

# BROWNVILLE, NEBRASKA – SMALL TOWN, BIG HISTORY

**A**s with any fast-growing settlement town, law breaking in Brownville, NE was often ignored. Some sources relate the story of a fight on Main street between an older man, Mr. Summers and a younger man, Peter Witlow. Whitlow had been drinking heavily when he accosted Summers in front of I. T. Whyte's store on Main street. During the quarrel, Whitlow "drew his pepper box (an Allen revolver), thinking to scare Summers and cause him to retreat." Instead of the expected action, Summers grabbed a pick handle and hit Whitlow on the head to "let some bad blood out of him."

Then, such a race! Not Whitlow after Summers, but Sum-

mers after Whitlow until finally he hid in the brush." "Dang it," Summers later explained, "I wouldn't a took the pick handle to the drunken cuss if he hadn't a drawed his darn old pepper box on me!"

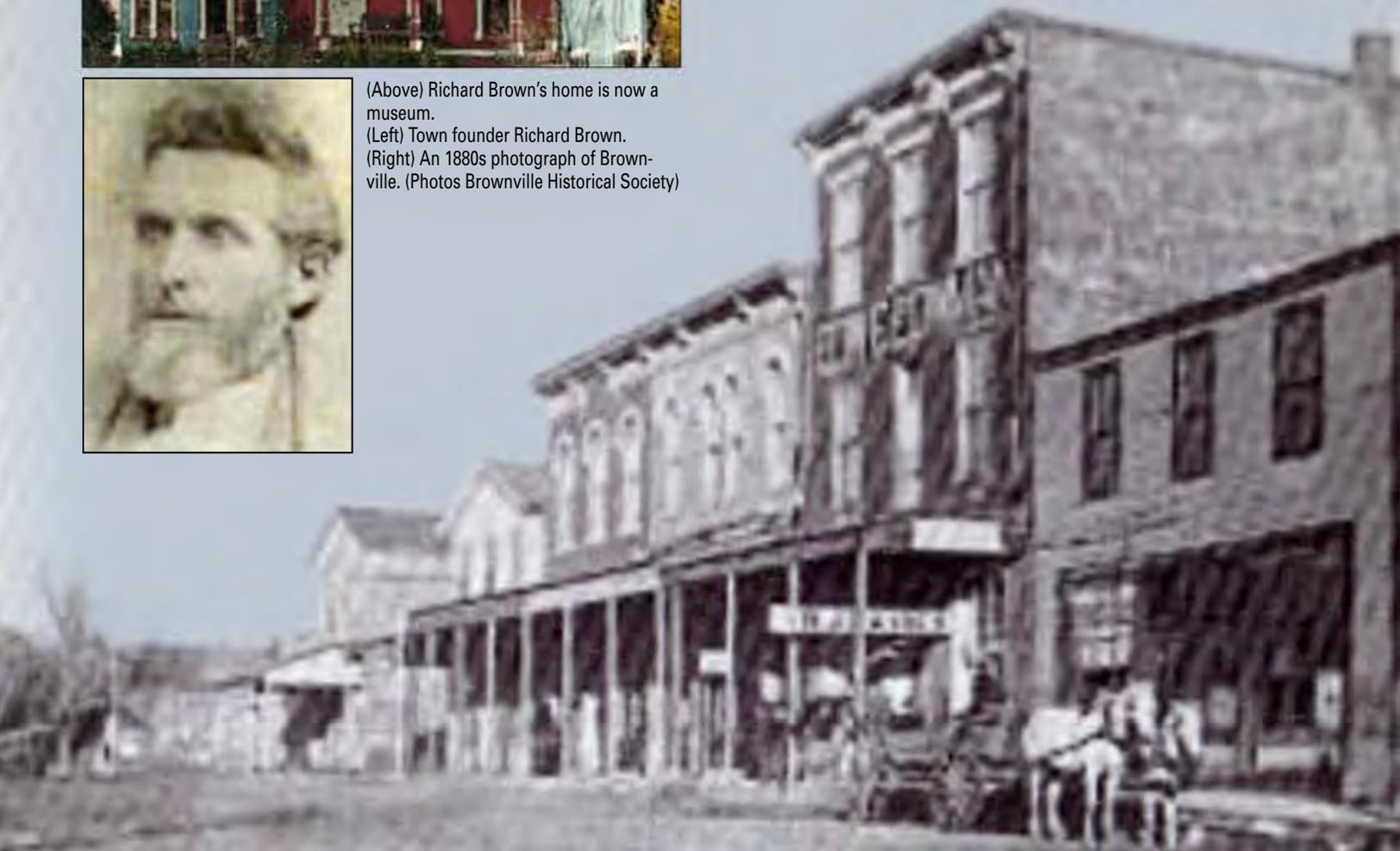
Wm. Curler reported: The halcyon days of Brownville were when steamboats made regular and frequent trips between St. Louis and Omaha. As early as 1856, eleven regular packets were engaged in the passenger and carrying trade. During the next year, forty-four packets were running on the Missouri River."

