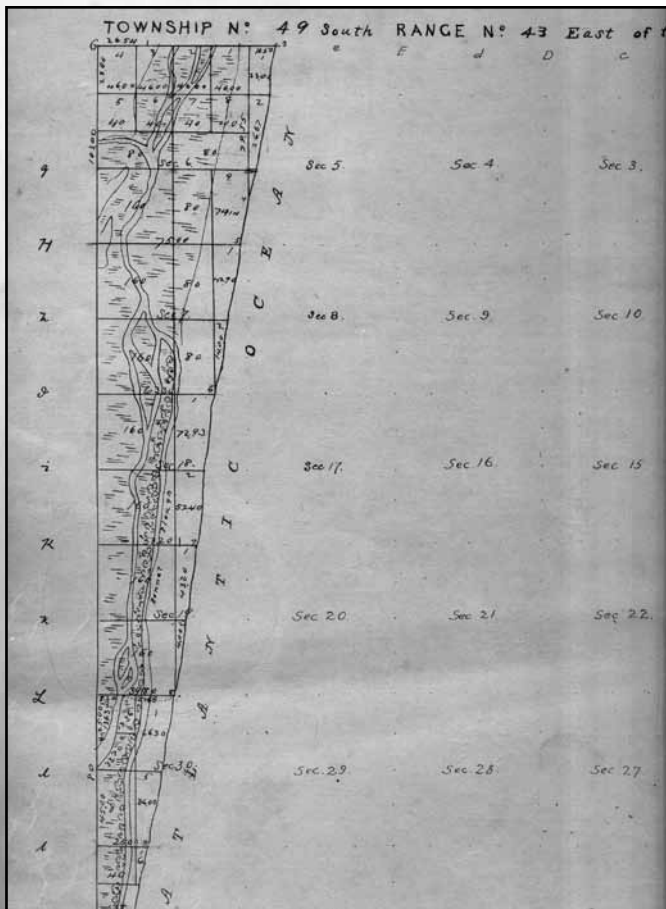


Ending the Hunt for “Pig” Brown: Solving the disappearance of John Joseph Brown, Broward County’s first elected official

By Christopher R. Eck



Marcellus Williams’ 1870 survey map of Township 49 South, Range 43 East, showing the approximate area where it is believed the Brown family resided. (Broward County Historical Commission collection)

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In the 1870s, John Joseph Brown and his family were virtually the only white settlers in the area that would eventually become part of Broward County forty years later.¹ To the small and scattered community of Dade County – of which the area of Fort Lauderdale Beach where the Browns lived was part – he was known as “Pig” Brown, because he and his wife, Lavinia, and their several children raised hogs on their modest and isolated farm on the barrier island along New River Sound.

Beyond the fact that Pig Brown and his family were recorded as living here in the US Census of 1870, part of why people in Broward are still interested in him and his family is the century old “mystery” of their disappearance from their beach farmstead. Another part of our interest stems from the fact that he was this area’s first resident to be elected to state office when he was seated in the state legislature in 1877; however, after he and his family left for Tallahassee in 1877, they never returned.²

The mystery of Pig Brown’s disappearance is a mystery that has now been solved.³

Background

We know from the US Census records that enumerated the population of Dade County in 1870 that John (born in Virginia in 1822) and Lavinia Brown (born in Georgia in 1821) were then living on Fort Lauderdale beach, just five years after the end of the Civil War.⁴ They are recorded as having six children living with them: William F., 23; Josephine, 21; Benjamin, 19; Laura J., 17; Clarence M., 15;

and Arnold, 13.⁵ John and his two oldest sons, William and Benjamin, are each noted by occupation as “farmer.”

The 1870 Census also records John as being born in Virginia and Lavinia as being born in Georgia. However, it is now known that he had been living further up the coast in Volusia County in 1860 at the time of the prior US Census. In that document John is described – different from later census enumerations – as being born in New York.⁶ His occupation was also stated to be “journeyman carpenter.”

