

Meshach Browning – Great Hunter and Chronicler of Pioneer Life in Mountain Maryland

GCHS Historical Museum, Oakland, Maryland

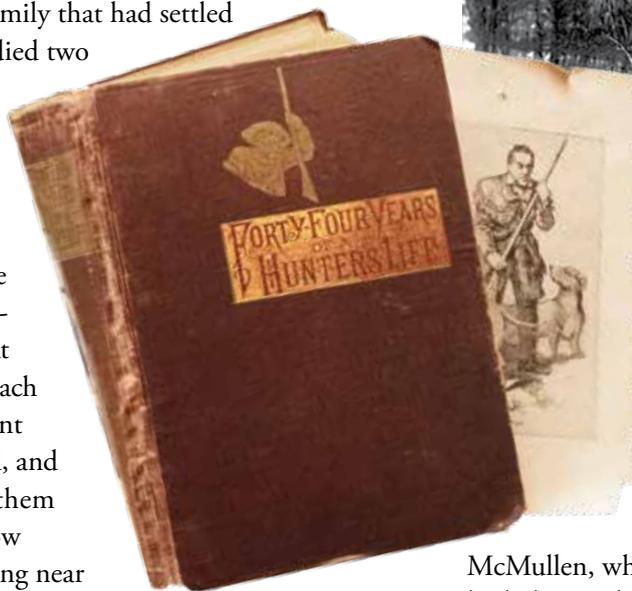
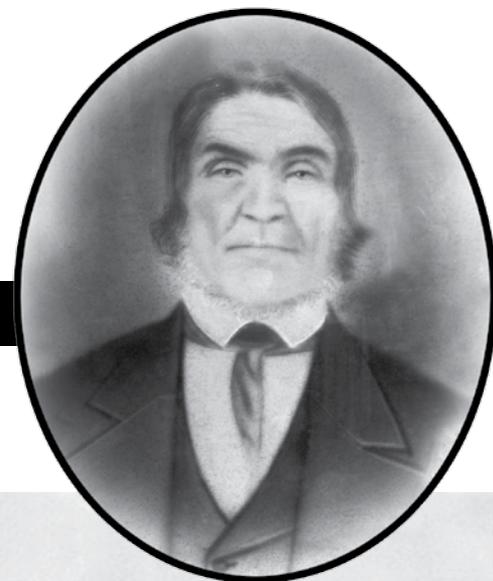
Written by: **Mary (Mattingly) Reisinger**
Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**

One of the local figures showcased at Garrett County's Historical Museum in Oakland, Maryland, is Meshach Browning, one of the most renowned residents of Garrett County, who overcame many challenges to live a life of impressive accomplishments.

Meshach was born in 1781, the last of four children, near Frederick, Maryland. Meshach's father Joshua, fifth generation of an English family that had settled in Virginia in 1622, died two weeks after Meshach was born leaving his mother, Nancy, with little means to support her children. She moved to be close to relatives near Cumberland, Maryland. At age nine, young Meshach became part of his aunt and uncle's household, and they took him with them to the area that is now Garrett County, settling near McHenry, Maryland.

In those days, families had to gather enough children together to hire a teacher and arrange for a term of school. Meshach participated in only one term of about three months; even with this limited education, he ran businesses, corresponded with others over property matters, was active in political affairs, composed poetry, and wrote an autobiography, originally titled *Forty-four Years of a Hunter's Life* and later called *Forty-four Years of the Life of a Hunter*, first published in 1859 and still available.

Meshach ascribes his rapid progress in school to a competitive spirit. He particularly wanted to avoid being outdone



Above: One of Meshach Browning's homes in Garrett County, MD.

Left: An early copy of Meshach Browning's autobiography, *Forty-Four Years of a Hunter's Life*.

by his neighbor's daughter, who had had a previous term of school. Meshach married this former classmate, Mary McMullen, when they were both eighteen; together they had eleven children, and they worked hard to support their growing family.

