

Wandering Around the World The Robert and Charlotte Brown family story

By Sarah Samson

Foreword

In December 2011 the Museum received an amazing donation. Four descendants of Captain Robert Wilcox Brown travelled to Renton in order to donate two of his daughter Alura Brown Cutler's journals. Dated 1873-1878 and 1887-1898, the journals offer a firsthand glimpse into the life of the area in the late 1800s. Alura was the sixth daughter of Robert Brown, a whaler and rancher who travelled the world before he became one of the first white settlers in the Renton area. He settled in late 1870 on an existing ranch along the Cedar River where present-day Liberty Park is located. The following is the first of a two-part account of the Brown family's story.



The Robert & Charlotte Brown family, 1858. Back row (L-R): Annie Brown, Charlotte Brown. Seated: John Heppingstone (Charlotte's brother), Mary Brown, Amanda Brown, Charlotte Heppingstone Brown, Edith Brown, Robert Wilcox Brown, Alura Brown. (RHM# 1969.002.0420)



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Phone: 425-255-2330
FAX: 425-255-1570

www.rentonhistorymuseum.org

Hours:

Tuesday - Saturday 10:00am - 4:00pm

**Admission: \$3 for adults
\$1 for children**

Always free to members and to the general public on the first Wednesday and third Saturday of the month.

Board Meetings: Please call the museum for time and location.



President's Message

By Sandra Meyer, President



The Board of Trustees is off to a good start for 2012, with committees working on goals and objectives to support the Society in a variety of ways. The Board recently hired a local accounting group, McCorkle and Associates. We feel that their knowledge of the community, commitment to the Renton area, and close proximity to the Museum make them a very good choice.

We are preparing to continue with the community briefings we began last year. The purpose of these briefings is to solicit feedback about the Museum Master Plan and the ways we hope to

implement this vision. Interviewees in the first round came from a variety of backgrounds, and included the Mayor, all City Council members, and members of Renton's business, arts, and philanthropic communities.

Overwhelmingly we heard a positive response to our intention to represent the rich ethnic diversity of the Renton community. At the same time, those we interviewed expressed a strong desire that the Museum retain its focus on depicting the unique character and history of Renton. Many were excited about the prospect that the Museum could be a leader in a cultural corridor linking North Renton and downtown, building on such assets as the Cedar River, Liberty Park, and perhaps a future cultural organization or other public space in the Library building. To that end they approved of our plans for physical improvements to our building and landscape that will build awareness and enthusiasm for Museum programs. All agreed that updating the Museum's use of digital technology and appeal to youth and children were necessary improvements.

For 2012 the Museum's Board of Trustees has formulated a set of three strategic goals based on recommendations gathered during these briefings. They are:

1. Continue community briefings. The Board will complete a second set of 25 briefings during 2012 to continue to get out the word about our exciting plans and to gather feedback about the best ways to proceed.
2. Make the Museum building more welcoming. The Board is currently developing plans to update and refresh the Museum lobby to make the best possible first impression to the visiting public.
3. Improve the Museum's brand. We will be improving our marketing materials and print publications, beginning with a redesign of our quarterly newsletter for 2012.

So as the year progresses don't be surprised if you, as one of our valued members, are contacted to discuss these plans. Come by the Museum and talk with us!

Renton Museum Report

By Elizabeth P. Stewart, Director



What a great 2011 we had here at the Museum! Four changing exhibits, a start on our Museum Master Plan, and a fully operational Coast Salish curriculum. Our final exhibit of the year—*Bigfoot is Probably Real*—was one of our most popular exhibits ever, attracting Rentonites and folks from Seattle and beyond. It broke new ground for the Museum, as our first exhibit that combined art, science, and history in a way that really made people stop and think

about Bigfoot as a longstanding Pacific Northwest legend. One typical reaction:

The exhibit is wonderful, it really got me to think about whether Bigfoot could be real or not. I liked the interaction that you give us to go along with the museum. I had a great time reading/hearing the different stories/encounters that people have had.

Bigfoot also represented the first time we incorporated audio into an exhibit; we hope to do a lot more of that, now that we've received grants from 4Culture and The Next Curve to digitize our audio and film collections. We'll be working on that project this year.

