The Brown Brothers had a Sister

“Nick and Josie, John and Mosie.” Or “Johnnie, Josie, Nickie, Mosie.” I haven’t been able to source this one, but I’ve also heard the four Brown brothers—Nicholas (1729-91), Joseph (1733-85), John (1736-1803), and Moses (1738-1836)—referred to as “Nick, Joe, Jack, and Moe.”

Ubiquitous in the annals of early American commerce, politics, and slavery and in the history and lore of Providence, Rhode Island, the wealth from the Brown brothers’ extensive merchant trading and companies was the foundation for centuries of family philanthropy and was instrumental in the founding of Brown University. The Browns are both emblematic of the kinds of wealth that was generated through trade in the eighteenth century, and distinctive for their success and long legacies. Those legacies in Providence and beyond are many, including the library where I work, named for the originating collection of John Carter Brown, a grandson of Nicholas Brown. Joseph Brown helped design the university’s first building, University Hall. The John Brown House is a cornerstone of the Rhode Island Historical Society’s programming. The Moses Brown School remains a pillar in the city. The brothers were such a potent foursome, then and since, that when their powerful-in-her-own-right mother died in 1791, she was memorialized on her gravestone as “the mother of Nicholas,
Joseph, John, and Moses Brown.”

So much for Mary, their sister and their mother’s only daughter.


It’s a commonplace that women remain largely absent from histories in part because of biases in the sources. But for early periods the always scant historical record of women’s activities is even spottier. Thus Mary Brown Vanderlight (1731-95) has been, like other women, even spectacularly privileged women, elusive to history. In a detailed biography of her brother, Moses, she appears three times, all to note her, incorrectly, as a member of his household—just another dependent. In the account of the family that was long the standard, written by the organizer of the family business papers, she doesn’t warrant a single mention. Mary remains so invisible and appears in so few accounts of the family’s or the city’s or the university’s history that even historically-minded folks in Providence today suggested when I began to research her life that she couldn’t possibly be a Brown sister, but another of the many Mary Browns—maybe one of the brothers’ aunts. The vagaries of archives, how records are created, preserved, and survive, the ways that historical narrative facilitates some stories over others, and the gendered expectations and narratives about women in the era in which she lived all conspired to make her near-invisible to us.
Yet what the available pieces of Mary Brown Vanderlight’s life reveal is not only a more richly complex picture of a complex family, but also a fuller account of how elite women facilitated and even instigated the key connections of early American commerce and society. Missing women like her impoverishes our histories in that it leaves them incomplete, but it also leaves us spectacularly ill equipped to understand how women could both struggle in a system of gender hierarchy and also be so privileged that they facilitated and furthered that privilege at the expense of others. An especially tantalizing set of account books at the John Carter Brown Library suggest that the Brown brothers’ sister was a dynamic force in her own right, managing her husband’s business during his life and continuing at least part of it in the years following his death. Other than these books, Mary is seen within the collections of others’ (mostly her brothers’) papers, and occasionally in public accounts. A daughter, sister, wife, mother, and aunt, Mary was also at
the very least a businesswoman, wealthy property owner, significant member of Providence society, and perhaps an apothecary or even an erstwhile doctor. Like her brothers, she too was both emblematic and distinctive.

When Mary Brown was born in 1731, she was the fourth child and the only daughter of James Brown, who died when Mary was only eight, and Hope Power Brown, who would remain a dominant figure in Mary’s life. Her oldest brother died young, at sea, and another older brother died as a toddler. She married David Vanderlight, a doctor and Dutch immigrant, in the early 1750s. Both her husband and their only child, a baby boy, died in February of 1755. When she died in the spring of 1795, Mary Brown Vanderlight had been a widow for four decades, and lived on her own or with her mother. Like her mother, she remained a stalwart of the Baptist church that their forebears had helped found (though her brothers wandered to Quakerism and the Anglican church). Like her mother, she never remarried. Like her mother, she was the administrator of her husband’s estate, a complex job that came with significant legal and other practical responsibilities. For most of her life, then, it was Mary, her mother, the four brothers, and a city full of connected, extended kin.

