

Mary (Downing) Spring, McCarthy

1834 - 1899

The Life of a Pioneer Woman Living in the Irish Settlements

of

Oldcastle & Maidstone



Mary (Downing) McCarthy

A Pioneer Woman of Oldcastle

Mary

Mary (Downing) Spring-McCarthy was born in 1834 and was the first daughter and 3rd child of Capt. Denis & Honora (Houlihan) Downing. She grew up in what was then, the Township of Sandwich, Essex County, Western District of Upper Canada, on the Downing farm (*lot 302 S ½ on the north side of Talbot Rd.*) She was second generation Irish living in a time when women had few legal rights. The pioneer women of Essex County float like ghosts between the written pages of the 1800's historical accounts. History recorded much about the men of this era but told few stories of the strong spirited women who were often the backbone of these small communities.

Much research has been done, in order to uncover the story of Mary an Irish pioneer girl who not only learned to survive in a land and time that was not kind to women but contribute to the growth and development of her community.

Pre Mary

In 1830, Mary's father petitioned Col Talbot for land along the recently completed Talbot Road in Essex County. In 1831, lot 302 S ½ North of Talbot Road, was assigned to him.

Colonel Talbot granted, in 1832, to Denis Downing (**a patriot**) one hundred acres of dense forested land. It would be the beginning of many decades of struggle and back breaking work. The land grant was situated on the tree lined Talbot Trail, not much more than a foot path (**a sometimes swampy path**) cut through the wilderness. It would take years for her father and the other Irish petitioners to clear enough land just for a house and garden, let alone fields of crops that would generate an income to sustain the family.

It would take another seventeen years before he had the deed in-hand. While there is no information as to their first dwelling, family folklore says, it was a log cabin. The petitioner was required to take immediate possession and live on the land as one of the conditions for the land grant. Most of these early pioneers of the newly completed Talbot Trail in Essex County would have lived in tents or log cabins in the beginning.

Early Life in the Township of Sandwich

Mary would have spent her early years living in a remote wilderness log cabin. Neighbours would be few. The Meehan family was granted lot 302 N ½ on the south side of Talbot Road (across from the Downing Land) and they would become her closest neighbor. In 1845, east of the Downings, on the next lot 301, was the Michael McCarthy family and down a little further on the south side of Talbot road was her uncle's farm, James Houlihan (*her mother's brother*).

I can only ascertain that as a little girl, Mary would have enjoyed those Sunday afternoons when the two families could get together and socialize. Playing with her Houlihan cousins would have been a welcome break from the many chores that little pioneer girls had at this time.

In 1838, not only was Mary's Dad, Denis, trying to clear the required ten acres of land, he was also expected to perform one of his other duties, volunteering for the local militia. Mary, only four years old at the time, probably would not have understood the political tensions and frequent gatherings of the men. However, she would have sensed the fear in her mother and two older brothers as her father prepared to defend Sandwich, along with his friends and neighbours against the raids of the rebels. *It is not known at this time, if Denis actually fought in any of the local battles in the Rebellion of Upper Canada, but there is a record of him receiving payment for a claim arising from the "Rebellion Losses Bill." This would confirm his involvement in some way.*

Death was no stranger to these early settlers. In 1844, two of Mary's siblings died suddenly and no explanation for these young deaths, at the moment, can be confirmed. (*I suspect it was cholera due to the numerous epidemics recorded in the county at this time.*) Denis who was eight passed away (**May 20, 1844**) and Catherine who was just two died two weeks later (**June 8th, 1844**). Diseases such as typhus, cholera, measles, small pox and influenza caused a high mortality rate among children. Few families at this time were spared the sorrow of losing a child. Living

in such a remote area meant that Mary would have assisted in caring for the sick and the preparation of the dead for burial and maybe even accompanying her parent's on the long journey to Sandwich, by horse and wagon, to their burial spot in the Assumption Cemetery. She would have been only ten years old but as the oldest and now, only girl, her mother would have relied on her heavily. It was these sorrowful times of great need, that neighbours were called on for help and support. This small Irish settlement was bound together in care and service to one another for survival. The links to each other, most likely, came from their deep rooted Irish desire to own land (*an opportunity, they would not have had in Ireland*) and their strength to persevere in the face of hardships from their strong Catholic Faith. Mary would have learned well from these early life lessons and developed a spirit of gentle kindness and love for her family and neighbours as well as the fortitude to press on.