Our newest exhibit, *Two By Two: Students Reinterpret Renton History*, stems from our drive to be more collaborative and experimental. The idea for the exhibit came out of our experience working with Renton High students on the high school centennial exhibit in 2010 – 2011. Teacher Derek Smith has become a fantastic partner for the Museum, working with us to incorporate exhibit work into his classroom assignments. Through this partnership, students have a chance to hone their writing and critical analysis skills, work under a deadline, and become more invested and involved with their own community. For our part, the Museum gets the opportunity to bring a youth perspective to history and share that with our audience, while we nurture the next generation of history-lovers (we hope).

To create *Two By Two*, two classes of Honors English students spent many hours here at the Museum in the fall, selecting historic objects and photos from our collection and researching them, before going back to the classroom to work with Mr. Smith on crafting essays. By pairing museum objects with objects from their own lives, these students brought a fresh take on history to this exhibit. Their stories—like that of the student for whom a photo of North Renton boys in the 1930s brought back memories of her cousins in Viet Nam—add a new richness to our understanding of our city's history.



Liz Stewart

"Wandering Around the World" continued from page 1

The Browns and Heppingstones

By the time Robert Wilcox Brown was born in Ledyard, Connecticut in 1809, his family had been in the American colonies since the founding of Connecticut almost 175 years prior.¹ Brown took to the sea as a young man. He quickly rose through the ranks to command several vessels throughout his career at sea. When he sailed into Geographe Bay in Western Australia in 1840, Brown was a 31 year-old 3rd mate on the *Mentor*.² While in port, the ship took on a female passenger named Charlotte Heppingstone.



Charlotte's family hailed from England and her father, Robert Heppingstone, was also a sea captain. Her family sailed under Captain John Molloy to Australia in order to deliver debtors and the poor to establish an English colony. Captain Heppingstone and his family stayed to help oversee the settling of the area that is today known as Augusta.³

Robert and Charlotte apparently became enamored with each other onboard the *Mentor* and on August 27, 1840 they were married in Robert's home base of Connecticut. Robert continued his voyages to sea, this time on the *Montezuma* and *Electra*, while his young wife kept house in New London, Connecticut.⁴ From 1841-1848, their family grew with the birth of three daughters: Agnes (who died as a baby), Mary, and Charlotte.



Charlotte Heppingstone Brown, 1874 (RHM# 1969.002.0226)

Robert became captain of the *North Star* in 1850. Charlotte and the girls joined Robert aboard the ship and sailed east to the Faial Islands (now known as the Azores off the coast of Portugal), around Africa into the Indian Ocean, and onto Australia, where they visited Charlotte's family in Augusta.⁵ Their oldest surviving daughter, Annie, remembered this journey and later wrote about it in her journal. According to Annie, after leaving Australia the *North Star* "sailed for the Arctic... We sailed through the Straits of Timor into the Okhosk Sea where Mary Harriet was born April 22, 1851."⁶ Later in life, Mary always said that she was born "at sea" when reporting to census takers.

"Green and lovely" islands

After completing their whaling in the Okhosk Sea, the crew of the *North Star* headed south and east, landing at the Sandwich Islands (today known as the Hawaiian Islands) in October 1851. The family settled near Honolulu on the island of Oahu. This new home saw the family grow further with the arrival of five babies: Amanda, Alura, Edith, Thomas, and Cynthia. Alura described the ranch: "Miles of stone wall enclosed gardens, cattle yards, calf pastures, goat pens and so on. Five large stone houses on the place. Our dwelling home was large and white."⁷ Robert remained a ship captain sailing as master of the *North Star*.

In 1854 Robert left the *North Star* and purchased a new whaling ship, the *Black Warrior*.⁸ He aimed to hunt gray whales off the coast of California. Robert continued in this venture until disaster struck in 1859. The *Black Warrior* sank, uninsured and fully loaded with whale oil, in an inlet along the northern Mexican coast.⁹ Today this inlet is known as Laguna Guerrero Negro (Black Warrior Lagoon).