Because recording errors are fairly common in the early census records, this difference may normally be discounted as a simple error of the census enumerator. Errors in spellings, inaccurate ages, occupations and other incorrect personal information are to be expected in many early census records, inasmuch as the information that was written down was often innocently (though mistakenly) provided by neighbors, children, relatives or the persons themselves, if they were uneducated or uninformed or the enumerator was careless in recording the information.⁷

However, recent research has also identified the correct records that show that he and Lavinia were earlier living in Sumter County, Georgia (likely where Lavinia, as a Georgia native, was raised). In those records, he is again noted as being born in New York.⁸ His occupation at this time is stated to be “blacksmith.”

Is it possible that John, as a Northerner married to a Southerner and living in the South just after the Civil War, preferred to be considered “Southern” for the purpose of personal and familial sympathies? It should be noted that as a man of fighting age – at least for militia or Home Guard purposes – there would likely have been a great deal of pressure on him and his oldest son, William (who became 18 years of age in 1864 at the height of the fighting), to choose sides and enlist into either Confederate or Union military service.

In fact, there is both a John J. and William Brown recorded as serving in the federal First East Florida Cavalry Regiment that operated in northern Florida.⁹ Because both names are very

common, it is unknown at this time whether either of these two men are the same as the father and son that we are concerned with here. However, as a trained blacksmith, John would have been extraordinarily important in keeping the regiment’s horses well shod and, if this too is the same person, William, being recorded as a “gunsmith,” would have added another indispensable aspect to the military preparedness of the regiment.

It may also be that John himself was torn about the conflict. It appears now, from later census records that have been found listing him and his children, that he may himself have come from a family whereby his father was born in Virginia and his mother in New York; hence, the confusion in the records about his place of birth even among members of his family. This will be discussed in greater detail later.

Life for the Browns in the 1870s

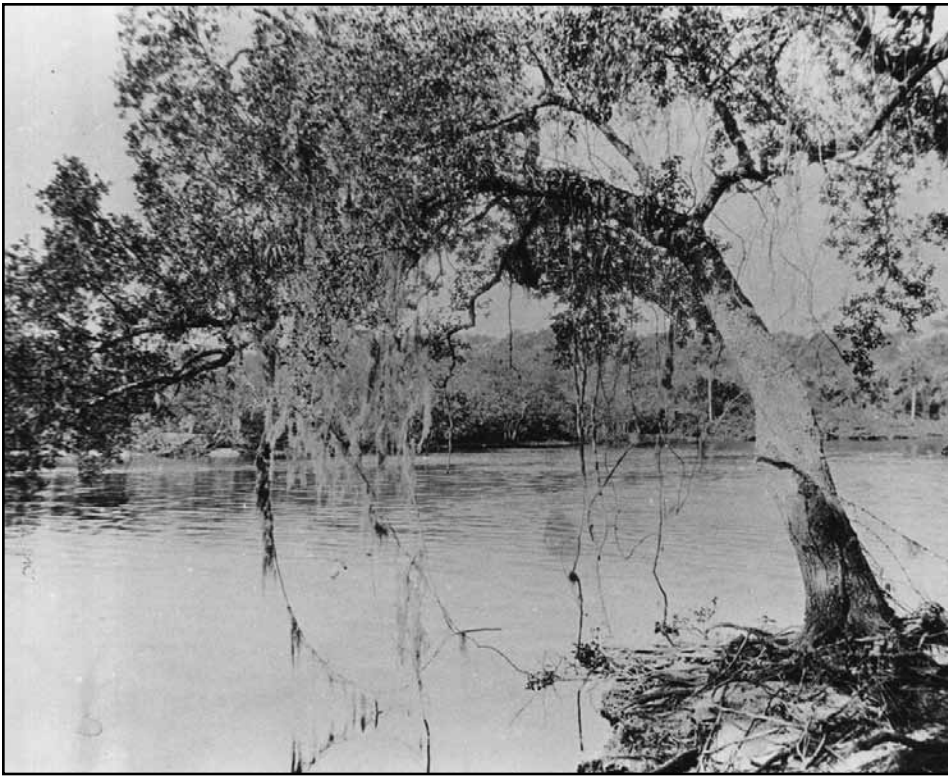
Moving to the remote southeast quarter of the peninsula shortly after the Civil War may have helped the family escape the ill-feelings about sides taken during the war which continued to plague Reconstruction Era Florida, as it did in so much of the federal troop-occupied South. With the exception of Seminole settlements further into the interior, as one of only two non-Indian pioneer families in this area, the Browns were not only largely isolated but free to make of their lives what they willed. Undoubtedly, the Browns would also have come into occasional contact with Seminole families who frequented the New River and the sound and shore for hunting, fishing, trading and other purposes.

