

ST. HELENA STAR

Dowdell was early wine leader in St. Helena

MARIAM HANSEN & HILLARY LYONS | Dec 27, 2016

In 2016, St. Helena's Crocker & Starr celebrated its 20th anniversary and in September, the winery held a retrospective tasting with leading wine writers and media.

Winemaker Pam Starr said, "There's something incredibly special about experiencing what goes into a memorable and delicious bottle of wine that's made from a single vineyard like this one.

"When people come to Crocker & Starr they taste our wine, see the vineyard in a historic district, and they leave with a sense of being part of our history and of this beautiful place in St. Helena," she said.

That history began with James Dowdell, who was an early wine leader in St. Helena. His legacy continues with his winery and brandy house buildings that are on the Crocker estate and the grapes grown on his land at Crocker & Starr.

Charlie Crocker and Pam Starr of Crocker & Starr continue to evoke the exceptional characteristics of Dowdell's unique land in their award-winning cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon and sauvignon blanc.

Dowdell moves to St. Helena

James Dowdell was born in Northern Ireland in 1845 with a wanderlust that spurred him out of his small town at the age of 18. In the following year Dowdell traveled the world, from New Zealand to Tahiti, and ultimately landed in San Francisco where he planned to settle with his wife Elizabeth, but fate had other plans.

Through his travels, Dowdell had learned a bit about farming and a job listing for a foreman to Edge Hill Winery caught his eye. In 1868, James and Elizabeth moved to St. Helena and Dowdell unknowingly began his career in wine. The estate, owned by retired General E. D. Keyes, lay on the hillside south of Sulphur Springs Avenue. Given his skills with stone masonry, Dowdell's primary task was to oversee the construction of the cellar however, over time, he found himself gravitating to working with the wine itself.

At 100,000-gallon capacity, the winery was the largest in Napa Valley, and it was there that Dowdell learned the art of winemaking.

The logo for Crocker & Starr features the brand name in a gold, serif font. A decorative, swirling flourish is positioned between the words "Crocker" and "Starr".

Charlie Crocker and Pam Starr celebrated the 20th anniversary of their winery, St. Helena's Crocker & Starr in the past year. property's history, though, goes back much further as James Dowdell bought the property in 1880 and had built a winery by 1886



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After several seasons under Keyes' wing, Dowdell was eager to branch out on his own and so he purchased 60 acres along the street that now bears his name. Nestled between the river and the Vaca range, the vines thrived in the rich soils of the Valley's alluvial plain and by 1880 Dowdell had 20 acres of robust zinfandel and riesling as well as hops.

Though he began merely as a wine grower, by 1886 Dowdell had built a winery and brandy house on his estate and between his own harvest and that of his neighbors, he produced 50,000 gallons of wine in his first year.