The Providence of the Brown Brothers—and their sister—was a smallish place in a big and expanding British empire. The homelands of Narragansett, Nipmuc and Wampanoag peoples, Rhode Island’s ports and harbors made the colony attractive to settler merchants, and while from the mid-seventeenth century Newport had been their dominant city, by the end of the eighteenth-century Providence had surpassed its population. In addition to an expanding white population, and growing numbers of both free and enslaved Black people, Indigenous people continued to live in and around the settlers in their midst. Merchant commerce powered both of these small cities' wealth, with Atlantic trade in anything that could be imported or exported, including whale oils made into candles, sugar made into rum—and enslaved people.
The Brown Brothers’ slaving was modest both in the family’s overall enterprise and by comparison to Rhode Islanders’ deep investment in the slave trade. But it was devastating in its consequences and indicative of slavery’s inextricable ties to the expansion of colonial commerce and politics. The vast majority of African people captured and sold into slavery in the Americas were in South America, not North America, and the vast majority of those in North America were sold by European slavers. Still, Rhode Islanders dominated the slave voyages that originated in North America. There was little if any of the colony’s commercial activity that was not touched by the slave trade. The family that Mary Brown Vanderlight grew up in was an enslaving family. Her father’s will listed four enslaved persons, and one of his last and most expansive commercial endeavors was the first of the Browns’ slaving voyages.

In 2006, under the leadership of Ruth Simmons, the first African American president of an Ivy League university, Brown was the first American university to confront its connections with the slave trade. A centerpiece of Brown’s
Slavery and Justice Report is the account of the Brown Brothers’ 1764 slaving venture with the ship Sally, on which more than half of the nearly 200 men, women, and children they captured in Africa died before they reached the Americas and a life of enslavement. Two of the brothers ultimately fell out over slavery, with one, Moses, becoming an ardent abolitionist, and another, John, a defender of slavery and slaving.

Mary isn’t the only woman missing from the center of the Brown’s story. Most histories credit the children’s uncle, the successful merchant Obadiah Brown, with having launched the brothers’ mercantile career after their father’s death, but their mother Hope Power Brown was a figure in her own right. While her husband lived and for all the decades after she would continue to keep her own account books, and continue to reckon accounts with all of her children about who bought and sold and owned what to whom and whose property should be ceded to whom and why. And it was surely their mother who was Mary’s model as a widowed woman of means.
Women’s work is often hidden or marginal within historical records that were meant to show men’s economic and political lives. But historians have been able to show just how regular and central they were to both realms of early American life. In early New England, middling and wealthy free women could play key roles in protecting and increasing their property, including in court. Historian Sara Damiano, for example, has recently written about how white women’s “financial and legal work” in New England’s cities “was an essential component of . . . [the region’s] political economy.” Free women of middling means and more could create and hold debts—the essence of an economy that ran on credit—and went to court to vigorously defend their financial interests. Though women were a relatively small slice of the eighteenth-century financial industry, they were essential to its function. The evidence of Hope Power Brown’s extensive accounts with local businesses while she was raising her children, and then her pervasive presence in her family members’ financial
dealings, as well as the lives and financial affairs of otherwise unrelated business associates including as an estate administrator, show her to be active and energetic in advancing all of their interests—and her own. Hers was a model for Mary Brown Vanderlight to follow.

Imagine that a historian was trying to reconstruct something of your life from just a few years of bank statements, with perhaps a handful of random emails. What we know about Mary Brown Vanderlight is a little like this. We have to build a picture from what we know of others in her family and community, and what we know of other people she associated with or even just people whose experiences may have been something like hers. One of the many missing pieces of Mary Brown Vanderlight’s story is the date of her marriage. Like other key documents, perhaps it will turn up. Why are they missing? After all, the eighteenth-century record for such things is remarkably full. Still, absences occur, and likely much more often for women. But we do have David’s estate inventory along with the three account books. The former tells us a little of their life together, and the latter may look just as dry as a bank statement, with debts and credits listed under the debtors’ and creditors’ names in the accepted practice of the time. But they are remarkably revealing, especially when placed alongside the bits and pieces of Mary’s life and interests that

Figure 5: Hinshelwood, Robert, “City of Providence from Prospect Hill (Object ID: 3682)” (1872). David Winton Bell Gallery. Brown Digital Repository. Brown University Library.
survive among her brother’s papers.

What’s clear is that Mary started keeping the Vanderlight accounts as soon as she married.

A key challenge in writing women back into the center of the history they lived is the law that firmly put them at the margins. The laws of coverture in colonial British America meant that women’s property was largely ceded to their husbands upon marriage, and they became “covered” legally—part of his household. But this law could not change the reality that most economic undertaking was a family enterprise to one degree or another. When David and Mary married, the business made use of both of their talents and skills including her management of the medical and pharmaceutical practices.

