

## Acknowledgements

# How Octagon House letters were discovered

When, in 1979, the Octagon House was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, Mrs. Floyd (Bess) Hawley, was proud and pleased, but stated clearly that it was a home, and not a museum. Mrs. Hawley died in August, 1980, leaving the house with an uncertain future. The National Register nomination had been obtained with the help of the Barrington Area Council of Governments (BACOG) office, which had followed up on a Historic Sites Survey conducted by the Illinois Department of Conservation in 1975.

With Mrs. Hawley's death, interest in the Octagon House deepened, and the Barrington Historical Museum, sensing a responsibility for a Landmark property, undertook several efforts to purchase the house for some type of joint community use. While those efforts failed, the interest of one man took off in another direction. Robert Kosin, assistant planner with BACOG, believed that the house was so unique it should be placed on the Illinois Register of Historic Places, an even more select list than the National Register. Bob began a search for the true origins of the house, a search which put him in contact with Joseph Brown's descendants in New York, New Mexico, Louisiana, California and Minnesota, and a dozen historical societies in New England. County records, probates, township documents and maps, were all needed in the attempt to trace the

footsteps of Joseph Brown. From this search came Bob's contact with Ruth Nightingale, and the discovery of the letters. Without his integrity and dedication, this project would not have come so far. The Octagon House has passed the initial review process to place it on the Illinois Register, but the family letters add a human dimension to the story, and are indeed, after all these years, really the Brown Family's gift to Barrington.

To Ruth Nightingale also, must go thanks for her willingness to share all of her gathered knowledge about the families concerned, and the treasuring of a "long distance love" for the quaint home of her ancestors.

It is impossible to acknowledge adequately the debt that Barrington owes to the late Arnett C. Lines. Without his lifelong interest in gathering the story of this community and its pioneers, historical understanding of the Barrington area would only be at a starting point.

To the Barrington Courier-Review, and Mike Chapin, must go deep appreciation for encouraging and supporting the project, to present this unique collection to the community. Yesterday's news is already history, and to the Courier-Review, sincere thanks for being willing to take such an extensive look back at that history.

—Barbara Benson

## Octagon House letters—

(Continued from page 25)

House in Barrington has generally been called the "Hawley House" instead of the "Brown House."

On April 25, 1889, Emaline wrote to her daughter:

"My Darling Laura,

"As I am alone I think I will write to you. We are so very glad to get your letters. I read them over two or three times. Mrs. Harrower is sick abed with material fever and Mr. H. is scouring the country looking for a girl to work for them. (The Harrowers lived north of the village on what is now Route 59, somewhere in the vicinity of East Cuba Road) but has not succeeded in finding one yet, so Hattie told them she would come and do what she could until they could get one, she went this morning. We are trying to clean house, got nearly done upstairs, should have been done but it has been so cold to wash windows. Yesterday pa and Hattie papered the pantry overhead and all. It looks nice. I guess today pa will paint it. He has painted the sink and pump and all the woodwork in the kitchen."

April 26th, the same letter:

"Yesterday I went to Mrs. Nelson's, she is not at all well, she enquired after you and so did Jerry he is better. Mrs. N. said she could not bear the thought of having you go away without seeing you again. She said she thought about you that night after we came away from there and the first thing in the morning, and the tears came into her eyes while she was talking about it. Martha Leonard has been quite sick is better now. Jennie Power's little girl has the measles. We had another suicide in town Monday, the milliner's husband Mr. Fisher. Hank, Sherman and pa have gone hunting today, took their dinner and started early this morning.

"Mrs. Nelson thinks May is going to have a baby and she says every one around there thinks she is surely it is that or she is getting a bay window of fat. I heard the same of Myrtle. Well time will tell.

"Eli Butte was burned out at the time the prairie fires were raging so. Butte is sick with the inflammatory rheumatism and Cora has gone to Elgin to take care of (her?) The advertisement you see in the Herald refers to Florence Sizer and Ray Kimberly (of Honey Lake) she is standing on the store steps half the time talking with some fellow. Brockway and Ida don't go together any more. Ida went to the dance last Monday night with Carl and Zoa. (now is not that a pretty —)."

A footnote on the top of the first page is the first mention of Hattie's future husband: "Pa saw Ren Porter downtown and asked him if he knew Jim was married he said Maxwell's folks wrote to them that Jim has married a great fat dutch girl as big around as she was long. Pa told Ren he had seen her picture and she was a good-looking girl."

The chit-chat flowed so easily from Emaline and Hattie's pen. That all the members of a close-knit family, separated from each other, and without electronic communication, were sustained by this regular exchange of news is quite apparent, and their powers of expression grow as time passes. We shall follow the fortunes of Browns, Hawleys and Nightingales, and the Porters too, and a host of others bearing names familiar in area history. We have their own words, and we shall take a look at Barrington as their story unfolds.

In the next article is worthwhile taking a further look at the "Octagon Fad" and its origins. What association, if any, did Joseph Brown have with an "eccentric genius" named Orson Squire Fowler?

To be continued next month.

Authors note: While letters may be excerpted, the original mode of their writing has been left intact, so that the different styles of the writers may be apparent.

The Barrington Historical Museum would be pleased to provide anyone with a bibliography of source materials for those articles.