The arrival of the telegraph was a big occasion for Brownville on August 28, 1860. After several messages were received where the telegraph had opened in the Hoadley building on Main street, it was reported that "a barrel of wine was carried up the stairs during the evening, it head knocked in by Dr. McPherson, and those got drunk who never drank before, and those who drank now only drank the more, not many of those who celebrated the occasion going sober to their beds."

On August 28, 1869, the office of the United States Express Co. was robbed of \$15,000. On the day of the robbery, employee J. K. Bear traveled around the city paying his debts. The next day, he disappeared. Before he left, he wrote the following letter to the editors of the Brownville Democrat:



(Above) Richard Brown's home is now a museum.  
(Left) Town founder Richard Brown.  
(Right) An 1880s photograph of Brownville. (Photos Brownville Historical Society)



“GENTLEMEN – I suppose before you read this, you will have heard the rumor that I have absconded with a large amount of money, which you can believe is true, and no mistake. The amount is about \$12,000. Suppose you will get a job of printing circulars, giving a full description of me, when the Superintendent (Mr. Quick) comes down. You can show him this, and I recommend you to get up as good a poster or handbill as he will need to distribute over the country. Wonder how much reward they will offer for my arrest? Expect it will be pretty large, though. There is one thing, however, that you can give me credit for, and that is this: I don't leave Brownville owing different parties any money, not even the printer, as I have paid all my just debts. Well, I expect when you hear from me next, it will be to the effect that I am in the hands of an officer, as I know there are nine-

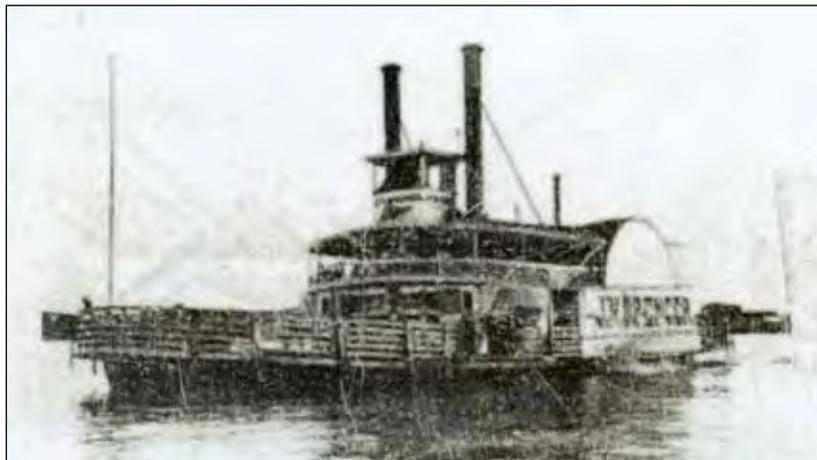
ty-nine chances that I will be caught to one that I will escape; but I prefer to take the one chance for \$12,000. There is only one thing that I feel sorry for, and that is my wife, but I do not think she will trouble herself much about me (as least I would advise her not to). Won't this make a splendid local for you! J. K. Bear”

After a reward of \$2,000 was offered, Bear was caught and given a sentence of one year's imprisonment in the penitentiary. Some believed the light sentence “was an outrage, but the Governor of the State capped the climax by pardoning the prisoner at the end of three months.” During the time in prison, the wife sued for divorce. However, once dismissed, Bear returned to Brownville, remarried his wife, and left for parts unknown.