Mary's education was carried out by her father a learned man, "a man of letters." For in the early days of settlement, food and shelter took priority over education. All hands would be needed at home. It took a large family pulling together to survive this wilderness. The education at this time was in need of revision and was slowly evolving from a two tier system of rich and poor. Each district had a school but it was supported and largely attended by wealthy children and influenced by the Anglican Church. The district school was located in Sandwich (*where Brock elementary is today*). It was too far and costly for the Downing children to attend. The lower tier school system was composed of what was referred to as "common" schools. These schools in many cases were log structures staffed by teachers mostly interested in earning a wage and under qualified to teach. Girls in general were not allowed to attend school so it seems logical that Mary as well as her siblings were home schooled.

The early farms of Essex County in the Western District were not yet money generators. Land was slowly being cleared of the giant hard woods and some income may have been earned from selling the lumber. The few acres under cultivation and the livestock they had at this time would be for the family's own consumption. In 1839, Denis had nine acres under cultivation. Jobs and money were hard to come by. This was evident because of the many income undertakings one family would have. The Downings were no exception. Mary's father, held different offices and jobs throughout his life. He represented The Township of Sandwich as Reeve in the Municipal Council of the United Counties of Essex and Lambton, Land Agent, Justice of The Peace and Magistrate for Sandwich East, Superintendent of schools for the district, Captain of the Militia and in later years

returning officer for Sandwich East. Denis Downing was a very busy family head. It must have fallen to his sons to work and develop the farm. The care of the family and the running of the house hold would have been on the shoulders of the women but they too would do their part to earn money for the family.

Downing Inn & Stage Coach Stop

Having eight younger siblings, one can only imagine the many responsibilities Maria (baptismal name) may have had. At approximately the age of sixteen, serving the needs of weary travellers would have been added to her long list of chores.

Records show that in the 1850s the Downing house was licensed as an Inn. *(Dennis and Honora had earned the deed to the farm by 1847. They most likely built their new frame house around that time).* Stage coach service was introduced in the 1830's from Windsor to Leamington. The Downing's location on Talbot Road made it a convenient rest station for any one traveling to and from the towns of Sandwich and Windsor to the county towns and settlements. Mary's home would serve as a stage coach stop along this long route.

In those days, the family home/ Inn would have provided just the minimum accommodations, light refreshments and a place to rest for a very short time. Mary, by now a teenage girl, must have fostered a hardy pioneer spirit, a sense of responsibility and a strong work ethic to manage, along with her mother, their growing family as well as performing inn keeper duties. *(It is possible that the family's experience of running an Inn was the reason Mary later in life began the tavern at Oldcastle and managed it assisted by her brother and then her second husband Michael McCarthy.) (It is interesting to note her older brother James immigrated to Kansas and opened a tavern there.)*

Young Adult

The mid 1850's brought changes to the Oldcastle neighbourhood. The Downing family experienced extreme happiness and great sadness in the fifties. Richard, the last of the Downing children was born in 1853 but only lived to just over the age of one. In the same year, James, the eldest Downing, was the first to marry bringing into the family a sister-in-law for Mary. In 1854, James and Catherine had a daughter and they named her Ann. It should have been a happy time for Aunt Mary but the little baby girl died four months later.

In 1855, their neighbour on the South side of Talbot road, James Meehan passed away. Life on the farm alone was often too much for the widow and so in 1856 James wife Margaret Meehan sold the farm to John Spring. It appears John, recently emigrating from Ireland, was a widower with an eight year old son named Edward.

In 1856 Mary's uncle, James Houlihan (*her mother's brother*) died and his wife Bridget sold their farm. Mary would probably have been saddened to have her cousins and close neighbours move away.

