The Joseph R. Brown House

"Leave now for a place of safety, the lower Indians are coming. They will harm you."

A Fiery End

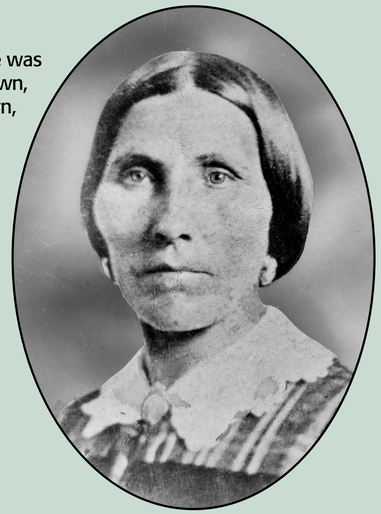
That frantic warning in the early morning of August 19, 1862 sent Susan Brown, wife of former Dakota Indian Agent Joseph R. Brown, along with their children, hired help and neighbors fleeing. Joseph Brown was traveling from New York at this time. Shortly thereafter the house was gutted by fire. Nearly all of the Browns' family belongings were lost or destroyed. Substantial damage was done to the structure. Only the exterior walls remained standing and the house was never rebuilt. Since 1862 much of the building stone was removed and incorporated into the homes and barns of local homesteaders. In 1937 the building remains and a small parcel of land were bought by the state of Minnesota for a wayside park.

The burning of this house was just another part of the Dakota Indians failed attempt to drive European and American settlers from the Dakotas' southern Minnesota homeland during the United States and Dakota War of 1862 (also known as the United States/Dakota Conflict and the Dakota Uprising).

Susan Frenier

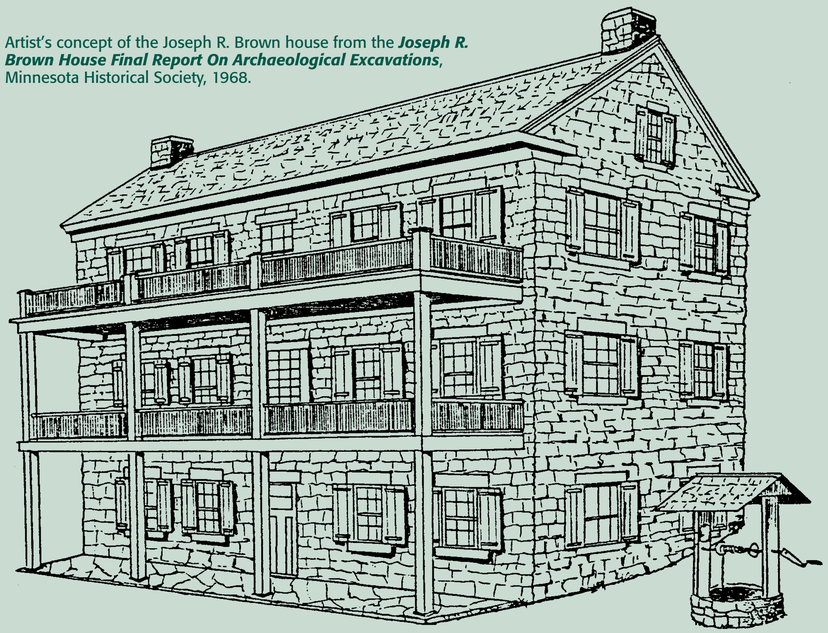
Susan Frenier, whose Dakota name was *Hinyajice-duta-win* or Soft Scarlet Down, had 11 children with Joseph R. Brown, most of whom were here at the house in 1862 when the United States/Dakota Conflict started. Susan and the children were taken captive on August 20, 1862 and kept in Little Crow's encampment, eventually being released at Camp Release six weeks later.

After Joseph Brown died in 1870, Susan lived out her days at the Sisseton Agency near their son Joseph. Susan died December 23, 1904, and is buried at the Sisseton Agency, South Dakota.



Susan Frenier, wife of Joseph Renshaw Brown, ca.1860
Minnesota Historical Society.

Artist's concept of the Joseph R. Brown house from the ***Joseph R. Brown House Final Report On Archaeological Excavations***, Minnesota Historical Society, 1968.



A Grand and Luxurious Home

This was the first house built of quarried granite in the Minnesota River valley during the 1860s. Most structures then were cabins or small wooden frame houses. Brick and stone structures had been built at the Lower Agency and Fort Ridgely but none could compare to the Brown House.