Our farm is located about 19 miles west of Brownville, and this town has always interested me because of past events in that early settlement. Its history taken from early records intrigues



Explore the Missouri River on the Spirit of Brownville excursion boat, and enjoy the scenic beauty of the river lowlands. (Photograph from Randall and Jane Smith, owners of the boat).



Early steamboat on the Missouri River at Brownville. (Photo from the Brownville Historical Society.)

and fascinates.

Richard Brown was a “man of his time” with visionary ideas. He first lived in Missouri, but then he discovered a place more advantageous to his livelihood along the Missouri River in Nebraska.

Shortly after the Lewis and Clark expedition, the Missouri River became a highway for mountain men, fur traders, explorers, missionaries and pioneers who could not wait to pursue their individual dreams and ambitions on the vast plains.

After the signing of the Kansas/Nebraska Act in 1854, Richard Brown, his wife, three children and slaves moved from Holt County, MO, across the Missouri River to Nebraska. In this location, he saw great advantages including

a natural stone wharf where steamboats could dock, abundant timber on bluffs for building and for steamboat fuel, and a passage where a westward road could be built between river bluffs.

Wm. Cutler, in his Nemaha County, History of Nebraska, 1882 wrote: “The city of Brownville is built upon hills and in the valleys that nestle between, sloping to the river's edge and affording the natural drainage. From the bluffs that surround it a view is afforded of the rolling prairies and wooded slopes of four fertile states.”

Upon arriving on August 29, 1854, Brown and his three slaves used cottonwood logs, gleaned from trees along the river banks to build an 18 ft. square cabin. This cabin became a political, cultural and educational center. It was designated as an office voting place, a temporary courthouse and a place of worship. Later, Brown used this building as a school where he taught his children and

others during a three month school term. An early writer stated that Brown taught the “young ideas how to shoot.”

Needing a place where more people could worship, Brown and two friends organized the Campbellite church. This was where the minister “held up the terrors of the impenitent.” Today, this church continues to exist as the Brownville Christian Church.

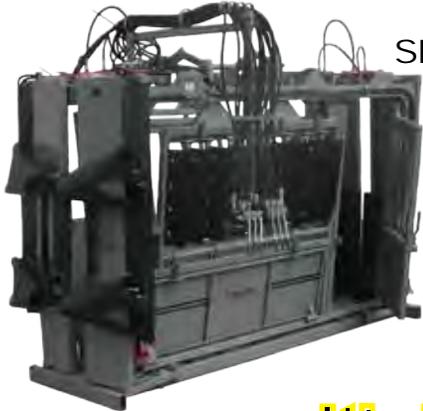
Soon, others arrived, crossing the river on Brown's flatboat ferry. In this ideal spot, 10 additional cabins were built. More people and services were needed to a place where settlers were beginning their overland journey along the Oregon Trail. At one time 189 Conestoga wagons traveled west from this settlement.

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in 1856, Brownville became the largest town in what was then the Nebraska Territory. In 1880, this settlement had a population of 1,309. With rapid increases in numbers of settlers, more services were required. Fulfilling these needs, Brownville became an outfitting center, selling supplies needed by those who headed west. It also was an overland freight terminus and milling center.

Brownville had attained importance by 1856. According to the first issue of the first newspaper, the **Advertiser**, of June 7, 1856, this settlement of 400 people contained two dry goods and grocery stores, the Grand Hotel located in a lot house on Main Street, a schoolhouse, court house, steam sawmill, lath and shingle machine, cabinet shop, two blacksmith shops, one banking house, several boarding houses, and an increasing number of residences.

One wonders if Indians were a problem in this location? No attacks have been recorded, but an early account there was a call from Orderly Sergeant O. F. Lake, commanding the Nemaha Guards, to parade in their memory in their armory in full uniform with 14 rounds of ammunition, on Saturday, June 21, 1856. The object of this military organization was to ready for possible Indian attacks.

It is unusual that the founder of this settlement was forced to leave because of his views on slavery. Slavery was legal in Missouri; across the river in Nebraska, many were against slavery. Brown, owning slaves, was an ardent believer in that institution and later, after disagreements, moved first to Texas and then to California.

