

JOHN BROWN, SR.

By RICHARD D. THOMPSON



JOHN BROWN, SR.

JOHN BROWN... such a common name for so extraordinary an individual. Brown successfully pursued many careers in his lifetime — fur trapper, scout, gold miner, businessman, rancher, road builder and author — and he was a leader in many controversial causes of his day. He exerted a strong influence on the development of San Bernardino in the early 1850's, even though, as a non-Mormon, he was an outsider. After the Mormons left, he became even more influential, providing wise leadership when it was most needed.

Brown was born in Massachusetts in 1817. While in his early teens he left home to become an adventurer in the wild and romantic West. Stopping first in St. Louis, then the edge of civilization, he rafted boats down the Mississippi River. He was a sailor for a time, but a shipwreck off the Texas coast put an end to that occupation.

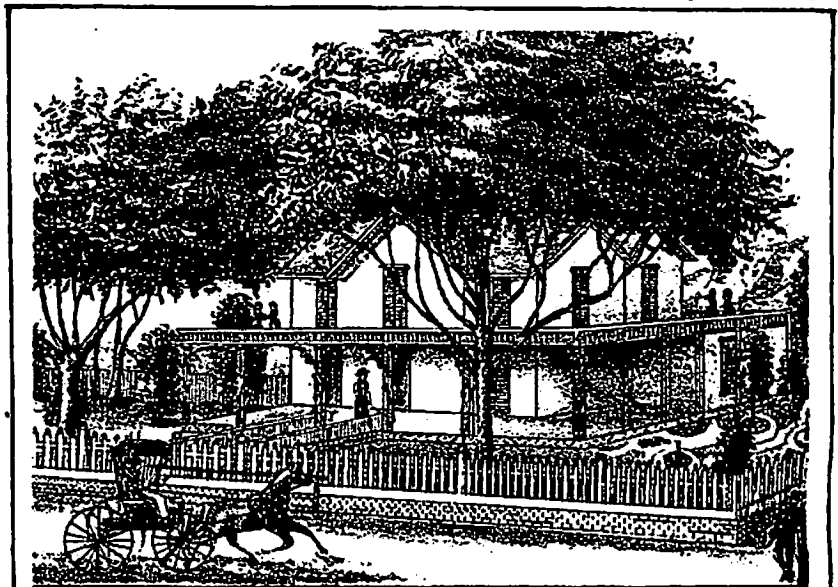
He entered the Rocky Mountain fur trade, spending 17 years in that dangerous business, where one mishap could result in death. Over the years he became associated with many of the famous frontiersmen and is said to have helped build Fort Laramie, Fort Bent and Fort Bridger. He served as scout with Kit Carson on one of Fremont's expeditions to California in the 1840's. Starting in the 1850's and continuing through the rest of the 19th Century, several of Brown's former "mountain men" associates settled in San Bernardino.

When news of the gold discovery became known, Brown travelled to California arriving at Sutter's Fort on September 15, 1849. He mined near the Calaveras River for a while until winter forced him to stop. He then moved to Monterey for a short time, before opening a livery stable and hotel in San Juan Bautista. He was elected to his first public office at San Juan Bautista but did not finish his term, as ill health led him to seek a warmer climate.

He arrived in San Bernardino with his family on May 1, 1852, and bought a cabin from Marshall Hunt in the Mormon stockade. Living conditions in the stockade were wretched; the flimsily constructed cabins had dirt floors and offered but little protection against wind and rain. Mrs. Brown gave birth to a baby about the same time her neighbor, Mrs. Jefferson Hunt, also became a mother again. The two women could converse freely through the common wall of their cabins, almost as if there was no barrier between them.

Brown became one of the most influential non-Mormons of the colony. After San Bernardino County was created in 1853, he was named one of commissioners to supervise the first election. The county governing body in those days consisted of the county judge and two justices of peace, forming what was called the court of sessions. John Brown was one of the first two justices of the peace. Later, a group calling themselves the Independents was formed, comprised mostly of non-mormons and Mormons who were dissatisfied with their leadership.

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CITY RESIDENCE OF JOHN BROWN, SAN BERNARDINO, CAL.