Despite their isolation, the Browns did more than simply scratch out a meager living on their farm. Arthur Williams, the son of state surveyor Marcellus Williams and who accompanied his father in his survey work in 1870 that came through the area, noted years later in his own memoirs that he recalled that the Browns also made their “living by wreck and beachcombing.”¹⁰ As the owners of a small schooner, the Browns’ practice of salvaging and beachcombing could add significant additional income at a time when money and goods were hard to acquire. Because John had virtually no other neighbors to compete for what came ashore, the sale of items found on and off Fort Lauderdale beach likely helped immensely to provide money for his family. Most of what he salvaged he would have sold in Key West, as it was the largest and closest established market for such things.

In fact, about this time, it was later recalled by Commodore Ralph Munroe of Miami that John – whom he called “old man Brown” in his memoirs – once found two large metal ingots on Fort Lauderdale beach following a hurricane. Taking the heavy metal bars on his boat to Key West he sold them for their value as lead, as he believed them to be. Later, he learned from others in the town that the two bars had actually been discolored silver ingots – the remnants most likely of a long-forgotten and unrecorded Spanish wreck – but when he returned later to the same place on the beach nothing more was to be found, as another storm had come and changed the beachfront.¹¹



The silver ingots found by Brown may have looked like this one from the shipwreck of the Atocha. (Image from the Broward County Historical Commission collection)



*Pig Brown lived on the picturesque but isolated New River.
(Image courtesy the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society)*

Into the Maelstrom

It was not long, however, before Brown was thrown into the thick of a human storm involving volatile Reconstruction politics. In 1872, Dade County had only 30 registered voters and, together with the 69 voters in Brevard County to the north, the 99 voters in these two areas comprised the total electorate for the Twenty-First Senate District in any run for statewide office in Tallahassee.¹² In 1872 John was put up to run against the powerful and corrupt William H. Gleason, an audacious Carpetbagger that manipulated local government, business and community life in Dade County for a decade beginning with his move to the area in 1866.¹³ Even given the myriad of past and present political scandals in Florida, Gleason's audacious and unlawful exploits are still legendary today.

It is not known whether Brown was chosen to run for office or whether he decided for himself to go up against Gleason, whom many area residents despised.¹⁴ In the 1872 race, John received 16 votes to Gleason's 14. Gleason, who was already serving as clerk of the circuit court, county clerk, tax assessor, tax collector, school board member and state representative

simultaneously, arranged to have three votes known to have been cast for John by foreign-born but naturalized citizens thrown out, eventually leaving him with the winning lead of 14 votes to 13.¹⁵

The underhandedness of all of this must not have sat well with Brown because he is known to have filed a formal protest with the Speaker of the House following the election. With the convening of the legislature in January 1873, the protest was read into the legislative record but, following the preparation of Majority and Minority reports, Gleason was allowed to retain his seat.¹⁶ Ironically, in an amendment to a bill that was proposed and approved to allow several contestants for assembly seats to be provided \$150 (John was among those listed), Gleason was among those voting to approve the payment.¹⁷ Gleason may have believed that the approval of this "hush" money by the state assembly to an embittered office seeker such as John may have assuaged his wounds. It did not.

