

The Brown Tract

By Dr. Marian S. Henry

Introduction

In 1798, John Brown, of Providence, Rhode Island, acquired 210,000 acres of land in upstate New York. This became known as the “Brown Tract.” The majority of this tract (167,000 acres) is located in present-day Herkimer County. The rest is in Lewis County (40,000 acres) and Hamilton County (3000 acres). At a time when settlers poured into the state, fueling an enormous population boom, three generations of the Brown family failed utterly in their attempts to develop their “wild lands.” In this article we look at the history of John Brown’s tract to discover why your New York ancestors probably chose some other region of the state in which to settle.

The Brown Family

John Brown[1] was born in 1736, the son of James and Hope (Power) Brown, and the great-grandson of Chad Brown, one of the earliest settlers in Providence. John Brown married Sarah Smith and the couple had four children. Son James Brown never married. Eldest daughter Abigail (Abby) married John Francis (1763-1796), the son of Tench and Anne (Willing) Francis, on January 1, 1788. They had a son, John Brown Francis. Middle daughter Sarah (Sally) married Charles Frederick Herreshoff (1763-1819), son of Charles and Agnes (Muehler) Herreshoff, on July 1, 1801. They had a son, John Brown Herreshoff. Youngest daughter Alice married John Brown Mason (ca. 1774 -1845) on July 16, 1800.

Acquisition of the Brown Tract

At the close of the Revolutionary War, the state took over all Crown lands as well as lands held by loyalists. In 1792 Alexander Macomb bought an astonishing four million acres from the state at eight cents an acre. Cash flow was a problem for early land speculators and Macomb was bankrupt within six months. He sold 1.9 million acres to William Constable for 50,000 pounds. Six months later Constable sold 1.3 million acres to Samuel Ward for 100,000 pounds and became one of the very few land speculators in the region to make a profit. Ward sold the 210,000 acres that later became the Brown Tract to James Greenleaf for \$24,000. Greenleaf was a business partner with Robert Morris, financier of the Revolution.

Part of the cash flow problem experienced by businessmen of the time was due to the fact that there was simply not enough money in circulation. Thus, businessmen used letters of credit as a substitute. To raise money, James Greenleaf mortgaged his 210,000 acres to John Livingston for \$38,000. In 1794 John Francis, a son-in-law and business partner of James Brown, accepted a second mortgage on the land as payment for a shipload of tea. Considering the prestige of the Greenleaf-Morris partnership at the time, it was a reasonable business transaction.[2] However, the panic of 1796 put both Greenleaf and Morris in debtors’ prison. When it finally became clear that James Greenleaf’s financial state was not going to recover sufficiently to honor his note, John Brown sent his son James to visit the area in August 1798. James did not go to the Brown Tract itself, but instead traveled to Utica and Rome (the two largest settlements in the area), and to Boonville. He wrote that “these regions although settled only about 10 or 12 years are thickly inhabited and many of the inhabitants are again emigrating.”[3] John Brown did not have first-hand information about the land in question. At this point he made the business decision not to accept the loss, but to buy the land by paying off John Livingston’s first mortgage. According to Brown and Walton, “If Brown had not bid on it, the land’s selling price, if anybody wanted to buy it, would have been much lower, not even enough to cover the Livingston Mortgage.”[4] John Brown got the deed to the tract on December 5, 1798.

First Generation Development Attempts (1798–1803)

John Brown had his tract surveyed into eight townships, which he named Industry, Enterprise, Perseverance, Unanimity, Frugality, Sobriety, Economy, and Regularity. We find the following instructions to his surveyor, John Hammon, in a letter dated March 31, 1799.

