

STANLEY LEWIS DRESSER (1867-1889)

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Stanley Lewis Dresser (1867-1889), Bond Street London copy of his Winnipeg cabinet photo. The copy was sent to Winnipeg by Christopher Dresser to prove he was Stanley's father. Source: Probate of Stanley Dresser, Manitoba Vital Records.

Stanley Lewis Dresser was the youngest son of Dr. Christopher Dresser (1834-1904). Dr. Dresser was a contemporary of William Morris (1834-1896). In the 1870s and 1880s, 'the doctor' was famous for 'artistic' machine-produced design and prolific dissemination of design advice. He had 13 children, 8 girls and 5 boys. His youngest son Stanley Lewis Dresser is buried in the Handscomb family plot at St. James in Winnipeg without a marker. This is Stanley's story as I have been able to piece it together.

June 8, 1867, Stanley Lewis Dresser was born at No. 2 Myrtle Place, North End Road, Fulham, SW London. It is described in a "to let" notice in *The Times*, London as a "beautifully decorated 10-roomed villa, the residence of Dr. Dresser separated by an invisible fence from apple and

cherry orchards, has large billiard room.” By the end of the summer of 1868 the Dresser family moved to the even grander neo-gothic ‘Tower Cressey,’ described in the Nov. 8, 1882 times as a “FREEHOLD MANSION, containing five spacious reception rooms, 11 bed and drawing rooms, usual domestic offices; garden and stabling; occupying an elevated site, commanding extensive views.” The 1871 England and Wales Census captures Stanley, age 3, sharing mansion life with nine siblings, his mother his father, and 5 female servants.

1881 British Census (age 14) Stanley continued to live at Tower Cressey, Aubrey Road, Kensington. Its staff list now reduced to 3 female servants.

1883 (age 16) this is the year of the demise of Christopher Dresser’s Art Furnishers’ Alliance, which had opened in 1880 on New Bond Street. In this time *The Heilbrunn Timeline* of the Metropolitan Museum, New York, says Christopher Dresser suffers progressively poor health and financial problems. He sells Tower Cressey in London, moving the family to Wellesley Lodge, Sutton, Surrey. This is a property with grounds and food growing potential and Dr. Dresser advertises in *The Times* for a gardener, specifically one who can care for orchards and the kitchen garden. In November 20 of this year Stanley’s older brother, Frank Perry Dresser (age 21) leaves the United Kingdom for Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Since I suspect Frank Perry ran away, 1883 must have been a memorably difficult year.

The next year at summer’s end (28 September 1884) Stanley’s younger sisters, Effie Beatrice Dresser (15 yrs.), Nellie Mabel Dresser (13 yrs.) and Ellen Rosamund Dresser (11 yrs.) are christened in the Methodist church at Sutton near Croydon, Surrey, England, followed by Stanley Lewis Dresser (18) the very next year, August 30, 1885.

1887 Christopher Dresser works on his first designs for paintable Anaglypta wallpaper. Nineteen-year-old Stanley Lewis Dresser embarks on the *SS Peruvian* (fig. 3) of the Allan Line at Liverpool, England bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia. He is recorded on the manifest as age 19 and with final destination Winnipeg, Manitoba.

1887, March 12, after 9 days at sea—a short trip for the times—the *SS Peruvian* arrives at Halifax. The train for the prairies left from Halifax, bringing Stanley to the Canadian west at its most expansionary period on the heels of tremendous real estate boom in the city of Winnipeg.

More is known once he is in Winnipeg. Sometime between May 1887 and September 1888 he begins work for G. L. Stephens, wholesaler in paint and decorative materials, a field closely tied to his father’s design concerns. With great foresight he purchases a life insurance policy from The Federal Life Assurance Co. and sometime between March 1887 and September 1889 opens a bank account with The Commercial Bank of Manitoba. He also sends his father (and family) a cabinet portrait taken at the American Art Gallery 574 ½ Main Street Winnipeg, proprietor, Mrs. R. E. (Rosetta Ernestine Watson) Carr, photographer. He also joins the Winnipeg Rifles as a

volunteer militia member. Only four years earlier the Winnipeg Rifles had been at the Battle of Batoche, Fish Creek, during the Northwest Rebellion

Stanley sent handwritten letters to his family regularly. One of them, written Oct. 20th, 1887 survives and I will quote it because it gives an idea of Stanley as a kind boy with a sense of humour who teases his sister, loves his family, and of his family training in art and design as a matter of course,

*C/O G. F. Stephens and Co.
Wpg. Man.*

My dear Effie [his immediately younger sister b. 19 Feb. 1869]

On Sunday [October 23 1887] I will wish Nellie [aged 16, the second youngest of the family b. 1871] many happy returns of the day. This wont be her twenty first birthday will it?

Last Friday night [October 14, 1887] after I had nicely got to sleep I woke up to see Mr James Dresser enveloped in his night---night shirt standing at the bottom of my bed & as I woke, he was saying, "Be quick, get out of bed and get dressed, there is a big fire a way off" I got up in bed & looked out of the window & then back into bed & asleep. James did differently, he got dressed and went out to see the fire. It was a big blaze three buildings were burnt down one being a printing office, the other private houses but all being made of wood they burnt down very quickly.

Fires are very frequent here & the fire brigades are splendid (there are four). There are between forty and fifty fire boxes distributed about the city so if a fire breaks out anywhere you have to run to the nearest fire-box from which the alarm was given & pull the bell which is connected with the nearest fire station, it is then telephoned to the city belfry which at once takes out the number of the firebox from which the alarm was given. So if you are in any part of the city you can tell where-about the fire is.

That's enough about fires but it reminds me that it is getting cold, it has been freezing hard all day.