Mary's Mystery

In the year 1857, a mystery for inquisitive historical minds unfolds in the life of Mary Downing. On Feb.9th, with the consent of her parents, Mary is quickly married to the new and little known widower neighbour from Ireland, John Spring. John Spring was fifty years old (just five years younger than Mary's father) with a young son from his previous marriage and Mary was only twenty-three years old at the time. St. Mary's records indicate, Mary had only one publication of the bands and received a dispensation from announcing the other two publications from Bishop Pinsonneault. This seems to indicate a need for a quick marriage.

Why she married in such a hurry is the question? Many reasons come to mind:

- 1) Was it for love? He was fifty years old while she was only 23 and he was a stranger to the neighbourhood.
- 2) Was she pregnant? Her first child Alice, was born ten months after their marriage in December.
- 3) Did she feel compassion and the need to help John? He was a widower with an eight year old son to raise and maybe in poor health.
- 4) Was it an opportunity for Mary to move out of a crowded home into her own house and yet remain close to the family who had always depended on her? (*The Meehan house, John now owned was large and it was located on the farm across the road from the Downing Homestead.*)
- 5) Was it an arranged marriage between her father and John Spring and she dutifully obeyed?

The answers to these questions (*for now*) are lost in time.

(Notes of interest: 1)The present day structure, St. Mary's church, was not yet erected. St. Mary's was a log mission chapel in the woods at this time. 2) A nuptial blessing is given to John and Mary by the priest and witnessed by two people but there appears to have been no wedding mass or ceremony performed.)

Married Life in Oldcastle

Mary (Downing) Spring began her new married life with John that winter. Soon after, she became an expectant mother. What should have been a happy time in Mary's life soon turned into sadness. Her mother, (Hanora (Houlihan) Downing) was ill. Mary would have seen to the needs of her sick mother. She would now be helping to care for two families. In September of that year, her mother passed away leaving behind her husband, Denis (*Mary's father*) and their six remaining children ranging in ages from 25 to 8. Hanora's death must have been a great loss to the family and very sad for Mary since her mother would not be present for her first born child. In December of that year, Mary gave birth to a baby girl and named her Mary Alice. No doubt, little Alice received a lot of attention living so close to her Grandpa, Uncles and Aunts.

1857 was a very eventful year. The north half of lot 302, south of the Talbot Road, was granted, one hundred acres, to Denis Downing for the sum of fifty pounds for fulfilling the conditions of the first grant in 1847. For a small sum, fifty acres of the newly granted land was sold to his eldest son, James and Catherine, (the wife of James), who built their own home on this farm (*in my early years, it was known as the Rounding Farm*). The Downing family had expanded. Denis Downing owned one hundred and fifty acres, James and Catherine Downing owned the other fifty acres and John and Mary (Downing) Spring owned one hundred acres. 1857 had been a year of setbacks and a year of growth. The Downing family together now owned three hundred acres in what sometimes was referred to as the Oldcastle Station.

Mary Begins Again

In September 1858, tragedy knocks on Mary's door again. Her husband for less than two years dies leaving her with a ten year old stepson, Edward and their nine month old daughter, Alice, to raise on her own. (*While not totally clear, it appears there is a mortgage on the farm that is left by John Spring to Mary, Edward and Alice.*) Her faith, Christian devotion, the help of her family and support of neighbours

must have carried Mary through these hard times. It is evident that the Downing family was there to help her the way she had always helped them. Drawing from her experience as a child (*helping to run the Downing Inn*) and ever so industrious, Mary decided to operate a tavern in her home to support the little family. According to the 1861 census, two of her brothers were living with her. John was the tavern keeper and Alexander helped her with the carpentry work. (*I am assuming, he was the one who added the bar room to the Spring home*). In these years, Mary shows her pioneer spirit; a willingness to work hard, an optimistic view, a love of family and a trust in God. There is evidence that Mary (*Downing*) Spring was a respected member of the Irish community and St. Mary's Parish (*or she had a good tavern patronage*) for records show that Mary was often asked to be the Godmother to many baptized babies in the community.

