

while a landmark may survive structurally, rarer are the circumstances in which the life and times of those who dwelt in a future landmark have been so well documented through letters, papers and photographs, so that vital and marvelous portraits emerge from a time and environment outside the memories of most of us.

## The Family

More than 700 times, the letters from Barrington, begin "Dearest Laura" and after several pages of family news, local gossip, commentary on current events, and neatly drawn verbal portraits of friends and neighbors, they are signed "Lots of Love, Mother" or "Love, Ma." Others are signed, "your loving Sister, Hattie Brown," for Hattie too contributed to this prolific correspondence, and thereby shared the pangs of her young womanhood with her sister on the Minnesota prairie. Only the letters outward bound from Barrington have been found.

The letters of Emaline and daughter Hattie now form part of the permanent collections of the Barrington Historical Museum, donated by Ruth Nightingale of Canandaigua, N.Y., great-granddaughter of Emaline and Joseph Brown. Ruth has spent years working on the family history of the Browns, the Hawleys, and the Nightingales, and she brought the letters to Barrington from her mother's home in Fairmont, Minn. They are tightly packed, in five shoe boxes, sequentially numbered, and represent nearly 8,000 sheets of close and precise writing. Emaline's letters are newsy, lively, often opinionated, but totally familial, while Hattie's are more introspective—her sister clearly her best friend, but now removed from the possibility of a daily exchange of thoughts. In a sense, Hattie now had to manage her own life.

In order to preserve these letters as part of the history of Barrington and of the Octagon House, museum staff and volunteers spent three months copying every page, so that two complete sets of copies now exist to be used for research, instead of constantly handling the originals. The letter collection is registered with the Library of Congress for the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. The Catalog cards and identifying numbers have not been received yet. Some of the letters, including the first one, are missing, apparently because descendants of the Browns have borrowed them through the years for family research and those letters have not been returned to the main collection. Letter No. 2, written from Barrington on April 21, 1889, is the first in the Museum collection.

"Dear Sister,  
"Rec'd yours of numerous data yesterday A.M. all O.K. and we were very glad to hear from you again. I am kept busy as I am the family scribe as well as eyes.

"It is a lovely Sunday afternoon and I just came home from S.S. (Sunday School) with Carrie. She has been off two weeks.

"Young George Comstock and Will Cronk went away a week last Thursday with George's father's horse and buggy and have failed to return.

"George began by riding around town and coming back all right, and his father thought it was alright to let him go.

"Result now is: Geo, his dad, swears again.

"Walter told pa to tell you to write for May kept him going to the office all the time to get her a letter from you.

"Carrie and Aunt Addie want to hear from you when you get time to write.

"Mrs. Townsend says tell Laura that Minnie Hendrickson has a 'kid.'

"Ma has dictated so much of this letter, and she wants me to write and think too and I 'bolted.'

"Well I suppose I may as well dip in my pen again and go to writing after a half hour's meditation.

"Last Monday night Emma, Mary and I went to hear Bishop Dubbs and ma went with Mrs. Kingsley.

"George B. came home with me, and we sat on Mrs. Dodge's steps and visited.

"He keeps talking as if he wanted to come up and spend some evening here but I don't take the hint at all, at all."

These are some excerpts from that April 21st letter which is eight pages long, and already includes one of Hattie's frequent references to the status of her courtships. It is interesting to note, that for the time in which they lived, both Laura and Hattie married late. Laura was 32 when she married Joseph Nightingale on March 4,

1889, and Hattie was 29 when she married Lorenzo Porter on June 1, 1893. Both girls were educated as school teachers, and both had attended the Washington Street School on the north side (now the building at 320 E. Washington), which, from 1866 when it was built until about 1884 when the four-wing frame Hough Street School was completed, served as a "School of Higher Learning" for Barrington. While the sisters were 10 years apart, the lists of pupils of the Washington Street School provide us with the names of many of the sisters' close friends, who were subsequently mentioned frequently in the letters.