In 1876, John again ran against Gleason for the state legislative seat for Dade County. As before, Gleason once more tried to rig the election in which John received more votes.¹⁸

This time around, however, it was John who was found by a majority of the legislators to be the rightful electee and he was sworn into office on February 1, 1877.¹⁹

Out of Town and Out of Sight

When John moved his family to Tallahassee in 1877 to take his seat as representative he must have already become tired of the nefarious politics of Gleason and his gang in south Florida. "Pig" Brown's election as a Democrat for his district coincided with the end of Carpetbag rule in Florida which culminated in the election of Democrat George F. Drew as governor. With his defeat and that of his cohorts, Gleason moved out of Dade County to the town of Eau Gallie farther north up the coast, in what is today the Melbourne area.²⁰

However, after serving in Tallahassee, John and his family also never moved back to their farmstead along New River Sound. The end result of the election of 1876 was that both contestants moved from Dade County never to return or again run for office locally. But the answer to what happened to the Browns after John left the state legislature has haunted local historians for over a century. One might assume that a search in the 1880 federal census would easily have helped discover his new home, but it did not.

Ending the Mystery of "Pig" Brown's Disappearance

Since the 1880s, the whereabouts of Pig and his family after they moved away remained a mystery. This was in part compounded by the fact that a simple search by historians of records, such as the census, has been hampered by the utter ubiquity of a name such as "John Brown."

This type of problem has been alleviated in recent years by modern research tools, such as internet genealogical research service sites (e.g., pay-for-service websites such as Ancestry.com) and free publicly-accessible databases, both of which have allowed research to be conducted using name and keyword searches on consolidated groups of original or transcribed records in ways that would not have been possible a generation ago.

Still, even with the use of a sophisticated tool such as an internet-based genealogical research site, the task can be daunting. For example, a search for “John Brown” in the 1880 US Census on Ancestry.com lists 15,148 persons by this name enumerated across the country for that year. Narrowing this by various criteria – such as adding the middle initial and place of birth (New York or Virginia) – eliminates all of these men as possibilities. Although the use of this type of research device is often greatly successful, a researcher must still face the fact that in any given census year, a person may not have been enumerated using the correct spelling of his or her name or at all.

However, by searching from another angle – using the names of his children, particularly Clarence M. Brown (the most uncommon name among them) – a door was opened. He is found in the 1900 census living on Chokoloskee Island and has a child named after his father, John J. Brown.²¹ By backtracking using combinations of first and middle names and initials of known family members, Clarence is then found in the mid-decade 1885 Florida State Census under the initials of “C. M. Brown” in the Monroe County tally for all residents residing outside of Key West. This was the break in the “brick wall” that had been needed; John (now a widower) was found to be living with his son, Clarence, in the Southwest coast of Florida around Chokoloskee.²²

Once the family was found, the ages, places of birth and family names (many of these shared given names passed along by John’s children to his grandchildren) helped to confirm that the correct “John Brown” family had been identified. This led to finding local histories of that area which helped to further ensure that this truly was “Pig” Brown and his family.²³

The Brown Family in the Chokoloskee Bay Area

It is now known that John Brown and his family settled in the Everglades City and Chokoloskee Bay area about 1880 and it is provable that they were there by 1885, as members of the family appear in the 1885 Florida Census, as noted above, when that

area was still part of Monroe County. John Brown descendant and author Loren G. “Totch” Brown stated in his memoirs that his paternal great-grandfather established the family home there in 1880.²⁴ Historian Charlton W. Tebeau, in his two histories of the area, notes that in 1883 John bought the house of Mr. and Mrs. Madison Weeks (who had settled on the Allen River at Everglades City the year before in 1879) and that the Browns were still only one of six families in the area as late as 1897.²⁵

It is also interesting to note that Charles G. McKinney, who came to Chokoloskee in 1886, was a blacksmith by training (like John) and had been born in Sumter County, Georgia in 1847. It is not known whether there was a prior family or social connection with John’s wife, Lavinia (who had lived and was likely also born in Sumter County, Georgia), or whether it was sheer coincidence that he settled near the Browns. That would seem to be an unlikely coincidence and there is likely a connection between these two families that is not identified here.

Conclusion

The peregrinations of the Browns – from Virginia first for John and then from Georgia and throughout Florida for him with his wife and their children – lasted for several decades until they finally settled around Chokoloskee Island about 1880 where their descendants remain to this day. In the end, the real mystery concerning “Pig” Brown and his family was why he did not return to southeastern Florida after his brief and contentious service in the Florida legislature in the late 1870s. It may be that after his short stint as a legislator during the nasty Carpetbag politics of Reconstruction-era Florida he decided that he wanted a place set even further apart from all of that.

