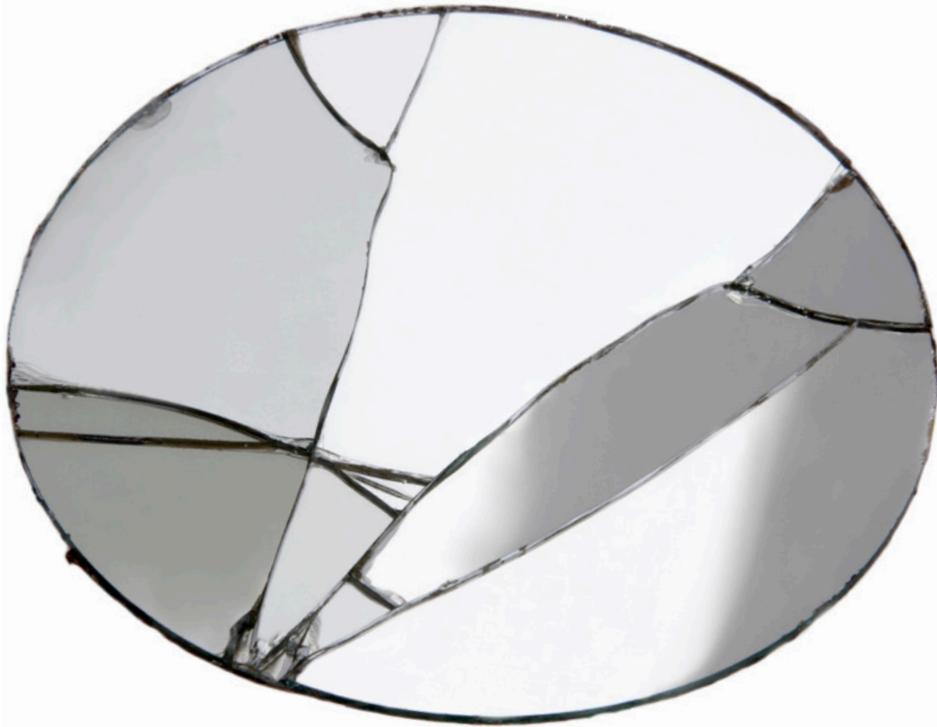


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Dr. William Shaw Bowen: From Scalpel to Scoop

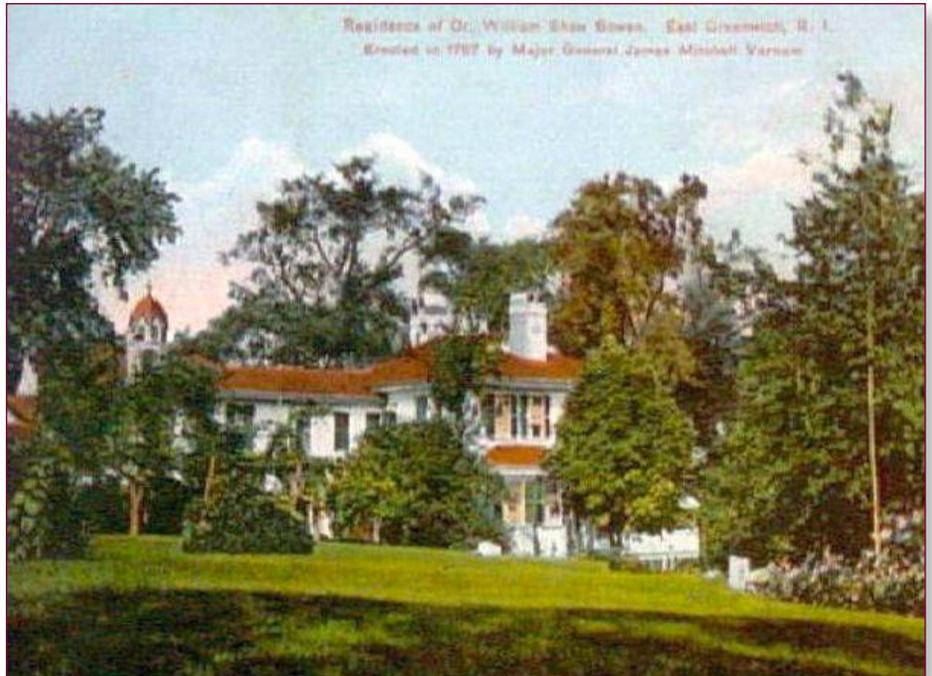
East Greenwich Physician Switches Careers in Era of 'Yellow' Journalism

MARY KORR

RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

Rhode Island Medical Society member **DR. WILLIAM SHAW BOWEN** (1845–1907) was an active contributor to the Society's journal, then called *Transactions*, but perhaps medical writing became a bit too dry for the East Greenwich ophthalmic and aural surgeon. After practicing in Rhode Island and Hartford, Conn., for more than a decade after graduation from Harvard Medical School in 1867, he switched scalpel for pen and began work as a correspondent for the *New York World* owned by Joseph Pulitzer.

It was the heyday of sensational aka 'yellow' journalism. The competition between Hearst- and Pulitzer-owned tabloids and print newspapers was fierce. One of Dr. Bowen's colleagues at the *World* was Nellie Bly, famed for replicating Jules Verne's tale of *Around the World in 80 Days*. She embarked on a voyage and indeed made it in 72 days. Another of her exploits was feigning insanity to study the goings-on in a women's asylum on Blackwell's Island in New York City.



