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History of the John Brown House

My final project is focusing on the structural history of the John Brown House. I will be doing this by looking at the architectural structure and interior decorations of the original house as well as the major additions and renovations made to the house throughout the years by its various owners[[1]](#footnote-1). In that train of thought, I also want to briefly explore the personal histories of the various owners of the house. Since the construction of the house was conceived by, and is still referred to by his name, I will specifically focus on John Brown and his extensive (and often confusing) family tree—rather than focusing too much on the history of Marsden Perry.

 Before I provide you with the history of the ownership of the house, I think it’s important to have a decent understanding of the John Brown family tree. A lot of the family members have similar names and close blood relationships (first cousins did get married), so I’d like to explain the relationship behind the names that I will be referencing later in the paper[[2]](#footnote-2).

John Brown was born to Captain James Brown (1698-1739) and Hope Power Brown (1702-1792) on January 27, 1736[[3]](#endnote-1). Captain James Brown also had a brother named Obadiah (1712-1762) who proved to be a major influence to his brother’s sons in the adult life. John Brown had 3 older brothers James, Nicholas (1729-1791) and Joseph (1733-1785), a sister named Mary, and a younger brother named Moses (1738-1836). While the eldest brother James died relatively early in comparison to his other brother’s, the four remaining brothers were able to lead successful lives.

Shortly after the death of their eldest brother, John, Nicholas, Joseph and Moses—affectionately dubbed the Four Brothers: Nick and Josie, John and Mosie[[4]](#endnote-2)—began what would be lucrative and influential business careers. Their uncle Obadiah Brown had entered into the mercantile industry in 1730, and in 1751[[5]](#footnote-3), the youngest brother Moses began working as a clerk for his uncle. The two men formed a close relationship, especially in terms of business dealings, and entered into a business partnership in 1754. Eventually, the remaining three brothers joined the firm as well, and the Brown family established themselves as respectable, formidable businessmen. When Obadiah passed away in 1962, the four brothers, headed by Nicholas, formed Nicholas Brown and Co. The company formed the Hope Furnace, a profitable iron foundry,in 1765, was involved in the manufacturing of spermaceti candles and participated in extensive overseas trading[[6]](#endnote-3).

When Nicholas Brown and Co. chose to stop their involvement in the slave trade in 1765 following a disastrous slave ship voyage, John Brown grew dissatisfied with the company. John Brown officially withdrew from the company in 1772 and Moses and Joseph withdrew from the company as well in 1774. John Brown formed his own company with Tench Francis and his son John Francis in 1781 and called it Brown & Francis Co. The formation of his own company marked the beginning of a truly remarkable business career. One of Brown & Francis Co.’s notable achievements was their first trip to the Orient, South China to be specific, in 1787 where they traded in many Chinese imports—imports that would even be featured in John Brown’s own home.

A man of imposing physical size as well as a man with an imposing personality, John Brown had many other notable achievements outside of his immediate business dealing. In 1772, he participated (and is even credited with leading) the colonial attack on and burning of the British trade ship the Gaspee. John Brown was also an ardent supporter of the American Revolution, a U.S. Congressman in 1799, and even a treasurer at Brown University[[7]](#endnote-4).

Brown also had a rewarding family life. John Brown married Sarah Smith (1738-1825) in 1760 and together, the couple had 6 children. Their children were Benjamin, James IV (1761-1834), Abigail, another Abigail (1766-1821), Sarah (1773-1846), and Alice, but sadly, Benjamin and Abigail died in infancy. The other children were able to lead productive lives, and although James IV never married—John Brown never stopped prodding his son to end his bachelor lifestyle—Abigail married John Francis, Alice married James Brown Mason and Sarah married Charles Frederick Herreshoff.