South Florida pioneer and “barefoot mailman” Charles W. Pierce once described Brown in his memoirs (published posthumously after his death in 1939) as “a lonely hermit who lived on New River and raised pigs.” After being elected and seated for his position, according to Pierce, he apparently “disposed of his hogs

... and never returned.”²⁶ Perhaps politics were not the only reason he sought a more “hermitic” life in the wilds of southern Florida for himself and his family, his personal disposition or possibly traumatic experiences during the Civil War may also have contributed to his being drawn to places that were away from the tumult of the greater society.

If so, he chose the right place, because even today the area around Chokoloskee is fairly remote. Reading “Totch” Brown’s book about his family’s life and adventures in this area – and their attachment to this land on the edge of Florida, the Everglades and the sea – indicates that this last place that John Joseph Brown chose to settle and stay was perfect for himself and his many descendants in many, many ways.²⁷

- 1 When the 1870 state survey party, led by Marcellus A. Williams, went north to survey the lands between Miami and Lake Worth, the Browns and one other family on the south side of New River, the Halls, were the only families encountered by the surveyors the whole distance between Biscayne Bay and Jupiter Inlet, a distance of about 80 miles. See Joe Knetsch, “A Well-Connected Man: The Career of Marcellus A. Williams,” in *Broward Legacy*, Vol. 16 (Summer-Fall 1993) Nos. 3-4, pp.2-10, 5.
- 2 Local historians Philip Weidling and August Burghard wrote in their history of Fort Lauderdale that “there is no indication that he ever returned.” Philip Weidling and August Burghard, *Checked Sunshine: The Story of Fort Lauderdale 1793-1955*, Fort Lauderdale, Wake-Brook House (1974), rev. ed., p.14.
- 3 During the time of the preparation of this article, a new publication was released regarding the pioneer families of this area. Local historian Tim Robinson of West Palm Beach wrote *A Tropical Frontier: Pioneers and Settlers of Southeast Florida, 1800-1890*, Port Salerno, FL, Port Sun Publishing (2006) and reached the same conclusion – that the Brown Family moved to Florida’s Southwest Coast. I wish to thank Broward County Historical Commission Curator Denyse Cunningham for bringing this valuable reference to my attention.

