

JOSEPH R. Brown,
*from a daguerreotype
taken in
the early 1850s*

The SEARCH for *JOSEPH R. BROWN'S HOUSE*

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IN THE COURSE of an investigation of Minnesota's early architecture, my wife and I became intrigued with the mystery of Joseph R. Brown's lost house in Henderson. Its solution had all the elements of a detective story: the blind alleys, the series of false clues, and at last the lucky discovery of a witness who identified an unlikely suspect as the missing residence. Closer study revealed supporting evidence, and it now seems reasonable to conclude that a small brick house on South Fifth Street near

Brown's Park (now Allanson Park) is the only remaining home of one of Minnesota's most versatile and intrepid pioneers.

According to Return I. Holcombe, Brown was "easily the first man in Minnesota in point of general ability" during the earliest period of settlement. Among the members of the state's constitutional convention, William W. Folwell rated him "the most skillful of all in the usages of conventions and legislatures"—no small compliment when one considers that the competition included erudite attorneys like Moses Sherburne and Lafayette Emmett and a politician with the experience and adroitness of Henry H. Sibley. A historian of Minnesota journalism has called Brown "one of the ablest editors" of

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the *St. Paul Pioneer*, and “so superbly gifted that whether in wigwam or legislative hall he was always the leader of men.” These accolades were bestowed on a man who had received no formal education beyond the age of thirteen, who had arrived in Minnesota playing the fife and drum with the garrison of Fort Snelling, and who had lived for years at isolated trading posts with few English-speaking companions.¹

Brown is credited with producing the first crop on a farm in Minnesota and with sending the first log raft down the St. Croix, thus earning primacy as the state’s pioneer farmer and pioneer lumberman. He was also a fur trader, innkeeper, politician, Indian agent, newspaper editor, and land speculator. In a sense he founded Taylors Falls, where he cut timber and resided in 1836–37, and Stillwater, where he played host to the leaders of Minnesota’s first territorial convention a few years later.²

¹ Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 2:93 (Mankato, 1908); Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:231, 403 (St. Paul, 1956); Daniel S. B. Johnston, “Minnesota Journalism in the Territorial Period,” in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 10, part 1, p. 267, 275.

² Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:232–237.

³ Johnston, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 10, part 1, p. 275, 292; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:379.

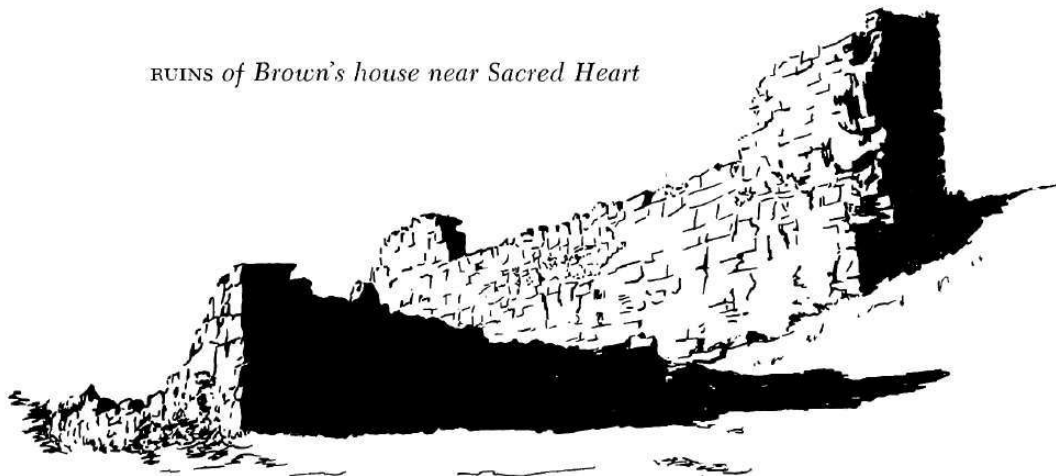
⁴ For a full account of Brown’s steam wagon, see Folwell, *Minnesota*, 3:347–357 (St. Paul, 1926).