1861 appears to be a happier year for the Downing family. John Downing (Mary's brother) purchased the other fifty acres of lot 302 N ½, North of Talbot Road, next to his brother James from his father.

At the ripe old age of twenty-seven, Mary finds a new potential husband. Her affections were directed to Michael McCarthy the son of a neighbouring family, (*Michael and Catherine (Finn) McCarthy*). Mary would have known Michael her whole life, possibly as children, the Downing boys and McCarthy boys being neighbours, may have played together with Mary tagging along behind her older brothers. He was one year older than Mary born in 1833 (*according to Assumption Church Records*) an educated man, not yet married and still living in the homestead on Talbot Road when Mary's husband John Spring passed away in 1858. It is possible that Michael began to frequent Mary's new tavern being in close proximity to his home or maybe he consoled her and offered his help to his widowed neighbour as many in this close knit community would have done. Somehow a relationship must have bloomed and sparked a flame or rekindled an old one. Mary married the boy next door in May, 1861 (*a respectful 2 ½ years after the death of her first husband*). Her father, brothers and sisters would have been most happy for this union.

Michael must have cared deeply for Mary to want to marry a widow with two children, a farm and a tavern to run. Hard work and willingness to face large challenges must have been some of the characteristics of this McCarthy gentleman. With Michael's help, Mary was able to make big improvements to the farm by erecting more substantial and commodious buildings. For thirty-two years, they conducted a hotel on their premises.

Mary's Family

Mary and Michael had six children; Josephine, Frank, Arthur, Nora, Victoria and Frederick. Mary's tasks would have been many. Josephine was the first child of the Michael and Mary (Downing) McCarthy union born April 1862. In 1864, Mary gave birth to their first son Francis (Frank). In 1866, the McCarthy's were blessed with another little girl, who she named after her mother Honora, (*later nick named Nora*). In 1871, a daughter Victoria was born and then their final child a boy, Fredrick in 1872. In just a span of ten years, Mary had given birth to six children. She now had a large family to take care of and raise as well as a tavern to run.

Living in Sandwich East

The early 60's was a time of growth and development. The Township of Sandwich was divided into two distinct municipalities, the Township of Sandwich East and the Township of Sandwich West. Denis Downing must have been a happy man in these years. His two sons were located on farms behind him. His eldest daughter was happily married to a man from good pioneer stalk and he had sons and daughters still at home to help him with the farm. Alexander now 24, Cornelius 22 and Denis 13 were strong and capable of running and doing the farm work. Ellen 17 and Honora 15 with the guidance of their close neighbour and older sister Mary could take care of the household chores. Denis (*her father*) at this time pursued his occupations and duties for the newly formed district of Sandwich East as magistrate and superintendent of the schools. 1869 Dennis was named Captain Dennis Downing of the reserve militia of Essex.

The stability and tranquility was short lived. James not content with the hard work of farming in Essex County began looking towards Kansas just admitted to the union as a free state in 1861. The Homesteaders Act of 1862 offered land to settlers and this caught his attention. In 1865 we find James, Catherine (his wife) and Cornelius (his younger brother) in Kansas. A letter from Dennis to his son Cornelius, informs him that he has rented James' house and farm, paid Mrs. McCarthy the money owed at the grist mill and to declare themselves as British Subjects at the border when they return home since many US draft dodgers were escaping into Canada.

In 1867 John, no longer interested in farming sold his fifty acres to Jerimiah McCarthy (*a cousin to Michael McCarthy*) and the following year James (*who never*

returned home) sold his fifty acres to his brother Alexander. Alexander, must have decided that he too was tired of clearing the tree covered land or maybe he was unable to pay his brother because the very next year he sold the land to Jonathan Dennison (*another cousin of Michael McCarthy*) for the very same sum.

