

## MISTAKEN AND MISBEGOTTEN: A TALE OF TROUBLED TOMBSTONES

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*"Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."  
Proverbs 16:18.*

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This is the story of a local eccentric whose unusual last will and testament set the stage for a lesson in humility. The moral of this story is that a greater power can countermand the best laid plans of mortal man.

I would like to acknowledge several individuals from whom I have acquired information for this article. They include Floyd Gillis of Low Hill, who helped write *Centre to Center*, a book of reminiscences of Centerville borough; Rebecca Hoop of Blainesburg, who suggested that the story of the McCutcheon monument might interest readers; the Rev. John Springer, whose 1989 *Your Brownsville And Mine* column included details of the McCutcheon story; and Lindsey P. Gillis of Beallsville, who relayed an eyewitness account of the monument's gusty finale.

The historic Taylor United Methodist Church, founded in 1772, is in West Pike Run Township along old Route 40, four miles west of Brownsville. In the cemetery adjoining the church stands an unusual grave marker.

Local residents call it the "Spite Monument." The story of the monument is that of a miserly old man who, rather than bequeath his fortune to his surviving family members, decreed in his will that his entire fortune was to be spent on a monument to himself.

James Shannon McCutcheon, one of three children, was born on January 15, 1828. At the age of two, his parents moved to East Bethlehem Township in Washington County, where James was raised. He labored as a farm hand during his youth, saving and investing his

money wisely. As an adult, he purchased 127 acres of land on the present Tate Road near Taylor Church. Later, at the age of fifty-six, he bought the Denbo Farm and lived there until his death in 1902 at the age of seventy-eight.

According to *Centre-To-Center*, that farm's "fine old brick house, built before the Civil War, is the present residence of the McAnulty's."

The Reverend John A. Springer wrote that McCutcheon's financial fortunes benefitted from the discovery of coal on his farmland. He was a bachelor who "lived quietly and frugally with his sister. He came to Brownsville occasionally, mostly to the National Deposit Bank."

Unfortunately, when McCutcheon's sister married and moved away, he became an eccentric miser. Rather than pay the toll to use the covered bridge, they say, he would cross the frozen Monongahela River on the ice. When asked to donate to church missions, this relatively wealthy man contributed one solitary dime. He once gave a dozen teaspoons as a wedding present and bragged that they "cost him every bit of a dollar."

What did McCutcheon plan to do with the money he was hoarding? The story is that he was talking to a Dr. Cotton of Centerville one day. McCutcheon reportedly said that "he was going to build a large burial monument to himself in Taylor Cemetery so that when people passed by on the National Pike, they would see it and say, 'There lies Shannon McCutcheon.'"

Sure enough, he contracted with T. Wright and Company Marble Works of Brownsville to erect an eighty-five-foot-high granite monument with a forty-five-foot base. His entire fortune was to be spent on its construction. The Rev. Springer noted that the price of the granite alone, purchased from a granite company in Barre, Vermont, was twenty thousand dollars.

McCutcheon supervised the project on a daily basis. Rumor had it that he devoted his fortune to this memorial, rather than bequeath his estate to his sister and her family, to spite her for moving away and leaving him to live alone. Locals soon nicknamed it the "Spite Monument."

Ironically, McCutcheon died before it was completed. According to details provided in *Centre-To-Center*, his last will and testament stated that "the monument was to cost around \$20,000. The balance of his estate was to be used for building a fence around the main monument with smaller monuments at each corner as high as the balance of his estate would permit. The corner monuments were to be the same style as the main one. The inside of the low granite wall surrounding the monument was to be paved with granite blocks."

Since the monument had not been completed when he died, he was



**In this rare photo from a family album, the size of the towering McCutcheon monument can be appreciated in comparison to the people sitting and standing on the monument's base.**

temporarily buried to the rear of the site. When the memorial was finished, his body was moved to its present location at the front. For years, the towering spire could be seen for miles around. The name of Shannon McCutcheon undoubtedly passed many lips.

