquor in the federal capital and then a well-known philanthropist whose name continues to be memorialized in his native Virginia. Local bottle collectors also



**Emma Norris Hume**

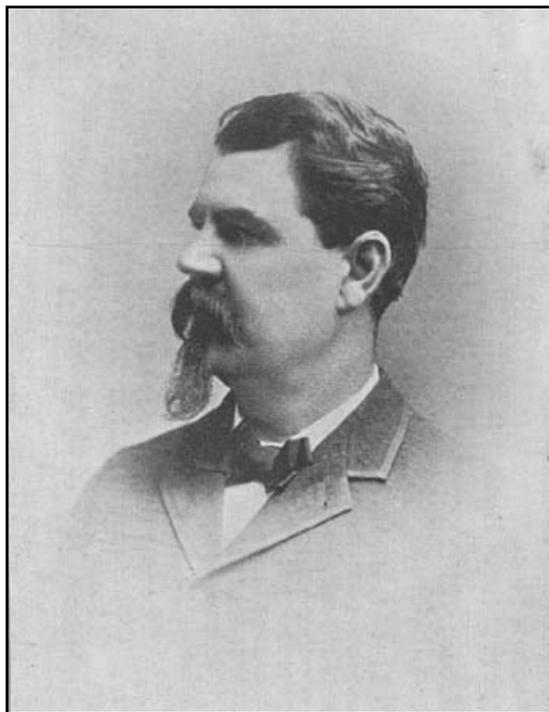
esteem the elaborately embossed bottles in which he marketed his whiskeys.

Hume was born in Culpeper County in 1843, the son of Charles and Virginia Rawlins Hume. At the age of 18 he enlisted in the Confederate Army, joining one of General James Longstreet's units called The Volunteer Southern. Hume served as a signal scout with General J.E.B. Stuart and participated in 11 major battles, receiving a serious wound at Gettysburg. Part of his service was reputed to have been as a spy attempting to sneak northern battle plans to General Robert E. Lee (see end note). It was during this purported mission that he apparently stopped in the District of Columbia long enough to have his picture taken in Confederate uniform.

Hume returned home after Lee's surrender at Appomattox and settled in Alexandria. He reportedly tried his hand briefly at farming and then crossed the Potomac to work in a Georgetown grocery. His older brother, Thomas, was an established merchant in the District. Finding mercantile life agreeable and remunerative, Hume sought to marry and start a family. In 1870 he married Emma Norris at Trinity Episcopal Church in the District. She was the daughter of a prominent Washington lawyer with Virginia roots. Frank and Emma would have 11 children.

A year after his marriage Hume opened his own grocery store in downtown Washington, on Pennsylvania Avenue near the old Central Market. The store prospered, with the sale of "wet goods" -- liquor -- being an important part of his merchandise. Among Hume's house brands were "Old Stag," "Homestead Old Rye," "Old 'A' Whiskey" and "Warwick Old Rye." Like Downham, Hume was a rectifier, and mixed his own whiskeys to taste in a back room or loft. One observer has noted that Hume chose to emboss his bottles rather than just slap paper labels on them. Incurring this additional expense, it is suggested, meant he knew he could count on each brand having substantial sales.

Hume seems well aware of the anti-alcohol sentiments that were building in Congress and around the country. As a result of local option laws communities throughout the South were going dry. Like other whiskey men trying to counter the trend, Hume emphasized the medicinal



**The Honorable Frank Hume**

an equal." Virginia voted in Prohibition in 1916; Congress decreed it for the District of Columbia in 1917 and the entire nation adopted it in 1919.

Meanwhile Hume's brother Thomas was making a name for himself as a Washington social climber, known for the extravagance of his parties. A D.C. journalist noted about one such event that, more than the notables present, it was the prodigality of the entertainment that caught his and everyone's attention. He wrote that Thomas provided two hundred guests with "a perpetual lunch for all, (with liquid attachments embracing wines, brandies, whiskies, mixed drinks, and plain lemonade), cigars for all, and towards evening a dinner, which was not only ample but excellent."

Unknown to the public, Thomas Hume was heading into bankruptcy, ultimately racking up debts of \$100,000 against assets of \$6,000. In October 1881, the day it was announced that his firm was being dissolved by his withdrawal and retirement, he suffered a heart attack in his office and died on the spot. A court later declared him "utterly insolvent." Creditors howled and attacked Frank Hume for repayment. He successfully fended off financial responsibility, although his brother's sudden demise must have been a shock.

At the time Frank Hume was enjoying life at his newly acquired mansion called Warwick Estate. It served as his summer home, positioned on an Alexandria hill west of the point where Commonwealth and Mount Vernon Avenues merge. He also kept a District residence. Over the next 25 years, Warwick was the site of many holiday and family celebrations where guests enjoyed Hume's hospitality, as well as superb views of the Potomac River



**"For the sick room or the side board"  
Embossed Clear Flask**

value of his whiskey. The embossed bottle of his "Old Stag" reads, "For the sick room or the side board, without

and Washington. As many as 150 guests at a time attended Fourth of July celebrations where large U.S. flags adorned trees and guests enjoyed picnic feasts, lemonade and champagne. These events were said to be especially memorable for the twilight fireworks display and the firing of a cannon.