Dowdell & Son established

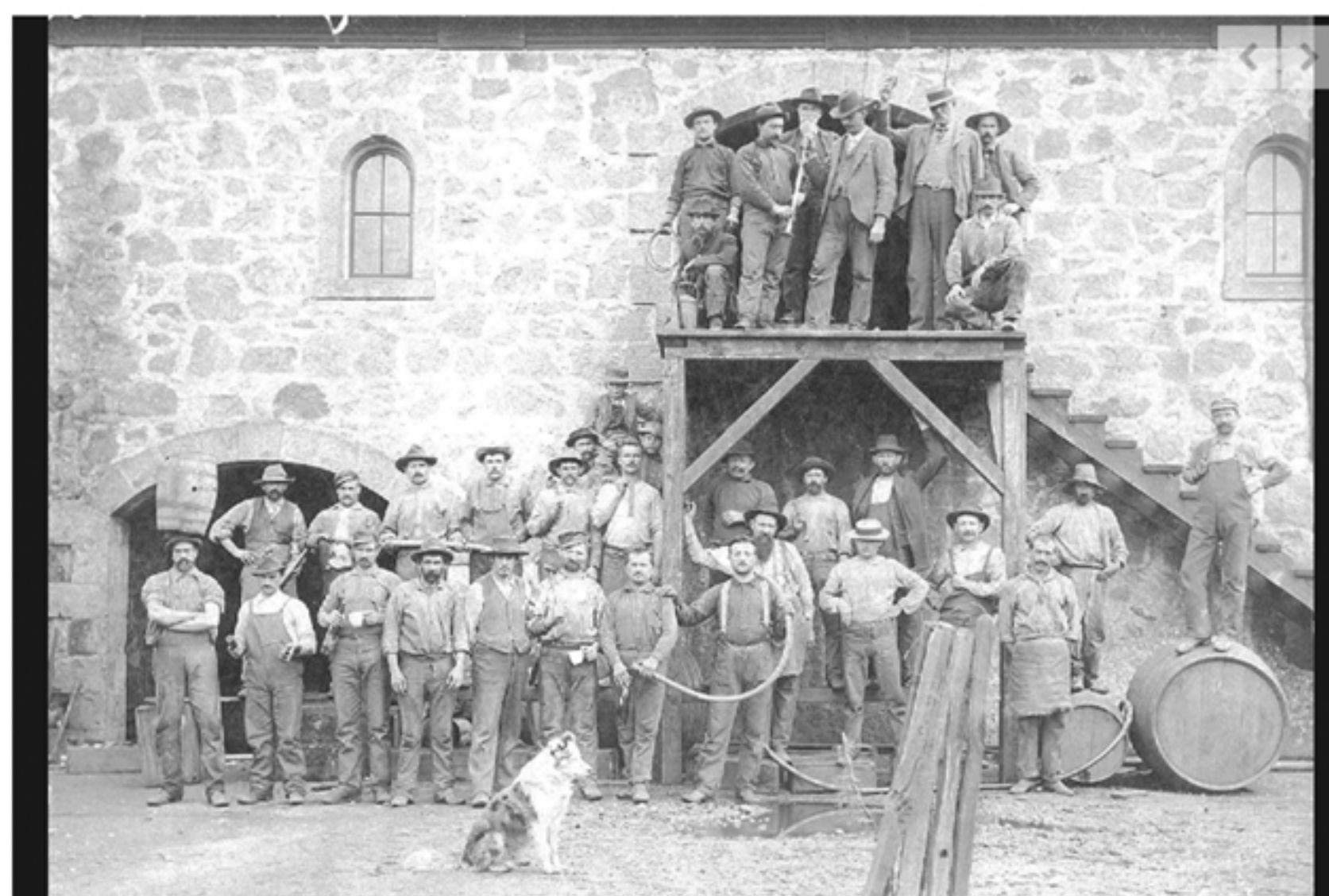
Given the estate's remarkable soil and climate, James Dowdell and his son Arthur wanted a wine label of their own, and in 1891 they established Dowdell & Son.

The Cloverdale Wine Company bought 320,000 gallons of Dowdell's wine in the winery's inaugural year, prompting Dowdell & Son to lease the Greystone Winery, largest in the state at the time, in 1892. As James' business and repute grew, Dowdell & Son became a major asset to the local winegrowing and winemaking community.

When grape prices fell to \$8 to \$10 per ton in 1892, it was Dowdell & Son that vineyardists turned to for support. James agreed to an unparalleled price of \$15 per ton. That same year, the Italian Swiss Colony at Asti in Sonoma acquired 300,000 gallons of wine but didn't have enough space to store it. Once again Dowdell came to the rescue, renting the company cooperage.

Despite James' role in this close knit and collaborative wine community, it was a legal dispute with the Bank of Saint Helena and wine buyers that ended his career in wine.

A loan that Dowdell had taken to keep pace with his booming business (with wine as his insurance) devolved into a battle over price and a forced sale that put the winery out of business in 1895. It was not until four years later that the Supreme Court ruled in Dowdell's favor. Sadly, Dowdell never made wine again though he continued to grow wine on his estate and became one of the most renowned hop growers of the region.



A group of men pose for a photo at St. Helena's James Dowdell Winery in 1914. It had been built in 1886. The property today is now the site of Crocker & Starr.



