

# *Over the Hills*

*The Brownsons and  
Their Community  
in 1913*

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Shelton Historical Society



In 1971 the Shelton Historical Society acquired the Brownson House for \$1.00 from the Derby Savings Bank under the condition that it be removed from its location at the corner of Old Shelton Road and Shelton Avenue. The house was moved approximately one mile to the corner of Ripton and Cloverdale Roads where it is now part of the Shelton History Center.

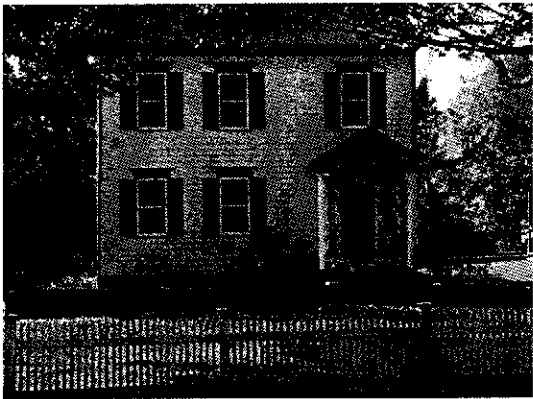
This booklet details the new direction the interpretation of the house is taking to reflect the daily life of a rural New England farm family in 1913.

For complete references and bibliography please refer to the full version of this text contained in the library collection of the Shelton Historical Society.



***George Washington never slept here.***

The house owned by the Shelton Historical Society (SHS) is not the oldest in the city nor is it the fanciest. George Washington never slept here and nothing of world wide renown ever happened under its roof. The house is a two story, three bay structure that incorporates stylistic elements of Greek Revival architecture. Past records date the construction of the house as early as 1720 or as late as 1769. An architectural assessment conducted by the SHS in 2002 determined, based on physical and documentary evidence, that the house was built between 1820 and 1825.



Little information exists today concerning the early period in the history of the house. Hezekiah Marks, for whom the house was built, was a respected member of the community and served as a Justice of the Peace and a repre-

sentative to the General Assembly. His widow and children sold the property to the Bennett family in 1835. They held it until 1866.

There are limited documents available from this period, no artifacts or photographs in the SHS collections, and little detailed information available for interpretation. The histories of these people, like so many others, has been lost through the passage of time.

The strength of our SHS holdings, both in material culture and documentation, lie in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The SHS has significant collections of photographs, diaries, account books, furniture, textiles, and agricultural equipment from the 1890's through the 1940's. Oral histories have been collected from people with direct connections to this period. Many of the physical aspects of this community, such as the factory buildings that line the river as well as acres of farmland, are still intact after one hundred years and provide striking environmental reminders of Shelton's history.

These factors and evidence have led the SHS to turn the focus of its interpretation of the c. 1820 house at the Shelton History Center to 1913. This encompasses the early years of the marriage between Harry and Gertrude Brownson. This couple celebrated over sixty-two years of marriage and were the last of a family who lived in the house for over one hundred years. During this time, levels of industrial production along the river peaked and agriculture moved firmly into the modern age. History was being written with every jar of peaches canned and each bushel of potatoes dug.



Harry and Gertrude Brownson, c. 1910

## **Pootatuck, Corum, Ripton, Huntington and Shelton**

The area now known as the City of Shelton was originally settled by members of the Paugussett tribe. They were hunter-gatherers who were also involved in agriculture. They referred to the area along the banks of the Housatonic River as Pootatuck.

English settlers from Stratford moved into the Long Hill section of Shelton by 1680. The settlement was known as Coram and was under the jurisdiction of Stratford. By 1717 there were approximately fifty families in Coram and they petitioned for the formation of a separate parish, to be known as Ripton. The parish was a prosperous agricultural community with farming in the hills and a modest shipyard along the river. The architecture of the community reflected this prosperity and several examples of 18<sup>th</sup> century architecture were extant in the center district by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1789 Ripton Parish separated from Stratford and became the Town of Huntington. As happened in many New England communities, the population declined from a high of 2,770 in 1810 to a low of 1,301 in 1850. This was not necessarily due to the depletion of the soil or other negative factors, merely that the local economy had reached the limits of its growth and leveled off.



