WILLIAM BROWN HOUSE
3180 PORTAGE AVENUE

As the Red River Settlement stabilized and developed after the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) reorganization in 1821, many of the Company's retiring employees were offered large plots of land along the Red and Assiniboine rivers. The reasons were threefold: to help populate the Settlement, to provide incentives for employees still working, and to increase the amount of agricultural activity at the Settlement, thereby increasing its self-sufficiency. The policy was successful in all these areas, and many of the men who obtained grants later became economic leaders of the newly incorporated City of Winnipeg.

As more and more men retired at the Settlement, grants were made further away from what is now downtown Winnipeg, thus slowly populating outlying areas. New rural municipalities were formed, encompassing territory once occupied by these retired HBC employees and their families. To the west of the city, Headingley grew slowly as a small farming community. In ca. 1856 William Brown, an ex-HBC labourer and cook, built a log house on one of his holdings in the area, purchased as a result of his earlier successes on land granted to him by the Company.¹

STYLE
The Brown House is of log construction common to Manitoba and given a variety of names: Manitoba frame, Red River frame, piece sur piece, poteaux sur sole, poteaux et piece coulissante, and the Hudson's Bay style.² As some of these names suggest, the building type grew from strong French influences, but actually originated in Denmark and Scandinavia, then found favour in


France. The style was introduced to North America by the settlers of New France and brought west with the fur trade. Eventually, it was adopted by the employees of the HBC. It was used to build Fort Douglas, the Selkirk settlers' first fort, and remained popular for homes, churches, stores and outbuildings throughout the area until the 1870s. An increased availability of manufactured materials late in the century made elaborate homes possible and common homes easier to build, log buildings lost their popularity.

The Red River frame building started with a frame of hand-squared logs, often oak, resting on the ground or a foundation. This foundation could be built of any readily available material, which on the prairies often meant a mixture of fieldstones and mortar. Sill logs were placed atop the foundation, then vertical members were tenoned at the corners and along the sill. These vertical logs were grooved in order to accept the tapered ends of horizontal logs placed between the uprights (see Plate 1). Doors were often set between two minor uprights, windows similarly established or were simply cut out of the wall, with the rough hewn window frames nailed to the free ends of the logs.

CONSTRUCTION

The Brown house is built of hand-hewn oak logs, likely rafted down from Baie St. Paul. It was built on River Lot 39, one of three lots Brown bought from the HBC on the Assiniboine River in Headingley. The one-and-a-half storey structure is rectangular, 6.6 x 9.5 m. (21' 6 1/2" x 31') in size (see Plate 2) and originally rested on a fieldstone foundation. Common chink for these log

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3 Ibid., p. 36.
5 Ibid., p. 36.
8 Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 245-6, 369.
homes was a mud and hay plaster, liberally applied to both the exterior and interior of the home. After drying, the exterior would be whitewashed. Hardware, nails, door knobs, and hinges, came from a variety of sources both within and outside the Settlement. Glass for the windows made the long and arduous journey from England to Red River.10

**DESIGN**

In 1967 John F. Lamont, who had bought River Lot 39, notified the Provincial government and the St. James - Assiniboia Museum that a log house of historic significance was located on his property. After years of negotiations, the house was moved in 1973 onto the Museum property, being turned and moved a short distance to its present location in 1982. Extensive interior and exterior renovations were completed in 1973 and in 1990 and more interior work is planned.

The building rests on a concrete foundation built in 1976 which was covered with fieldstones in 1990. The hand-hewn, oak logs are roughly square, 17.5 - 20.0 cm. (7-8"). Remarkably, only 12 of the original logs had to be replaced during restoration in 1989.11 The front elevation, now facing north onto Portage Avenue, contains the main entrance, 7.9 cm. (2' 7 1/8") and two windows, 8.5 cm. (2' 9 1/2") wide, on the first floor. The east and south walls each hold two windows of similar dimension, while the two openings on the west wall are 5 mm. (1/4") smaller (see Plate 2). The rear of the building also includes a second door, 8.1 cm. (2' 7 11/16") wide.

