

# Obituaries

## JOHN NICHOLAS BROWN

John Nicholas Brown, real estate broker, connoisseur of art and architecture, and public servant, was born to John Nicholas and Natalie Bayard (Dresser) Brown in New York City on February 21, 1900. The birthplace may be seen as an anomaly, for Brown was as thorough a Rhode Islander as can be imagined. His family's roots went back to the founding of the colony in the seventeenth century, the forging of its mercantile success in the eighteenth, and the endowment of Brown University in the early nineteenth. Most of his subsequent life was spent as a resident of Rhode Island—in Newport or Providence.

Brown inherited vast wealth at a tender age. His father died when he was less than three months old, as did his uncle eleven days later, having taken sick on the voyage home from Europe to attend his brother's funeral. His father and uncle bequeathed a total of about \$30 million to the infant, whom the press soon dubbed 'The Richest Baby in the World.' Upon his college graduation, Brown came into an additional \$20 million.

Brown's secondary education was gained at St. George's School in Newport, a school for which he long retained a deep affection. From there he went to Harvard (not Brown, the college of many of his ancestors), from which he took an A.B. degree, magna cum laude, in 1922. He immediately embarked on a year's sojourn in Italy and other parts of Europe on a Harvard College Traveling Fellowship (without stipend). After this year abroad he entered business in Rhode Island but found it not to his liking. Thereupon he returned to Harvard and took an A.M. degree in fine arts in 1928. He continued to work, in 'desultory' fashion, on a Ph.D., but his marriage in 1930 to

Anne Seddon Kinsolving and his need to reorganize the family businesses following the Great Crash of 1929 caused him to give up the attempt at the doctorate 'for more realistic pursuits.'

In the 1930s Brown paid close attention to business affairs, particularly the family's textile business and its extensive real estate holdings scattered around the country. Some of those holdings were in Midwestern farm lands, which Brown actively managed during the Dust Bowl years in an attempt to salvage the fertility of the soil and the morale of the people who depended on it for their livelihood. The entrance of the United States into the Second World War deepened Brown's involvement in the life of his community and nation. He directed the Newport civil defense unit and served a two-year term as a Democratic councilman on the Newport Representative Council. Toward the end of the war and afterwards, he served as a civilian with the assimilated rank of colonel in General Eisenhower's Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Section, where he was involved in the repatriation of art works plundered by the Nazis. He returned to the United States in 1946, and shortly after was appointed by President Truman to be assistant secretary of the navy for air, a post he held until 1949. This federal service he later called 'the most significant, worthwhile, and exhausting period of my life.'

The arts and humanities held Brown's intense interest throughout his life. His academic training was in the fine arts, and in this general field his special love was for architecture. He actively collaborated with the great American gothic architect Ralph Adams Cram in the design and construction of a chapel at his prep school, St. George's, and donated funds for its construction. He was an incorporator and the first treasurer of the Mediaeval Academy of America and a founder of its learned journal *Speculum*. A devotee also of music, he learned the cello in order to play in string quartets, served on the board of trustees of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and was a

founder of St. Dunstan's College of Sacred Music. For years Brown was active in the affairs of Brown University's John Carter Brown Library, which commemorates his grandfather, the eminent book collector, and for which he laid the cornerstone as a four-year-old boy in 1904. His association with Brown University deepened thereafter. He served as a trustee, fellow, and senior fellow, and as chairman of the university's Planning and Building Committee.

Brown was elected to membership in the American Antiquarian Society at the 1947 annual meeting. Several of his ancestors had been members, including John Carter Brown. In writing to Society President Samuel Eliot Morison, Brown acknowledged his election to be 'a great honor' and added, 'I accept with a deep sense of gratitude, and with a real appreciation of the responsibilities involved in carrying on through another generation the long record of family interest in the membership of your distinguished society.' Unfortunately, Brown did not take an active part in the affairs of the Society, pleading an unwillingness to overextend himself beyond his prior commitments, especially to Brown University.

Brown counted his marriage 'the one true, deep, and complete happiness of my life.' He and his wife shared a passion for music and a love for the sea. The latter found expression in the family's ownership of a succession of sailing craft which were entered in numerous competitions, including three Newport-to-Bermuda Races. It was on board his latest yacht, at Annapolis, Maryland, that John Nicholas Brown died on October 9, 1979. His widow survives him, as do their three children, Nicholas, J. Carter, and Angela (now Mrs. Erwin Garvin Fisher).

John B. Hench

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