

## Nurse Basser's Hospital



Image: CCHG

**Rosedale House**  
**15 Drummond Street, Carlton**

Ellen Forehan sat, pen poised, and contemplated the document placed before her. Her husband Jeremiah had died a few weeks ago, on 29 November 1890, and in his will he appointed her executrix of his estate. She was now to sign an affidavit that would grant her probate of her husband's estate, valued at £1,231, 16 shillings and one penny. An official of the Supreme Court of Victoria had read and explained the document to her, and he believed that she had fully understood the content. In his presence, Ellen made her "X" mark on the affidavit. Ellen Forehan, the woman who could not sign her own name, later went on to become matron of Rosedale House private hospital in Carlton.<sup>1</sup>

Nurse Basser, as Ellen was later known, was born Ellen Madigan in County Limerick, Ireland, in 1857. She was the daughter of Michael Madigan (Maddigan) and Ellen Fitzgerald, with whom she shared a name. In 1874, at the age of 18, Ellen married Jeremiah Forehan, who hailed from County Kerry, Ireland. They had seven children - Kate (Catherine), John, William, Jeremiah, Albert, Ernest and Ellen (Nellie) - born between 1876 and 1889. Jeremiah was publican of the Marquis of Lorne Hotel in George Street, Fitzroy, from 1879 to 1888 and the Rochester Castle Hotel in Johnston Street, Fitzroy, from 1889 until his death in 1890. He died at the age of 55 years and was buried in Melbourne General Cemetery.<sup>2</sup>

After the death of her husband Jeremiah, Ellen stayed on at the Rochester Castle Hotel for a few years, then she married a much younger man, George Basser (Besser), in Collingwood in 1894. London-born George, a carpenter by trade, was only 24 years old when he married 36 year old Ellen. They moved to Carlton and had a daughter Florence (possibly adopted) in about 1896. As Nurse Basser, Ellen began

advertising nursing and maternity services at 108 Pelham Street and 217 Cardigan Street, Carlton. She also advertised babies for adoption to “kind” or “respectable” persons. This practice was legal at the time, provided the adoption complied with provisions of the Infant Life Protection Act of 1890. But not all adoptions had good outcomes. In February 1898, Ellen was called to give evidence at two coronial inquests into the deaths of infants she had adopted out. In both case, the infants were passed from one carer to another within days of their birth and *The Herald* commented “There was no doubt the frequent changes had a lot to do with the child's death.”<sup>3 4 5 6</sup>

Towards the end of 1902, Ellen established a private hospital at Rosedale House, 15 Drummond Street, Carlton. The two storey house, built in 1874, had twelve rooms with a stable at the rear, and the larger premises enabled Ellen to extend accommodation to surgical and convalescent patients. In December 1902 she advertised:<sup>7</sup>

***Nurse Basser's Private Hospital, midwifery cases taken in, also surgical and convalescent, receive professional attendance by trained nurses. Doctor attends daily.***<sup>8</sup>

By October 1903, Nurse Basser had boosted her profile:

***Nurse Basser's midwifery establishment is recommended [by] medical men as best conducted, most private in Victoria; town and country patients can engage by letter or interview; terms exceptionally moderate; careful nursing, skilful and experienced treatment; doctor and trained nurses in attendance .***<sup>9</sup>

Nurse Basser added midwifery training to her repertoire:

***PROBATIONERS wanted, to train in midwifery through tuition, Nurse Basser, private hospital, 15 Drummond st, Carlton (city end).***<sup>10</sup>

There were also more discrete advertisements, directed to women with inconvenient pregnancies:

***NURSE BASSER will BOARD lady indisposed free, in return for light services.***<sup>11</sup>

The babies of these “indisposed” women were most likely adopted out and Ellen, as a registered nurse, was authorised make the arrangements. In October 1913, Ellen Basser appeared in Carlton court to face a charge of infant trafficking. The infant, Catherine Wilson, was born in December 1912 and her mother Annie Wilson had allegedly made a part payment to cover adoption expenses, a claim that Ellen Basser denied in court. There was some doubt as to whether Catherine was available for adoption, but she was handed over to a Mrs Hansen, who, after returning the baby once, decided to keep her. The prosecution’s case was that money had changed hands – which was not in itself illegal – but that Ellen Basser had failed to make the required notifications under the Infant Life Protection Act. The presiding magistrate, Dr Cole, was in no doubt that money had been paid to Nurse Basser for the adoption and he recommended a custodial sentence of one month. However, he deferred to his fellow magistrates, Messrs Clyne and Allison, who favoured a fine of £15, with £2 6/6 costs. It was noted that Ellen Basser’s “condition of health has created some sympathy for her”.<sup>12</sup>

Ellen was not the only member of her family to fall foul of the law. In June 1898, when they were living in Pelham Street, Ellen’s youngest son Ernest was fined 5 shillings for playing football in Madeline Street, Carlton. Ernest and his team mates were in the habit of practising their ball handling and kicking skills in the street and, according to *The Age*, they considered the nominal fine a bit of a joke. Madeline (now Swanston) Street was a major traffic thoroughfare and the newspaper commented that the young football players posed a risk to the safety of horses, vehicles and pedestrians. In February 1912, Ellen’s adult son John Forehan faced a serious assault charge in Carlton court. On Friday 16 February, John had visited Ettie