The loss of the *Black Warrior* and Robert's investment in it was a harbinger of bad times for the Brown family. Robert, now a captain without a ship, tried to make a go of it by catering to the needs of the other ships going in and out of Honolulu. According to his daughter Annie, "Father had had a hard struggle since the loss of his ship. He started a blacksmith shop. At another time he had a butcher shop to sell to the whaling ships."¹⁰

By this time the two oldest daughters, Annie and Charlotte, had married and were starting families of their own. In 1865 Robert and the family pulled up stakes once again and moved to the island of Hawaii and set up a ranch at Kahuku Ka'u on the southern side of the island. It is unclear if they all moved at the same time, but by 1868 Annie, with her husband Charlie Spencer, and Charlotte, with her husband Nelson Haley, each had ranches near Kahuku Ka'u ranch. The final addition to the Robert Wilcox Brown family came at the ranch with the birth of son Theophilus, born in 1866.

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The idyllic landscape of their Hawaiian ranch was soon the scene of a great sorrow. Daughter Amanda died there on August 31, 1866 of typhoid fever. Alura spoke of her sister in her journal: "How well I remember the time she was with us. Slender, dark-eyed and merry. Singing and so happy hearted... But she died. Mother tells me that she did not see me smile for a year after."¹¹

"A day of terror"

Heartache for the family continued on April 2, 1868 when the largest earthquake ever to strike the Hawaiian Islands leveled their stone home.¹² The earthquake was preceded for days by hundreds of small jolts that left all the Brown family on edge. The little earthquakes had already caused much damage. On the day of the big quake, Annie wrote in her journal: "At 20 minutes of 4 there was a most frightful earthquake. It was impossible to walk. Charlotte fell coming off the steps and I on top of her."¹³ Violent aftershocks plagued the island for five days until the volcano Mauna Loa unleashed a wave of lava. The molten rock hurtled down the side of the volcano and over Kahuku Ka'u Ranch which stood right in the lava's path to the ocean. "We were beginning to hope that the earth had shaken as much as it was going to for that time when just as we were about to retire we heard a fearful noise and on looking up the mountain but one short mile from us came the roaring, boiling lava. We had to run for our lives," recalled Alura in her journal.¹⁴

The family barely escaped thanks to the help of a neighbor and several Native Hawaiians. Their home and all of their possessions, gathered from their world travels, were lost. Though most of the island's inhabitants suffered property damage, neighbors took up a collection for the now-homeless Brown family. The Browns at first refused the help but the neighbors later used collected funds to purchase a piano, which the Browns accepted.¹⁵

Children of Robert Wilcox Brown & Charlotte Heppingstone Brown

Agnes Brown (1841-1842)

Annie E. Brown Spencer (1845-1914)

Charlotte Ellen Brown Haley (1848-1932)

Mary Harriet Brown Abrams (1851-1914)

Amanda Williams Brown (1853-1866)

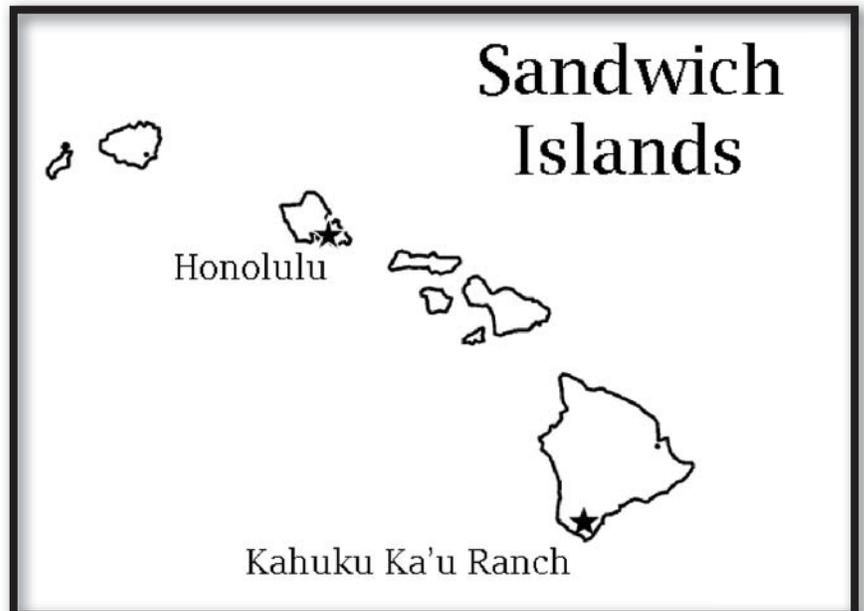
Alura Eliza Brown Cutler (1855-1936)