Postcard printed by the Rhode Island News Co. circa 1900 shows the East Greenwich home of Dr. William Shaw Bowen.

THE HAWAIIAN INVESTIGATION.

Dr. Bowen Says that Mr. Blount's Suspicions Were Groundless.

WASHINGTON, Jan. 29.—The Senate committee investigating the Hawaiian affair had before it this morning as its principal witness Dr. William Shaw Bowen, the correspondent of *The New-York World*, who went to Honolulu shortly after the revolution. Mr. Bowen was present for the purpose of denying some statements made by Mr. Blount. He said that he went to Hono-

The *New York Times* from 1894 reported on a Congressional panel inquiry into the abdication negotiations between the US, the 'sugar trust' and Queen Liliuokalani. Dr. Bowen was in Honolulu covering the situation in 1893.

Dr. Bowen's travels for the *World* took him across the country and continents. He covered politics, presidential elections, wars and coups. We find him in Honolulu in 1893. The latter assignment landed him in an imbroglio, when one San Francisco tabloid reported he was a secret envoy for the U.S. government, on hand to negotiate Queen Liliuokalani's abdication. A Congressional inquiry was later launched, and *The Morgan Report* was issued.

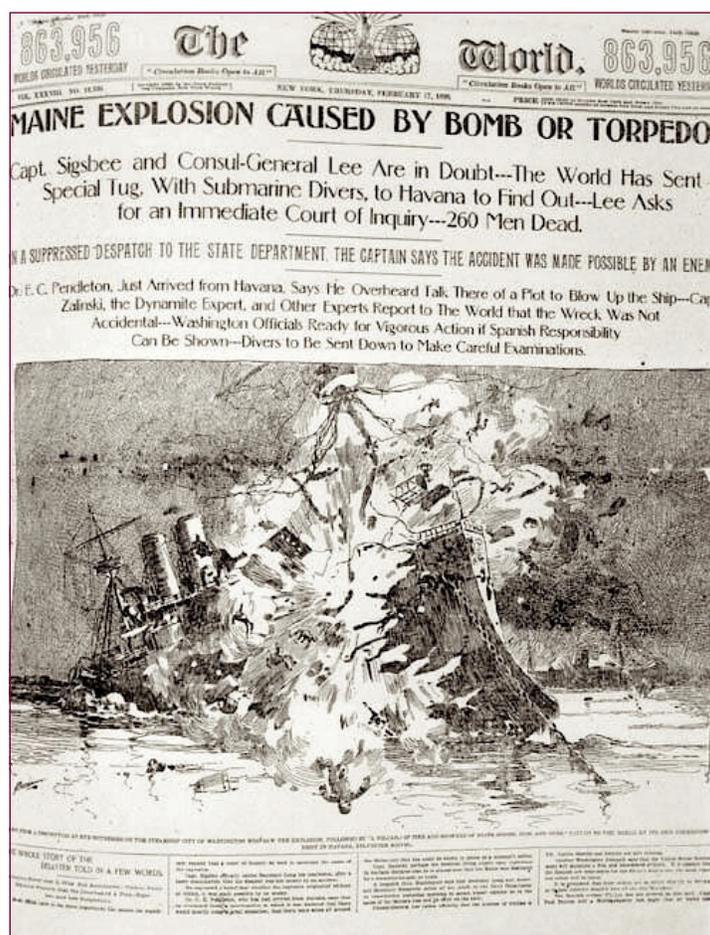
In it, Dr. Bowen stated he was not acting as a representative of President Grover Cleveland, although acknowledged that the two were friends, since Dr. Bowen's coverage of the president's election. He admitted to having informal conversations with those in power and with the Queen's emissaries, purely for journalistic reasons. Like all journalists, he was in pursuit of the scoop.

Given his medical background, Dr. Bowen also noted in

his testimony the Queen's reported heart condition, which he considered relevant to the matter of obtaining a pension for the regent.

In the report, Dr. Bowen stated: "I went there with the news instinct of a developed journalist. I saw very little to write about the country; it had been covered. There were a great many correspondents there. I conceived the idea of obtaining some very important and very exclusive news. I studied the situation. I knew before I left here that annexation was undoubtedly impracticable at present — I had very strong reasons for believing that. I always believed that the American people would not believe in the restoration of the Queen. I therefore saw a status quo condition there that I thought would continue, and that there was a fine field for making history.

"I was in company with Paul Neuman going out in the steamer and the Queen's commissioners were just returning from Washington. I became very intimate with them, especially Mr. Neuman. Mr. Neuman had the power of attorney from the Queen. I thought that I heard from authority



Dr. Bowen's final assignment for the Pulitzer newspaper, the *New York World*, was to cover the Spanish American War in 1898.

which was entirely correct that the Queen had a disease of the heart. I had that from a professional source which it would be improper for me to mention; but it came from the best authority on the islands. I heard that she had a disease of the mitral valves of the heart, and that she was liable at any time to sudden death. I thought it was equitable that she should be taken care of. I am only explaining the motives which prompted me to do what I did. I thought it would be better if the Queen were taken care of. She was generous to her following, and there were many people depending upon her. That made an impression on me. I thought she should be taken care of."

Dr. Bowen's final assignment was covering the Spanish American War in 1898 for the *World*. After that, he retired to his home in East Greenwich with his family, which included his wife and two daughters. His life of adventure came to an end in 1907, when he died from a cerebral hemorrhage. His obituary ran in all the major medical journals in the country, which cited foremost his journalistic accomplishments. ❖