Redman, a widow who lived in Trades Hall Place, a laneway at the rear of Rosedale House. He was in a drunken state and, when Ettie asked him to leave, he had allegedly knocked her down, dragged her by the hair, kicked her and damaged furniture in the house. In his defence, John claimed that Ettie had provoked him by remarks she had made on a previous occasion. He was found guilty and fined £5, in default six weeks' gaol, and the penalty was considered too lenient by some observers. Ettie (Henrietta) Redman was not a woman to be taken lightly. She had two prior convictions for theft and in January 1911 she was charged with the attempted murder of her daughter Olive. Despite her daughter's compelling evidence, she was found not guilty and discharged.<sup>13 14 15</sup>

Ettie Redman allegedly exacted her revenge on John Forehan within hours of her brutal assault. She was back in Carlton court on 23 February 1912, this time as defendant, charged with having "feloniously unlawfully and maliciously set fire to certain straw then being in a certain building to wit a stable then in the possession of one Ellen Basser under such circumstances that if the said building were thereby set fire to the offence would amount to felony." Ellen, who rented the stable, was called to give evidence and she stated that John and Ettie were "on intimate terms" and were always quarrelling. A neighbour, Mabel Abadee, claimed to have seen Ettie leaving the stable in an excited state around the time of the fire. Fortunately the fire was contained, but some straw was burnt and a jinker belonging to Ellen was damaged. Ettie denied that she had lit the fire, or that she had ever been on the premises, and she was found not guilty. Quite possibly, news of the previous week's assault charge against John Forehan, and her own bashed and bruised appearance may have worked in her favour.<sup>16 17 18 19</sup>

George Basser died at Rosedale House on 13 July 1905, at the young age of 35 years, and was buried at Springvale Cemetery. His death certificate states the cause of death as pneumonic phthisis and, interestingly, that there was no issue from his marriage to Ellen. (This suggests that Florence Basser may have been an adopted child.) Twelve years later, on 20 September 1917, Ellen Basser died at Rosedale House, aged 60 years. Her death certificate confirms that she suffered from chronic morbus cordis (heart disease) and this could have been the "condition of health" referred to in the 1913 court case. In this certificate, Florence is named as the issue of Ellen's and George's marriage. Ellen was buried in Melbourne General Cemetery, with her first husband Jeremiah Forehan. A year later, in September 1918, her errant son John Forehan followed his parents to the grave. Another son, Albert Forehan died in April 1922. All four family members are buried in the same grave at Melbourne General Cemetery.<sup>20 21 22</sup>

After Ellen's death Mabel Jane Donnolly, a nurse at Rosedale House, took over as matron. Several of Ellen's adult children lived at Rosedale House and they would have known Mabel. Romance blossomed and Ellen's son Jeremiah junior married Mabel Donnelly in 1923. They moved to Hilton private hospital in Murrumbena and their daughter Joan was born there in October 1924. The departure of Mabel marked the end of the hospital at Rosedale House, which ceased to appear in newspaper notices, directories and rate books after 1924. Jeremiah Forehan died in 1954 and his wife Mabel two decades later in 1974. They are buried together in Melbourne General Cemetery.<sup>23 24 25</sup>

***Rosedale House is now a rental property and there are rumours that the house is haunted. Could that odd creaking sound on the stairs be the ghost of Nurse Basser doing her nightly hospital rounds?***

Susan C. Crowe  
Carlton Community History Group  
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## Notes and References:

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<sup>1</sup> Probate file of Jeremiah Forehan, 44/401, 1891 (VPRS 28)

<sup>2</sup> Biographical information is sourced from birth, death and marriage records, electoral rolls and cemetery records.

<sup>3</sup> *The Age*, 13 April 1901, p. 6

<sup>4</sup> *The Age*, 7 December 1900, p. 8

<sup>5</sup> *The Herald*, 8 February 1898, p. 4

<sup>6</sup> *The Herald*, 9 February 1898, p. 4

<sup>7</sup> Rosedale House was built in 1874 for Sarah Leah Herman. She died in 1879 and ownership was transferred to her husband, Marks Herman. From 1902 to 1924, when the hospital occupied the site, the owners were: Louis Solomons, Lewis Braham, John Rogers and Gourda Singh.

<sup>8</sup> *The Argus*, 30 December 1902, p. 1

<sup>9</sup> *The Age*, 5 October 1903, p. 3

<sup>10</sup> *The Argus*, 29 August 1908, p. 4

<sup>11</sup> *The Argus*, 18 April 1907, p. 10

<sup>12</sup> *The Age*, 30 October 1913, p. 13

<sup>13</sup> *The Herald*, 17 February 1912, p. 1

<sup>14</sup> *Ballarat Star*, 9 February 1911, p. 2

<sup>15</sup> *Hamilton Spectator*, 25 March 1911, p. 5

<sup>16</sup> Criminal Presentments, 1 March 1912/14 (VPRS 17020)

<sup>17</sup> *The Herald*, 23 February 1912, p. 8

<sup>18</sup> *The Age*, 15 March 1912, p. 11

<sup>19</sup> The arson charge against Ettie Redman was prosecuted by William Ah Ket, the first Chinese Australian solicitor to be admitted to practise as a barrister in Victoria. He was a former resident of Carlton, living in Grattan and Drummond Streets.

<sup>20</sup> Death certificate of George Basser. George's step daughter, Nellie Forehan, was the informant.

<sup>21</sup> Death certificate of Ellen Basser. M. Donnelly, authorised agent, was the informant.

<sup>22</sup> Melbourne General Cemetery records

<sup>23</sup> Electoral rolls confirm that Mabel Donnelly, Ernest Forehan, Jeremiah Forehan, John Forehan and Nellie (Ellen junior) Forehan, were living at 15 Drummond Street in 1916.

<sup>24</sup> *The Age*, 25 October 1924, p. 5

<sup>25</sup> Death Index Victoria and Melbourne General Cemetery records.