The second-storey roof is a simple gable design, with two windows in each of the gable ends (now facing east and west). These openings are 6.8 cm. (2' 2 3/4") wide (see Plate 3). All windows openings, including those on the first floor, are cut out of the walls and finished with plain wooden frames and sills. Cove or drop horizontal tongue and groove siding similar to that presently on the

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10 Manitoba Department of Cultural Affairs and Historical Resources, Historic Resources Branch, *Seven Oaks House* (Winnipeg: Historic Resources Branch of the Manitoba Department of Cultural Affairs and Historical Resources, 1983), p. 3.

home was added to the second floor gable ends ca. 1880 and approximately 50% of the original material remains.\(^\text{12}\)

The original roof would have consisted of oak or cedar shingles, given Brown's holdings and moderate wealth. Poorer owners would have relied on clay, bark or thatch to provide protection from the elements.\(^\text{13}\) The present roof is built of pine shingles.

The William Brown House is one of the city's small collection of well-preserved log buildings, most of which are of Red River frame construction (see Appendix I for an inventory of these log buildings).

**INTERIOR**

The interior is divided roughly in half by stairs leading to the upper level of the home. The first floor is divided into three basic areas - to the right of the entrance, a parlour and a kitchen, and to the left, a living and dining room. Room sizes are: parlour - 17.1 sq. m. (184 sq. ft.), kitchen - 13.9 sq. m. (150 sq. ft.), and the living and dining rooms - 21.7 sq. m. (234 sq. ft.).\(^\text{14}\) An area under the stairs, accessed by a door opening into the kitchen, served as a root cellar.

The second floor holds four bedrooms ranging in size from 8.7 sq. m. (94 sq. ft.), used as a nursery, to the connecting bedroom which measures 12.1 sq. m. (130 sq. ft.). All rooms have a window to provide natural light and ventilation.

Due to the present use of the structure as a museum, many pieces of period furniture, including some of the original Brown family artifacts, are displayed to give the visitor an idea of the type of


\(^{13}\) Ibid., Vol. II, p. 16.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., "Floor Plan, 1st Floor," n.p.
furnishings that would be in the home prior to 20th century.

**INTEGRITY**
The house no longer occupies its original site but it is in excellent structural condition for its age. Alterations, including a new foundation and the restoration of interior and exterior elements, have returned the home to a more original state, rather than diminishing its originality.

**STREETScape**
The Brown house is situated close to Portage Avenue, beside the old Rural Municipality of Assiniboia Municipal Hall. Both structures pre-date by many decades the neighbouring strip malls, apartment blocks and residential structures. While the two buildings that make up the museum complex are relatively compatible, the same cannot be said for the rest of their surroundings.

**ARCHITECT**
William Brown, the original owner, would have been the architect and builder of his home, designing it in accordance with the common practices utilized for several decades in and around the Red River Settlement. Because Brown and his sons owned and operated a blacksmith shop in the 1870s and 1880s, he would have made much of the construction material such as hinges and nails.

**PERSON**
William Brown was born ca. January 1, 1809 in the Parish of Sandwick on the island of Mainland, the largest of the Orkney Islands off the northern coast of Scotland (see Plate 4). The rugged land was filled by Brown and others who survived as tenant farmers on small plots of large estate farms. Between 1800 and 1830, and influx of Scottish immigrants and the consolidation of the estate farms into larger holdings meant many Orkney farmers either lost their plots or saw their meagre returns
reduced even further. As a result, many young Orkneymen sought to leave the islands to make a better life for themselves and their families.\textsuperscript{15}

One of the most popular avenues open to these young men was the HBC. Employment with the Company offered them a well-paying and adventurous life, freedom from the drudgery and uncertainty of the small farms, food and lodgings while they worked, and a generous retirement stipend which included money and often land. The HBC liked hiring Orkneymen because they proved to be tough, sober, hard working, and accustomed to the primitive lifestyle they would lead in British North America.\textsuperscript{16}

William Brown enlisted as a labourer with the HBC on May 4, 1830, boarded a ship in late June and left for York Factory. Brown spent 11 years with the Company, retiring at the Red River Settlement in 1841 with a land grant of 62.8 ha. (155 acres). This land, Lot 223 in the Parish of St. John, is located near present-day St. John's Park.\textsuperscript{17} Soon he had approximately 4.1 ha. (10 acres) of land under cultivation. He would have supplemented this income by moving goods for the HBC or by hunting and trapping. In 1844 he married Crawford Spence, a native of the area. She died two years later, and Brown subsequently married Charlotte Omand (Plate 5).\textsuperscript{18}