The rise of the railroad played a role in Brownville's undoing. The railroads carried goods usually delivered by the steamboats. Actually in its attempt to have a railroad, taxes were increased to pay for the bonds. About this time, the county seat was moved to nearby Auburn. In addition, residents because of high taxes, moved away.

Today, because of the lack of river traffic, its location and the loss of the railroad, Brownville has diminished slowly,

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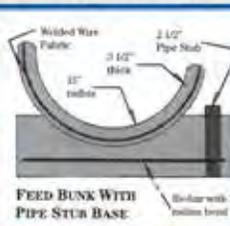
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losing population and businesses. However there are many historical reminders of this town's glorious past days in the museums, historic homes, art galleries, a winery and cultural events.

The Brownville Village Theatre, the oldest repertory theater in Nebraska, located in an age-old church is the scene of four Broadway-type plays presented by talented college students during summer months.

The evolution of the Missouri River is documented in the Capt. Meriwether Lewis Museum, a land-based, steam-powered side-wheel vessel. This vessel houses charts, maps and artifacts showing the development of the Missouri River valley from prehistoric times when glaciers covered the Midwest, to present day.

Several older homes are now museums. In 1860, Richard Brown moved out of his cabin into a home built of locally manufactured brick. After the slavery disagreements, Brown sold this home to banker John Carson, who remodeled the structure to represent Italianate architecture. Today, this house,

open to visitors at certain times, retains its early appearance and original furnishings. This and other homes all portray life during past days, with interiors displaying intricately carved woodwork, brick fireplaces, dumbwaiters constructed in thick walls, original native wood floors and basement kitchens.

Governor Furnas, the second Nebraska governor, built a home here in 1868. Today, all its rooms contain period furniture and feature interpretive exhibits defining his term in office. He is often remembered for his motto: "Leave the world something the better for having lived in it."

In addition, the Furnas Arboretum, named in honor of Robert W. Furnas, signer of the first declaration of Arbor Day, provides educational activities, eco-tourism, birding, symposiums, garden tours and memorial plantings.

Another house/museum is the gabled Captain Bailey house, once owned by a Civil War captain, is shrouded in mystery as some locals whisper that it is haunted by members of an ancient love triangle which resulted in murder. It seemed that Captain Bailey impressed a lady so much that she decided no one else could have him if he spurned her love. Evidently he had other "interests," so she used poison to murder him. However, this does not deter tourists viewing this home's artifacts from Brownville's "heyday."

A recent addition to Brownville's intellectual spirit is the Lyceum and several other bookstores. The Lyceum displays thousands of books and features a restaurant. Periodically, speakers offer topics for discussion. Another bookstore, located in the former schoolhouse, has a large collec-



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tion of books. The bookstore on Main Street has a select collection of books.

Some visitors to Brownville stay in a “hotel” on the Missouri River. A large steamboat has been converted to luxurious living, with the very latest in accommodations.

Recently, bald eagles have returned to this area. “Eagles and the River” has been celebrated with demonstrations and lectures during early spring. Such topics as “Eagles and Hawks,” “Native Americans and the River” and “River Wildlife and Birds” are presented.

During summer months, visitors enjoy riding up and down the Missouri River on the Spirit of Brownville. These journeys reveal the scenic beauty of river lowland and the animals that inhabit that area.

Today, Brownville is not just a bend in the road adjacent to the Missouri River. Instead, it flaunts its historical significance for all to see. Throughout this region, few remains exist today for those interested in life during past days. Brownville “fills the bill” for bringing the past to full realization through its homes, museums, galleries and various activities. Indeed, it is a small town with a big history. ●

**Several other nearby attractions draw Brownville visitors:**

- For nature lovers, Indian Cave State Park fills all expectations.
- Steamboat Trail offers the beauty of nature.
- Coryell Park, an early homestead, commemorates the spirit and values of Nebraska settlers. The park is unique with recreation as well as beauty. Its playground, covered bridge, pavilion, chapel and Treasure House filled with collectibles and a doll collection make it an interesting place as one of Nebraska’s “Hidden Treasures.”
- Nemaha County Museum in Auburn, NE