Then it happened.

On July 27, 1936, the infamous windstorm of 1936 ripped through the area. Lindsey Gillis of Beallsville told me that his cousin, John Cleaver (owner of Cleaver's greenhouse in Richeyville), was caught in the storm. John was attempting to reach his home, which then was at Malden. When he reached Taylor Church, fallen trees blocked the road. Unable to go farther, Cleaver watched in wonder and awe as the tumultuous wind seized all but the pedestal of McCutcheon's eighty-five-foot high monument and hurled it toward the ground. The granite obelisk smashed into the surrounding tombstones. Only the base of the

monument was spared.

When the storm had subsided, an appraisal of the destruction was made. The builders of the original monument, T. Wright and Company, were no longer in business. Their successors, Simon White Sons Monument Company, assessed the damage. McCutcheon's will had specified that his entire fortune was to be spent on construction of the memorial. There was no money left to repair the damage. The shards of scattered granite were hauled away by Simon White Sons.

Now, more than a century after his death, gentle winds waft by the empty pedestal, humbled without its shattered spire.

And the breeze whispers, "There lies Shannon McCutcheon."

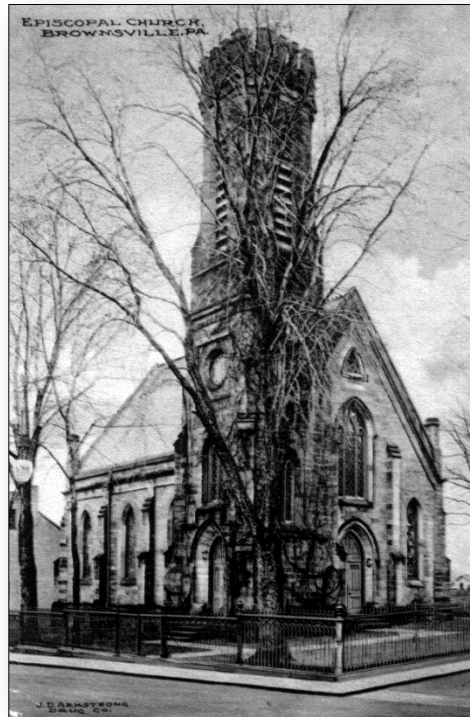
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***COULD THE TOMBSTONE OF THE FOUNDER  
OF BROWNSVILLE BE MISTAKEN?***

Is it possible that the inscription on the tombstone of the founder of Brownsville contains a significant error? A few years ago, I decided to play amateur sleuth and try to prove that it does.

In 1991, I created the Local History course at Brownsville Area High School. In preparing to teach the inaugural class, I was busily assembling articles and photographs for a booklet I was creating for student use as a textbook, focusing on the early settlers of Brownsville. That was when I came across a puzzling contradiction.

I was doing research for an article I was writing for the booklet, an article about Brownsville's founder, Thomas Brown. In my hand I was holding a photograph of

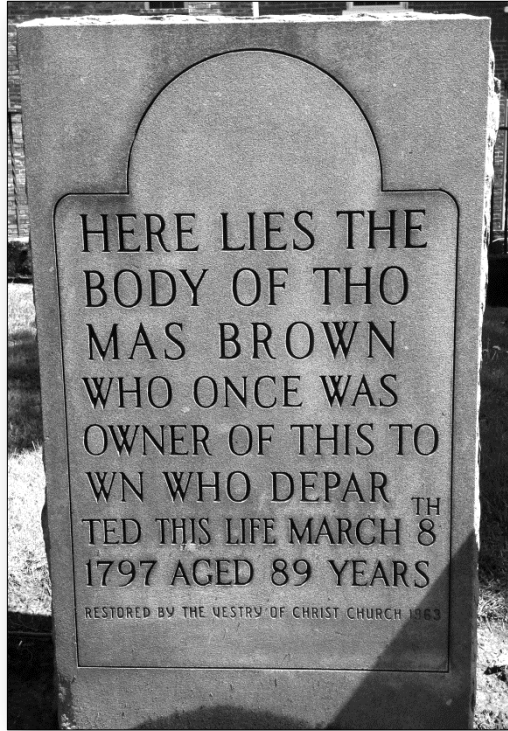


**Christ Episcopal Church**

Brown's present tombstone. That tombstone, crafted from granite in 1963, is a replacement for Brown's original sandstone marker, which had eroded badly.