The account books show a lively business. David Vanderlight only kept his own accounts briefly before Mary took them over, suggesting not only that they married fairly quickly after he arrived in Rhode Island but also the extent of Mary’s skill with financial recordation. In 1752 he was referring to Hope Brown as “Mrs Brown” in his account book, but soon she was “Mother Brown.” He seemed to have quickly become part of the Browns’ circle. The patients he saw included Stephen Hopkins, very soon to be the governor of the colony, other doctors, and any number of prominent merchants. He treated and they provided to Ann Hopkins, the wife of Stephen, “Sundry Medicyns, visits, and Attend[ing].” They also saw enslaved and free Black Rhode Islanders. Under Joseph Olney’s account Mary noted that David had treated a “Negro Woman” for “Sickness” and provided her what was described as the same “Sundry Medicyns, visits, & attend[ing]” as Mrs. Hopkins. Some patients received more specific treatments and medicines. The Vanderlights also traded in a wider variety of goods, including tea and spices. Among things they sold early on to Hope Brown were bottles of “elixir” as well as nutmeg, ginger, tea, and sugar.
While David Vanderlight lived, they had their home and business on Towne Street, at the corner of what is now Main and Hopkins, now the site of the Superior Court buildings. All of the early and mid-eighteenth-century homes were fairly closely clustered. Hope Power Brown’s home on the river side of the street was likely just a few blocks away while the site of Joseph Brown’s was practically next door. Though the other Browns’ late eighteenth-century houses in Providence are impressive and stately, including the Joseph Brown House, the John Brown House (now a museum of the Rhode Island Historical Society) and the Nightingale-Brown House (now the John Nicholas Brown Center at Brown University), it’s likely that the Vanderlights’ mid-eighteenth-century home and workplace was much more modest. Views of the house are always just out of site in various eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century views of the Market House (across the street) or the full city, including a famous 1809 drop scene at the Rhode Island Historical Society.
The Vanderlights’ home and shop was full of medical equipment as well as the apothecary goods they dispensed. There was “myrtle,” “myrrh,” a version of arsenic, but also plenty of equipment, including bottles and “ointment pots,” boxes and cases, and tools including a “case of Pockett Instruments.” A Dutch immigrant who arrived in Rhode Island by way of Guyana, David was educated at the University of Leiden and was reputed the most educated man in mid-eighteenth-century Providence. He was a founding member of the city’s new library (which morphed and merged and is now the Providence Athenaeum), and was part of the small committee charged with purchasing its initial collection.
Did they know that David’s illness (likely malaria) would be fatal so quickly? Or was he carried off by a different seasonal illness that also killed their little boy? One obvious conclusion from the Vandelights’ account books is how close the medical community in Providence and Newport was. The Bowens were several generations of doctors and bought quite a bit of equipment and medicine from the Vandelights (and may have bought some of the Vandelights’ stock from Mary after David’s death). Surely they all discussed extensively who was sick, and what treatments they were providing. Being a doctor then as now was no surety against disease and death.

From the time David died, Mary continued the surviving account books. It looks like she also continued to serve patients at least by selling medicines but maybe also by practicing—or even teaching. As late as 1757 she was billing her neighbor Elisha Shearman for having trained his son in the “arts of apothecary.” She also took up her husband’s role in the library and was listed as one of only two women among the nearly 150 “proprietors” who regularly paid to support—and use—it. The other was another widow in the Browns’ circle who had also, perhaps unsurprisingly, been one of the Vandelights’ patients and customers. She also kept investing. These investments included, according to a
single notation in one of her brother’s accounts, helping to finance the infamous slaving voyage of the Sally. On the cover of one of the surviving Vanderlight account books, she has written her name in large, bold letters: “Mary Vanderlights Book.” This is one of the few extant examples, besides the accounts she wrote and her signature on deeds and other financial instruments, where we can see how firmly she identified and claimed her position.

Figure 9: Mary Vanderlight’s Titled Account Book, from the collections of the John Carter Brown Library.