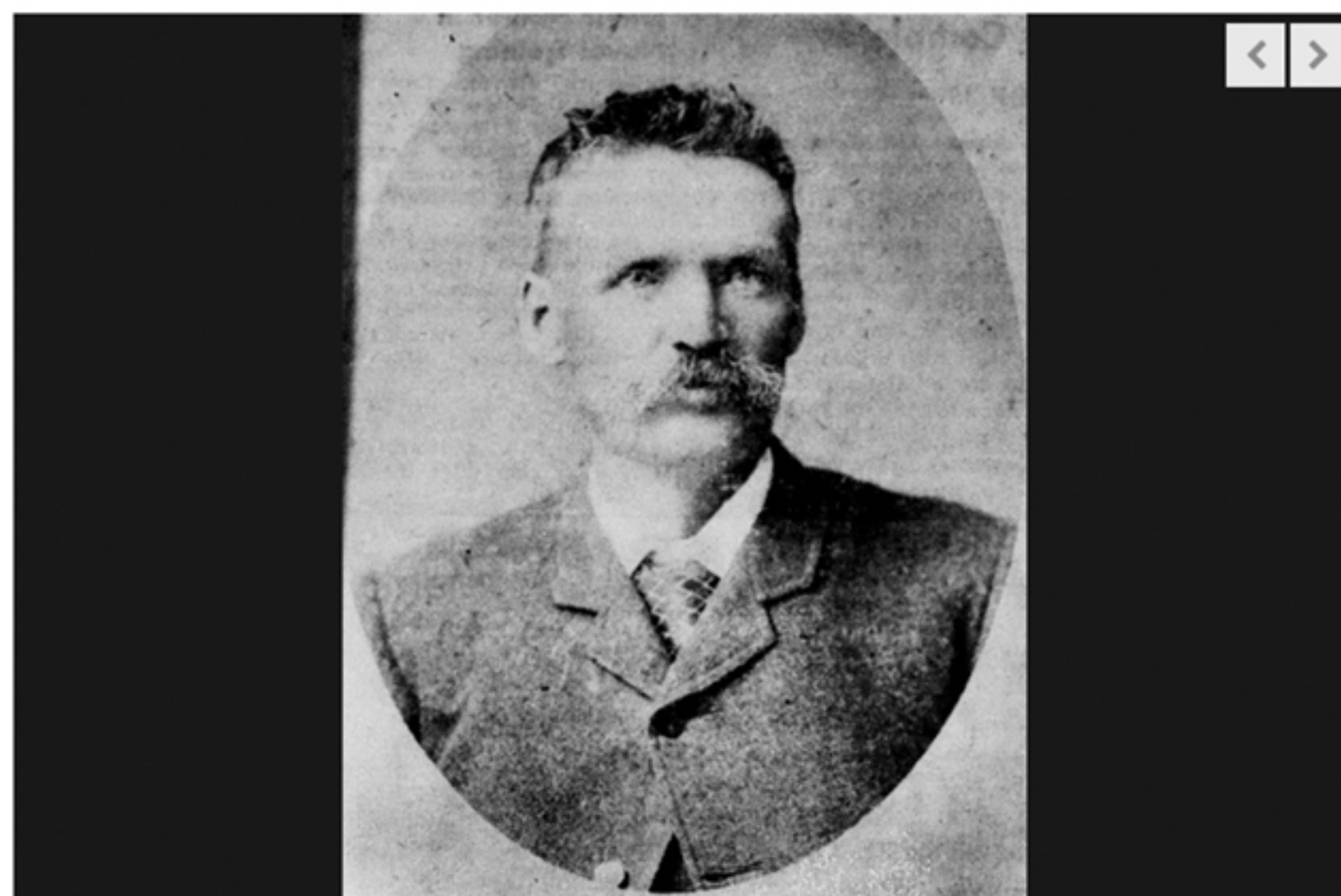
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After Dowdell's sudden death in 1902, his son Arthur maintained the vineyards and later, was employed by the California Winegrower's Association at Greystone. James Dowdell is buried at the family plot in the St. Helena cemetery.



James Dowdell, born in Ireland in 1845, came to the Napa Valley in 1868 to work at Edge Hill Winery as a stonemason. By 1880 he had bought 20 acres of land and established the James Dowdell Winery. Six years later, he had built a winery.



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