

The Gant Family History Part 1 – A Man With Many Skills

Last month's family history featured the Crawford family and in that family history we were introduced to Martha Crawford and John Gant. Because I was able to find a lot of information for John and some of his family members, I decided to highlight the Gant family in this month's family history. As mentioned, Martha Joiner Gant was the biological child of Laura Virginia Sidney Buckner and the stepdaughter of George M. Crawford. She married John Gant, the son of Edward and Roxanna Gant, on May 26, 1868. John Gant was also referred to as 'Professor' John Gant and he worked in many jobs including his work as a barber, Sanitary Officer and Dog Tax Collector, and County Constable. Of all the people I have written about in the family history series, none have been written about in the *Amherstburg Echo* more than John Gant. As a result, I'm going to share many of the newspaper articles that mention or are written by Gant to show a clearer picture of his importance in Essex County.

Before I do this, I want to first share a bit more about Martha. She was a member of numerous organizations that stemmed from the First Baptist Church, including the Church Aid Society, the Amherstburg Guild, the Women's Guild, where she was secretary, and the Amherstburg Ladies Sewing Circle. Martha's obituary which appeared in *The Border Cities Star* on March 29, 1923 says "Mrs. Martha Gant is Called at 'Burg – Passes After Lingered Illness; Funeral is Held Friday – Amherstburg, March 29 – Death removed from the midst of the citizens of Amherstburg during the past week, Mrs. Martha Gant, relict of the late Professor John Gant, after a lingering illness. Mrs. Gant had been a citizen of Amherstburg for many years and was held in close esteem by those who knew her. The funeral was held on Friday afternoon from her late residence to the First Baptist Church, where impressive services were held, followed by interment in Rose Hill cemetery. Mrs. Gant was the daughter of the late Mrs. Laura Virginia

Crawford and was married in Amherstburg almost 50 years ago to the late Professor John Gant, who predeceased her little over four years ago. Surviving her are two sisters, Mrs. John H. Alexander, wife of Alderman Alexander of Amherstburg and Mrs. Philip Thomas, of Oberlin, Ohio. The sympathy of the community is extended to the bereaved.”

Not mentioned in Martha’s obituary is a reference to her daughter Mabel Binga. On November 12, 1953 the *Echo* printed “Miss Mabel Binga formerly of Amherstburg, passed away in Ontario Hospital, in London, on Sunday. Miss Binga who was 77 years of age, was the daughter of the late Mrs. John Gant (Martha Crawford); Surviving is an aunt Mrs. P.N. Thomas of Oberlin, Ohio. Another aunt, Mrs. John H. Alexander of Amherstburg, predeceased her. The funeral was in London.”

As mentioned, John Gant had many professions. He owned the Twilight Barber Shop and worked as a barber there as early as 1877. On November 9, 1877, the *Amherstburg Echo* printed “After 17 years experience – the latter part of which has been very costly – the Professor has opened a shop on his own hook, and he has brought the prices down to the times. My motto is, - ‘Break the Tammany ring – Live and let live.” Gant stated that the Twilight Barber Shop was the Official Barber to the Mechanic and Laborer, and placed several ads in the *Echo* to draw in business. One ad from January 25, 1878 which appeared in the *Echo* stated “the Prof. has opened the cheapest and best Tonsorial Parlor in town, one door south of the Post Office. Only one price in my shop – not 10cts. to one and 5cts. to another; also have three chairs; I allow no sore face to get in those chairs and allow not one to get out.” The Twilight Barber Shop offered a shave for 5 cents, a haircut for 10 cents, shampoo for 5 cents and a 5-cent haircut for boys under 16 years old. He also offered seam foams for 5 cents, mustache dyed for 10 cents, in addition to cleaning clothes for 75 cents.

Gant's confidence in his trade is clear in an ad from April 5, 1878 which says "Out of 13 apprentices that I have learned the trade they are all satisfied that I am the boss, if they are not, lot any of them put up \$25, or more, as they wish, and I will cover it immediately, and I have not got to run around and borrow it. This challenge is open for all time. I am the originator of Amherstburg's 5 cts. shave, and why not 'live and let live,' I can live at it, and hundreds save 5 cts. I remain, Amherstburg's reformer and Superior tonsorial artist, PROF. GANT."

In addition to owning the Twilight Barber Shop, John Gant also worked as a chimney sweep, white-washer and gardener. An ad from May 13, 1881 says "Look out for the Lime Kiln Club. Opposition is the Life of Trade! Brother Gardiner is in town in the shape of J. GANT. As I have neither been appointed Magistrate or Constable, and shaving being at a discount, I am now white-washing, sweeping chimneys, Digging Gardens, and doing general work. My office will be on the street anywhere that I am found. I respectfully solicit a share of Amherstburg's patronage. All orders promptly attended to. Chimney-Sweeping a Specialty. For I am equal to a black squirrel on a roof. No more shaving till next winter, then I shall open a 10-amendment shop. There will then be four shops in town. BROTHER J. GANT."