The granite replacement tombstone stands in the graveyard of Christ Episcopal Church on Church Street in Brownsville. It is to that churchyard that the tombstones (but possibly not the bodies) from the town's first cemetery on lower Front Street were moved long ago.

The inscription on the 1963 replacement granite stone reads as follows:



**Replacement (1963) tombstone**

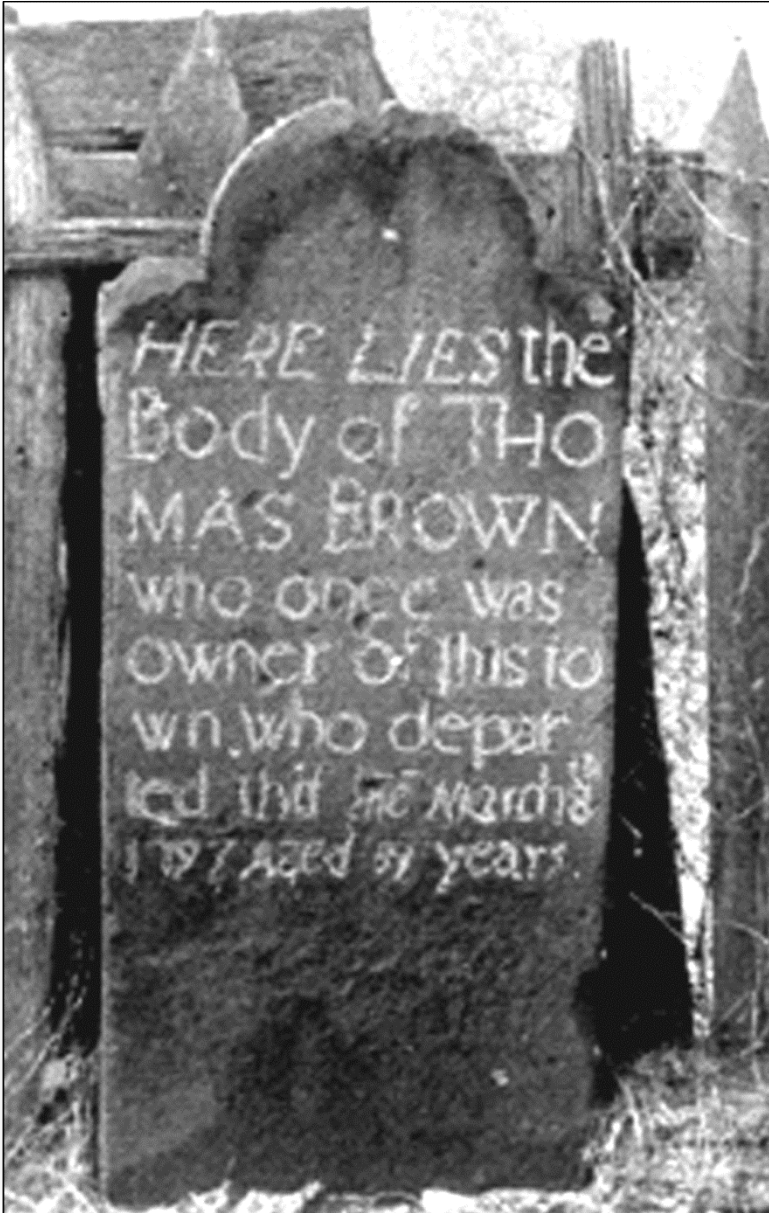
*Here lies the body of Thomas Brown  
who once was owner of this town  
who departed this life March 8th, 1797  
aged 89 years*

In smaller letters below is engraved:

*Restored by the vestry of Christ Church, 1963.*

I had never seen Brown's original sandstone marker. However, I had seen a photograph of it in J. Percy Hart's 1904 book, *Hart's History and directory of the Three Towns*.

