

Then & Now – Resident Inventor Theophilus Brown - (1811-1879)

Born in Worcester, on April 19th, 1879, as the youngest of three children. As a child, he began to record observations and thoughts in a series of diaries that would document his life and work.

Brown made his home at 33 Mountain Rd in Princeton, Massachusetts with his wife, Elise. Brown's sense of creative adventure and intellectual endeavor are traceable to his rich ancestral history. Through his maternal line, he is a descendant of Ephraim Curtis, the first white man to have lived in Worcester. While his paternal grandfather, also named Theophilus Brown (1811-1879), was a famous literary tailor and an intimate and friend of Thoreau and Emerson. His grandfather and wife, Sarah Ann Brown opened their home and intellects to the leading thinkers of their day, Thoreau, Alcott and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who praised Brown as "the freshest and most original mind in Worcester".



Princeton's Theophilus Brown went to Classical High School and to Worcester Polytechnic Institute where he graduated in 1901. For nine years he worked for the old Richardson Manufacturing Company, a manufacturer of agricultural machinery, which was located on Prescott and Garden Streets. His first invention was a tailboard for a manure spreader, which seemingly unromantic, was a vital addition to general agriculture.



[Check out his diaries.](#)

His career at Deere Company started as the inventor of the first American steel plow bought Brown's patents from the Richardson Company. Brown preferred his home in Princeton, but Deere offered him a job he "couldn't refuse" and he therefore moved to their headquarters in Moline, Illinois becoming the head of the experimental department. Brown was a director for 30 years of John Deere and Co. and personally held at least 159 patents.

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Probably his best known invention is the power lift for tractors. This raises any implements used on the tractor through a hydraulic system. Other inventions were in the field of mowers, plowing devices, cultivators, and early forms of cultivating tractors.

Brown's enthusiasm and ingenuity was even recognized by Deere's competitor, International Harvester. After having lost the race to the patent office for a new invention, taking advantage of his unique name, they dubbed him "**The Awfullest Brown**".

Brown's diary, which he kept daily for over 69 years, reflects on his own contribution as an inventor: "It is quite a source of satisfaction to have bridged the gap from the old time New England farm implement factory to the large full line company and to have had a small part in the transition from animal power to the power of the gasoline motor."



"After his retirement, Theo continued his interest in Deere, remaining as a consultant and also appointed to an advisory committee, but by 1954 he wrote, on January 24th, "... this growing older and finding that Deere & Co. matters move on without my taking much of any active part gives me a strange feeling ..."

Gradually, in the years that followed, Theo's focus was on his family. He and Elise, his wife, whom he affectingly called "Lovie," traveled to Europe on the Queen Mary in 1954. They visited family and friends often, and wrote and received frequent letters to and

from their children (Elise or Lee and Bill) and Theo's sisters. After Theo's retirement they began spending their summers at their house in Princeton, Massachusetts, many years arriving in May and staying until October. Some years Lee and her family visited for part of the summer. They usually spent holidays with Lee's family.



Theo Brown 1901 Yearbook

Lee's family moved to Memphis in 1957, and there are letters about segregation in the South. During the early 1960s Theo's granddaughter Cathy decided to get involved in the Civil Rights Movement which effected the family.

Theo was actively engaged in his community and other activities. In 1958, Theo wrote an article on Farm Machinery for the Encyclopedia Britannica. For many years Theo recorded in his diaries neatly printed headlines from, major world events. He also did sketches, many of plants in Princeton, Massachusetts and hand colored them. He and Elise had joined the Blackhawk Hiking Club in Moline many years before, and they continued their hiking both there and in Princeton. He set up a workshop in his basement in Moline, and did woodworking, often making gifts for friends.

By 1965, Lee was in Hinsdale, Illinois with her family. Theo and Elise decided to give up their house and move to a retirement community nearby. In 1968, a group of Deere retirees began to have a bi-weekly lunch, which Theo frequently attended and enjoyed. By 1970, Theo had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, and it became more difficult for him to write clearly. Many of his 1970 and 1971 entries are typed. He was honored by his lunch friends in 1971 on the occasion of his 92nd birthday.

In their last few years, Theo and Elise were dependent on other people for transportation, as they decided they should no longer drive. They flew to Massachusetts for a few weeks in the summers, having given the Princeton house to their daughter. They continued to take an active interest in their children and grandchildren. In one of his last diary entries, on March 31, 1971, Theo wrote: "I miss my little basement work bench and tools but now my hands have lost their skill, my eyes can no longer be depended on and I have little strength. Elise and I have had a wonderful life together, ours has always been a happy family and an understanding of aims and purposes of each member." His last diary entry was May 22nd, and inserted in later pages is an obituary for Elise. The obituary in the WPI Journal stated that Theo died in Princeton in July 1971."

Inventor of Agricultural Implements:

- John Deere “manure spreader”.
- 1918 Disk Colter
- 1920 Conveyor Chute
- 1925 Plow
- 1943 Hydraulic Control Mechanism
- 1945 Tractor
- 1951 Adjustable Wheel Base Tractor

[Exhibit at WPI of his Diaries](https://digital.wpi.edu/collections/3x816q79g) [\[https://digital.wpi.edu/collections/3x816q79g\]](https://digital.wpi.edu/collections/3x816q79g)

The line of creativity in the Brown family continued through Theophilus Brown’s son, [William Theophilus Brown](#), an established artist in San Francisco.

W. T. Brown Art Exhibit:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pJxXOFh-y4>

Resources:

Biographical Synopsis of Theophilus Brown 1879-1971 – quotes from

- Written by Willie Cade Grandson of Theophilus Brown, CEO and Founder of PCRR

Worcester Polytechnic University Website

https://digital.wpi.edu/collections/special_collection

https://www.asabe.qcesc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Theo_Brown_biographical_synopsis.pdf

This issue of “Then & Now” was compiled by William “Bud Brooks in 2025.