*South view of the Episcopal and Congregational Churches, Huntington.*

From *Connecticut Historical Collections*  
John Warner Barber, 1838

By 1870, along the banks of the Housatonic River a dam was constructed, a canal dug, and factories were established to draw off the hydroelectric power. The Borough of Shelton was formally established by 1882 and separate census records were kept from 1880 on. It wasn't until 1919 that the borough officially became the City of Shelton and the Town of Huntington voted to become incorporated within it.

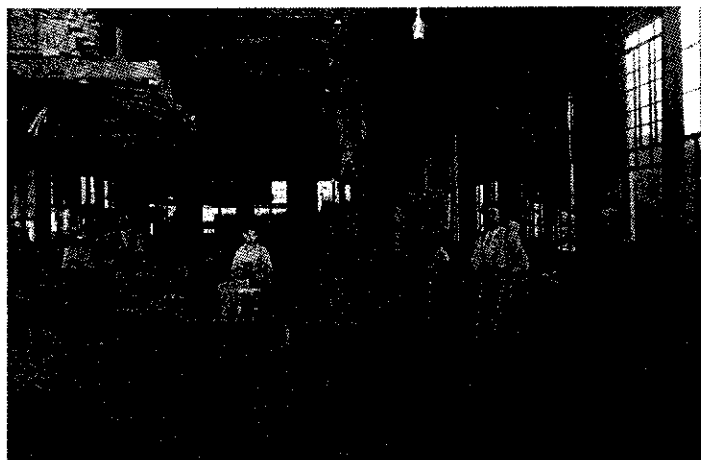
An 1890 article in the *New York Times* entitled "A Connecticut Sunday" describes a visit to the town of Huntington as follows:

The few curiosities of Huntington are soon seen and digested. Here runs the New York and Boston telephone line, cutting across country as straight as a die, its forest-tree poles carrying more than fifty wires. Here is a public square in front of the church, smooth and green, surrounded by an iron fence. Here is the little town hall that in former times, I am told, was often the scene of revelry by night, the sort of revelry that embraces dancing and oysters and ice cream. And here is the village store, in which are also the telephone office and the Post Office. There is no frantic crowd of customers pressing up to the counter, but I am told that a former owner of this little store made a fortune of \$80,000 in it, and retired on his laurels and his cash... Huntington lies in so deep a valley that from all around the neighborhood you look down upon it and see only a great collection of trees, with some roofs and a church spire peeping through.

While no similar account has come to light concerning the Borough of Shelton, it can be inferred from photographs, city directories, and other period sources that along the river was a bustling industrial center that was a counterpart to the more agrarian life found just a few miles away in the hills. There were close connections between the two communities but they were fundamentally different on many levels

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to the 1901 *Connecticut State Register and Manual*, Huntington was a well established agricultural economy and Shelton was largely concerned with the:

mfg of paper, paper boxes, woolen yarn and knit goods, cotton goods, pins, tacks, hooks and eyes, carriage and other hardware, silver plated ware, pianos, rubber goods printing presses, metal bedsteads, buttons, brass hardware, combs, razor strops, bicycle forgings, silk goods, etc.



Shelton Basket Company, c. 1910

The factories of Shelton relied on the labor of immigrants or their children. According to the 1910 census over 62% of Shelton's population fell into this category. The population of the Shelton Borough had exceeded that of the Town of Huntington in 1890 with the totals being 2,837 and 2,735 respectively. Most of this growth was undoubtedly due to rising trends in immigration across the entire nation and the availability of unskilled or semi-skilled jobs in the factories.

Even in rural Huntington there were a surprising number of immigrants. In 1910, 905 or 52% of the total population were immigrants or the children of immigrants. While there were many families who had been settled here for multiple generations, those considered traditional Yankees, there was also a steady influx of new blood.

The economic and social ties of Huntington were based on an extensive network of kinship, neighborliness, and other community ties. While these factors undoubtedly existed in the Borough of Shelton as well, the larger size of the community and the dynamic flow of its population would have made such connections more difficult to maintain. This type of industrial society was more likely to be based on wages, goods available for purchase, and services for hire.

