

Jonathon Browning  
22 October 1805 - 21 June 1879  
by Elaine Johnson

Jonathon was born on the Brushby fork of Bledsoe Creek, in Sumner county and grew up in the wild Tennessee hills where his father taught him to play the fiddle. There is now a Bledsoe Creek State Camping Park. You can camp, picnic, fish, hike, and launch a boat. His parents were Edmund and Sarah Allen Browning. He was said to be a steady and thoughtful youth, devoted to the acquisition of knowledge. Jonathon was about thirteen years old when he received an old flintlock from a neighbor for a week of farm work. The man thought the gun was worthless because it didn't work and the nearest gunsmith was in Nashville. Jonathon repaired the gun and sold it back to the farmer for four dollars. He spent his free time in the shop of a friendly blacksmith. The blacksmith got a helper and Jonathon had free use of the tools and a skilled teacher. Occasionally he even received a dollar or a sack of corn. In 1820 the family still lived in Sumner county.

By the time he was nineteen he had invented his own tools for repairing guns. But he didn't know how to make the barrels. Jonathon saw a gun stamped with the name of a gunsmith in Nashville and decided to go there and try to make a similar deal as with the blacksmith. The shop amazed him with its variety of tools. He didn't even know a use for so many. He offered to do any job Samuel Porter gave him in exchange for lessons. Within a few weeks he was being paid two dollars a week and room and board. By the time he was ready to leave Porter wanted him to stay as a partner. Jonathon refused the offer and the men parted friends. He was given some tools as a parting gift and spent all the money he had saved on more. He later said he reached the end of his savings and the carrying capacity of his horse at the same time.

He married Elizabeth Stalcup of Nashville 9 November 1826, when he was twenty-one years old. They would have twelve children, the first five born in Davidson county, Tennessee, where they were living at the time of the 1830 census. Jonathon served his community as Justice of the Peace.

Jonathon's brother James Green Browning had moved to Illinois and their father followed and spent the last year of his life there. In 1834 Jonathon moved his family to Quincy, Illinois, where he purchased land and became Justice of the Peace. He invented a repeating rifle that was so simple and efficient he couldn't keep up with the orders.

His cousin Orville H. Browning also settled in Quincy and was a prominent lawyer. A friend, and fellow lawyer, sometimes came to the area and needed a place to stay, but Orville's house was small so he brought his friend to Jonathon's home. He and Jonathon enjoyed staying up and talking. Years later when that man, Abraham Lincoln, was President of the United States, Jonathon described those talks as "two frontiersmen yarning."

In 1839, the "Mormons" came to Quincy, fleeing for their lives from Missouri. The leading citizens, perhaps the Justice of the Peace among them, extended a welcoming hand to these destitute people. They passed a resolution encouraging the people of Quincy to extend aid and kindness toward them. One day one of these peculiar people came into Jonathon's gun shop. He was encouraged by Jonathon's interest and returned the next day with a "Book of Mormon" and offered to call at their home to answer any questions he might have. Jonathon's reading became more intent as he began to understand the importance of what he was learning.

Joseph Smith was brought to trial as a fugitive from justice, a charge which came from Missouri, in June 1841. Lawyers in Illinois were warned anyone acting in his defense would have no political future. Despite these threats, Cousin Orville and five other men stepped forward and defended the prophet. Orville's remarks were particularly eloquent and moved the Judge, officers of the court, and spectators to tears with his accounts of seeing the bloody footprints of barefoot women and children leading back through the snow to Missouri. He acted in Joseph's defense several times.

Jonathon's daughter Asenath remembered Joseph Smith visiting her father's home in Quincy when she was a girl. According to Federal census records the Brownings were in Quincy in 1840. Some records show 1840 as the date of Jonathon's baptism but the official church record has 10 Aug 1843. They moved to Nauvoo in 1843. The lot he purchased had a one-room cabin too small for his family. Jonathon built a beautiful two-story brick home, with an attached blacksmith and gunsmith shop, on main street across from the "Times and Seasons" office. Their customers included the Smiths down the road. Part of his time was given to build the Temple.

The candidates for President of the United States in 1844 were unfriendly on the issue of the Mormons. The people of Nauvoo needed someone they could vote for with good conscience. Joseph Smith was nominated with Sidney Rigdon as his running mate. Capable speakers were sent out from Nauvoo to clarify his platform. Jonathon was a delegate assigned to travel within the state of Illinois.

Then Joseph and Hyrum were imprisoned again, this time in Carthage. With the prophet dead, danger from mob violence grew rapidly. Quincy and the surrounding area were no longer friendly and the very men who had braved ridicule to defend Joseph were among those who lent their support to the ones who demanded the Mormons get out of the state. Orville and others said it would really be best if they left peacefully. He turned his back on his cousins' families. He did not suffer politically after all, but helped organize the Republican party in Illinois. He served as a U.S. Senator, Secretary of the Interior and Attorney General under President Andrew Johnson.