Meshach describes their joint efforts:

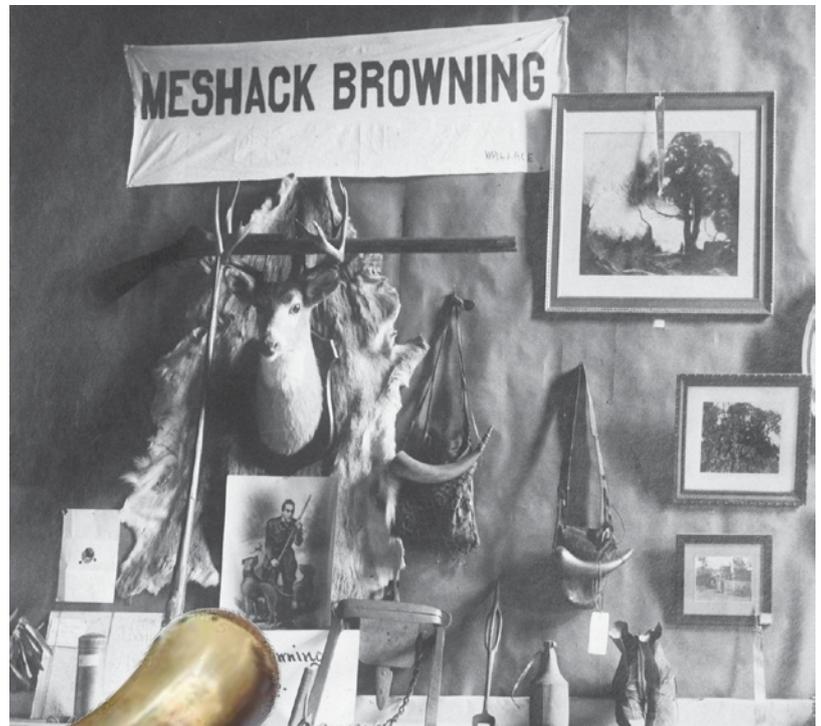
[While I furnished meat and bread, she made as sweet butter as ever was eaten, and laid away enough for winter use. There were thousands of wild bees, and from each hive I discovered I got from two to ten gallons of honey. I could sell deer skins at any time in the old settlement; for in those days many men, and almost all the boys, wore buckskin pants and hunting shirts. I used to take my skins to the mill, and leave them there, and the farmers would leave me their value in grain; and for bear meat I received four dollars a hundred. In that way I bought flax and wool, and Mary carded it by hand, spun, wove, and made it into clothing. She done washing, knitting, housework, milking and churning, besides keeping herself, her children, and myself always cleanly and nicely dressed.]

Meshach is remembered most for his hunting. “I tilled my farm industriously until the leaves had fallen; when I would go into the woods and hunt ’til a little before Christmas and then set off to market with all that I could take.” By his own account, he killed “from 1,800 to 2,000 deer, from 300 to 400 bears, and about 50 panthers and catamounts, with scores of wolves and wildcats.” The mighty hunter has been accused by modern biologists of decimating the game animals in the area, but historian Charles E. Hoyer notes in 1935 that when Meshach died, game and fish were still plentiful. “It was the next generation that almost exterminated the wild life of Garrett County.”

The couple lived in many places around what is now Garrett County. They sometimes moved into old cabins without floors or doors, where they had to flush out rattlesnakes, and they sometimes had to build housing. They suffered some serious financial setbacks, and Meshach’s hunting was a necessity rather than a luxury. Once, when they were “completely ruined” by a streak of bad luck, Mary bought powder and lead on credit and convinced Meshach to go hunting. That fall he killed seventeen bears — the beginning of their return to solvency.

In addition to farming and hunting, Meshach also served (briefly and reluctantly) in the military during the War of 1812, built and ran a sawmill, took on the duties of Justice of the Peace at Sang Run where he lived, ran for political office (losing by 199 votes), raised money for construction of a Catholic church (Mary and he had converted to Catholicism), patented tracts of land that helped to establish Allegany County, and worked as an assessor in Cumberland.

Meshach enjoyed music and literature. He was a singer and fiddler, who often entertained friends and family. He taught his six sons to fiddle, and they were popular performers. A story was recounted in the local paper of a German violin professor who



Top: A photo of an exhibit at the first Garrett County Agricultural Fair in 1917 featuring Meshach Browning items, including his hunting gun that now resides in the Smithsonian.

Other items can be viewed at the Historical Museum — powder horn, bear trap, and bear skin typical of Meshach Browning’s time period. The Browning Company rifle is an antique cap lock.

asked to visit them to learn about their technique. This visit turned into a test of hospitality as the professor stayed for four months.

