

Albert Brisbane

Batavia's 19th Century Radical

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Everyone in Batavia is familiar with the building at 10 West Main Street between the Post Office and the Genesee County Jail. Now serving as headquarters for the Batavia Police Department, for many years it was Batavia's City Hall. Local residents with an historical bent know it as the "Brisbane Mansion" since it belonged to Brisbane family members from 1855 when it was built until 1917 when it was sold to the City.

The mansion was erected by a son of James Brisbane, Batavia's first postmaster, first merchant, and one of the three wealthiest men in early Batavia. The son in question, George Brisbane, was very straight-laced, seemingly concerned mainly with money, and, frankly, not a very interesting fellow. So he is mentioned here primarily to provide a context for the focus of this essay—that focus being George's brother, Albert.

Albert Brisbane was born in 1809, three years earlier than George. Like George, he spent his childhood and most of his teen years in Batavia. However, unlike George, Albert evolved into a world-traveler, developed a disdain for personal wealth, and became a "free-spirit" of the first order.

There were early signs of the direction Albert's life would take. He was fascinated by the ancient history as well as modern science taught him by his mother, Mary, from all appearances a 19th century feminist. Reportedly, he enjoyed standing on the bridge across the Tonawanda (where the pedestrian bridge is now located), tossing stones into the water, watching the resulting ripples, and, though still a child, meditating on the meaning of our existence. In his later autobiography, Albert related stories of the pleasure he also received from hanging around the shops of village mechanics.

Albert grew dissatisfied with the schooling available in Batavia and, while a teenager, persuaded his father to fund further education in New York City. There, Albert came under the influence of a French teacher who encouraged even further education abroad. Subsequently, Albert again persuaded his father to fund additional studies, this time a six-year odyssey

throughout Europe where Albert met people such as Felix Mendelssohn, Franz Liszt, Victor Hugo, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Froebel.

While traveling about Europe, Albert was introduced to the notion of “Fourierism,” a form of utopian society developed by Charles Fourier, a French socialist. Albert was so taken with Fourierism that, upon his eventual return to the United States, he wrote and spoke extensively on the subject. His advocacy for Fourierism was instrumental in the formation of at least 40 such communities in this country.

For readers not familiar with Fourierism, here are a few quick facts. It’s based on the idea that if at least 1,600 persons took up residence in a communal setting, the personal interests of each individual would be sufficient to perform all the necessary work. Essentially communist in nature, the commune would provide a subsistence for all and any surplus would be equitably distributed. Although not necessarily central to their operation, the practice of “free love” was sometimes a part of Fourieristic communities.

A life-style involving free love may have had a special appeal to Albert. His personal diaries have survived from his travels in Europe and they are filled with intimate encounters. One is given to suspect that there may be many Brisbane descendants in France, Germany, Italy, England, and elsewhere. Over the course of his life, Albert had four wives, and during one period, more than one at the same time. His first wife, a European woman Albert brought back to Batavia with him, baptized one of their children at the St. James Episcopal Church when it stood on Ellicott Street. There is a surviving letter written by this wife in which she speaks highly of how nicely she was treated by Albert’s aunt, Margaret Cary, who lived in the Cary Mansion that once stood just east of the present YMCA building. That appears to have been in contrast to the cold shoulder given her by Albert’s parents.

Albert’s disdain for money-making is revealed by the conflict between Albert and his brother, George, over their father’s estate. The brothers inherited their father’s fortune jointly, but Albert was totally uninterested in managing the investments. Letters survive in which George berated Albert for failing to help out. Eventually, the conflict escalated to the level of law suits between the two. Through it all, there is no indication that Albert ever had employment of his own, but lived solely off the wealth inherited from his father.

Albert Brisbane’s fertile imagination led to many inventions, some of which actually got off the drawing board. They included compressed wood pavement, an oven designed to cook in a

vacuum, underground fertilization of plants, and a transportation system for moving mail and other matter through pneumatic tubes.

Although Albert fathered at least 10 children we know about, he proved to be totally inadequate as a father. That was a serious matter because, despite his many liaisons, Albert sometimes had to function as a single parent. Unfortunately, during these periods of time, he was so absorbed in “thinking great thoughts,” that he tended to overlook his children’s care. Stories have been handed down about neighbors finding Albert’s children wandering about unwashed and unfed. Despite that fact, one of his children became an internationally renowned newspaper editor—the famed Arthur Brisbane.

As an adult, Arthur Brisbane became a close associate of William Randolph Hearst. Eventually Arthur was the most widely-read newspaper journalist in the world, reportedly read by 30,000,000 readers each day. He also became the highest-paid editor of his time, earning \$260,000 a year by 1923. Like his grandfather, James Brisbane, Arthur became extremely wealthy. We in Batavia have been recipients of some of that largess. Arthur Brisbane gave the City the wading pool that used to be in Austin Park. He also provided the necessary funds to complete Austin Park, a park largely provided for in the will of a local jeweler, George Austin.

Except for Mary Brisbane, whose burial location has never been identified and could be behind the Post Office, most of the individuals mentioned in this essay are interred in the Batavia Cemetery on Harvester Avenue. Readers who would like to visit the grave sites of James, George, Albert, and Arthur will find them there.