While the direct descendants of John Brown would play an obvious role in the history of the house, John Brown’s brother Nicholas also fathered a family tree that had a key role in the history of the house. Nicholas Brown married Rhoda Jenckes and together they had Hope Brown (1763-1767) and Nicholas Brown Jr. (1769-1841). Their daughter Hope married Thomas Poynton Ives while their son Nicholas Jr. married Anne Carter. Later in this paper, it will be important to remember that Hope and Thomas had two sons, Moses Brown Ives and Robert Hale Ives. Robert Hale Ives had a daughter named Elizabeth Amory and she married William Chase Gammell and had two daughters with him. Nicholas Jr. and Anne Carter had a son, John Carter Brown, one of whose sons, John Nicholas Brown had a John Nicholas Brown Jr[[8]](#endnote-5). Confusing? Most definitely. But understanding, the family tree, even if only in a small amount, will make understanding the timeline of the John Brown House ownership much easier.

 The remaining part of this paper will focus on the John Brown House itself and its immediate surrounding landscape features. John Brown purchased the tract of land which houses the John Brown House from his brother Nicholas in 1769. The estate as it was originally purchased included the entire area as bounded on the west by Benefit Street, Charlesfield Street on the North, Power Street on the South, and Brown Street on the East. It wasn’t until 1786 that John Brown had construction of his actual home begun[[9]](#endnote-6).

Building the home was a long process that took almost two years. The home was partially designed by Joseph Brown, but also John Brown himself and John Francis. Brown wanted his home to combine elements of the (then) new Early Adams Style and the more “outdated” Georgian style[[10]](#endnote-7). Combined, the styles recalled to mind stately English homes, but the decoration scheme was greatly influenced by French aesthetic. Payment records indicate that the house was constructed by skilled Northeastern craftsmen of European, African, or Native-American descent. Although the exact ethnicity of the workers is unsure, records do show that at least two African-Americans worked on the construction of the home[[11]](#endnote-8). Although not necessarily related to the history of the house, it is interesting to note how Brown’s involvement in the slave trade served to benefit him even in his domestic sphere.

At the time of its construction, the John Brown House was the largest house in Providence. In keeping with the theme of “display my wealth and expensive taste,” the house was situated on what was at the time, a large hill that both had a wonderful view of the waterfront that used to reach very close to the house and also was in a prominent place in order to be seen and admired. It was designed with lavish entertainment in mind, and the house-warming party was actually Sarah Brown’s wedding party. That being said, the family officially moved into the home in 1788, and although not being completely finished, the Brown family set about enjoying life in their admired mansion.

The original house was almost rectangular in shape. The original house is said to have been 54 x 60 feet although in his will, John Brown describes the house as being 54 x 60 feet. The house was originally in the exact center of the green yard (which we still see today) and the garden (which has been encroached upon in terms of size). The entrance gate stood back from the street at the top of a flight of brownstone steps. A visitor, after making the short trek up the impressive stairs, would have seen the carriage gate on his right side that led to the “paved yard” or the impressive front of the hosue with its Palladian window and brownstone columned porch crowned by an intricate wooden entablature and balustrade[[12]](#footnote-4).

The house was three-stories high with an attic and a deep basement underneath the entire house. Inside, there would have been a long central entryway running through the house with masonry partitions on each side—John Brown prided himself on the fact that almost every wall was constructed entirely of brick. The flooring was a greenish-yellow soft pine flooring and the walls were all papered in late 18th century designs reproduced from Parisian hand-blocks. There would have been four rooms, each with a fireplace. I personally find it interesting that although there were four fireplaces, there were only 2 chimneys—one chimney on the east side and one chimney on the west side. The rooms on the first floor would have been used for dining and formal entertainment, and included a library and a parlor.

For decoration, engaged columns were built into the wall, and imported French marble busts—some from the French town of Versailles—were placed atop. Instead of window curtains or draperies, shutters were used to shut out light and retain warmth. Although there are many oil paintings featured in the John Brown House Museum, only three of the oil paintings would have belonged to him. It is more likely that the walls were decorated simply with the colorful wallpaper as well as more freestanding decorations such as marble busts. There were of course other decorations, small details, and expensive furniture pieces that would have been strategically placed in order to continue the impressive aura that would have been created by the house.

