



The Opendore Story

The following history is excerpted from “Sherwood Historic District” prepared by Dr. Judith Wellman of Historical New York Associates.

“This multi-roomed, multi-gabled house incorporates an older dwelling, built by James Davis, a blacksmith, as a small frame gable-and-wing house in 1837. Henry Fisher purchased it, and then, in 1851, Slocum Howland’s son William (1826-1905) bought it. In 1853, he married Hannah Letchworth, who had grown up in Sherwood and had just moved with her father Josiah to Auburn. They had three children, Clarence, Frederick, and Eugene, all of whom died within days of each other in a scarlet fever epidemic in 1858. The following year, on May 21, 1859, their daughter Isabel was born, and in 1863, they had a son Herbert.

Isabel Howland attended Cornell University, 1877-1881, with classmate Harriet May Mills. These two would become a powerhouse of woman suffrage for New York State and the nation for the rest of their lives.

William Howland took over the store after his father died in 1881 and built the new commercial block in downtown Sherwood, where Hannah and Isabel established Sherwood’s library and museum. William was a civic-minded man who served as Justice of the Peace for more than forty years. In 1882, he was elected to the New York State Assembly, where he served two terms and promoted legislation relating to women’s rights. In 1891, Hannah Howland became first president of the Sherwood Equal Rights Association, and Isabel and William became founding members.

In 1888, the Howlands enlarged their dining room and added a new kitchen to their house, which they called “Shade Lawn.” Hannah Letchworth Howland planted beautiful gardens at Shade Lawn, continued by Isabel Howland. One notable willow tree grew from a switch taken from a tree on the grave of Emperor Napoleon.¹

About 1910, after her parents’s (sic) deaths in 1902 and 1905, Isabel Howland hired a Syracuse architect to create a many-gabled small mansion, incorporating the older house, including William Howland’s office, the library, dining room, middle stairway, and butler’s pantry on the first floor, and her own bedroom, middle bathroom, middle hallway, Herbert Howland’s bedroom, and her parents’ bedroom on the second floor. She had all these rooms finished in oak, but she incorporated many kinds of wood throughout the house, including maple, cherry, bamboo, and rosewood. She named various rooms the Cheerie Room, the Shakespeare Room, the Balcony Room, and the Inglenook Room. She called the house “Opendore”, because she

¹ [S.W. Greene], “Reminiscences of Cayuga County History: Sherwood and Vicinity,” *Auburn Daily Advertiser*, April 22, 1881; *New Century Atlas*, 1904.

intended the house to become a home for the community. Even when she traveled, as she did extensively, especially in the winter, she kept the house open for community events. She had the assistance of Charles and Alice Koons, caretakers, and Stella Phillips, granddaughter of freedom seekers Herman and Hannah Phillips (whose house still stands next door), as well as other local people.

Miss Isabel's gifts to Sherwood were many, from the Sherwood Hospital to the Robin Hood Inn to her own Opendore, which she used as community center where she entertained the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Sherwood Political Equality Club, and many school children.²

*Sherwood residents remembered Miss Isabel as "kind, caring, and a true friend." She felt that "the whole community was her family, and she especially loved children." Edith Scileppi remembered Isabel as "soft, quiet, concerned, gentle, small, always a lady, compassionate." Homer Write remembered that Miss Isabel had a party every year for his class in her social room, with a fancy lunch and dancing. One year when she gave a party for children, recalled Edith Scileppi, she hid things all over the house for a treasure hunt. "Wally Bowen & Mrs. Smart fetched down a trunk with playthings: jewelry, toys, etc. Edith discovered a cuddly doll and played with it during her visit, . . . Isabel gave it to her." Elizabeth Hoxie Arnold remembered that Isabel gave her the book, *Hitty, Her First 100 Years*, about a wooden doll. When Elizabeth had polio in 1924, Isabel made her a sunshine box, with a little ivory deer and a minute glass with red sand. Isabel also had a school picnics. Herb Heffernan recalled that she gave parties for grade school kids with games, ice cream, cake and cookies. Kay Kanalley noted that she hosted the high school Christmas party in 1924. Harold Brown remembered that Miss Isabel allowed the children to "romp about and slide down the beautiful banister, which worried the parents." Miss Isabel replied, "Leave them alone. This is their day. Let them play." Willard Brown recalled Miss Isabel's snowplow, which she used to keep roads, sidewalks, and walks to all the village outhouses open in the wintertime.³*

Many outbuildings, including a fine barn, once surrounded the house.

When Isabel Howland died in 1942, she left an estate worth more than \$487,000. While it is difficult to estimate the value of that amount in twenty-first century terms, comparing it to approximate house values, to say it is equal to \$3,000,000 would not be far wrong.

The house became an apartment house, where many local teachers lived. Edward Deschl purchased this house in the 1970s and owned it until his death in 2007. Ironically, given Isabel Howland's generous use of Opendore as a major community center, the house has been deserted since 1976. Although Deschl paid taxes on his three Sherwood properties, he never returned to the community. By the late twentieth century, Opendore stood abandoned, open to the weather and desolate."

² Nellie Powers, interviewed by Mildred Myers [?], typewritten notes at Hazard Library, Poplar Ridge.

³ Typewritten notes of interviews by Mildred Myers [?] at Hazard Library, Poplar Ridge.