- 4 US Census, Dade County, State of Florida, p. 1 (430), 30 July 1870.
- 5 The latter son, Arnold, is incorrectly noted as being female though it is clear from the other records that this was a scrivener's error.
- 6 US Census, Volusia County, State of Florida, p. 7 (867), 9 June 1860.
- 7 See, for example, "U.S Federal Census Indexes – FAQs," in Ancestry.com, www.ancestry.com/search/rectype/census/ais/faq.aspx#12 (11 August 2006).
- 8 US Census, Sumter County, State of Georgia, (196), 25 October 1850.
- 9 "American Civil War Soldiers Record" in Ancestry.com (10 August 2006) notes a "John J. Brown, farmer" enlisting as a private in this unit, which was also known as "Brady's Company of Florida Cavalry," on 19 November 1864 and that a "William Brown, gunsmith," enlisting on 12 January 1865.
- 10 Knetsch, p. 5; see also, Ralph Middleton Munroe and Vincent Gilpin, *The Commodore's Story*. First published in 1930, 2nd reprinting. Historical Association of Southern Florida, 1974, p. 301, where Munroe notes Brown as a "beachcomber."
- 11 Munroe and Gilpin, *The Commodore's Story*, p. 301 and David O. True, "Pirate Lore and Treasure Trove," in *Tequesta* No. 6 (1946), pp. 3-13, 6.
- 12 Thelma Peters, *Biscayne Country 1870-1926*, Miami, Banyan Books (1981), p. 30.
- 13 Ibid, p. 16 et seq.
- 14 Ibid, p.26. Gleason was once apparently whipped with a cowhide strap on the streets of Key West – to the delight of many an onlooker – by Dr. Jephtha V. Harris of Key West who had bought the old English family plantation, which had become Fort Dallas at the mouth of the Miami River. Dr. Harris had bought the property from the English heirs but he had been in a long-running battle with Gleason who had been trying to steal the property. See Peters, *Biscayne Country*, p. 25 and Jerrell H. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over yet: Florida in the Era of Reconstruction 1863-1877*, Gainesville, The University Presses of Florida (1974), p. 267.
- 15 Ibid, pp. 26-30.
- 16 *A Journal of the Proceedings of the Assembly of the State of Florida at the Sixth Session Begun and Held in the Capitol in the City of Tallahassee on Tuesday, January 7th, 1873*, Tallahassee, S.B. McLin, State Printer (1873), pp. 19-20, 202-207, 307.
- 17 Ibid, p. 244.
- 18 *A Journal of the Proceedings of the Assembly of the State of Florida at its Ninth Session, Begun and Held at the Capitol, in the City of Tallahassee, On Tuesday, January 2, 1877*, Tallahassee, C.E. Dyke, Sr., State Printer (1877), pp. 11, 228-9, 241-2.
- 19 Ibid, p. 229. The official return of the Board of County Canvassers had officially certified a result favoring Gleason once again, with Gleason receiving seven votes to Brown's four, with several votes for the contested legislative seat thrown out by Gleason's appointees to the Canvassing Board. See *United States Senate, Report of Committees of the Senate of the United States for the Second Session of the Forty-Fourth Congress. 1876-'77*. Vol. 2, Washington, Government Printing Office (1877), pp. 481-482.
- 20 Peters, *Biscayne Country*, p. 32.
- 21 US Census, Monroe County, State of Florida, 1900, p. 198.
- 22 Florida State Census, 1885, p. 10, enumeration District 7. The page is entitled, "Inhabitants exclusive of the Island of Key West, in the County of Monroe, State of Florida," recorded on 18 June 1885.
- 23 After research for this article began, I contacted Fort Lauderdale historian and attorney Patrick S. Scott who has written a number of articles on local history. Mr. Scott informed me that he himself had come across the references to the Brown family in Chokoloskee and had assumed that they might well be the same family as the people which had also lived in Fort Lauderdale but he had never pursued the research. I wish to also acknowledge Mr. Scott's helpful assistance in pointing out several of the obscure references to Brown that are included in this research. Personal communications of the author with Patrick S. Scott, August 10 and November 14, 2006.
- 24 Loren G. Brown, *Totch: A Life in the Everglades*, forward by Peter Matthiessen, Gainesville, University Press of Florida (1993), pp. ix, 1.
- 25 Tebeau does not provide the primary source for this date but it likely came from information that he gleaned from his years of working to document the history of the families in this area. See Charlton W. Tebeau, *The Story of the Chokoloskee Bay Country, With the Reminiscences of C.S. "Ted" Smallwood, Copeland Studies in Florida History*, Coral Gables, University of Miami Press (1955), p.16. Tebeau, *Florida's Last Frontier: The History of Collier County, Copeland Studies in Florida History*, Coral Gables, University of Miami Press (1966), pp. 98, 118-119. A letter written in 1883 to E.O. Gwynn, the state's Deputy Surveyor stationed in Key West, notes that "C.M. Brown" (Clarence M. Brown), "N.F. Brown" (probably a scrivener's error for "W.F. Brown" or William F. Brown) and "B.B. Brown" (Benjamin Brown) – three of John Brown's sons – all were reported to have homesteads in the area of Chokoloskee. See James Hammond, *Florida's Vanishing Trail, Morrisville, NC, Lulu Enterprises* (2008), p. 39.
- 26 Charles W. Pierce, *Pioneer Life in Southeast Florida*, edited by Donald W. Curl. Coral Gables, University of Miami Press, p.225.
- 27 The Brown family has survived now for several generations here in this rugged and relatively secluded stretch of the state. References to them are frequently found in memoirs of the hard life here that has been won here by a resourcefulness that seems to stretch back to Pig Brown's own ways of subsistence farming, and raising livestock, wrecking and beachcombing. An example of this is the mention of the Browns participating in rum-running during Prohibition. See, for example, Rob Storter, *Crackers in the Glade: Life and Times in the Old Everglades*, Athens, GA, University of Georgia Press (2000), p. 75.