Jonathon helped defend the city in the Battle of Nauvoo. He and Orvill S. Cox converted an old rusty steamer shaft into cannons. Using them, fewer than 300 men forced the attacking mob of over sixteen hundred to retreat. "On main street between Kimball and Munson streets . . . Jonathon Browning . . . had begun to design and make the first of the repeating rifles that would earn him and later a son . . . a worldwide reputation . . . had turned out several dozen guns for the Nauvoo Police department - local crime rate among nations lowest - used to defend against

increasing onslaught of terrorism from outside.”<sup>1</sup> The citizens of Nauvoo were forced to leave “as soon as they can cross the river.” Brigham Young asked Jonathon to wait and be the last to leave because his firearms were so necessary to the safety of the remaining Saints. His blacksmith shop was an important help in preparing others for the journey.

Family tradition says the Brownings and the Carlings were on the last ferry out of Nauvoo. They left early one morning hoping their enemies would still be abed. As the boat pulled away from shore a howling mob arrived. They fired on the ferry but missed entirely. One man tried to jump on and caught the edge with his fingers but the current was too strong and he was sucked under. Jonathon tried to enlist in the Mormon Battalion but President Young pulled him aside and said "we cannot spare you."

They traveled from Nauvoo to Council Bluffs in Orson Hyde's company. Jonathon was a captain of ten families. He operated another gunsmith shop in Council Bluffs from 1846-1852 supplying guns to many traveling the Oregon Trail. Jonathon was also a magistrate. He was a High Councilman under Orson Hyde and was president of the Big Bend branch, Kanessville, Iowa, in 1848.

GUNSMITHING. The subscriber is prepared to manufacture, to order, improved firearms, vis: revolving rifles and pistols, also slide guns from 5 to 25 shooters, all on improved plan, and he thinks not equaled this far east (further west they might be). The emigrating and sporting community are invited to call and examine Browning's improved fire-arms before purchasing elsewhere. Shop eight miles south of Kanessville on Mosquito Creek, half a mile south of Trading Point.

Jonathon Browning<sup>2</sup>

The slide resembled a modern clip. It was a chambered bar pushed manually from right to left through the breech as each round was fired.

The Brownings left for Utah in Henry W. Miller's company in the summer of 1852. Jonathon was a captain of ten for this journey also. On the morning of the 12th of August, within sight of Mount Laramie, "we left Browning's ten behind to mend a wagon." He was an expert marksman and supplied buffalo meat for the company throughout the trip.

They arrived in the Salt Lake Valley that autumn and Jonathon settled his family in Ogden. Jonathon became one of the town's leading citizens. He owned much of the business real estate on the west side of what is now Washington Boulevard. He was a Justice of the Peace and Probate Judge for Weber county. He served on the city council and was Ogden's first representative to the Territorial Legislature. He also continued to run a gunsmith shop where his

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<sup>1</sup> *The Mormon Trek West*, Joseph E. Brown

<sup>2</sup> Advertisement in the *Frontier Guardsman*, Kanessville, Iowa, 19 September 1849

son John Moses Browning<sup>3</sup> learned the trade. He also had a blacksmith shop where he made plows, mill irons and nails, and repaired boots and shoes and any other job for which he saw a need.

He received his Patriarchal Blessing on 30 August 1853 from John Smith. He served as Bishop's Counselor, President of the High Priests Quorum, member of the High Council, and Patriarch. Jonathon was called to serve a mission to Tennessee in a conference held 10 October 1871.

From the east Elder Jonathon Browning writes from Rutherford County, Tenn. He had traveled through several counties of that state and of Illinois, had found many people ignorant of the principles of the gospel, had been enabled to correct much prejudice, and had found many friends. He could not have realized the great hardships the people of Tennessee had been subjected to, and the misery of the common people.<sup>4</sup>

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A Mormon Elder. We had the pleasure of meeting, on Wednesday, with Elder Jonathon Browning, of Ogden City, Utah. He is a native of this county, having been born in Trout's district. He emigrated many years ago and became a follower of the Prophet Joseph Smith. He has been nineteen years in Utah and is, we believe a sincere believer in his faith. He has only three wives as we understand. He addressed quite a large concourse of our people that evening at the Court House and was listened to with attention and respect. So far as we heard him, he preached the doctrine of faith, repentance and baptism.

Elder Browning is respectfully connected in Sumner county. He is a cousin of Dr. Browning, formerly a physician in this place. He left on the Thursday morning train for his home in Utah, and we are very sure that he can tell the Saints that, as widely as we differ with them, we were a very tolerant people and gave him a fair, patient hearing.<sup>5</sup>

Jonathon was a man of integrity and strong character. He held public office in each place he lived as an adult. He was called Judge or Squire all his life. He took two plural wives, Eliza C. Clark 17 March 1854 and Sarah Emmett 29 March 1859. He had twenty-two children. He is buried in the Ogden City Cemetery.

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<sup>3</sup> Look for John Moses Browning in an encyclopedia.

<sup>4</sup> *Deseret News*, 6 March 1872

<sup>5</sup> Gallatin, Tennessee, *Examiner*, 20 March 1872, as quoted in "History of Henry Cox Esplin and Lucy Chamberlain, Roots and Branches", by Ann Esplin Thompson, pg 104-105

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