Harry and Gertrude Brownson were members of an extensive and intricate community. They were successful farmers and business people with close ties to the Huntington and Shelton communities. A better understanding of both communities, and the nation as a whole, can be attained and illustrated by examining the lives and livelihood of this family.

## ***A Journey from Shelton to Huntington***

Around 1910, a person traveling from a distance would most likely arrive in town by train to visit Harry and Gertrude Brownson. By 1888, the railroad crossed the Housatonic River into Shelton and the station was along the canal on Canal Street. Upon disembarking a visitor would be on a street lined with factories and the canal. Between 1900 and World War I the factories in Shelton reached their peak and were churning out silverplate, pianos, pins, tacks, nails, cutlery, iron beds, and plush fabrics at an amazing rate.



Shelton Canal, c. 1910

People immigrated from the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, Sweden, Italy, and numerous other countries to work in the factories and the air would have been filled with a medley of foreign tongues. Howe Avenue ran parallel to Canal Street and was the main shopping district in Shelton. Concerns such as Webster Brothers Bakers, Lorenz Bruszek boot dealer, and Mahoney's Corner Drug Store touted their

wares to the inhabitants of downtown and to the farmers who traveled down from the hills.

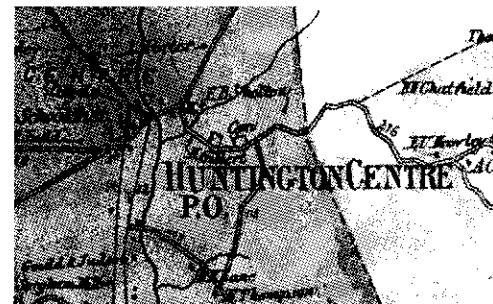
While the trolley ran from Shelton to Derby, New Haven, and Bridgeport, no such convenience extended to Huntington. Therefore, to reach the Brownson homestead one would have had to walk, hire a horse, or hitch a ride with someone going that way. Harry Brownson occasionally hired out his livery services. For instance, he received \$1.00 for taking a man to Booth Hill on August 30, 1913.

Traveling from the Borough of Shelton to the center district of Huntington on Shelton Avenue, one would pass the Plumb Memorial Library, built in 1895, and several Victorian style homes of factory managers and other local notables perched on the hillside. Further up the road was a collecting reservoir established by the Bridgeport Hydraulic Company when it constructed the Trap Falls Reservoir in 1905 to supply the city of Bridgeport with potable water.

Once at the east junction of Old Shelton Road and Shelton Avenue the original Congregational Cemetery would have been to the left on what was called Fanton Hill.

Mentioned in an 1866

land record, this burying ground was fenced in to keep it separate from the street and from the property being sold. Further research is necessary to determine when this burying ground disappeared. It is also



listed in the 1867 Beer's Atlas of Fairfield County on the Huntington map. The houses now standing there appear to have been built after the 1950's; presumably any remaining graves were relocated beforehand.



On the right side of Shelton Avenue is the childhood home of Gertrude Brownson. It was built in 1766 by the Reverend Jedidiah Mills, first minister of what is now the Huntington Congregational Church, for his daughter. Gertrude's mother, Mary Emma Shelton, moved to the house when she was four months old and lived there for the rest of her life. Upon her marriage to Samuel Buckingham in 1878 the bridegroom moved into the family manse with her parents Edgar Beardsley Shelton and Polly Ann Lane. There Mary Emma and Samuel raised their two daughters; Emily Gertrude born on April 8, 1882 and Elma Evalina on April 14,

1891.

The 1926 Shelton High School yearbook, the *Argus*, published an alumni directory of all graduates from the founding of the school in 1899 to 1926. While Elma Buckingham is listed with the class of 1909, her sister Gertrude, as she preferred to be called, is not listed at all. Elma's daughter, Virginia Tucker, remembers that her mother attended what she called a 'finishing school' at Bishop Thorpe Manor in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania for one year. She believes that her aunt attended a similar institution in Ithaca, New York but currently there is no documentary evidence to support this.

