

## Mather Byles DesBrisay

A notable citizen of yesteryear, the name DesBrisay lives on today through the DesBrisay Museum. But just who was this man that inspired a museum to be named for him?

Born in Chester, Mather Byles DesBrisay was a great-grandson of Thomas Desbrisay, lieutenant governor of St John's (Prince Edward) Island, and of the loyalist clergyman Mather Byles. He was a lawyer, judge, politician and historian. Educated in Halifax and Dartmouth, he articulated as a law student with Judges George Augustus Blanchard and Alexander James of Halifax. Called to the Bar in April, 1851, he practiced law in Halifax for the next several years. In 1854 he and Howard D. Steele were named secretaries of Nova Scotia's first Provincial Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition, and in 1863 he ran, unsuccessfully, in the provincial election.

Moving his law practice to Bridgewater in 1865, DesBrisay ran again in 1867, and was elected to the House of Assembly for Lunenburg County by a large majority. A Liberal, and very much opposed to Nova Scotia's participation in Confederation, he was subsequently elected in 1871 and 1874, finally accepting that Confederation was here to stay. In May 1875 he was elected speaker of the assembly, but the following year he resigned his seat to become county court judge for Lunenburg, Queens, and Shelburne, a post he held until 1897.

In 1876, Mather DesBrisay married Ada A. Harley, daughter of Colonel John Harley, the Collector of Customs in Bridgewater, and in 1878, they moved into a home on Pleasant Street – the fashionable “millionaire's row” – for which they paid \$2000, and called Ivy Banks. Throughout his adult life, DesBrisay had been a collector of “curiosities”, and although his original collection was lost in a fire, over the years he acquired a vast collection of papers and artifacts, and Ivy Banks became a popular site for school children to visit. Mather and Ada were well respected and involved members of the community.

Mather Byles DesBrisay will be better remembered as a historian than as a judge or politician. His essay on the history of Lunenburg County, submitted for the Akins Historical Prize at King's College in 1868, was published in an expanded version two years later in Halifax and in a greatly enlarged second edition in 1895. Based on a wide range of documents and on interviews with many elderly settlers, the *History of the county of Lunenburg* recreated the atmosphere of early Lunenburg and described the progress of settlement in the county.

Mather Byles DesBrisay died in 1899, and Ada sold his extensive collection to the town of Bridgewater in a deal brokered by mayor and lumber baron, E. D. Davison Jr. Ada passed away in 1925, and she and her husband are both buried in the Brookside Cemetery in Bridgewater. (Photos courtesy of NSARM)