In 1852 Brown “promoted” Henderson, which was incorporated in 1855 by a compliant legislature next after St. Paul, Stillwater, and St. Anthony. In the new town he made his home and published a newspaper during 1856 and 1857. Thanks no doubt to the wire-pulling of “Joe, the Juggler,” as his political foes called him, Henderson soon became the hub of nine public roads.³

On one of these, a few years later, traveled a monstrous steam-driven automobile of Brown’s contrivance, looking something like an early tractor. With his “steam wagon” he proposed to establish a mail route to Fort Ridgely, but the vehicle sank in muddy roads and seemed hopelessly cumbersome and costly.⁴

During his tenure as United States Indian agent for the Sioux, from 1857 to 1861, Brown apparently made his headquarters at the Yellow Medicine Agency, where in 1858 a house was provided by the government. When he was replaced by a Republican appointee following the election of 1860, he moved his family to a nineteen-room limestone mansion that he had built on a hillside overlooking the Minnesota River Valley south of Sacred Heart in Renville County. There he apparently hoped to found a family estate. It was such a hospitable establishment and so far beyond the frontier of settlement that a visitor dubbed it “Farther and Gay Castle”—in a pun upon the English

RUINS of Brown’s house near Sacred Heart



Fotheringhay Castle, where Mary, Queen of Scots, spent her final days.⁵

The seignorial life at "Farther and Gay" lasted scarcely a year, for in August, 1862, while Brown was in the East on business connected with a new model of his steam wagon, the Sioux Uprising occurred. Among its victims would have been his wife, twelve children, and numerous retainers, had Susan Brown not been kin to the Sisseton Sioux — as she informed a war party which intercepted them on the way to shelter. She was a formidable woman, and the Sioux treated her with respect, but they destroyed the castle.⁶

Brown died in 1870. He deserves a good biographer, for his story is a dramatic, far-ranging chronicle, containing a central problem which should be competently probed: Why was he, like so many other pioneers of great intellectual capacity, courage, and energy, unable to persevere upon a project? Why did he leave so much unfinished? Why was he driven always to move on into empty land, to plow and plant and then to leave the reaping to others?

While that biographer is awaited, another puzzle provokes the amateur historian. The State of Minnesota has been assiduous in

preserving the pile of rubble which is all that remains of Brown's "Farther and Gay Castle." A park was established on the site in 1937, archaeologists have swarmed over the place, and a plaque was erected in 1959 to make certain that its tale is known. Yet, if Brown had a true home, it was Henderson. The town was the focus of his attention during his most vigorous years and is his most lasting monument. It is there that he is buried. Why has no one before now taken the trouble to identify the house — or houses — in which he presided over his town? ⁷

TRADITIONALLY it has been assumed that a two-story Greek revival house a few doors south of Main Street was Brown's, presumably because his daughter, Mrs. John S. Allanson, lived there with her family.⁸ The house, now owned by August F. Busse,

⁵ Indian Office, *Reports*, 1858, p. 56; William W. Folwell, "A Visit to Farther-and-Gay Castle," in *Minnesota History*, 12:125-129 (June, 1931).

⁶ June Drenning Holmquist and Jean A. Brookins, *Minnesota's Major Historic Sites: A Guide*, 106 (St. Paul, 1963).

⁷ Holmquist and Brookins, *Minnesota's Major Historic Sites*, 107, 175.

⁸ *Henderson Independent*, July 25, 1952, sec. 2, p. 6.



THE ferry to
the new town of
Henderson, 1854

might once have been one of the town's more impressive residences. The admirer of Brown who visits Henderson, however, is struck with the relative obscurity of this structure in comparison with a fine brick mansion which commands the whole town, standing atop a hill just off the axis of Main Street, immediately overlooking the town square.

This house is hip-roofed, with a symmetrical façade of five windows set in arched openings in the upper story, the central one of which is full-length (obviously intended to be a "French door" opening onto a porch which has disappeared). These arched windows are united by a carefully laid belt-course of brick which gives them the arcaded effect desired in larger houses of the Italianate style. The lower windows are also set in round arches, but with a softer curve, and they carry above them eyebrows of brick, acting as drip moldings to keep the rain from running onto the glass. The doorway has been altered, but, on investigation, two great doors, beautifully carved, were found in the barn behind the house.

This would have been the sort of house, in the sort of location, that a man who was founder and leading spirit of the town might have been likely to build. But local memory failed to associate this house with Brown. Although now owned by Mr. and Mrs. William L. Haas, it was generally known as the "Comnick house," after an earlier long-time owner. Before Comnick, memory was dim. We enlisted the help of Miss Margaret Foltz, a teacher in the Henderson schools and a chronicler of the area. Miss Foltz examined the title deeds of both the Busse and the Comnick houses with these results: The credentials of the Busse house appeared weakened. It was true that Brown's progeny, the Allansons, did occupy the house, but they had not taken it by inheritance from the great man; they purchased it from other owners, the Poehlers, in 1881. Various members of the Poehler family had held the property since 1856, when, shortly after their arrival in Henderson, they bought the land



SUSAN F. Brown

from Brown, who, at that time, owned most of the townsite.