Construction on the house began in June 1861, after Brown had lost his agency post. The house was a three-and-a-half story, 19-room stone structure. Pinkish granite blocks cut from a nearby quarry were used on the exterior. The interior walls were finished with lime plaster tinted different colors in each room.

The first floor had a wide central hall, kitchen, pantries and storerooms. The second and third floors served as parlors, sitting rooms, and bedrooms. The attic contained a billiard table and Joseph Brown's desk. The house was furnished with upholstered furniture, heavy curtains, bronze and crystal chandeliers, a piano, kerosene lamps and the latest cooking and serving utensils, all of which were considered genuine luxuries for the time and location.

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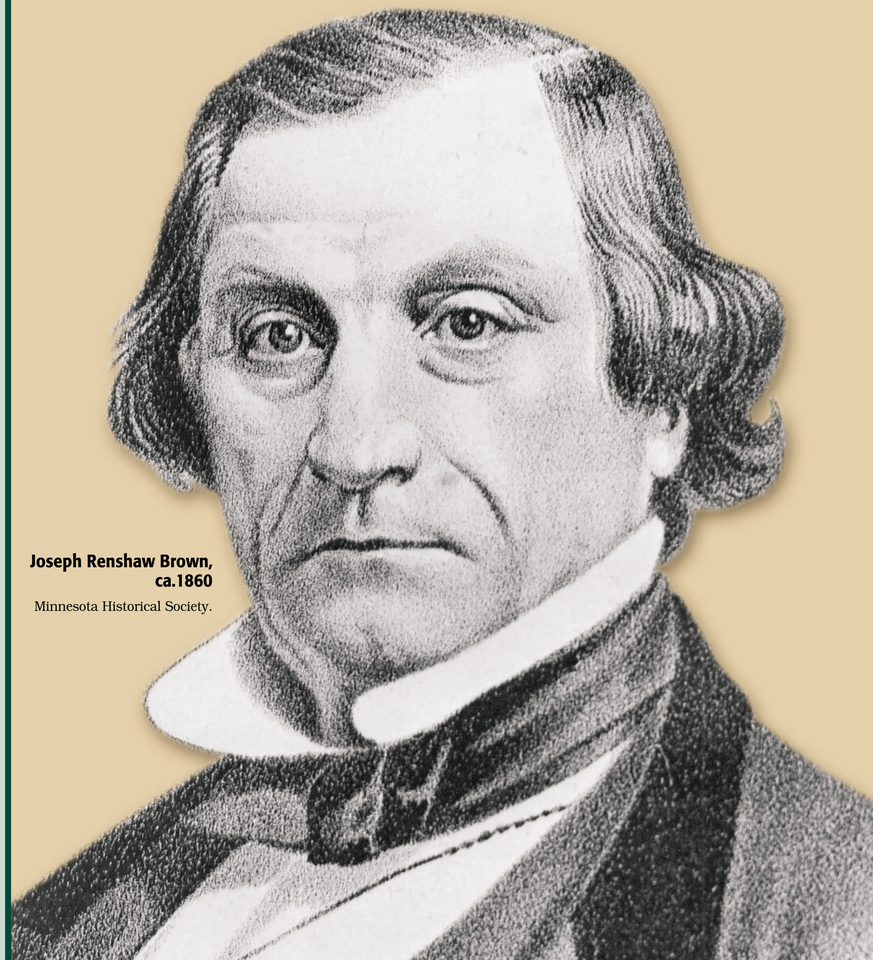
Dakota Friend or Foe?

Joseph Renshaw Brown came to the site of the future Fort St. Anthony (now called Fort Snelling) in 1820 at age 15, with Colonel Leavenworth's military regiment, whose duty it was to build the fort. He stayed rooted in Minnesota the rest of his life. Brown was a pioneer fur trader, lumberman, journalist, and the founder of two Minnesota towns, Henderson and Dakota (Stillwater). Brown served in both legislative houses, playing a major role in legislation that created the Minnesota territory. He was also was a state printer, an Indian Agent (1857-1861), an interpreter for the Traverse des Sioux treaty, an instigator of the 1858 treaty, and a promoter of steam engine tractors. Brown County and Browns Valley are named after him.

Brown also was the author of the "traders' paper" which caused unrest with the Dakota and has been deemed as one of the most contentious issues in the political affairs of the early Minnesota territory. As an Indian Agent, Brown was a sincere advocate of the United States government's assimilation policy and believed the Dakota should give up their traditional lifestyle in favor of Euro-American style of farming self-sufficiency.



Joseph Renshaw Brown, ca.1860
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