

3180 PORTAGE AVENUE – BROWN HOUSE
W. Brown, 1856



When William Brown established his Red River frame log house in c.1856, he was marking one of many new starts in an already full life.

Born in c.1809 on Mainland off Scotland's northern coast, Brown was among the Orkney Island tenant farmers attracted to employment with the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) as a result of economic dislocation in their homeland and the HBC's promise of pioneer adventure, food and lodgings while they worked, and generous retirement stipends. Brown boarded a ship for York Factory soon after enlisting as a labourer in May 1830. He spent 11 years with the HBC, then retired to the Red River Settlement with a land grant of 62.8 hectares (155 acres).

The policy of providing ex-employees with lots along the Red and Assiniboine rivers not only

encouraged workers to remain with the Company, but also boosted the colony's population and agricultural self-sufficiency. As more men retired to the settlement, land grants extended outward in ribbon fashion from what would become the City of Winnipeg, in turn forming the basis for adjacent rural municipalities.

In addition to cultivating a portion of his holding, Brown may have engaged in hunting, trapping and/or part-time freighting for the HBC. He was married, widowed and remarried during the 1840s. He also built up a relatively valuable farm, complete with livestock, before acquiring three HBC lots in Headingley, including his second homestead of nearly 120 hectares (292.5 acres) on River Lot 39.

It was there that he built his four-bedroom log home and, with a family of four sons and two daughters, again developed a substantial crop and livestock operation. The men also ran a blacksmith shop during the 1870s and 1880s. The family remained on the farm after Brown's death in 1891, then relocated to the village of Headingley and sold Lot 39 in c.1918.

The 1½-storey, rectangular-shaped house consists of hand-squared oak logs which may have been transported by raft from Baie St. Paul. Following the Red River frame construction method, the building has a log sill which originally sat on the ground or on a foundation of readily available materials (e.g. a mixture of fieldstones and mortar); grooved vertical uprights tenoned at the corners and at various points along the sill; and horizontal logs secured between the uprights by tapered ends that fit into the grooves.

Mud and hay plaster commonly was used to fill chinks in these dwellings, followed by an exterior coating of whitewash. The Brown House has a simple gable roof which likely was covered with oak or cedar shingles.

Poorer owners relied on clay, bark or thatch. Some hardware, such as nails, door knobs and hinges, was made locally; other items, along with glass for windows, had to be imported.

On the dwelling's front facade, a central entrance separates two main-floor windows with plain wooden frames and sills. The side walls contain two openings both at ground level and in their gable ends, while a second door and a single light appear on the rear elevation. Cove or drop horizontal tongue-and-groove siding was first added to the gable ends in c.1880. Stairs to the upper level divide the interior roughly in half. The main floor contains a parlour, kitchen, and living and dining rooms. An area under the stairs served as a root cellar. Among the four second-storey rooms is a nursery connected to the largest bedroom.

The house is one of a small collection of well-preserved Red River frame structures in Manitoba. This building method originated in Denmark and Scandinavia, then found favour in France and was introduced to North American by settlers of New France. Brought west with the fur trade, it was widely adopted for homes, churches, stores and other buildings up to the 1870s. However, log construction subsequently declined in popularity as manufactured material become more available.

In the mid-1970s, the Brown House was relocated to a highly urban setting, next to the former St. James City Hall, as part of the Historical Museum of St. James-Assiniboia. The building was restored and set on a new concrete foundation with a covering of fieldstones. Some of the Brown family's furniture and other artifacts also are displayed.