When I reexamined the photograph in that book, things began to get mysterious. I studied the old photograph. The original tombstone, with its straight sides and rounded top, was shaped differently than the replacement stone. The 1963 replacement tombstone is a rectangle, but



This photograph of the original tombstone of the founder of Brownsville, Thomas Brown, was published in J. Percy Hart's 1904 book, *History and Directory of the Three Towns*. The inscription may have been touched up by the publisher in order to make the epitaph more legible to that book's readers. When this picture was taken in 1904, the tombstone was 107 years old. Take a close look. How old was Thomas Brown when he died?

when it was fashioned, the craftsman was either looking at the original tombstone or at a photograph of it. To show the shape of the original stone, he had etched onto the granite slab an outline in the shape of the old stone, and then within that outline he had copied the inscription from the old stone.

As I examined the photograph of Thomas Brown's original tombstone, I focused particularly on the last line of the inscription. I even took out a magnifying glass to study it.

Did it really say *89 years*? Or was that a 5 instead of an 8? Either the photograph was poorly focused or the tombstone had been so badly eroded by 1904 that the number was already difficult to read.

Why was I questioning that number?

Because Brownsville was founded by Thomas Brown in 1785. The replacement tombstone says that he died in 1797 at age 89. I was reluctant to believe that at age 77, Thomas Brown began laying out the streets of a new town and selling lots. That seemed to me to be a project for someone younger.

Therefore, I wondered if the age on the new tombstone had been miscopied by the craftsman, who may have misread a flaking number on the old tombstone or on a photograph of it. If only the epitaph had included the year of Brown's birth . . . but it recorded only his age upon his death and the year of his death.

I wanted to see that old tombstone for myself.

But where was it?

Some time later I was visiting Ann Frondorf, who lives on Front Street and is a willing collaborator in any search for information about Brownsville's history.

"Ann," I asked her, "do you know where the original tombstone of Thomas Brown is?" I had already explained to her my suspicion about the age on Brown's replacement stone.

She gave me an uncertain look. "I think . . ."

She lingered over the word "think."

"I think it is in the new one."

"*In it?*" I said, puzzled.

Shaking my head, I continued, "That's not possible. I went over to Christ Episcopal and looked at the new one. It is solid granite. There's nothing in it."

I paused, then offered, "The shape of the old stone is etched onto the new one. Perhaps that's what you're thinking."

She really wasn't very sure, she said. But she thought that someone had told her that the old stone was in the new one. I thanked her, but I remained mystified. Surely they would not have discarded the original

tombstone, no matter how badly eroded it was. But there was no way the old stone was “in” the new one.

Several months passed. The school year began, and soon my Local History class came to the lesson on Thomas Brown. I told the class my suspicion about the possible error on Thomas Brown’s tombstone.

While we were discussing it, I suddenly said, “Wait. There is someone in Brownsville who might know where the original tombstone is. I interviewed him a while back. His name is Donald Edwards.”

I had videotaped a conversation with Donald Edwards of Brownsville, who has since passed away. At the time, he was about ninety years old. I remembered that he was a longtime parishioner of and authority on Christ Episcopal Church.

I called him on the phone.

After reintroducing myself, I asked Mr. Edwards the same question I had asked Ann Frondorf. Upon hearing his answer, my puzzlement deepened.

“It’s in the new one,” he said unhesitatingly.

“Mr. Edwards,” I said, “the new one is solid granite. There can’t be anything in it.”