One of the most impressive features of the house that still remains today is the beautiful staircase that links all three floors. The staircase features intricately carved newels and handrails with various designs. This exquisite mahogany masterpiece was, when paired with the unobstructed view upon entry from the front of the house to the back of the house, an eye-catching addition that was meant to draw admiration and praise from those who visited the house.

The second and third floors were almost identical in construction to the first floor, but the rooms would have been employed differently. The rooms in the second floor would have been used for adult bedchambers—also places for the informal entertainment of close family friends—and the guest bedrooms. The rooms in the third floor would have been used for the children’s bedrooms and any overflow rooming or storage that was needed.

The landscape of the house would have looked very different from what is seen today. John Brown mentions various “outhouses” that would have been placed throughout the yard. Directly behind the original house, there were 3 connected buildings. From west to east, those buildings were the following: a 2-story summer kitchen, a wood house, and a carriage house. Brown also references a stable house, a wood house, a bath house, a house for the servant’s quarters, and a well, as well as various bays[[13]](#endnote-9). The outside itself would have been decorated as well, possibly with more busts brought back from John Francis’ 1792 trip to Versailles.

Today, and especially at the time of its original construction, the John Brown House served as a testament to the wealth and influence of John Brown. The house was admired by those who were lucky enough to be invited inside as well as those who were simply passer-bys.

Tuesday 27th: This morning walked out to see the most elegant building in America, built by John Brown. It is situated on a very high hill and commands a prospect of the town and country for many miles with a delightful view of the river. The house is very large and furnished in a most extravagant manner. ‘Tis built after a plan of some of the Nobleman’s Seats in England and far surpasses any I have seen[[14]](#endnote-10).

When John Brown passed away in 1803, he left the house and the 1 ½ acres of land to his wife Sarah. Upon her death, he stated in his will that the house should then be left to his son James IV. Sarah Smith Brown occupied the house until her death in 1825 when the house, and the remainder of the John Brown estate, was officially left to the remaining unmarried child, James IV.

When James took possession of the estate, he began dividing up the property, and for a short period, the house property underwent a series of quick changes in ownership. On December 7, 1831, he sold the land west of the homestead (the yard area from the west of the house extending to Benefit Street) to Robert Hale Ives. After James IV died in 1834, his estate was further divided. On April 21, 1835, Sarah Brown Herreshoff was officially deeded the house, the furniture, and the land extending east of the house to Brown Street. James IV’s nephew John Brown Francis received the 3-acre lot at the “eastmost of Power Lane[[15]](#endnote-11).”

Sarah Herreshoff left the house relatively unchanged and occupied it until her death in 1846. Upon her death, she officially left the home to her grandson James Brown Herreshoff with the provision that her daughters Ann, Sarah, and Agnes be allowed to occupy the home. On October 26, 1852, Sarah Herreshoff’s descendants deeded the home to Hope Brown Ives. On February 21, 1852, Hope Brown Ives divided her newly needed property between her two sons, Robert Hale and Moses Brown. Robert received the remainder of the western side (including the house), while Moses received the land east of the house. In 1854, Robert Hale Ives presented the John Brown House to his Elizabeth Amory as a present to commemorate her marriage to William Gammell. When he died in 1875, he left the remainder of his estate to his daughter. This estate included not only the original John Brown House, but also the Hale Ives House that he had constructed around 1857[[16]](#footnote-5).

After John Brown, Elizabeth Amory Ives Gammell was the next owner of the house to make major renovations. While the house was in her possession, the Victorian era and its trends were very influential on popular culture. Therefore, many of the changes she made to the home were indicative of the Victorian style that was en vogue at the time. Her main addition to the home was the three-story “L-shaped” addition to the back of the home. This addition was used for servant’s quarters and meant to put the servant’s in closer proximity to the family. It’s also worth nothing that this addition connected the house to what used to be the outbuildings[[17]](#footnote-6).

