



The "Canal House" located on Superior Street in Fort Wayne is rich in history. Photo by Bob Schmidt

### CANAL HOUSE RICH IN HISTORY

Fort Wayne's oldest canal-related building that still stands is the "Canal House" built in 1852 that was the home and business place of stonemason John Brown. The 22 x 50 foot building was located between the north bank of the Wabash and Erie Canal and Water Street (which today is known as Superior Street) and lies between Clinton and Calhoun Streets (the latter was once known as the Piqua Plank Road.) The date 1852 is carved in a limestone block on the building. In the lintel above the main entrance in faded paint and barely visible is "J. Brown." The stone building was probably built from stone quarried in Huntington.

The building originally had two stories. On the lower level Brown conducted his store for building material and stove coal. His family resided on the upper level. The old New York, Chicago & St. Louis Railroad added a half-story shelf to the canal side of the building to meet the level of the raised railroad once the canal was filled in. The railroad used the building for housing railroad personnel and for storage.

John Brown came from Glasgow, Scotland to the Fort Wayne area with his wife Mary and sister Elizabeth sometime prior to 1847. In 1852 he purchased the land (which had previously been owned by Samuel Hanna) from the Townley family, who were prominent merchants operating their business directly south of the Canal House on the opposite side of the canal. He completed his "Dealer in Stone and Lime" establishment a year before the Wabash and Erie Canal was opened its full 468 miles from Toledo, OH to Evansville, IN. It was adjacent to the canal so that he could easily receive boatloads of stone and other materials used in his contracting business. (This type of heavy bulk freight is probably what kept the canal alive for as long as it lasted. This

was true especially in the Fort Wayne area, which was rapidly growing and needed the building stone that was quarried in Huntington and Wabash counties.)

#### JOHN BROWN

Brown and his friend James Humphrey, another Scotsman, had cut stone and done masonry work for years. Extensive stonework was needed during the construction of the Wabash and Erie Canal in building culverts, piers for aqueducts, road bridges, and stone locks. The men were kept busy. Brown helped construct the first Barr Street Market, a huge stone affair. He also traded on the canal doing a "lively" business. He was the proud owner of the first steam-powered grist mill; was a member of the Kekionga Guardsman, Ft. Wayne's local militia; and was a director of the First and Hamilton National Bank in 1863.

The Canal House often housed itinerant deck hands and roustabouts during the winter season when the canal was not in operation. They lodged in the upstairs rooms and worked for Brown.

#### OTHER OCCUPANTS AND OWNERS

Later two families occupied the building. William Homeyer, a crewman on a canal barge captained by his uncle Fred Brase, chose the first story of the building for his family's residence. Christian Borgman, the captain of the canal boat "Coral," and his family resided on the second story. Other sources list Homer as a canal boat captain of a boat which ran between Fort Wayne and Huntington and Borgman as William Borgman. Borgman came to Fort Wayne in 1858. The men liked the building's location on the canal because their boats could be tied up at the rear of the building.

Borgman came to Fort Wayne from Stemmorn, Germany. He worked on the canal until its traffic closed down. He then worked for another John Brown, who was a blacksmith, to form the Brown Trucking Company. He was a policeman and later became police chief.

Homeyer appears on the 1860 census being 27 years of age with his occupation as lime burner born in Prussia with his financial worth of \$625. In the census he has a wife, Caroline, and a 2 month old daughter, Wilhelmina (Minnie), born in Indiana. He either worked at that time for Brown or for Drover, who followed in the limestone business.

#### HENRY DROVER

Henry Drover, an immigrant from Bremen, Germany, arrived in Fort Wayne in 1841. Drover was a farmer, but he soon became a canal boat captain. As

part of Drover's canal holdings was the boat captained by Brase on which Homeyer was a deck hand. It ran between Fort Wayne and Huntington. As is the case of many freight boats, it carried spare draft animals to relieve the ones on the towpath.

Drover's reputation was good and by the 1850s he held positions as the president of Fort Wayne's German Fire Company and a s councilman of Fort Wayne's City Council. Then in 1857, he moved to Huntington, which was the other end of his canal boat run. He served one term as Huntington's mayor, was a township trustee, and later served as Huntington County's representative to the Indiana legislature.

Drover purchased the Canal House from Brown in 1862 for his spoke factory and quarry warehouse. It was one of the many warehouses both larger and smaller that stood on either side of the canal.

James Shoemaker purchased the property from Drover's descendants. The last private owner was William B. Howard from Illinois. He later sold it to the New York, Chicago & St. Louis Railroad (Nickel Plate) in 1885. During its railroad years, the inside stairway was removed, three chimneys torn down, a new entrance installed, and the main floor made into two levels. At some time steam heat was installed. Later the property was owned by the Norfolk and Western Railroad, which gifted it to Fort Wayne in 1974.

#### RESTORATION

The Canal House was restored for Fort Wayne's 1976 Bicentennial Celebration by Detachment 0-726 of the Naval Reserve Construction Battalion. The 25 Seabees worked two weekends per month to restore the exterior of the building to its original condition. The chimneys, called chimleys in canal boat time, were rebuilt and the cedar shingle roof restored with a \$700 grant from Bird and Son of East Walpole, Mass., manufacturers of building materials and machinery. Six hundred old bricks for the chimneys were cleaned and sorted by Boy Scout Troop 24 from rubble of the demolition of the Fort Wayne State Hospital and Training Center. The bricks had the necessary patina of age. The mortar was color-toned to fill the cracks in the stone walls. The interior plastering partitions and steam heat were removed and a modern heating system installed. Every window was replaced and custom made.

The Canal House is now the home of Arts United, a group of area cultural and historical organizations. The Canal Society of Indiana is a member of the group.