When one of her daughters, Laura Ann Nightingale (right), married and moved away in 1889, Emaline and another daughter, Harriet Adeline (left), began writing the Octagon House letters to Laura. It was Laura's granddaughter who recently turned the 700 letters over to the Barrington Museum.

## Upcoming articles

In the future articles, as the letters unfold, the story of the "Hawley clan" and their many pursuits in the Barrington area will be documented. To be covered includes the following:

- The E.J. & E. Railway will be built through Barrington, with disturbing social consequences;

- The Barrington Review will begin publication, a look at the first page;

- Fires will rage in downtown Barrington, and the appearance of the business community will change as the century turns;

- Hattie Brown will visit the 1893 World's Fair, and will be married in that year too;

- "Little Arthur" will be born, and before he is four, his grandmother will call him a good Republican;

- George Comstock will continue as the black sheep of the family;

- Emaline and Hattie will both visit Laura in Minnesota, and Pa will go to Nebraska;

- The telephone will come to Barrington, and the Volunteer Fire Department will be founded;

- Jerome Kingsley will build the first house on West Lake Street, and the McIntosh's will have family problems;

- West Station Street will be opened up, and Pa will start selling off his land; and

- Emaline and Hattie will comment on day-to-day life in a small community, with a curiosity and vitality, a humanity and compassion, which give remarkable depth to their lives.

## The House

However, the Octagon House letters, and the discovery of their existence, are but a surprise culmination to quite another story, which is the long search to authenticate the date that the house was built, its architectural inheritance and integrity. The architectural inheritance, and flourishing of the octagon style is from an earlier period than the 1880's, and the integrity of the representation of that earlier style in the Barrington house is confusing when set against that 1882 property title assumption by Joseph Brown. The noteworthiness of the house as far as Barrington itself is concerned seems to have occurred only in more recent history. Locally always referred to as the Hawley House, it has become the standard "souvenir of Barrington" subject, with paintings, drawings, notecards, photographs, and even Christmas ornaments commemorating its uniqueness.

Given the fact that the house was surely an architectural anomaly in 19th century Barrington, it is amazing that none of the people who were quite prolific in documenting the growth of the community ever remarked on an octagonal house. Even Arnett C. Lines, who devoted much of his adult life to the compilation of his "History of Barrington"—with considerable attention given to houses, streets, who lived in, and moved around the community, and including the houses that were so frequently moved—never mentions the Octagon House or its occupants. A scrutiny of early editions of the Barrington Review, which first published in 1889, hasn't yielded any reference to the house itself, although occasionally the names of the Brown, Nightingale and Porter families appear in those notations of comings and goings and social doings, which were definitely the forerunner of today's neighborhood columns.

How to find a link, when only legend is definitive, between a carpentry tools maker arriving in Barrington from Massachusetts in the mid-1850's and an octagonal house in a village, incorporated in 1863, of just more than 300 people? Where is the connection, between "Pa" in those 700 letters, and the expression of an architectural style which was in its heyday in the United States in the 1850's and 1860's? At that time, octagonal houses, from simple one-story cottages, to a few glorious mansions, were being built from New England to California. Massachusetts, New York State, northeastern Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, are all states where several octagonal houses can still be found.

By far the greatest number, extant and not, is in Massachusetts where 21 have been accounted for. Many of these were in towns of the Connecticut River Valley, although occasionally what were actually round houses have been included in octagonal lists.

## Browns and Hawleys

It was in the Connecticut River Valley, that Joseph P. Brown first made any definitive notation of his life. He was born at Mollerton, N. H. on Jan. 21, 1824, the son of John Brown and Sarah Thayer. Joseph Brown appears next only through his own ledger, now also in the Barrington Historical Museum's collection. The first entries place him in Amherst, Mass. in 1844, and there he first encountered members of a family that was undoubtedly to dominate his life, and, through his two marriages to Hawley cousins, determine that he would join that steady migration to the potentially rich lands of the midwestern prairie, where a tribe of Hawley's, led by the patriarch Phillip, had settled in Barrington Township, Ill., as early as 1835. Perhaps the omnipotence inherent by sheer numbers of Hawleys accounts for the fact that the Octagon

(Continued on page 42)