

"Frank Brown's Letter Book"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Prior to the advent of carbon paper, and later the photocopy machine, making a copy of a document was often a labor intensive project. Hand written copies were the most common form well into the late nineteenth century which made it fairly easy to keep a copy of outgoing correspondence. During the late nineteenth century patent copy books appeared. After writing a letter, the sender pressed the original against a dampened page in the letter book thereby making a copy. The copy was sometimes less than perfect, the sender had a exact copy for future reference. Today these letter copy books are significant survivals because most of the original correspondence, which had been mailed to numerous recipients, has been lost.

The Historical Society recently received an important letter copy book kept by Frank Brown of Springfield, near Sykesville, from 1887-1891. The more than 700 letters range from personal notes on family matters to Brown's activities as postmaster of Baltimore City, a farmer and stockman, and his involvement in a variety of associations. The letters reveal his diverse business, professional and personal interests. The letters also reveal that he was a man of independent action. This attribute is clearly evident in a June 4, 1889 letter to the County Commissioners:

"June 4th, [1889]

County Commissioners,
Carroll County,
Westminster, Md.

Gentlemen:

The bridge at the Springfield mill, piny run, on county road #205, election district #5, on which I am supervisor was fatally damaged by the flood, but it was already in a rotten condition and not safe for the summer. This road is the main artery for an immense section of the country and the bridge must be re-built at all hazards. Knowing that you are over-run with these complaints at present I have engaged lumber and will prepare to re-build the bridge at once and submit the bill to you at the actual cost of of same, which will, beyond doubt, be considerably less than you could get it contracted for. There is no time for delay and I am sure the steps I have taken will be for the best interests of the county and the tax-payers generally, as the flooring on the bridge is now almost entirely gone and the sleepers are in a doted condition, besides one abutment is entirely washed away from the bridge and I am having it propped up temporarily and will re-build as soon as possible.

Yours very resp'y
Frank Brown"

Brown entered politics in 1875 and won two consecutive terms representing Carroll County in the Maryland Legislature. He was an unsuccessful gubernatorial candidate at the 1887 Democratic Convention, however, he remained undeterred. Bucking the machine politics of his day, he mounted an individual campaign and secured the Democratic nomination in 1891. He easily won and became the

only Carroll Countian to hold the state's highest elected office. His letter book helps to document the interesting life of this important figure in state and local history. The Historical Society would like to thank member George Horvath for donating this important item to the collection. The preservation of this book will ensure that future generations will have easy access to its contents.

Photo caption: Governor Frank Brown of Sykesville served as governor of Maryland from 1892-1896. A copy book of his correspondence was recently donated to the Historical Society. Historical Society of Carroll County collection, gift of Francis H. Benton, 1990.