Although twelve years her senior, Harry Brownson undoubtedly knew Gertrude Brownson growing up as his house was right down the road toward Huntington center.



Elma and Gertrude, c. 1905

The Brownson family originated in New Milford, Connecticut, spent some time in Great Bend, Pennsylvania and according to *The Recollections of James Beardsley Wheeler*, arrived in Huntington around 1852. The Brownson family, in the form of Sheldon Myar Brownson and his eldest son Henry I., purchased the house at the west junction of Old Shelton Road and Shelton Avenue from the descendants of the Bennett family in 1866. Presumably the purchase was to establish a household for Henry I. with Sheldon Myar merely helping out.



earliest known photograph of the Brownson House, c. 1880

Henry I. Brownson and Anna Booth were joined in marriage in Huntington on October 13, 1869, the groom was 35 and the bride was 20. While both she and her mother Elizabeth were apparently born in Newtown, Connecticut, her family was living in Huntington by the time of the marriage.

The apparent mobility of the Brownson and Booth families appears to be typical of the period and hints at that inclination continuing in American society.

The only known portrait of the couple was taken at the Shorey Photographic Studio in Baltimore, Maryland. Henry I. had a sister Abigail who married a Dr. John Neff. A search of the 1870 census reveals that there was a Dr. John Neff and his wife Abby living in Baltimore, Maryland at that time. Henry's other sister married into the Stearns family. There is a Gertrude Stearns listed in the 1870 census living with the Neff's as a servant but she appears in the 1900 and 1910 census as a niece. While all this could be a coincidence, it seems unlikely and further research needs to be done to confirm the link. It is possible that Henry I. and Anna were on their honeymoon visiting family in Baltimore when the picture was taken.

Upon returning to Huntington four children followed in quick succession: Harry Booth in 1870, Mary Louise in 1872, Edith Elizabeth in 1875, and Anna Gertrude in 1878. Sadly, Anna Marie died of pneumonia five months after the birth of her last child in November of 1878. Having four young children to raise and no wife, Henry





I. presumably sought the help of his mother-in-law Elizabeth Booth who is listed as a household member in the 1880 Tenth Census of the United States.

The next few years were tumultuous ones for the Brownson family. Edith Elizabeth died at the age of 19 of tuberculosis in 1895, Henry I. of chronic Brights disease two years later, and Elizabeth Booth in 1902. Anna Gertrude married Harry Bowles in 1900 or 1901 and Mary Louise married William Wallace Watson in 1903. After his sisters' marriages, Harry Brownson was left alone in the family home. Not for long however as he and Gertrude Brownson, Mary's bridesmaid, were married the following year on October 5, 1904.

### ***Continuing the Journey to Huntington Center***

With the Brownson house to the left, the home of Daniel Nash Morgan, known as Bonnibrook, was on the right. Built in 1816, it was the summer home of the Morgan family from 1868 till 1928. Daniel Nash Morgan served as Treasurer of the United States, Mayor of Bridgeport, and the Democratic candidate for governor. A friendly neighbor, he gave the Brownson family a two dollar bill from his term as Treasurer and even signed it. This bill hung in the Brownson's back parlor to the left of the porch door for many years.

Crossing the bridge over the Far Mill River extension one entered the Center District. Straight ahead was the Curtiss Memorial Fountain that was given to the town in 1895 by Julia DeForest Nash in honor of her father Charles

Curtiss who had spent his boyhood in Huntington. To the left was the residence and general store of Edward J. Buckingham. The house was built in 1772 and the store opened for business at an unknown date. From the store one could pick up the mail or make a phone call to Derby or Ansonia for five cents in 1913. Mr. Buckingham, or Bucky as he was known, was a constant on the Town Green for over fifty years and was staunch in his refusal to sell 'coffin nails' as he called cigarettes.



Circling around the Town Green on Church Street, one passed the c. 1734 Reverend Jedidiah Mills saltbox house, the Obadiah Hyde Greek Revival style home built c. 1860, a house of 1880 vintage, the colonial style DeForest Rudd house built c. 1770, and the Gothic Revival Huntington Congregational Church which was built in 1893 after the previous one in the same location burned.