Unlike his brother, however, Frank Hume could afford his hospitality. His mansion also gave him a residence in Virginia and from 1889 to 1899, over several elections,

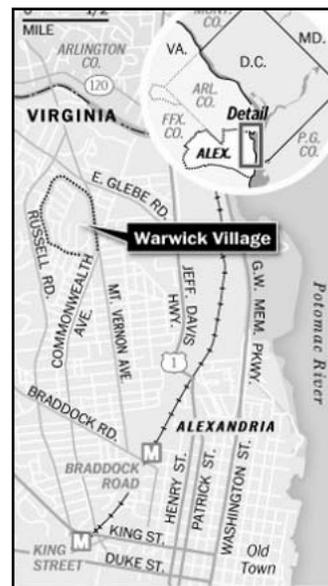


**Warwick Estate, Hume's Virginia Home**

he was sent by Alexandria voters to the Virginia House of Delegates. He also was becoming recognized as a District business leader. He became president of the Independent Steamboat and Barge Company, a director of the Fireman's Insurance Co., and served on the Washington Board of Trade. He was a vocal advocate for a new bridge linking Alexandria and the District and when built it became Memorial Bridge.

Hume was also gaining a reputation as a philanthropist. In 1891 he donated the land for a school in Arlington, Virginia, along with an adjacent area for a playground. In return the school was named for him. Hume Elementary School, the oldest school building in Arlington County, operated for 67 years, closing in 1958. It was renovated in the early 1960s and reopened as the Arlington History Museum. The museum, on Arlington Ridge Road, is open to the public on the weekends and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a Virginia State Historical Landmark.

In a more controversial act of generosity, Hume provided assistance for Coxey's Army. The "army" was a protest march of unemployed American workers, led by the populist Jacob Coxey. They marched on Washington in 1894, the second year of a four-year economic depression which to that time was the worst in United States history. It is considered by historians as the first significant protest march on Washington. (Needless to say it would not be the last.) Hume's employees distributed food to



**Site of the Hume Estates, Now Warwick Village**

the encamped marchers. According to press reports, the grocer received a bouquet of flowers from Coxey's people as they left town.

In 1906, at the age of 63, Frank Hume died. His wife, Emma, whose photo indicates a no-nonsense woman, apparently continued to manage the grocery store for a time. In 1907 federal records show her registering the brand name "Old Stag Rye" with the Patent Office. Emma died in 1931 and is buried with Frank at the family grave site in Alexandria's Ivy Hill Cemetery. Hume's Warwick mansion was demolished in 1953 and 55 acres of land sold for the townhouse development we know as Warwick Village.

One major tribute to an extraordinary man and his career remains on view. At the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, located in the plaza between Brown College and Monroe Hall, one still can see the Frank Hume Memorial Wall and Fountain, dedicated in 1938. It memorializes him as a benefactor of the university Mr. Jefferson founded.

The question naturally arises whether E. E. Downham, the Yankee, ever met Frank Hume, the "Johnny Reb." Although no record exists that joins them, it is highly likely that Downham would have been a guest at Hume's Warwick home, if not often then at least for his Fourth of July fetes. If so, I would imagine their conversation turned to politics and, of course, to whiskey.

### **End Notes:**

#1: According to Hume's own account he was sent by General Lee personally to find his way through enemy lines to Annapolis in 1864 to find out what General Burnside was planning to do with his forces. Part of his purported adventure was rowing across the Potomac River in a coffin because boats were in short supply.

When he arrived in Annapolis, according to the story he told in a family history, he found that his mission had been obviated by subsequent (but unstated) events. He then headed back to his unit but stopped in Washington long enough to be photographed. He claimed that despite not bearing any new intelligence he later received Lee's personal thanks. Historian Carlton Fletcher, who has studied Hume's story, suggests it is "a flattering fiction."

#2: The information on which this article is based was gathered from a number of sources, chief among them the Internet and the Local History Section of Alexandria's Barrett Library. The pictures of Downham and his Washington Street home are from the library, whose researchers were helpful in gathering information. Permission to use the photo of the Downham family on the lawn of the Lee-Fendall House came from the museum staff. The pictures of whiskey bottles and corkscrew were provided by Dr. Richard Lilienthal. The map showing Warwick is through the courtesy of the *Washington Post*. References for information provided herein are available from the author. Contact at jack.sullivan9@verizon.net.

**The Author:** Jack Sullivan, who holds a Masters Degree in Journalism and a Ph.D. in Political Science, writes about American history, concentrating on the 19th and early 20th centuries. His particular interests are the U.S. whiskey and patent medicine industries.

He was a volunteer for two years with the Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary Museum assisting with curating and cataloguing its collection. For the past three years Sullivan has been a volunteer with the Local History Division of the Alexandria Public Library. There he currently is transcribing the handwritten diary of a Confederate soldier in Alexandria who fought with Lee's Army and penned a daily entry from the outset of the Civil War until Lee's surrender at Appomattox. A 46-year resident of Alexandria, Sullivan is a civic activist and has been a member of a number of city boards and commissions.



**Frank Hume's Grave Site, Ivy Hill Cemetery, Alexandria (Note the Confederate flag at the base of the monument.)**

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**“For the sick room or the side board”  
Embossed Clear Flask Sold by Frank Hume**

The mission of the **Alexandria Historical Society** is to promote an active interest in American history and particularly in the history of Alexandria and Virginia. For information about society lectures and awards presentations and for past issues of the *Alexandria Chronicle* please visit the society’s web site: [www.alexandriahistorical.org](http://www.alexandriahistorical.org). The *Chronicle* is published through the support of the J. Patten Abshire Memorial Fund.

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“Whiskey Men of Note,” an apt description for E.E. Downham and Frank Hume, whose lives and times are the subject of this *Chronicle*. Both men made their money selling liquor and then became important civic leaders in post-Civil War Alexandria. The article, in addition, describes how whiskey was bottled and sold in the late 19th century, when whiskey was advertised for both its medicinal and congenial attributes.