Edith Emily Brown Parker (1857-1952)

Thomas Spencer Brown (1860-1938)

Cynthia Nina Brown Spencer (1864-1951)

Theophilus Morgan Brown (1866-1938)



After the eruption buried their home, Robert and the family moved to a small plantation near Waiohinu, the nearest town.¹⁶ Both Annie's and Charlotte's homes, though damaged, were not covered by lava. Once the lava was cool enough, Robert set about uncovering Amanda's grave and removing his daughter's body to the cemetery at Kauaha'ao Church in Waiohinu.¹⁷ The small plantation was not their home for long, however. Robert, "heaping maledictions upon the islands, removed his family to Washington Territory, and settled upon a ranch there."¹⁸



Robert Brown next to the hole he dug to remove his daughter Amanda after the lava covered her grave, 1868 (Photo courtesy of Ruth Rice and Michael Rice.)

Coming in June: Part 2, The Alura Brown Cutler Story

The sixth child of Capt. Robert Wilcox Brown, Alura Brown, began keeping a journal in 1873, two years after her family abandoned Hawaii to live on Brook Farm in Renton. She kept the journal off and on for the next 25 years, recording her life as a young wife and mother on the sea and in the young city that was Renton.

¹Eunice A. Spencer, "The History of Captain Robert W. Brown Who came to Cedar River in 1870 From Hawaii," unpublished article, 5 November 1961, 1.

²Notes to Annie E. (Brown) Spencer, "My Reminiscences," http://www.captainbrown.net/stories_01.shtml, accessed 13 October 2007.

³"Augusta, Western Australia," http://www.captainbrown.net/scrapbook_10.shtml, 16 December 2011.

⁴Annie E. (Brown) Spencer, "My Reminiscences," http://www.captainbrown.net/stories_01.shtml, accessed 13 October 2007.

⁵Eunice A. Spencer, "The History of Captain Robert W. Brown Who came to Cedar River in 1870 From Hawaii," unpublished article, 5 November 1961, 2.

⁶Annie E. (Brown) Spencer, "My Reminiscences," http://www.captainbrown.net/stories_01.shtml, accessed 13 October 2007.

⁷Transcript of Alura Brown's journal Vol. 1, vertical file Captain Robert Brown, Renton History Museum, 33.

⁸Notes to Annie E. (Brown) Spencer, "My Reminiscences," http://www.captainbrown.net/stories_01.shtml, accessed 13 October 2007.

⁹Eunice A. Spencer, "The History of Captain Robert W. Brown Who came to Cedar River in 1870 From Hawaii," unpublished article, 5 November 1961, 2.

¹⁰Annie E. (Brown) Spencer, "My Reminiscences," http://www.captainbrown.net/stories_01.shtml, accessed 13 October 2007.

¹¹Transcript of Alura Brown's journal Vol. 1, vertical file Captain Robert Brown, Renton History Museum, 34.

¹²"The Great Ka'u Earthquake of 1868," Hawaiian Volcano Observatory, http://hvo.wr.usgs.gov/volcanowatch/1994/94_04_01.html, accessed 16 December 2011.

¹³Annie E. (Brown) Spencer, "Another Account," http://www.captainbrown.net/stories_04.shtml, accessed 16 December 2011.

¹⁴Transcript of Alura Brown's journal Vol. 1, vertical file Captain Robert Brown, Renton History Museum, 34.

¹⁵Annie E. (Brown) Spencer, "Another Account," http://www.captainbrown.net/stories_04.shtml, accessed 16 December 2011.

¹⁶Transcript of Alura Brown's journal Vol. 1, vertical file Captain Robert Brown, Renton History Museum, 34.