To the left of Church Street is the Town Green. Encir-

ced by elm trees until the blight of the 1930's and an iron fence until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Green was cared for by the Village Improvement Society in the 1870's and then again from 1895 until after World War I. Gertrude Brownson was an active member for many years and served as the Secretary and as a Director. The Society was responsible for mowing and haying the Green as well as maintaining the Curtiss Memorial Fountain, which continuously overflowed its basins and flooded the road. They also organized the annual Memorial Sunday parade and church service, had a young people's branch, and hosted socials and plays. It is possible that Harry and Gertrude grew close during their time spent on the flower committee for the

Memorial Day function in May 1903. While Harry Brownson frequently donated flowers to the organization he was not listed as an active member on a regular basis in the minutes, unlike Gertrude.

The Brownson family church was St. Paul's Episcopal, which stands diagonally across Church Street from the Congregational Church. The present structure was built between 1812 and 1823 after



the first building on the site was "destroyed in 1811 by a fire ignited by the smouldering tow wadding from a gun fired at pigeons in the belfry by Sidney DeForest." The Federal style, classically designed structure remains a testament to the prosperity of Huntington in its early years. The early members of the church are buried in its shadow in the old cemetery.

At the end of the Green was the 1869 building that served for many years as the Town Hall and after 1919 as the Huntington Fire Department.



Across from the Green were three houses built after the 1850's and the Huntington School which was established in 1911. An imposing brick structure, its stability and modernity spoke to the importance of education and its place in a modern society.

If one continued down Huntington Street towards Trumbull one passed several colonial era survivors or could circle back around the Green and Bucky's store to continue back to the Brownsons.

## ***The Daily Life of the Brownsons and Their Neighbors***

*"Every individual is part and parcel  
of a great picture of the society in which he  
lives and acts, and his life cannot be painted  
without reproducing the picture  
of the world he lived in."*

Harrict Beecher Stowe

Life in Huntington was extremely rural well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The roads were packed dirt, or if improved, macadam. Food was chilled by ice cut during the winter on ponds and rivers. Telephone service was limited to fifty-seven families, the Brownsons not being one of them. Electricity did not reach the area until 1926. According to Guila Hawley, long-time Huntington resident and good friend of Gertrude, in the early 1900's "perhaps six or seven wagons would pass by on Huntington Street in a single day." The main occupation of residents was farming and the community revolved around that fact.

The life of a farmer is dictated by the seasons. This can seem very foreign to a society that lives in homes cooled in the summer by air conditioning, warmed in the winter by central heating, and eating fresh strawberries in January. The Brownsons were primarily farmers and as such their lives were influenced by the seasons, weather, and other forces outside of their control.

Reading over the *Every Day Accounts of H.B. Brownson & Family* which covers in varying detail the years 1907

through 1915 and the 1942 daily diary of Gertrude Brownson, one is struck by the seasonal nature of their lives and by its unchanging nature over a span of thirty-five years. National events like World War II and its mandatory rationing of vital supplies such as gasoline do intrude in the later volume, but the daily life of the couple is essentially undisturbed.

Paid	.. 2 porks	1 95
"	.. 2 settings of Eggs	1 00
"	.. crackers & bananas	40
"	.. Candy	10
"	Mrs. Marie L. Matson (Kempford + Hesteth)	22 33
15	Gave Sheldon for School Books	11
	Paid Mrs. Heagy for work	1 25
16	" for oil	66
Rec.	" Grinding	49
"	Money Order Returned	13 75
"	for 2 bu. Seed Potatoes	2 00
"	" 5 doz. Eggs	1 20

There is also an incredible amount of diversity in the Brownson's financial dealings. While they were farmers, they did not depend solely on Nature's bounty or on one crop to keep body and soul together. While the 1942 diary provides the most complete view of the couple's daily activities, the account book supplies the most comprehensive financial picture. Any specific numbers that follow are gathered from this source for the year 1913, which is complete.