A horseback riding accident in 1835 or 1836 left Mary an invalid until her death in January 1839. Meshach wrote a poem as a tribute to his wife. The first verse describes his sorrow. *“I’ve heard that first and early love / outlives all after dreams; / But memory of my first great grief / To me more lasting seems.”* Nevertheless, Meshach decided to follow Mary’s advice and “seek some good woman as a companion.” His work in Cumberland required him to stay in lodgings, and there he met his landlady’s mother, Mary M. Smith, a widow. Meshach and Mary Smith were married in April 1841 and had a happy union until her death in 1857. Two years later, Meshach died of pneumonia while on a visit to his daughter Nancy.

Without Meshach Browning’s account of his years in Western Maryland, we would know far less about pioneer culture in this area. He had the good fortune to live a long and vigorous life, and fortunately for us, he had the talent to leave us a record of his experience.

The Garrett County Historical Society’s Historical Museum in Oakland houses many artifacts related to Meshach Browning. Visitors can see an intricately stitched quilt that his mother made for him; daguerreotypes and paintings of Meshach, his family members, and some of his homes, including three glass plate photographs made by another famous Garrett Countian, Leo Beachy; a picture of an exhibit at the first Garrett County Agricultural Fair in 1917 featuring Meshach’s hunting gun that now resides in the Smithsonian; an elderly copy of his autobiography; and many other items. The museum collection also includes a great deal of written material such as genealogical research, articles and historic accounts.

For those who are interested, Meshach Browning’s gravestone (which spells his first name Meshack), along with the burial sites of his two wives, can be found in a small cemetery on Friendsville Road (Route 42).

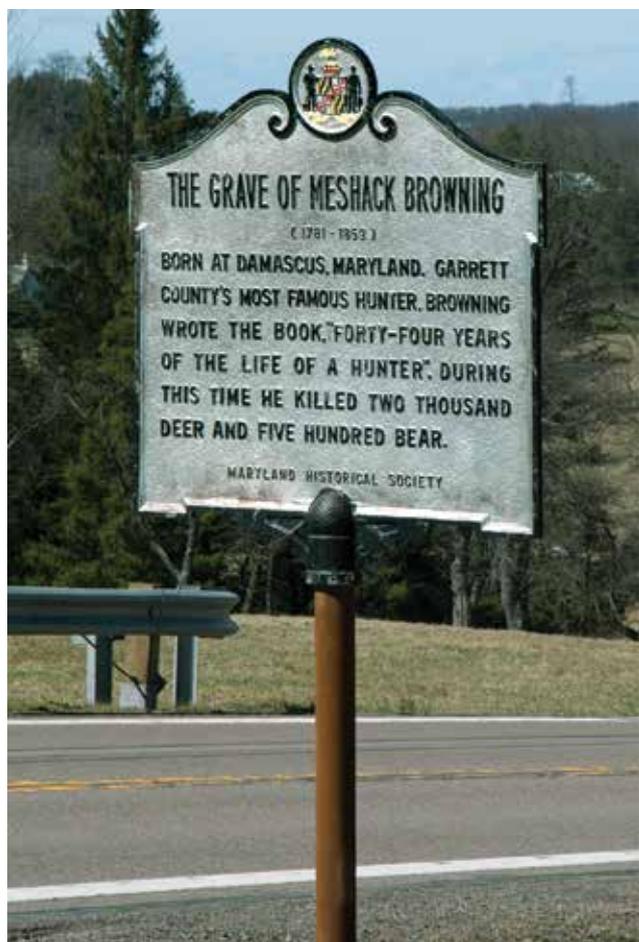
Author’s Note: *By the time Meshach Browning died in 1859, he had 122 descendants. Today there are many more twigs in his family tree. I am one of them, through his sixth child Nancy Ann; Alice Feather Eary, who kindly assisted me in finding materials at the museum and gave me access to her own research on Meshach Browning, is another, through his first child Dorcas.*

Garrett County Historical Museum
107 S. Second St., Oakland, MD 21550

Museum Summer Hours: May 1st,
Monday through Saturday 10:00 am - 3:00 pm.

Museum Winter Hours: January through May 1st,
Open Thursday, Friday & Saturday 10 am – 3 pm.

Closed Major Holidays. Please call first: 301-334-3226.



Top: The intricately stitched quilt that Meshach’s mother made for him can be viewed at the Historical Museum in Oakland, MD.

Above: Maryland State Historical marker at the entrance of the small cemetery on Friendsville Road (Route 42). Meshach Browning’s gravestone (which spells his first name Meshack), can be found there along with the burial sites of his two wives.