

# HISTORIC RED HOOK

## The Lown Children

**George Andrew Lown**  
1828-1838

**Mary J. Lown**  
1834-1838

**Charles Nelson Lown**  
1831-1838

**James Robert Lown**  
1838-1838

**David Lewis Lown**  
1833-1838

**Nancy R. Lown**  
March 20, 1836 - March 13, 1839

St. Paul's Lutheran Church Cemetery, Village of Red Hook  
*A rectangular curved-top marker in the first section of the cemetery, on the south side of the road located directly behind the church.*

A memorial stone in St. Paul's Lutheran Church cemetery identifies William and Olina Lown's six children who passed away in childhood. Their youngest daughter Nancy R. Lown's name is at the top of the marker which is next to the marker of the children's grandfather David D. Lown who died on June 25, 1862 at the age of 83. Five of William and Olina's other children—George, Charles, David, Mary, and James—are noted as having been "lost on Lake Erie June 6, 1838." Perhaps the children are buried here or maybe the marker is a cenotaph to memorialize the children. Research shows that there was not an accident on Lake Erie on June 6, 1838. However, there are accounts of a steamboat catching fire and going down on June 16, 1838, so we presume that is the tragedy that resulted in the five Lown children perishing. It is difficult to know why the children of William and Olina Lown were on the steamer *George Washington* as it made its journey on Lake Erie. We assume that one or both parents were onboard with their children when a tragic and horrific accident occurred in the pre-dawn hours of a June voyage, leading to the deaths of an estimated 50 people, including the five Lown children. There is uncertainty regarding the details of the horrific event, but it is clear that the grief of the Lown family experiencing six children die in such a short time span would be insurmountable.

Much is murky about the steamboat accident, despite many newspaper reports. The suspected event did not occur on June 6, 1838, as stated on the marker but rather on June

# HISTORIC RED HOOK

16, 1838, based on numerous historical accounts. According to an account by Louis F. Pelletier, the historian of Silver Creek which is a village located on Lake Erie and in Chautauqua County in western New York, the vessel was a “side wheeled wooden steamship built around 1837 in Ashtabula, Ohio with a high temperature boiler on wooden decks,” as noted in a February 18, 2022, Facebook post titled “The Tragic End of the Steamship *George Washington*.” Many sources report the steamer was on its maiden voyage traveling from Buffalo to Cleveland, although Pelletier’s research indicates it most likely was heading from Cleveland to Buffalo. The steamship caught fire about three miles from shore and could not navigate toward safety because it was engineered with a wheel rope steering mechanism; the fire that most likely started in the boiler of the ship also burned through the ropes, making it impossible to steer, posited newspaper accounts of the time. Pelletier notes the industry was beginning to move from rope steering mechanisms to iron rods which would have led to a much different outcome if the *George Washington* had been so outfitted.

The residents of Silver Creek, alerted to the steamship on fire off their shore, attempted to rescue as many passengers as they could; the crew of a nearby steamer named the *North American* also assisted in rescue efforts, writes Virginia Becker in a post of the Sheridan Historical Society of October 12, 2022 and reporting on a talk given by Pelletier. Casualties occurred when people suffered burns from the flames onboard the ship or drowned when they leapt into the cold Lake Erie waters. “Because the ship’s manifest and passenger list was lost to the fire, not everyone could be accounted for,” states Becker. Among them, we can assume, were the five Lown children who perished. Most likely one or both of their parents and maybe siblings were onboard as well and somehow survived. Those details remain to be unearthed, but no matter the specifics, an unfathomable and grievous loss had occurred.

The children’s father was William Lown, born to David and Rebecca (Beis) Lown in Red Hook on June 26, 1803. He was married to Olida (listed as Olina on the children’s marker at St. Paul’s and sometimes referred to in other sources as Alida) Clark Lown, the daughter of Jabez and Peggy Clark, born in 1803 as well. The 1830 US Census reports two

# HISTORIC RED HOOK

adults and four persons under the age of 20 as residing in Red Hook under the household of William Lown and transcribed as William Louer. A little over a decade after the accident, William and Olida are listed in the 1850 US Census as residing in Red Hook along with children William age 20, Eliza Jane age 10, and Asabah (perhaps Azuba) age 8; William Sr. is listed as a farmer, and his wife's name is spelled as Olida rather than Olina or Alida.

At some point William and Olina emigrated to the Midwest, living in Illinois and Indiana. The 1860 US Census lists a farmer named William Lawn, most likely William Lown, age 57 and his wife Elida (another version of her name) age 58 along with a William Lawn aged 32 and Kate Lawn age 21 and two workers Agario and Frank Minks, ages 18 and 13 respectively, residing in Dundee in Kane County of Illinois. The Lowns next lived in Elgin, IL, in an Italianate-style house at "1012 Duncan Avenue was built around 1868 for William and Olida Lown for \$800. It was one of the first two homes to be built on Duncan Avenue. The Lowns did not own the property long, until selling it to Melvin Armstrong," reports the Historic Elgin website. Another clue pointing to the couple having moved from the Red Hook area is that in David Lown's will (filed September 6, 1860, in Dutchess County court records and listed in New York wills and probate records) desired to leave his home, property, and goods to his widow and adult sons still residing and farming in Red Hook; to William he left \$500 and to his married daughter a dollar. William's father died in 1862, and his estate was settled in 1864, according to a filing found in New York wills and probate records.

Apparently, William and Olina Lown eventually moved to Indiana. The 1870 US Census reports a Wm. H. Lown, age 66, and an Alida Lown (most likely Olida and also known as Olina), age 67, both native to New York and residing in Kankakee, La Porte, Indiana. William's occupation was listed as gardener and his wife's as keeping house. No children resided with them, and their personal estate value was \$3,000 and real estate value was \$1,000. William died May 29, 1881, and Olina died November 21, 1889; both are buried in the Rolling Prairie Cemetery in Rolling Prairie, La Porte County, Indiana, according to FindaGrave.com.