Gant also served as a county constable with the first reference I found in the *Echo* being as early as 1895. A decade later, on November 3, 1905, an interesting story was printed about Gant and his work as a janitor which says "John Gant has great reason for thankfulness on Thanksgiving Day, because of being rescued from a perilous situation just in the nick of time to prevent his strangling. That morning, as usual, he went to the Sovereign Bank, where he does janitor work, and locks after the draughts, i.e., raising and lowering the windows, but before proceeding with his work, sent for John Pinean to repair a broken lock on the front door. Mr. Pinean left while Prof. Gant was busy leaving the door still locked. When the Professor

completed his work he couldn't get out, so after waiting round in solitary confinement for a long time, he was seized with an idea. Descending to the cellar, he placed a barrel under the cellar window, and made to climb out to the sidewalk and freedom. But in his efforts he kicked the barrel down, and was unable either to go forward or backward, his head and one arm being on one side of the window, while the rest of his body was on the other. He hung in this position until 9 o'clock when the Chief of Police and E.E. Palford, when passing, were attracted by his raucous cries, and after much difficulty succeeded in pulling him through as far as his feet, which defied, their united efforts, but at last were also taken through one at a time, by turning them over flat, and Mr. Gant hied home to a late breakfast, a sorer, sadder, but wiser man."

A year later, on May 11, 1906, the *Echo* mentions that John Gant was the Sanitary Inspector and "warns bicycle riders to keep on the street, and off the sidewalks, or they will be asked to meet him in court. He suggests that residents join in the general improvement scheme by repairing their out buildings and keeping all horses, cows, pigs, and geese off the streets." A few years later, on March 25, 1910, Gant's work as the local dog catcher is mentioned in the *Echo* which says "P.M. McGee dealt out justice last week to those against whom charges were made by local Dog Catcher Gant for not obeying the muzzling regulations. Fines of \$1 and costs were imposed. Since then Prof. Gant is said to have invested in a coat of mail, which he wears under his business suit, a pair of double riveted shin pads, a helmet and brass knuckles, to be ready for any emergency." The *Echo* also mentions that John Gant "developed into a tobacco planter and was growing tobacco with leaves 3 feet, 2 inches long and 18 inches across."

John Gant also contributed articles to the local press. On April 29, 1910, the *Amherstburg Echo* printed an editorial written by Gant titled "Prof. John Gant to the Rescue" which said "Rev. T.J. Henderson preached a very able and instructive farewell sermon to the sailors one Sabbath

evening recently. In part he congratulated them on their beautiful homes and he regretted to say that there was very little offered them to do here; and it was of such a small nature that a colored man could not justify himself in doing it without degrading his honor. I take this opportunity of correcting the learned pastor and will illustrate I have earned a good living in Amherstburg for 45 years and in that time I have noticed colored school teachers graduate and colored lawyers get their start here. I myself have graduated 22 professional barbers, which profession of late years is considered perfectly legitimate, especially by my white brother students; as for myself. I have been given several positions of trust, sanitary inspector, collector of dog tax, county as well as town constable, which are all perfectly legitimate because I succeeded white men of trust. Now my theory is that God helps those who try to help themselves. I further beg to say that my position of trust is just as legitimate as that of the pastor, lawyer, storekeeper, school teacher, or any other profession or calling requiring intelligence and judgement.”

The editorial continues by saying “Now as for the municipal honors that have been conferred on my colored brethren here: Ezekiel Stevens served as councillor with honor attached to his record. John Wesley served as trustee of our Public schools with honor to himself and to the satisfaction of the people. David H. Smith served faithfully as councilman several terms, had the honor of being nominated for mayor, and would have been elected if it had not been that the other man had the most votes. Now we colored men can not all be sailors’ some of us must stay at home and see to it in these dangerous dog days, that the dogs are kept muzzled so that the sailor’s wives and children are safe in their absence, and this is a legitimate occupation. Now I am proud today that the best people of Amherstburg commend me in the discharge of my duties, so I have nothing to fear and lots to hope for. I remain respectfully, the servant of the people. – JOHN GANT, Sanitary Inspector and Collector of Dog Tax. Amherstburg, April 20th, 1910.”

A second editorial appeared in the *Echo* on February 18, 1916 titled "A Blast from Prof. Gant" which said "Mr. Editor: - While in Hamilton and Toronto last week, I saw in both cities hundreds of volunteers with several Afro-Americans in the ranks. At one time I saw 800 on the double quick march. It reminded me of the Fenian Invasion of years ago when they fought together as one man. I am proud of my people fighting for the flag that gave them liberty and equal franchise. Now it is up to them to make good. If I were 45 instead of 70, I would be in the ranks, head, neck and shoulders. PROF. J. GANT."

What we publish is not a complete history of any family and is based on the documents that are available. We welcome photos and information to fill in the gaps. See you next week for part 2.