“You’l be very particular in Your Field book & Note Every thing of Importance, so as to Give Me the Value of Every Town as near as posable by its Number. You’l be sure to Note Every Mill place, Every Good place for a Compact Town, the ore, the Salt Springs if aney, the kind of Timber, the Lay of the Ground Weither good or bad or Indifferent, Weither Broken, or Even or Weither Large or Small Hills and Every other Observation You think worthey of My Knowing.”[5]

Brown laid plans for a village at the confluence of north and middle branches of the Moose River, with a grist mill and saw mill, and he hoped to build about 500 miles of roads. John Brown’s expectation was that settlers would come, plant crops, have good harvests, and thus attract more settlers. It was, after all, what was happening in the Black River Valley a few miles west. He hired James Sheldon as his agent to oversee the clearing of the land. Early surveyor reports of the tract having rocky ground instead of rich farmland did not dissuade John Brown. In a letter to Sheldon, he blithely praised the virtues of stone walls:

“There is nothing in My Mind that can Impeade the Rappid Settlement of my Lands unless there is too Maney Stones which from the account of those who had Reconorterd to Westward I confess give accts of more stones than I wish to have had, tho a large proportion of Stones Would in time be an Advantage Rather than Disadvantage to the Land, as no Fence in the World is Equilly Valuable to a Good Stone wall.”[6]

The work of building roads, bridges, and mills went slowly. Sheldon was not able to clear land for crops, so all supplies had to be hauled in. Few settlers came and fewer stayed. In January of 1800 John Brown wrote to Sheldon, “I must close by beging you to make use of all the Oconnemy in Your power and Reduce the Expenses already Exceeded my Expectation. More than Double Considering there is no produce Yet Raised & but Little Land prepared.”[7] John Brown’s efforts to turn a profit on this venture ended with his death on September 20, 1803. The townships of Industry, Enterprise, and Perseverance, went to his wife, Sarah; Unanimity went to his daughter, Abby Francis; he left Frugality to his daughter, Sarah Herreshoff; Sobriety was given to his daughter, Alice Mason; Economy to his grandson, John Brown Francis; and Regularity to his son James Brown.

John Brown had built a dam, a sawmill, a gristmill, a store, a few houses, and a road from Boonville crossing the Moose River into Old Forge. His will describes the improvements made in the townships of Industry (“2 Log Houses, a good Barn & considerable improvements of cleared land.”) and Economy (“a Grist Mill & Saw Mill, House, Store etc. on this Town is the best of Pine Timber which may be floated to the Mill & saw’d in to the best Pine Boards, very cheap.”). For all his effort and expense there were probably fewer than a dozen people living on the tract when he died.[8]

Second Generation Development Attempts (1806–1819)

The first of the second generation to try to settle the “wild lands” of the Brown Tract was James Mason, husband of John Brown’s youngest daughter, Alice. In April of 1806 James B. Mason hired Joseph Shaw to go to what is now Old Forge and attempt to attract settlers. James and Alice Mason made the first sale at the end of 1807, when Oliver Ingalls of Windham, Connecticut, purchased one thousand acres for \$2000. In May of 1808 they sold parcels to three settlers, a total of 940 acres for \$1850.

In 1811, Charles Frederick Herreshoff, husband of John Brown’s middle daughter Sarah, arrived in the Brown Tract with his nephew, John Brown Francis. They found all of John Brown’s earlier work on the roads, bridges, and mills of the tract in disrepair. Herreshoff began again, but all of his ventures seemed doomed to failure. In 1815 he decided to

try sheep ranching. The sheep died. The next year he wanted to establish a nail factory on the tract. The necessary loan was refused. This was also the “Year Without a Summer,” because of an eruption of the Tambora volcano in the Indian Ocean the previous year. This resulted in heavy snowfall in the second week of June, ruining most crops. In 1817 he built a forge (thus giving a name to present-day Old Forge). He wrote to his daughter Anna: “There is no more doubt but what we have two sources of the most valuable ore, and both inexhaustible.”[9] Even though Herreshoff stayed on site through the winter of 1817-18 to work on the mine, the ore quality was actually rather poor. He died on site on December 19, 1819, apparently by his own hand. John Mason had died the same year.

Third Generation Development Attempts (1819–1850)

In 1819, Sarah, widow of John Brown, turned over the three townships she owned to her daughter Abby Francis, her grandson, John Brown Francis, and her daughter Sarah Herreshoff. Abby Francis died intestate on March 5, 1821, at age fifty-four. Sarah Herreshoff died on August 2, 1846, nearly seventy-three. What remained of the Brown Tract was then in the hands of John Brown’s two grandsons and namesakes – John Brown Francis and John Brown Herreshoff.