He patiently explained what he meant.

In 1963, the church leaders had noticed that Brown’s original sandstone tombstone was in danger of becoming unreadable due to flaking away of the surface of the sandstone. The stone was also so thin that it could easily be accidentally broken. The stone needed to be protected, and the inscription needed to be preserved.

The leaders of the church hired a stone worker. He was to craft a supportive spine for the tombstone. Using a plain tombstone-sized piece of granite, he carved a recess into the surface of the granite slab in the exact shape of the ancient stone. He carefully fitted the old stone into the recess. This would protect it from being broken off or shattered.

Then he placed a properly sized sheet of Plexiglas over the surface of the fragile stone to protect the inscription from the elements. He secured the Plexiglas to the new piece of granite using four screws.

Unfortunately, covering the old stone with Plexiglass to preserve the inscription did not work. In fact, the erosion seemed to accelerate as moisture accumulated behind the Plexiglas.

Alarmed that their attempt to protect the tombstone’s inscription was having the opposite effect, the officials ordered the Plexiglas removed. The old stone was left inset within the new one, but the inscription was now exposed to the elements once again.

Realizing that the passage of time would eventually render the inscription illegible, a new plan was devised to at least preserve the

information on the old stone. On the opposite (blank) side of the granite stone, it was decided to carve the identical epitaph, including the odd spacing of the letters, within an etched border in the exact shape of the original tombstone.

That side of the granite tombstone, with the new inscription on it, is what visitors see today. It is only by walking around “behind” the tombstone that one can see the original tombstone of Thomas Brown.

Armed with this knowledge, I excitedly went to Christ Episcopal to look at the old tombstone. I walked around the granite marker and closely studied, even felt with my fingers, the number in question.



**This is the original tombstone today (2014). Only a few letters of the original epitaph can still be read. It has deteriorated significantly over the past 20 years.**

pioneer community in America’s West?

Fortunately, the story does not end there.

Several years passed. In May 1996, I visited Christ Episcopal

What I found was disappointing, to say the least. Nature had taken its course since 1963. Wind, rain, freeze and thaw, has rendered the number in question completely illegible.

And so my quest to prove that the granite 1963 tombstone of Thomas Brown contains a significant error was stymied. Still unanswered in my mind was this question:

Was Thomas Brown 77 years old when he laid out the streets of the new town of Brownsville and began selling lots, as his granite tombstone says he was, or was he a vigorous man of 47 who was ambitiously creating a

Church during National Pike Days, planning to tour the interior of the church (built in 1859). The church's priest, Father Burdock, was greeting visitors who came to tour the church and its graveyard. I had brought along my video camera to photograph both sides of Brown's granite tombstone, so that I could show my class what the new stone and the old stone looked like.

Father Burdock was standing near Brown's granite tombstone. I said to him, "I've always believed that there is a mistake on this tombstone." I went on to tell him that I thought Brown was thirty years younger when he died than the stone stated he was, making him thirty years younger than believed when he founded the town of Brownsville.

The priest told me he had something inside the church which might help. He went into the church to get it.

He reappeared with a small booklet in his hand. It was Christ Episcopal Church's graveyard registry. I watched as he turned a few pages. Then he read the words which resolved the matter once and for all.

"Thomas Brown, born in 1738, died in 1797."

That settled it.

Thomas Brown was forty-seven when he laid out the streets of Brownsville, and he died at the age of fifty-nine. The granite tombstone now standing in Christ Episcopal cemetery bears an incorrect age at death. The mystery is solved.

But there is some information which has eluded me.

When and why were the tombstones in the town's original cemetery on Front Street moved to the Christ Episcopal Church graveyard?

Secondly, were the bodies moved as well, or just the tombstones?

And perhaps most intriguing of all is one final question.

Near the western end of the Commons along Front Street, across the street from Nemaquin Castle, does there lie, somewhere beneath the grass, the body of Thomas Brown?