Mrs Campbell has mended two pairs of my socks which is scrumptious (I believe you know the meaning of this word I don't).

I have been very busy this week for as the bookkeeper is away I have to make out the invoices myself.

I haven't got any more drawing pupils yet I'm sorry to say.

I am very sorry about Nellie's drawing exam. Am glad Doll has been promoted at school [would Doll be the youngest?].

Tis past eleven so I must close this letter. The enclosure is not for our Mary but Louis' so please send it on. [Louis Leo Dresser marries Mary Elizabeth Bell in 1896, so she is in the picture quite a while before the marriage]

I remain

*Your loving popsy wopsy,
Stanley L. Dresser.*

Source: Probate of the estate of Stanley Lewis Dresser, Winnipeg Archives

It's an aside, but Stanley Lewis Dresser and the Mr. James Dresser standing at the foot of his bed at 82 McDermot Avenue funnel back within about six generations to two brothers from Yorkshire. I doubt they would ever have come to understand their connection but they must have been charmed to share not only same last name but fathers named Christopher.

Carrying on into 1888, Stanley Lewis Dresser, clerk, continues to share 82 McDermot Ave with James—3 minutes' walk from the G.F. Stevens business at 176 Market Avenue. Back in Britain, his father designs Clutha Glass for Couper and Sons, Glasgow and the striking, free-blown Art Nouveau designs in bubbly glass are retailed exclusively by Liberty's.

1889, August 29, Thursday, Winnipeg, Stanley writes a letter addressed Wellesley Lodge in which he shares,

"Last Friday evening I did not feel very well and when I went to the office on Saturday morning I found I was not well enough to do my work so came home again—the trouble was a bad attack of stomach ache so I kept quiet all that day and also Sunday but in the evening feeling rather worse I went to see a doctor."

This will be the last letter his family will have from Stanley.

1889, September 5, Thursday, Stanley Lewis Dresser dies in Winnipeg of what both doctors signing his death certificate describe as a six day obstruction of the bowels. His death and burials entry records him as a 22 year old Episcopal clerk.

1889, September 6, Friday, *The Manitoba Free Press* publishes a brief news item on his death

Stanley Dresser a well-known young gentleman of this city died yesterday after a very brief illness. He was a member of the 90th Battalion and very popular in the circles of his acquaintance. His father is Rev. C. Dresser, Ph.D., of London, England. The funeral will take place on Saturday afternoon at 2:30 o'clock.

And a death notice further down the page,

Death: Dresser--Stanley Lewis Dresser, age 22 years, son of Christopher Dresser Ph.D., F.L.S., London, England. Funeral from 11 Market Street on nt. Saturday afternoon at half past two, to St. James Cemetery.

The top notice has a mistake in Stanley's father's occupation and the bottom one doesn't. Canadian importers did not credit designers in their advertising or marks on their wares. Dr.

Dresser was not the public personality he was in Britain and the United States. The accuracy of the death notice about Dr. Dresser's Ph.D. and F.L.S. (Fellow of the Linnaean Society) qualifications is perhaps because whoever wrote the notice of the funeral was a friend of Stanley or originally from Britain or the United States.

1889, September 13. 2:30, Funeral of Stanley Lewis Dresser at 11 Market Street and inhumation in St. James cemetery in the Handscomb owned plot. There was no Handscomb marker on the plot at this time.

In England, it is the day of the arrival of Stanley's last letter home—the one in which he describes himself as feeling ill.

1889, September 20, a week after the funeral, Christopher Dresser receives a letter from Melbourne Francis Christie bookkeeper at G.F. Stephens about his son's death. In a deposition that Stanley died with no will. Christie writes that he was Stanley's constant friend and nursed Stanley for several days prior to his death. [He may be the bookkeeper Stanley mentioned in his letter to Effie].

1890, Feb 21, Christopher Dresser sends an affidavit to Winnipeg appointing Melbourne F. Christie to act as his attorney in the estate of his son

March 31, 1890 the government of Manitoba grants probate to Melbourne Francis Christie. The accounting for the estate shows Federal Life Assurance paid the estate \$2081.29. I think from historical accounts of what was thought reasonable for a night in a Winnipeg hotel c. 1887, which was \$1.50, and the fact the same might cost \$150 in 2016 that the settlement could be equivalent to \$200,000 to 250,000 in spending power. It was a colossal estate compared to that of his brother Frank who died in 1927 leaving (about) \$350 US.

1889 is a year that two sources record as a time of a new rise in fortune for Christopher Dresser marked by acquisition of Elm Bank at Barnes. The *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* of the Metropolitan Museum of New York explains Dresser promotes his design at the International Paris Exhibition [May 6 – October 21, 1898]. "Perhaps the increased business this generated enabled Dresser to move to Elm Bank, Barnes—previously the home of marine artist E.W. Cooke." The Dorman Museum site records, "By 1889, Dresser seems to have recovered much of his wealth and status. Although more time was spent relaxing, he was still signing new contracts, specifically in 1893 with William Ault for ceramic designs for his new pottery." Both these sites seem a little perplexed to account for the change in fortune that allows the purchase of Elm Bank and the more relaxed pace. Perhaps, if Christopher Dresser was Stanley's beneficiary on the policy, knowing a little more about his son's death adds to understanding of why finances seemed more comfortable from 1889 on.

The Handscomb grave marker was once a soaring red granite column on a plinth—a design speaking of noble lives. Now the plinth lists, and annual heaves of Red River gumbo have put the column at its feet. There is no grave marker for Stanley, only the cemetery records note his

burial. If anyone knows more of the Handscomb's connection to Stanley Dresser, of any attempt by Dr. Dresser to arrange a marker for his son, or of the origin of the design of the marker, please contact jamcquit@gmail.com.