The Victorian style incorporated rich colors and fabrics. It’s plausible to imagine the house, as decorated by Elizabeth Gammell, with deep, jewel-toned damasks and velvets, flowery wallpapers, plush and beautiful rugs, as well as touches of glass and other ornate objects for further decoration. It was along this decorative scheme that Elizabeth Gammell added the beautiful iron staircase with a glass treaded surface. This addition was both fashionable and practical (it was said that she had the glass staircase added so that the maids would be able to travel between floors without making too much noise on a creaking wooden staircase[[18]](#endnote-12)). One feature of the house that was lost after her additions was one of the Venetian windows on the second floor. At the entrance of the house, the visitor can see, above the main door, a beautiful Palladian window with a small balcony. This was a feature that would have been mirrored on the other end of the 2nd story hallway. Unfortunately, when Elizabeth Gammell made her renovations to the home, this feature of the home was lost.

Elizabeth Amory Ives Gammell occupied the house until her death in 1897 when she left the John Brown House to her two daughters, Harriett and Helen. Since her father Robert Hale Ives and only left the yard area, including his house, to the Gammell family as long as Elizabeth and William were alive, the Hale Ives returned to the possession of the Hale-Ives family. In terms of the John Brown House, the two Gammell daughters spent the majority of their time either residing in Newport or traveling to Europe, so they put the house up for sale. The estate (the John Brown House and the western yard) was purchased by Marsden J. Perry on October 15, 1901. The major changes made to the house by Perry consisted of his interior renovations and his landscaping of the exterior.

In terms of the outside of the house, Perry didn’t make too many changes at first. The Hale Ives was continuously occupied by Robert Ives Gammell until 1915. When the house began to only be inhabited sporadically, Robert Ives Gammell’s wife sold the yard area to Perry. Perry then decided to completely destroy the home at some point between 1923 and 1926. The reason for why exactly he decided to destroy what had been a beautifully impressive home is unknown, but he did landscape the resulting exterior into the format that is seen today (minus the parking lot).

Perry’s changes within the home involved a lot of technological updates and changes made to bring the home into the newer era. He first made changes to the main entryway. Although it’s unsure what changes he made exactly, his new entryway was described as being “entirely modern[[19]](#endnote-13).” He added molded plaster ceilings in the first floor eastern rooms and painted the northeast library with plaster and added ornate stucco onto the walls. He also added door hardware and decorations to the doorways throughout the home and changed the original soft pine floor to a more refined Carolina pine wood flooring. He enlarged the pantry and completely changed the now-indoor kitchen.

Another one of his major structural changes involved the northwestern dining room. Originally, the northwest and southwest rooms each had closets that were used for hanging coats and as storage space for the children’s toys. In the northwest dining room, there would have been some sort of southern wall near what is today’s functionless door that faces the west green yard. It appears that Perry removed the south wall, blocked up the door way, and removed the servant’s staircase that led from said doorway to the upper floors. He did this to enlarge the dining room and better accommodate his large dinner parties.

His other changes involved technological updates. He updated the basement to make it into a laundry facility, wine cellar and a heating facility. That being said, Perry also installed central heating, and this is seen by the movable marble heating vents seen in many of the rooms today. He also wired the house with electricity and installed two functioning elevators. Perry also outfitted the house with indoor plumbing and he created beautiful bathrooms with Italian tiles, inset tubs, porcelain toilets, sinks, and ribcage showers.

In terms of decoration, Perry definitely added his masculine touch to the house. The hallway walls, and possibly other rooms, were covered in dark green, gilded leather hangings. While this might have made the house seem dark and ominous, the gilded touches subtly added a rich, ornamental feel to the home. Perry also decorated with Chippendale gilt mirrors and added deep mahogany panels to things like the doorways. His house was known for containing a notable collection of 18th century English furniture.

Perry passed away in 1935, and since the Great Depression had affected Perry more than he cared to admit, his widow sold the house to John Nicholas Brown in 1935 to pay off her debts. In 1942, John Nicholas Brown donated the home to the Rhode Island Historical Society. Following a series of renovations intended to restore the house as much to its original structure as possible, the Rhode Island Historical Society turned the home into the house museum that is available to the public today.

