

Elizabethtown College 125th Anniversary
National Historic Preservation Trust This Place Matters Campaign & Campus Historic Building Survey
Based on the National Parks Service Historic American Building Survey
2024 Summer Creative Arts and Research Program SCARP
Ava Barton Class of 2027
Jean-Paul Benowitz, Director of Prestigious Scholarships and Fellowships and Public Heritage Studies



Walter E. Brown (1913 - 1998)

Walter E. Brown was born in Higgins, Schuylkill County. In 1930, he went to Reading to work on a farm for a doctor. "Later he worked "on the state highway" for four or five years before starting a nine-year stint in the steel foundry at Hamburg Pan Electric." Brown and his wife would eventually move to the Elizabethtown area and soon after "K" Ezra Bucher got Brown the job at Elizabethtown College.¹

To say that Walter E. Brown² was a dedicated groundskeeper to Elizabethtown College would be an understatement. Brown, affectionately known as "Brownie" was the Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds for the college for thirty-two years, beginning in 1948.³

The Elizabethtown campus was a very different place during this era. Much of the campus was a farm. "We farmed sweet corn, cabbage, corn, beans. The women used to do the canning." Says Brown. The new Thompson Gymnasium was a vegetable patch. Where Myer Hall grandly overlooks the Dell was an apple orchard. A creek meandered down from the sand quarry to where another apple orchard stood. "We used to pick apples and take them to Masonic Homes for storage." Brown says. "We used to make our own vinegar."⁴

In Brown's first few years at the college there were about 260 students and eight buildings. Throughout the '50s and '60s, Elizabethtown College "experienced a building boom, and Brown played a large role in making it happen." He was a jack of all trades and did a "little bit of everything – plumbing, heating, carpentry – at the College."⁵

¹ Elizabethtown College and Elizabethtown College, *Elizabethtown*, Internet Archive (Elizabethtown College, 1986), <https://archive.org/details/elizabethtown1989eliz/page/n137/mode/2up?view=theater&q=Walter>.

² "Walter E. Brown," Power Library, 2024.

https://digitalarchives.powerlibrary.org/papd/islandora/object/papd%3Aeliz-hi_764.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

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"At that time, the maintenance department consisted of two men. When Brown retired in 1979, he left a staff of about 20. "The more buildings we got, the more people I got," he explains. Some of the buildings on campus in 1948 were mere sheds, most of which Brown and his staff tore down. The first science building was an old wooden shed on the vegetable patch near Thompson Gymnasium. There was a shed for the Brethren to stable their horses, and a pig stable and chicken house where the College staff did its own butchering. "I tore them down," Brown says. The brick building behind Alpha was where the staff cooked apple butter. Wooden doors on the east side of the building led down to a cold cellar for canned goods. Upstairs was the kitchen. A dining room was located in the basement of Alpha. With no truck during his first few years at the College, Brown often found that he had to rely on his own resources. "We used to haul the sheets and pillowcases with wheelbarrows" from the residence halls to the basement of what was Fairview Hall (behind Nicarry), where "Harry Blough's wife did the laundry." Brown then bought a pick-up truck of his own, which he used on College business. Eventually, he turned it over to the College, but could continue to use it as his own. As Elizabethtown grew and its maintenance department expanded, the College bought its own truck, but the source of the original vehicle was never forgotten. "When I left, they gave me the pick-up I was driving," Brown says. Mowing the grass also called for manpower and ingenuity. "We mowed all the College lawns with a push mower," Brown recalls. "Then I made a Model A Ford into a tractor for the big patches, like the Dell." Brown prides himself on his staff's lawn-mowing capability to this day. "With two riding mowers and one big mower, we used to do the whole campus in two days and a half," he says. Brown's staff also took care of regular maintenance of furnaces and air conditioners, unless the problem was so big that they needed help from outside. That happened on a couple occasions, like the time Brown spent 30 straight hours in the boiler room of brand new Myer Hall during a snow storm until a repairman was flown in by helicopter to replace a burner that wouldn't stay lit. Then there was the time an underground electrical cable sprung holes, sending up little sparks along the line and knocking out the breakers. Students were sent to a local diner for dinner, and members of Brown's staff went to Baltimore for the wire. "It rained then; that was awful," he recalls. Brown was often called out at night to handle problems. When it snowed, he went out to the College immediately "to clean it off before the students trampled it down,"



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sometimes getting into good-natured snow-ball fights with the students. "Oh, I had my fun with them," he says. Once, Brown says, he was told by Ira Brandt, then head of residences in Ober Hall, to lock all the doors except the main entrance because "the boys wanted to have a panty raid." Brown did that. He also went one step better; he tied a rope to a tree and held the other end. When the students came back from Rider, he tripped them with the rope, dropping them in the mud. On Sundays, the gymnasium was locked, but Brown had to be there to take care of the coal furnace. At the east end, the students would open a window and jump down to get inside the locked building. Well, Brown decided he was going to teach these students a lesson. He installed a wash tub filled with 10 gallons of roofing pitch just inside the open window. "You could track that guy right to his room," he says. Brown knew how to handle his own workers, as well. One day he caught one of his men sleeping on one of the window ledges of a building instead of painting. Brown pulled the windows down and locked them. "He was hollering all afternoon that he couldn't get down. Brown says with a chuckle and a gleam in his eye. In Brown's basement are Elizabethtown College yearbooks dating back to 1921 that he and his wife, Mary, have purchased. They tell the story of Elizabethtown's changes, but for College history. Brown is a living memory himself. He cleaned out the woods and briars in the corner of College Avenue and Campus Road and made the picnic area back in the days when Lake Placida was half the size it is now. He tore out the wooden floor in the basement of Rider where students played basketball and filled it with concrete. Every morning he put up the flag at the top of Rider and took it down at night. When the College got its own organ. Brown put up the speakers in the tower of Rider. Brown was the inspector on three of the buildings constructed during his 32 years on the job, checking that "things were being done the way they were supposed to be." When Brown retired in 1979, about 300 people attended his retirement dinner at Willow Valley. The College named its maintenance department building the Brown Building in his honor.⁶

Brown retired in 1979 and at age 75 he still did a day's work. He worked "part-time/full-time" for Mount Joy Township "driving a truck, mowing grass, and laying blacktop." The wife of Gerald Risser, Mary Jean (Espenshade) Risser⁷, wrote the poem below to honor Walter E. Brown⁸:
"Brownie"

Director of Buildings and Grounds, you say
Yes, 32 years – almost to the day!
Though degrees in business, engineering and psychology he has none

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Gerald Risser," Find a Grave, accessed May 22, 2024. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/227258368/gerald-h-risser>

⁸ Elizabethtown College and Elizabethtown College, *Elizabethtown*, Internet Archive (Elizabethtown College, 1986), <https://archive.org/details/elizabethtown1989eliz/page/n137/mode/2up?view=theater&q=Walter>.

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Experience in each he has a ton.
He placed each wire, pipe and conduit
Where he knew Dick (Warfel) would not mow into it.
The boilers which heat each room
Are fretting – full of gloom.
They'll miss his 2 a.m. visit
To check if the pilot light is lit.
From registration through commencement, he set the stage.
No clock was needed as a gauge.
To his performance we all acclaim
And know the campus will never be the same.
His devoted Mary has supported his dedicated cause
Let's give this great couple a round of applause!

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