

John Brownell Spoke his Mind

By Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian

John Brownell (1864-1931) spent much of his youth on Parce Avenue, in the days when the enormous factory on the south side of the street hadn't yet been built. He grew to manhood, known as one who never failed to speak his mind. An example was his written resignation to the state's Secretary of the Treasury in 1898, a copy of which he provided to his hometown newspaper. By his own description, the position required little in the way of actual work: *"Having held the office of deputy collector of customs at the port of Pultneyville for a period of four years, I tender my resignation to the department. There is about as much use for a collector of customs at this port as there would be for one on a trout stream in the Adirondack Mountains. There was no money collected during the year 1897, practically none in 1896, and the aggregate receipts for the four years while I have been in office were less than \$150, while my salary for that time was \$2,880. Respectfully yours, John W. Brownell."*



Early 1900s view of North Main Street, looking to the north from the canal bridge. With two separate sets of railroad tracks and east and westbound rails for the Rochester, Syracuse and Eastern trolleys, travelers had plenty to contend with on the unpaved road.

After his resignation, John Brownell made ends meet as a salesman for a variety of products, including toilets for the Auto Ken Closet Company (“100 percent sanitary and can be installed wherever you desire it”), at a time when the population was struggling with the transition from outhouses to indoor plumbing. He traveled across much of the country, logging tens of thousands of miles per year. Brownell was celebrated for his way with words here at home and in the places to which he traveled. He became a favorite speaker at Memorial Day and Independence Day events, loved for his passionate, patriotic speeches.



A view of the Chase Block in the early 1900s, located at the corner of North Main Street and Parce Avenue. It was from this point to the Main Street Bridge that traveling salesman John Brownell identified as the worst road he had ever encountered. Note the elevated sidewalk in front of the building, no doubt an annoyance to Mr. Brownell.

It was no surprise when the ever-frank John Brownell shared his opinion of North Main Street in an essay published in the local newspaper in the fall of 1913: “...the worst road I have ever driven a car over is in Fairport, New York, from the Chase block across whiskey flats to the canal bridge. I doubt there is another town in the whole United States that has as disgraceful a piece of highway as this particular one I speak of. I don’t believe it would be possible to get an Arkansas jackass to walk alone over this road without forcing, if he was starving and knew there was a bin of oats at the other end.”