There were also architectural changes that aren’t easily accredited to a specific owner of the house. Since building permits, fire codes, and tax records weren’t as specific or standardized as they are today, it’s hard to find exact documentation of who made what renovations to the house. Some of these undocumented changes include a marble fireplace in what is currently displayed as the “music room”, decorative moldings and arched entrance ways. Although it’s hard to attribute these changes to a specific date, it is fairly safe to say that those weren’t the types of things included in the original design of the house as done by John Brown.

The John Brown House is a fantastic piece of architecture. Not only can is it heralded as a beautiful house by even today’s standards, it truly serves to personify Rhode Island as seen through the eyes of one of its influential patrons, John Brown. Despite the major changes made to the home’s structure and the shrinking of the actual estate’s boundaries throughout the years, it still stands as a testament to the John Brown family legacy and the longevity and beauty of colonial architecture.

1. In terms of sources used, the information regarding architectural changes and ownership changes came from the black informational binder currently located at the John Brown House museum. Also, rather than make a citation for every instance in which a fact was taken from another source, topical paragraphs are simply attributed to the source in which the grouping of information was taken from. In instances where non-dated facts are included, logical deductions were used to decide what changes were made to the house and when. For example, if it’s known that the original house was only rectangular shape, but the house already had the 3-story “l-shaped” addition when purchased by Perry, it must have been an owner in between John Brown and Marsden Perry who made the addition since the change was not attributed to either of the men. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (See Image 1 for the pictorial version of the family tree) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. All family tree information in terms of lineage, marriage, and life dates was compiled and cross-referenced with unnamed sources located in *John Brown House Binder #4 JBH General Information and Description; Room by Room*, John Brown House Museum. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. Unknown, --. "Description of the John Brown House." *Providence Sunday Journal* . Taken from the ARCH 1900 website. 5 Dec 2009. October 13, 1901, Print. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. When obtaining dates for the various events in the Brown family history, different sources provided different dates for the same events. In those instances, the date that was cited the most often was chosen to be used in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Information about Brown family business dealings taken from: “Evidence Implicating John Brown." *Gaspee.org*. 06/09. Gaspee Virtual Archives, Web. 3 Dec 2009. <http://www.gaspee.org/JohnBrown.htm>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
7. Information about John Brown taken from: Walton, Richard J. John Brown’s Tract: Lost Adirondack Empire. Phoenix: Phoenix Publishing, 1988. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
8. See endnote *i.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
9. Walton, Richard J. John Brown’s Tract: Lost Adirondack Empire. Phoenix: Phoenix Publishing, 1988. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
10. *John Brown House Binder #4 JBH General Information and Description; Room by Room*, John Brown House Museum [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
11. *John Brown House Binder #4 JBH General Information and Description; Room by Room*, John Brown House Museum [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
12. The twisted balustrade, a characteristic of local architectural trends, would have indicated a local Providence carpenter. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
13. “John Brown House- Census, Tax, Insurance” in the *John Brown House Binder # 2 JBH Related Materials*, Rhode Island Historical Society Library Archives [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
14. “John Brown Papers.” Description and Overview of the Manuscript Collection from the Rhode Island Historical Society Library Archives. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
15. The information regarding the deeding of the house from 1825-1901 was taken from: *John Brown House Binder #4 JBH General Information and Description; Room by Room*, John Brown House Museum. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
16. The Hale Ives House would have been located where the ARCH 1900 Archaeology of College Hill class had their Unit 6 digging site. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
17. This can be better seen in the fact that what is displayed in the John Brown House Museum as the “carriage house” used to be the wood shed. Upon original construction, the wood shed was intentionally set apart from the house. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
18. Information about the glass staircase was taken from: ARCH 1900 website. 5 Dec 2009. October 13, 1901, Print. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
19. “John Brown Papers.” Description and Overview of the Manuscript Collection from the Rhode Island Historical Society Library Archives.



Image 1: Condensed John Brown Family Tree

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 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)