In 1870 it appears that the Oldcastle Rd., (*Walker Rd. not confirmed*) was constructed. The new road divided a small triangular section from the rest of the Downing farm. (**This corner of the Downing Farm, located on the Talbot Rd. across from Mary and Michael's home causing some confusion as to ownership in later years.**)

(Not yet confirmed, it is possible, that the Oldcastle Road was originally a section of Walker Rd. built by Hiram Walker and was rerouted later to the present day road.)

Mary's Senior Years

The census of 1871, puts the number at 8 living in the McCarthy home. The youngest Fredrick is not born until the following year. Alice Spring, daughter of Mary and step daughter of Michael is now thirteen years old. Edward Spring, Mary's step son is no longer living with the family. (*US Census of 1870 places Edward Spring age 21 in Pittsfield, Massachusetts with wife Julia 23 and daughter Mary 5 months. This Edward Spring is the right age and it is possible that he could have named his daughter Mary after his step mother.*) In 1874, Edward sold Michael his share of the farm for one thousand dollars. In 1880, at the age of twenty-two Alice entered the St. Joseph order and took the name Sister Benedict. Mary purchased her daughter's share of the farm for one thousand dollars in 1886. She would now own 2/3 of the farm and her husband Michael 1/3.

Both Michael and Mary prove to be good providers as taught to them by their pioneer parents. They operated a farm and at one time two taverns the Oldcastle location and for two years the "Crown Inn" at Walkerville. In 1871, Michael was also politically involved holding many offices of the old Conservative party, having been assessor of Sandwich East and South for sixteen years. In 1878, he was instrumental at establishing the Post Office at Oldcastle which he served as postmaster for many years.

Another death knocked at the Downing door in 1878, Ellen, Mary's sister who had not been well for some time, died. Ellen had never married but lived as a single woman sometimes with her brother John but mostly helping care for her father. The Downing home was beginning to empty. James and Cornelius were settled in Kansas, John had opened a meat market in Hamtramck in Michigan and

Alexander was residing in Bay City Michigan working on the railroad. All were married with families. Honora Downing married Jeremiah Driscoll. By 1880 only two men, a widower and bachelor, were left living alone in the once overcrowded house, Captain Denis Downing (*approx. 77 years old*) and his youngest son by the same name Denis (36). The following year the Downing home was blessed with a new female occupant. The youngest son of Capt. Denis Downing and only remaining son working the farm, found a wife. He married Mary Catherine BOURKE, Windsor, d/o William BOURKE) & Maria WHITE. Dennis was seventeen years her senior. Immediately, Catherine would have the task of caring for her aging father –in-law, Denis senior. Close by however, was the ever faithful Mary who would welcome Catherine into the family and assist in the care of her father.

Mary's Father (Denis Downing Senior) Passes

In 1885 Mary's father died and her brother Denis and his wife Catherine (Burke) Downing inherited the homestead across the street. They had three little girls, Gertrude born in 1882 who died at the age of one, Catherine born in 1883 and Gertrude born in 1885.

Shortly after their father's death in 1885 Mary and her brother Denis received the news of a railway (*The Lake Erie. Essex and Detroit River*) to be constructed from Windsor to Kingsville and land from both farms would be acquired. A section of the railway would be built next to the Oldcastle Road. In 1889, sister and brother sold parts of the farm for Walker's railroad and construction soon began. A railway passing through the Oldcastle Hamlet would have endless possibilities for the future. Capt. Downing never saw the big locomotives come juggling across the South west corner of his farm. It would have been an awesome sight for these settlers who were so use to the quiet of isolation.

Three years after the death of Mary's father, Denis Downing, in 1888, Mary's sister-in-law Catherine (*Burke*) Downing, her brother's wife and neighbour, passed away leave their two small girls behind, Catherine, five years old and Gertrude just two years old. This must have been a very dark time in the lives of the Downing and McCarthy family. (*It is interesting to note that the women of these times, unlike today, often died before their husbands concluding that life for them was very harsh.*) Mary as always seems to be the one who lifts up the family. At the age of fifty-four, Mary takes into her home, her nieces Catherine and Gertrude and along with the help of her older children begins the task of raising her brother's

girls and looking after her widowed brother, Denis, who now managed the family farm down the road on his own. Needless to say, these would have been very busy years for her.