Quite striking is the nature of Gertrude Brownson's

involvement with the family's financial well-being. According to people's remembrances, Gertrude was the business person in the family, which bucked the stereotype of the traditional housekeeping wife and mother. While Harry tended to his crops and their produce, Gertrude was keeping the account book and may have been the one responsible for involving the family with buying fertilizer and gasoline wholesale and then distributing it to the community. In 1913 the Brownsons purchased over 660 gallons of gasoline from the Standard Oil Company for an average of 17 cents a gallon and then resold it for 20 cents. This was done at a time when the family didn't own a car and used no gasoline powered farm equipment. That year they also purchased over 27 tons of fertilizer. While undoubtedly utilizing some of it on the farm, there are also numerous entries in the account book for purchases of fertilizer by neighboring farmers such as J. Peterson, George Shelton, and Philip Jones.

Gasoline and Naphtha not sold for  
illuminating purposes in buildings  
Shelton, Conn.

No. 2392

Sold to *H. B. Brownson* 1913

100 Gallons GASOLINE @ 17 \$17.00

Received payment for STANDARD OIL CO. of N. Y.

RECEIVED THE ABOVE

Driver  
Customer

Besides serving as a retailer, the Brownsons also literally sold the fruits of their labor. They would purchase seed

in the late winter, sprout the seedlings, sell some of the seedlings, plant the remainder, and sell the resulting vegetables and fruit. They did this with tomatoes, cabbage, celery, and white egg turnips. Some of the produce was sold to neighbors while other sales were to stores such as R. C. Cook of Howe Avenue who bought 100 bushels of potatoes in October.

Harry contributed to the family finances in numerous ways: by distributing his crops as well as setting some aside for household use, selling over 8600 tons of hay, grinding for other farmers, cutting stalks for silage, working for others, selling the 6986 quarts of milk produced by his cows, and blasting for the town and neighbors who were attempting to build roads and houses on New England's notoriously rocky soil.

Occasionally Harry hired the labor of others, especially Bernard Martin. A neighboring farmer eight years older than Harry, he was listed as a widower in the 1910 census. Bernard died in 1925, leaving no known relatives.

Gertrude worked in the fields hoeing and bringing in the hay when necessary, canning fruits and vegetables in season, baking pies, cookies, and cakes on an almost daily basis, and tending to the family's flock of chickens that produced

**R. C. COOK.**  
**GROCERIES AND MEATS.**  
Home Dressed Poultry & Veal Made a Specialty.  
ALL BILLS MUST BE SETTLED WEEKLY.  
Phone 463. 88 Howe Ave.

Shelton, Conn., \_\_\_\_\_ 191\_\_

*3 1/2 doz of celery*

Reg. No.	Clerk	Account	Forwarded
1	<i>J. H. Jernigan</i>		80
2	<i>C. Jernigan</i>		185
3	<i>W. Jernigan</i>		30
4			
5			310
6	<i>J. Jernigan</i>		
7	<i>W. Jernigan</i>		
8	<i>W. Jernigan</i>		30
9	<i>W. Jernigan</i>		
10	<i>W. Jernigan</i>		
11	<i>W. Jernigan</i>		13
12	<i>W. Jernigan</i>		99
13			
14	<i>Paul</i>		90

Your account right to date. If error is found, return at once.

over 90 dozen eggs that were sold at an average price of 27 cents a dozen. A farm household in the 1910's required an enormous amount of work on the part of the women of the household. Having no daughters, Gertrude hired Mrs. Esther Hecox on a regular basis to help with the cleaning and laundry.

Born in 1855, Mrs. Hecox had a difficult life. She buried two husbands, the second of which died when a tree that was being cut down for lumber fell on him as he "absently walked to his death." She was left with four children to raise. Presumably she hired herself out as a laborer to supplement the funds remaining from the sale of her husband George's estate, that consisted of nineteen acres of land in the Trap Falls district of Huntington.

The families had some sort of relationship prior to the working one as Mrs. Hecox's daughter Mary served as one of the eight waiters of "admirable grace" at the Brownsons wedding along with Gertrude's sister and the daughters of other family friends. Seen within the web of community, Gertrude's hiring of Mrs. Hecox was not only a means to help out a family friend but also a way to secure necessary help with the daily chores of the household. Mrs. Hecox doesn't appear in the census records after 1910. Perhaps she remarried a third time after her youngest children married in 1911 and 1918 and began lives of their own.

