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Owen Brown

(1771-1856)

You're in Hudson, Ohio, at the corner of Baldwin and North Main Streets, and you feel like going to Isaly's for an ice-cream cone. You go down the hill, and just as things level out, a bit off to your right, is Owen Brown Street.



Owen Brown was born on February 16, 1771, in Torrington, Connecticut, the son of Revolutionary War hero Captain John Brown. His earliest memory was the departure of his father's militia company to engage the British in New York, in the summer of 1776.

He became a wealthy tanner and cattle breeder, with some land speculation on the side. He was also one of the founders of Hudson, Ohio, to which he moved in 1805, and where he operated a prosperous tannery.

He was a passionate abolitionist; a friend of Frederick Douglass, who would stay with Brown when lecturing in the area. With another founding figure, David Hudson, Owen established a way station on the Underground Railroad, where escaping slaves might pause on their trip to Canada and freedom.

In 1825, Owen became a founding trustee of Western Reserve College, just a block up Baldwin Street. During its first decade, not surprisingly, but also not agreeably to the other trustees, the new college came to be noted for its abolitionist sentiments. The death of the first president, Charles Backus Storrs, in 1833, produced a crisis. The new president, George E Pierce, distanced himself from the slavery issue, and in 1835, Owen resigned as trustee. With a large number of faculty staff, and students, plus one trustee, one professor, and many students from Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, he moved to the recently founded Oberlin Collegiate Institute.

There Owen again became a Trustee, and there again, a strong abolitionist feeling took root. Oberlin was one of the first colleges to admit black students. It was the first one to admit females on an equal basis, and Owen's daughter Florella studied there from 1835 to 1839.

Ruth, the wife Owen had brought with him to Hudson, died not long after. Owen married Sarah Root in 1809. She died, and was succeeded by Lucy Drake in 1841. Owen himself died in May 1856; the last of his eleven children was born shortly after his death. He is buried in the Old Hudson Township Burying Ground. Just a bit up North Main, and take the first turn to your right.

He had died a bit too soon to know of his son John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry, and its failure.

Not all of those with John were captured or killed. Five of them, including one black, escaped, among them John's son Owen, whose amazing escape from pursuit was written up in the *Atlantic Monthly* for March 1874. It created a sensation. Mark Twain, reading it, remarked, "Three different times I tried to read it, but was frightened off each time before I could finish. The tale was so vivid and so real that I seemed to be living those adventures myself and sharing their intolerable perils."

It ended peacefully, in Pasadena, California. In 1884, four members of the John Brown family were living in Pasadena – Owen and his brother Jason, who were homesteading in the hills north of Pasadena, and their sister, Ruth Brown Thompson and her husband Henry, who had been one of John Brown's soldiers in Kansas. Owen, the last survivor of the Harper's Ferry raid, contracted pneumonia in his distant mountaintop retreat, and died in his sister's home on 8 January 1889. His funeral on 10 January at the Methodist Tabernacle was attended by some 2,000 people.

That occasion reminded S P Snow of Santa Barbara of the earlier Owen. His letter, in the *Pacific Rural Press* of 13 April, reads as follows:

The recent death of Owen Brown in Pasadena, Los Angeles county, calls to mind some reminiscences of his grandfather, the father of "Old John Brown" of worldwide reputation. The grandfather and my father were very intimate friends; they often visited back and forth, and I remember the old gentleman as a very kind, genial, whole souled sort of person. He stuttered badly, and it sometimes pained me to hear him speak. He and my father were engaged in introducing better breeds of cattle into Northeastern Ohio; the first that I recollect were the Devonshires, and my father prided himself on having every animal on his farm of a cherry red color. The Durhams succeeded and were considered by Mr Brown and my father, who sometimes exchanged stock to improve the strains, much superior to the Devons. Many years after, the two breeds were mixed in Ohio, which produced a breed superior, I believe, to the pure bloods of either stock. The last time I saw Mr Brown was in May 1830, when my father was moving with his family to the West; we called on Mr Brown at his residence in Hudson, Portage (since Summit) County, Ohio. I have no recollection of "Old John Brown" in those days. Let not a grateful country ever forget the "grand old man," born, it may be, a little before his time.

This homely note is our last glimpse of Owen Brown of Hudson.

We may now take up the story of his much better remembered son, John – born, it may be, precisely to push the time.