Toll Gate on the Downing Farm

In 1888 (*according to the land records of Lot 302*) it appears the railroad purchased a small parcel of land for \$40.00 from Denis Downing to lay their railway tracks over a portion of his farm. The tracks now cut off the far Southwest corner of the farm separating a small triangle of land from the rest of the farm. It is believed, that Denis (*Mary's younger brother who now owned the land*) gave this part of lot 302 to his sister possibly as a settlement to their father's will.

Historical Maps of Sandwich South locate the toll gate on the corner of Walker Rd. (*now Oldcastle Rd. & #3 Hwy/ Where the Kavanaugh store and house were built in the 1920's.*) Features of interest regarding property were detailed in the 1881 Historic Mapping and also indicates a Toll Gates on lot 302 owned by Denis Downing. Alexander Cameron having the lease to Talbot Road collected the tolls to maintain the road. Cameron and later his Estate collected those tolls on this road that was neglected and more often than not it was impassable in the wet season. The Towns people of Essex and the area farmers became very resentful. On the late evening of Tuesday July 21st, 1896 a band of disguised men traveled the Talbot Road burning down all the gates as they went. After they burned the gate in Maidstone, they had a drink at the hotel of Harry North and then headed out to burn the next one in Oldcastle. The two ladies at the Oldcastle toll gate were so frightened at the sight of the disguised men that they ran off into the woods. It would take two days to find them. Mary would have had front row seats to the burning from her tavern window. (*It would have been interesting to hear her account.*)

Sandwich South

In 1893, the Township of Sandwich East was divided and the new Township of Sandwich South was formed. The first council was held on Mary's porch. Look closely through the window and you can see a faint outline of a person. (*Was Mary observing the meeting from her kitchen window?*) The land records of lot 302 clearly show Mary McCarthy deeding part of this triangle to the newly formed Township of Sandwich South dated Sept.30th, 1896 only two months after the burning of the gate.

Mary Passes

Mary died Nov.2nd, 1899, three years later at the age of 65 and is buried alongside her husband and children in St. Mary's Cemetery, Maidstone, Ont.

Conclusion

I am of the opinion that Mary (***Downing***) Spring McCarthy was a very industrious person, learning her work ethic from her mother and mirroring life's many hardships so many pioneer women, of the time had to endure in this wilderness. Time has lost the story of these strong, hard working, pioneer women. My purpose in writing Mary's story is to pay tribute to the many women who helped build our community and went unnoticed.



Mary (Downing) McCarthy lived in this house from 1857 – 1899

Homestead History

1848 – Farm granted to James Meehan (patriot)

1855 – James Meehan dies

1856 – Widow Margaret Meehan Sells the house and farm to John Spring

(Not verified – house was built between 1848 – 1855 - This house is between 170 – 163 years old)

1857 – February - Mary Downing marries John Spring a widower with an 8 year old son, Edward

1857 – December – Alice Spring, daughter of Mary (Downing) & John Spring is born

1858 – John Spring dies

1859 – 1861 Mary's brothers John (tavern keeper) Alexander (carpenter) are living with Mary. (It is presumed the bar room was added on at this time and the tavern began operation.)

1861 – Mary marries her long time friend and neighbour, Michael McCarthy

1862 – 1872 – Michael & Mary's children are born: Josephine, Frank, Honora, Victoria, Fredrick

1878 – Michael established the post office

1888 – Nieces, Catherine (Downing) Lepain & Gertrude (Downing) Sylvester move in with their Aunt & Uncle

19 - The last of the McCarthy children die and Gertrude (Downing) Sylvester inherits the farm

1957 – Fred Sylvester inherits the farm

20 - June Sylvester inherited the farm

20 - Children – Michael, Denis & Mark Sylvester inherit the farm

20 - The farm is divided into parcels and is sold out of the family