There followed years of tentative offers, none of which reached fruition. Land reverted to the state for payment of back taxes and was sometimes later redeemed within the allowable two-year period. The township of Sobriety, inherited by Alice Mason, was not redeemed. Even though the taxes were quite low (approximately \$700 per year), the estate was producing no income. It was a steady drain on the family finances.

Finally on March 20, 1850, John Brown Francis sold his interest in the Brown Tract – approximately 93,000 acres spread over six townships – to Lyman Rasselas Lyon. A few weeks later, on April 4, 1850, John Brown Herreshoff sold his remaining interest – approximately 69,000 acres in three townships – to the same Lyman Lyon.

Lyman Lyon, who would now try to make a going commercial concern out of this land, was the son of Caleb Lyon, an early settler in the region. A biography in Hough’s *History of Lewis County* begins: “Lyman Rasselas Lyon, than whom no citizen of Lewis County, past or present, is more entitled to the touch of the biographer’s pen, was born in what is now Walworth, Wayne County, N. Y., in 1806, and came a lad of twelve years with his father to Lewis County.”[10] The biography goes on to describe Lyman Lyon’s political and business activities including the Moose River and Otter Lake tanneries. Father and son were also involved in railroads. The Sackett’s Harbor & Saratoga Railroad Company was incorporated on April 10, 1848, but not actually organized until January 10, 1852. Caleb Lyon performed the groundbreaking ceremony on April 8, 1852, near Dayanville. Lyman Lyon was one of the directors, having contracted the Brown Tract to the company. By the fall of 1854, construction had ceased. The name was changed to Lake Ontario & Hudson River Railroad Company on April 6, 1857, and fresh capital was sought in England. In 1860 the name was changed to the Adirondack Estate and Railroad Company. The project was stopped by the Civil War. The company went bankrupt and came through receivership to Thomas C. Durant, who was connected with the Union Pacific Railroad. [11] Lyman Lyon died on April 7, 1869, the largest single landowner in Lewis County.[12]

John Brown Tract Today

With the completion of the Erie Canal, settlers poured into upstate New York. By 1842 the population in the region from Utica to Buffalo had increased to over a million people. At this same time the 328-square-mile Brown Tract was home to about fifty to sixty people – about six square miles per person. Even today only one substantial road crosses the southern edge (Rt. 28). The failure of the Brown family to develop the area discouraged others from trying. Today the entire tract is within the “forever wild” Adirondack Forest Preserve, created by the New York State Legislature in 1885.[13]

So what went wrong? One might try to second-guess some of the business decisions, such as the iron mine and forge, but ultimately one must come back to the land itself. To a geologist it is clear that there are sharp changes over the course of just a few miles. The land in the Brown Tract was not (and is not) suitable for farming. It is rocky. The growing season is short, less than 100 days. The winters are harsh. Settlers simply could not raise enough food during

the summer to support themselves. And there was good land farther to the west, which was available on equal or better terms. Thus, even though it was close to Albany, one of the oldest settled areas in the state, the Brown Tract remained a wilderness long after the “west was won.” Genealogically speaking, it is a desert.

[1] This John Brown should not be confused with the famous abolitionist of the same name.

[2] Newest information on this point contradicts the established version found in such sources as *A History of the Adirondacks*, Alfred L. Donaldson, Harrison, N. Y., Vol. I, 1977.

[3] *John Brown's Tract: Lost Adirondack Empire*, Henry A. L. Brown and Richard J. Walton, Canaan, New Hampshire, 1988, p. 112.

[4] Quoted in Brown and Walton, op. cit., p. 121.

[5] Quoted in Brown and Walton, op. cit., p. 125.

[6] Quoted in Brown and Walton, op. cit., p. 139.

[7] Quoted in Brown and Walton, op. cit., p. 157.

[8] Quoted in Brown and Walton, op. cit., p. 96.

[9] Quoted in Brown and Walton, op. cit., p. 239.

[10] *A History of Lewis County in the State of New York, from the Beginning of its Settlement to the Present Time*, Franklin Benjamin Hough, Albany, 1860, p. 441

[11] *The History of Hamilton County*, Ted Aber and Stella King, Lake Pleasant, N.Y., 1965.

[12] *The Adirondacks*, Joseph F. Grady, Old Forge, N. Y., 1933.

[13] www.adirondack-park.net/mainframe.html