Sheldon Brownson, born in 1905, was the only child of Harry and Gertrude. In later life he had severe allergies and apparently did not enjoy farming. He most likely attended

the Huntington School on the Green which was built in 1911. During 1913, dues were paid for Sheldon to the school bank, Mission Auxiliary Band, and six months of *Current Events*, a children's periodical.

While very productive, the Brownson farm was by no means self sufficient. Sprinkled throughout the account book are regular purchases of cheese, maple flake, buttermilk, tooth powder, sugar, peanut butter, and lye. The Brownsons seemed especially fond of clams and sweets as there are numerous purchases of seafood, cakes, rusks, and fruit such as bananas.

The household was heated by wood that Harry cut at their wood lot on Nells Rock Road. They also used it for cooking. Lighting was provided by kerosene. Gertrude didn't sew her own clothes like waists, dresses, and corsets but did do mending as well as fancywork such as crocheting and needlework as evidenced by the purchase of DMC crochet cotton, an embroidery hoop, and embroidery cotton. The family were also avid periodical readers and there are records for subscriptions to the *Newtown Bee*, *Rural New Yorker*, and frequent nameless magazine purchases.

The family also had an active social life as evidenced by the 1942 diary mentioning of people stopping by for daily visits, church functions, and trips to New Haven for dinner and a movie. The earlier account book corroborates this with entries for dances, whist, a syrup and pancake social, the Danbury Fair, dues for the Farmill River Grange, and the purchase of ice cream and fireworks around the Fourth of Ju-

ly.

Linking together the diary, account book, and other documentary evidence illustrates an intricate web of familial, financial, and social ties that intertwined the Huntington community. This was not a prairie homestead miles from its nearest neighbor or a country oceans away from familial roots. The Brownsons were intimately linked to their land, their family, and their neighbors just as so many countless others were as well.

*Shelton Conn., Oct 17 1913*  
Received of *Gertrude Brownson*  
*Two* Dollars and \_\_\_\_\_ Cents  
payment of dues to *Famill River*  
Grange, No. 130, up to *Oct 1 1913*  
\$ *2.00* \_\_\_\_\_ *A. J. Moore* Sec'y.

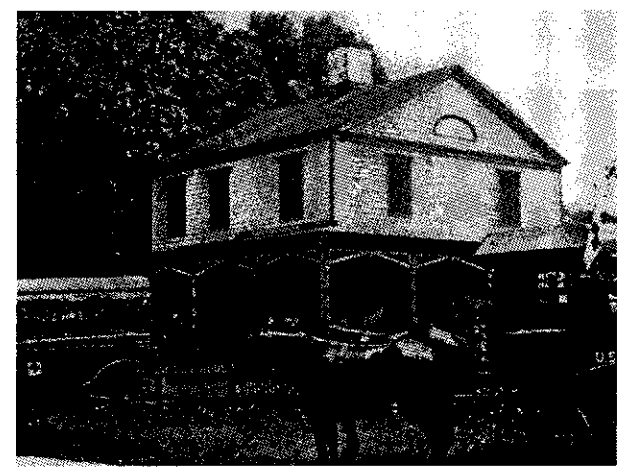
fundamental shift away from the land that was exacerbated by World War I, the Great Depression, and the rise of middle class culture after World War II. This publication and the reinterpretation of the Brownson House to 1913, highlighting the daily lives of Harry and Gertrude Brownson is an attempt to bring to life the everyday trials and triumphs of life on a New England farm for our visitors and the community.

*"To study the flow of common life  
is to discover the electricity of history."*

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

The life of a farmer in 1913 was neither easy nor glamorous. Reflecting a way of life that had existed since the founding of this country, the New England farmer was a vanishing breed. The Industrial Revolution, rising expectations of an acceptable standard of living, and suburbanization combined to push the farmer off the land and children away from their heritage.

As always, there are isolated holdouts, but there was a



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