By 1849 Brown's farm land and livestock holdings would have made his farm one of the area's more valuable and by the early 1850s he decided to purchase land further west, in Headingley. Brown had acquired three lots from the HBC by 1859 (1366, 1367 and 1368 under the HBC Land Register System). In June 1871 this land was resurveyed and transferred to the new system as Lots 38 and 39 of the Parish of Headingley (Plate 6), north of the Assiniboine River and west of what would become the village of Headingley. It was on Lot 39, nearly 120 ha. (292.50 acres), that Brown built

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 2-12.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., Vol. I, p. 14.
\item \textsuperscript{17} B. Hunter-Eastwood, in conversation with the author, January, 1992.
\end{itemize}
his log home in ca. 1856. In 1868, Brown transferred Lot 1368 (which became Lot 38) to his eldest son John. By 1874 he and his sons had a cultivated farm of 20.0 ha. (49.9 acres), large when compared to his neighbours, and a large number of livestock.\(^{19}\)

In 1881 Brown transferred part of Lot 39 to his second son, Magnus, who used the land as collateral for a loan. William's third son, James, was given part of Lot 39 in 1882, which he sold to William McLise of Headingley in 1886 due to his relocating in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. The last part of William Brown's original holding and his house, were transferred to his youngest son, William Jr., in October 1889. William Brown Sr. died in his log home on June 8, 1891.

In addition to his portion of Lot 39, William Brown Jr. also bought the portion land by Magnus Brown in Lot 39 in 1911. Later that year William Jr. died, leaving all this land to his youngest son, Clifford Brown. On April 24, 1937, Clifford sold his holdings to the Crown, but retained ownership of the house, moving it a slight distance away. He sold this house in 1967 to John F. Lamont, who donated it to the Museum.\(^{20}\) The land was ultimately used for a Manitoba Hydro right-of-way and for the federally-operated Stony Mountain Institution.

**EVENT**

There is no known significant event connected with this house.

**CONTEXT**

This structure is illustrative of both the early development of the province and its capital city, and the development of the agricultural settlement around the Red River Settlement and along the banks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers in Manitoba.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., Vol. I, p. 280.

Much of the territory along the river banks was settled after the establishment of the Red River Settlement at the confluence of the two rivers. Farmers and their families fanned out along the rivers that became an important transportation and communication link between their homesteads and the growing population centre at the Upper Fort (Winnipeg). As these small holdings and their owners settled into their new lives, small villages and towns organized to offer services to the rural population surrounding it.

Railways, the next important communication line, added to this centralization of services and newly surveyed railway towns began to dot the map. In some cases, already established rural communities grew rapidly with the construction of a station. In many other cases, the station preceded the organization of the town.

Headingley (see Plate 7), like West Kildonan, St. Norbert and St. James, began as an agrarian community of unconnected river lots. The need to band together both socially and during crisis acted to diminish isolation and bring these neighbours closer together. That many in these areas still see themselves as hailing from St. James or West Kildonan or Headingley rather than Winnipeg is an example of this bond.

The Brown House as it now stands is a reminder of the days of the agrarian pioneers whose determination, strength of character and will to succeed carried them through many trying times. They were hard working, honest people who saw a future for themselves in the unbroken land of the Canadian prairies and who worked towards that future. It was a credit to them and to the developing province of Manitoba and Dominion of Canada that they succeeded.

**LANDMARK**

The William Brown House rests on one of Winnipeg's busiest thoroughfares, and is highly noticeable due to its unique appearance among much newer structures. The situation, however, is not entirely true to the home's history, as it is very much a rural visitor out-of-place in its current urban setting.
1 Red River frame construction. (Reproduced from Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Recreation, Archway Warehouse, Jail and Powder Magazine, Norway House, p. 7.)
4 The British Isles, arrow indicating the Orkney Islands, 1985. (Reproduced from Collins Compact Atlas of the World, 1985, p. 3.)
William Brown and wife Charlotte (nee Omand), ca. 1880. (Photo courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, R.L. Taylor Collection, #98.)
Part of the Parish of Headingley, Manitoba, arrows indicating Lots 38 and 39, held by William Brown. (Map courtesy of the Historical Museum of St. James - Assiniboia.)
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7 Headingly, Manitoba, ca. 1910. (Photo courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Headingley Collection, #2.)