

The Gant Family History Part 4 – We Remember

Sadly, on September 13, 1918, the *Echo* reported that John Gant passed away. His obituary says “John Gant, a well-known citizen of Amherstburg and vicinity, passed away late Wednesday afternoon in the 73rd year of his age. He had been poorly for over a year with heart and kidney trouble and his death had been expected for three months. Mr. Gant was born in Little York (Toronto) August 1, 1846, and came to Amherstburg in 1869, following the American war, in which he served and on account of which he drew a pension. He was married at the First Baptist church, Amherstburg, in 1869, to Miss Martha Joiner, step-daughter of the late George Crawford, by Rev. R. Dulin. They had double bridesmaids and groomsmen – Misses Louis and Elizabeth Foster and Wm. Southard and David Foster. Their union was childless. Mr. Gant conducted a barber shop in town for nearly half a century. He took an active interest in municipal affairs, was Sanitary Officer and dog tax collector for many years and a county constable. He also was active in Dominion and Provincial politics as a staunch Liberal.”

Even after John Gant passed away, there were references to his life and work in newspaper articles and even a recent publication. Over a decade after he passed, on July 21, 1933, the *Echo* shared an article titled “Remodelling of Florey Block Recalls Famous Character – Prof. John Gant Used to Remodel Young Bloods of Amherstburg.” It says “The Florey Block of Dalhousie Street that is having its face lifted and remodelled, was once an establishment for doing that very thing to the masculine population of Amherstburg. We say masculine, for in the good old days a woman sitting in a barber’s chair would have created enough gossip to keep three sewing circles and a flock of pink teas in conversation for weeks. The men had this barber shop all to themselves, and it was no ordinary place of business. No siree, Bob! Several decades ago Professor John Gant (we give you his full title) ran a real hightoned tonsorial parlor in the basement of the block. He was dubbed professor by common consent, for he made a profession

out of his trade. When the professor finished slicking up one of his clients with a can of bear's grease, the object of his ministrations, the gay young blade, could get through all the rigors of post-office and forfeits without turning a hair. And his work on a moustache would make any 'mellerdrammer villun' mutter enviously. The professor believed in dressing his part, too, and it was a sight of a morning to see him march down the street clad in a high silk hat, Prince Albert coat, lavender trousers, no less, and, as they say in marriage columns, with matching accessories. He was one of the staunch Liberals, and was always appointed a delegate from Amherstburg to attend conventions."

The article also says "What this started out to be was a short history of the famous building now known as the Florey Block, but the professor is stealing the show. But he was the central figure in his circle in life, and now his memory is intertwined with the building he occupied. Previous to his tenancy it was a famous hostel, known as the British American Hotel. That was over 100 years ago. Since the professor's time it has been used chiefly as a gents' furnishings and merchant tailors' shop. M. Lawler was the first tailor to occupy the premises. His successors were H.Y. Pickering and James Lester. When these two dissolved partnership Mr. Pickering took over the business and after him it was occupied by Arthur Reynolds, the last one to use it as a place of business. The upper part has been used for some time as a dwelling house. Mr. Florey intends placing a new front on the building and changing its entire outward appearance. He intends it to be one of the most modern business places in town. The new front will undoubtedly add greatly to the appearance of the street."

A week later, on July 28, 1933, the *Echo* printed a response letter to the previously mentioned article which said "I was much interested in your write up of the old Webber House in the town of Amherstburg, especially the mention of 'Prof. John Gant' with his usual 'A nice

clean easy shave, five cents.’ His name brings to mind an incident which happened in the early nineties. As ‘Professor’ was an ardent Liberal in politics, and always attended the conventions of the party, at this time there was to be a convention in Toronto for some special purpose. He was asked by one of the Liberals to attend as a delegate. The Professor said he would like to go, but unfortunately he did not have suitable clothes to appear as he should. However, it was arranged he was to go to the other’s house immediately (as the time was short) and he would be given a suitable pair of pants. John forthwith proceeded to the friend’s house for the pants. It happened that the said friend had just bought a new suit of clothes which required some minor alterations and when Mr. Gant informed the good lady that her husband had sent him for the clothes, she thought he was to make the alterations, so she gave him the whole suit. Imagine the feelings of the friend when he arrived home and found what had happened. Needless to say the Professor attended the convention. – W.P.C.”

The *Windsor Star* also refers to ‘Professor’ John Gant on May 15, 1954 in the article “‘Buffalo Bill’ Haircuts Once Vogue” which says “Barbers still retain their reputation for being talkative souls. There are those who say that some of them are too talkative. But who still remembers the barber in Amherstburg who was so talkative and well versed in the affairs of men that they dubbed him ‘Professor’ Gant?”

Two decades later, references to Gant still appear in the *Echo* regarding his participation in Emancipation day celebrations. On July 31, 1974 an article mentions “This event has been observed in Amherstburg for many, many years. In the old days the event was heralded by a parade in which members of Lincoln Lodge took part. Prominent person in the parade was the late Professor John Gant.” While on July 30, 1980 another article refers to him as a “six-footer – who wore a silk plug hat and took a prominent part in these annual events.”

The recent publication *Heritage Buildings of Amherstburg* by Meg Reiner of the Marsh Collection includes a reference to Gant on page 40 which says “257-263 Dalhousie -John Gant, known locally as ‘the Professor,’ operated the Twilight Barber Shop in the former basement saloon at its north end. He was an Amherstburg barber for almost fifty years, and his popular shop was referred in the article as a ‘high-toned tonsorial parlour. In local advertisements, Gant described himself as the official barber to both the mechanic and labourer, and often shared his motto: ‘Live and Let Live.’ Born in Toronto, Professor Gant came to town after service in the American Civil War. In addition to his barbershop, Gant was a town and county constable, sanitary officer and dog tax collector.”

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 where we will celebrate another amazing family.