¹⁷Captain Charles Wetherby Gelett, "The Tribulations of Captain Brown," from "A Life on the Ocean," http://www.captainbrown.net/stories_02.shtml, accessed 16 December 2011.

¹⁸Captain Charles Wetherby Gelett, "The Tribulations of Captain Brown," from "A Life on the Ocean," http://www.captainbrown.net/stories_02.shtml, accessed 16 December 2011.

Volunteer Report

By Dorota Rahn, Volunteer and Education Coordinator

Dear volunteers and members of the Renton Historical Society,



Two of our long-term volunteers, Dorlene Bressan and Mary Sutter, retired from museum work in December. Both of them served as Saturday greeters for about 20 years, although even they don't quite remember when they started. Early on the museum was entirely volunteer-run; everybody did their best to keep the museum going and information like start dates and hours worked were less important. Thanks to the efforts of dedicated people like Dorlene and Mary we now have an organization that strives to follow the best professional practices in the museum field.

Mary and Dorlene greeted museum visitors on Saturdays once a month for many years. Thanks to their work the museum was open to visitors hundreds of hours. They always worked together and only rarely did one of them cancel her assignment. They were such a team that it was enough to check with one of them to see whether she would be available on a particular Saturday, and she would talk to the other to make sure they could do the assignment together.

Dorlene's daughter, Susie Bressan, provided us with more detailed information about their lives. It's amazing how many years of their long lives they worked raising children, being employed outside their homes, and volunteering. They were two very busy women, so no wonder they have decided to slow down now that they reached a golden age of late 80s and 90.

Susie Bressan wrote: "Dorlene (Eliason) Bressan moved to Renton from Opheim, Montana in 1944 to work for the Boeing Company. Because of her short stature, she was assigned the job of stringing cables in the wings. She returned to Opheim for a short while and trained as a nurse at a small hospital in Glasgow. She returned to Renton in 1946 and went to work as a nurse's aide at the Renton Hospital. In 1948, she married Angelo Bressan and they lived in the family home on Renton Hill that was built by Angelo's father in the early 1900's. She still lives there today. She had five children and when her husband, Angelo suffered a stroke, she returned to work in 1969 at what is now Valley Medical Center and retired in 1990. Angelo passed away in 1993. Besides her volunteer work at the Renton History Museum, she also volunteered for nearly 20 years at the Friendly Kitchen. When asked why she wanted to volunteer, she replied 'because it felt good.'

"Mary (Bressan) Sutter is 90 years old and lives just five doors down from her family home on Renton Hill where Dorlene lives today. She was married for 70 years to Lou Sutter who worked at the Boeing Company for more than 40 years and who recently passed away in July of 2011. She graduated from Renton High School in 1939. She has three children, seven grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. She loves to cook and loves to bake and throws the best Christmas Eve party which at times is attended by over 50 or more folks, mostly family and old friends. She wasn't sure why she started volunteering, but said that when it wasn't busy, she and Dorlene would play cards, one of Mary's favorite hobbies.

"Dorlene and Mary are friendly and love people and mostly they love Renton. Just don't play cards with them. They both cheat!"

THANK YOU MARY AND DORLENE FOR KEEPING OUR MUSEUM GOING!!!

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Randy & Ilka Daniels Family

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John Pavone & Gail Bisiack

Jeffrey Conner

Judith L. Leu

Membership Dues Reminder

The dues notices were mailed in November and over 100 members have not yet paid their 2012 dues. Please pay your dues and save us the expense of second notices. You can call 425-255-2330 after noon and I will be happy to check your membership. This quarterly has a printed form with the membership categories listed. Thank you, Daisy Ward.



Memorial Contributions
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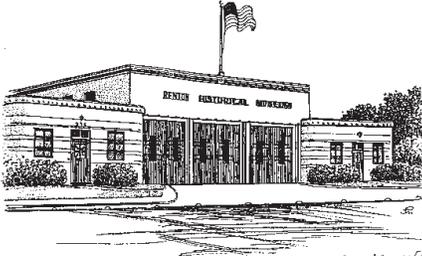
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In Hindsight...



*Spring has sprung--can pom poms and saddle shoes be far behind?
(Photo by Emmons Williams, #2010.015.223.)*