As she aged, Mary may have continued to be a source of medical expertise and information for her family. Women typically had practical experience as healthcare workers, tending to children and the sick and elderly as part of their expected domestic duties. In 1776 she was inoculated for smallpox, along with Moses and others in the family—though she and Moses seem to have purposely done theirs together. Mary also seems to have been entrusted with particularly sensitive family medical cases, including traveling with her fragile and ailing niece, Joanna, in the 1780s. From the tone of letters sent from school in Boston back to family in Providence, Joanna was a lively girl; she died in 1785 just before her nineteenth birthday. A sad number of the Brown siblings’ children died, with the management of both grief and the practicalities of care, burial, and memorialization intensive. In the throes of Joanna’s illness
her father Nicholas Brown wrote in some despair that “the Whole Business of this Life is to Learn to Die Well.” As Joanna weakened in the year before her death, her aunt Mary took her to Newport to consult doctors, and around the Rhode Island coast for the fresh air. None of Mary’s letters—in this period or any other—seem to have survived. But her brothers’ long letters about Joanna’s condition and about their travels for her health convey a wealth of detail about how the pair was trying to treat his daughter. They fretted over the seasonal temperature (she should wear layers of woolens if they were to return to Providence by boat), the herbals she was prescribed, and the status of her sleep and stools. But as to her real state, Nicholas Brown acknowledged to his “dear” and “Worthy Sister” that “no one can tell as well as you that take constant care of her.”

![Figure 10: Certification of smallpox inoculation for Mary Vanderlight and Moses Brown, from the collections of the John Carter Brown Library.](image)

It seems obvious that Mary had other account books that have not survived or at least are not extant in public repositories. Notations in the surviving three with cross reference to other “folios” and to accounts noted elsewhere suggest she had a full system in place and kept it up. Additionally, managing her husband’s medical practice and then his estate was far from Mary’s only or even her most extensive financial experience. How could it be? She, like her
brothers, inherited from their father’s estate. Even before she was widowed she would have been a woman of property. They divided and re-sorted some of that estate multiple times over the decades. When Hope Power Brown died in 1792 it was at Mary’s house that the siblings convened to discuss sorting out their mother’s estate.

Because the records are so spotty, neither Hope Power Brown nor Mary Brown Vanderlight’s estate inventories or wills are extant, confounding not just me but the city archivists I spoke with. And despite her clearly having controlled significant real estate, based on records of divisions of her parents’ property and accounts with her brothers, we don’t even know where Mary lived. She may have stayed at her home with David for some time, and then sold it. Possibly she moved in with her mother, which a bit of correspondence and that meeting after Hope Power Brown’s death suggests. And we don’t know what their household looked like, except for a few hints that it was modest. On a rare colonial census in 1774, Hope Power Brown was listed as a head of household of three, with only 2 other adult white women. Presumably Mary was one of them? Mary’s brothers all lived in households with Black men and women, some of them enslaved.

Mary Brown Vanderlight died while visiting her brother Moses at his home in what is now Providence’s East Side neighborhood of Wayland Square. She was memorialized with a stone in Providence’s North Burial Ground, like most of her family. Her husband had been buried there, too, four decades earlier, though his tombstone has now all but disappeared. If their tiny son ever had a stone, it isn’t apparent. One wonders if she tended it. Or if she visited Joanna’s grave, which is directly across from where Mary herself is now buried.
History yields more easily to the subjects it best documents: wars, politics and political structures, economy and economic activity, powerful people more than marginal ones, always men more than women. This is true despite, as scholars have shown us, women’s key roles in the central economic and political developments of their time, including slavery. But Mary Brown Vanderlight was also disappearing from her own time, in her own lifetime. Though there are multiple family accounts of her last days and her death, notices of her passing described her life in terms of relationships: she was described as “the relict of Dr. John Vanderlight” and the “Daughter of Mr. James Brown, and Hope his Wife.” She died “at the House of her Brother, Mr. Moses Brown, the 6th Day of May 1795, in the 62nd Year of her Age.” Thus she was, to the last, publicly defined by the men to whom she was related—and at least her mother. Even her husband’s name is incorrect on her own tombstone, John instead of David. So she was, to the last, consigned to error and erasure.
Figure 13: Memorial for Moses Brown and Mary Vanderlight, from the collections of the John Carter Brown Library.

Further reading


**Acknowledgements**

The fragmentary materials for Mary Brown Vanderlight’s life as I have described it are primarily at the John Carter Brown Library, where colleagues have been enormously helpful with this project. I want to also thank the staffs of the Rhode Island Historical Society and the Providence City Archives, who helped as I sought to find more about Mary’s life in the margins and interstices of other records—sometimes with luck, and sometimes not. Special thanks to Kate Wodehouse at the Providence Athenaeum who shared copies from the Library registers showing Mary’s membership. I am grateful to the Brown family for their ongoing interest and support for history and research.

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