Miss Foltz reported also on the Comnick house. The section of the town in which it stands was purchased by Brown at the height of his prosperity in 1859 for \$1,000. In 1873 his executor, W. S. Combs, sold the site and six lots for \$1,500 to Henry Poehler.

So far, so good. Then Leonard J. Blaschko, editor of the *Henderson Independent*, ran a short article on our visit to inspect the Comnick house, and the thesis collapsed. From Wilmington, Delaware, came a letter to the *Independent*, written by James Armin Poehler, a descendant of the family of German immigrants who succeeded Brown as Henderson's chief landed proprietors. According to Mr. Poehler, "the land on which the Comnick house stands was owned by Major Brown at one time, as was most of the land in Henderson, but the house itself was built by William Hartman. Hartman married Henrietta Poehler and built the house in

1858 or 1859. Uncle Charles Comnick bought it from him when he married Mathilda Poehler about 1880."⁹ The land records in Henderson are so vague and porous that they are of little aid. The Hartmans appeared first in the records of the Comnick house in 1874, as purchasers of a quitclaim deed, but they were recorded as the sellers to Comnick.

WHERE, THEN, did Brown live? In his letter to the *Independent* Mr. Poehler referred to his granduncle, Henry Poehler, who had recalled that when he arrived in the town in 1854, "in the middle of the second block from the river there stood the only frame house. . . . This was Major Brown's house, used for a store, boarding house, and residence for his family." Mr. Poehler went on

MONUMENT to Brown in Henderson



to say, "That house . . . was torn down about 1885 when city park was established." About 1855, however, "Major Brown built himself the red brick house on Fifth Street, next to Brown's Park."¹⁰

Returning to Henderson, we found three brick houses on Fifth Street near that park. Two were of red brick, but neither was next to the park. In that spot stands a large frame house and beside it a small brick structure painted yellow. The latter has a steeply pitched roof, a carved bargeboard, and tall windows in the manner of the Gothic revival. The chimney looked encouraging; it was of red brick, soft and old, of the sort made before kiln-drying was common. We wrote Mr. Poehler: Could this be it?

On September 14, 1964, he replied: "The house which you describe with the steep roof, wooden filigree work, now painted yellow, on the west side of the street, now owned by the Trimboes was always known to us in my childhood as the Major Brown house. Originally the color was dark red."

Back to Henderson we went, and conferred with Mr. and Mrs. Howard Trimbo, the present owners. Their abstract first showed a patent, dated January 1, 1859, from President James Buchanan to the town council of Henderson, then nothing until February 21, 1863, when Joseph R. Brown and Susan F. Brown gave to Henry Poehler a power of attorney to dispose of the property. Other real estate bought and sold by Brown had been in his own name. The presence of his wife's name in this case suggests that he was dealing with a homestead. In May, 1864, Poehler performed his trust; he sold the house to Martha M. F. Clark.

The building is located less conspicuously than the Comnick house, but when one considers the other homesites Brown selected, it seems a more reasonable choice. To a frontiersman a sheltered place near a good stream would have been more appealing than an eminence requiring a deep well. At

⁹ *Independent*, August 6, 20, 1964.

¹⁰ *Independent*, August 20, 1964.



THE Joseph R. Brown house on South Fifth Street in Henderson

Gray Cloud Island, at Dahkotchah (which became a part of Stillwater), and for his mansion on the upper Minnesota River, Brown chose sheltered locations, and the Trimbo house also nestles under a bluff. Before its frame neighbor was built, about 1905, it looked directly down upon a brook.

The absence of title records for the house during its early years is not strange; it was outside the original town plat filed by Brown in 1855.

The house itself manifests an early date, before the arrival of any quantity of cheap pine lumber from the north. It is of brick veneer, which was painted yellow by Mr.

Trimbo to prevent further decay of the soft, sun-dried brick. Inside is basswood siding laid over maple two-by-fours, then two layers of basswood lath and plaster. The sills are of oak, eight inches square, carefully mortised, without nails, bearing uprights of elm and maple. The flooring is of six-inch maple boards. All this lumber could have been milled in the vicinity.

If Mr. Poehler's recollection is correct — and the extant title deeds seem to corroborate it — and if the evidence of the site and the construction materials are given weight in indicating a date before the rush of settlers and lumber and freight in the years after 1855, then it appears that we have found the home of Joseph R. Brown during the years in which he presided over the destiny of Henderson and exerted a powerful influence upon the affairs of the state.

THE PICTURE of Mrs. Joseph R. Brown on page 275 was made from a tintype in the possession of the Allanson family. The photograph on this page was taken by Alan Ominsky. All others are from the picture collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.



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