

More on John Brown in North Elba

LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, April 22, 2005

LAKE PLACID — After reading our April 8 story, "John Brown: Revisited & Revised," Brendan Mills, curator of the John Brown Farm State Historic Site, called to draw my attention to an article from the New York Times Magazine of Oct. 20, 1929.

The reporter, Mary Lee, said:

"One time, Lyman Epps [Jr.] remembers, John Brown came to their house at night bringing a Negro with him, not one of the Negroes from 'Freeman's Home,' down in the hollow near Cascade Lakes, but a new fare. The man was an escaped slave who spent the night at the Epps house and the next day left with John Brown for the Canadian border."

Lee does not specify when the episode related by Epps was supposed to have occurred, so we don't know whether it supposedly happened when the Browns first came to North Elba and were renting the Flanders house on the Cascade Road (1849-51), or later (1857-59) after John Brown had returned to North Elba from the guerrilla campaign against slaveholders in Kansas, moving into the farmhouse built for the Brown family around 1855 by Brown's son-in-law.

Mills points to the 1929 New York Times Magazine article as one piece of documentary evidence of Underground Railroad activity in North Elba.

I'm not convinced, for several reasons:

First, Lyman Epps Jr. was known to sometimes embellish his recollections of John Brown. For instance, he claimed that his family ran into the Browns in Westport when both families were moving to North Elba, and that the two families traveled together on the final 30-plus-mile leg of their journey here in 1849.

In Ruth Brown's account of that move, however, she says that it was the family of Thomas Jefferson, another North Elba Black colonist, who met the Browns in Westport and traveled with them to North Elba:

"At Westport [John Brown] bought a span of good horses and hired Thomas Jefferson (a colored man, who with his family were moving to North Elba from Troy) to drive them. He proved to be a careful and trusty man, and so father hired him as long as he stayed there, to be his teamster. Mr. Jefferson, by his kind ways, soon won the confidence of us all. He drove so carefully over the mountain roads that father thought he had been very fortunate in meeting him."

Ruth makes no mention at all of the Lyman Epps family in connection with the Westport-North Elba expedition.

Second, Mary Lee's reference to "Freeman's Home," as if that were the entire North Elba Black colony, reeks of Alfred Donaldson, whose profoundly flawed "History of the Adirondacks" had been published only 8 years before. It's certainly not the way Epps would have phrased the account related in the Times.

Third, earlier in the Times Magazine article, Mary Lee takes someone's faulty account (I don't know whose) as gospel, claiming that "John Brown and his sons built [the John Brown farmhouse] for [Mary Brown] with their own hands. You can still see the marks their tools made on the wide boards." The house was not built by John Brown or his sons, but by Henry Thompson, who had married Brown's daughter Ruth in 1850. (Even Donaldson got this detail right!)

The point is, if Mary Lee presents one John Brown myth as fact, why should the reader trust her account of Epps' supposed (but not directly quoted) claim of the John Brown runaway slave episode?

The only other reference by an “eyewitness” to John Brown’s supposed Underground Railroad activity in North Elba — a July 1871 Atlantic Monthly article, “How We Met John Brown,” by Richard Henry Dana Jr. — has been exposed as an outright fabrication.

BRENDAN MILLS recalled another documentary reference to the presence of a runaway slave in North Elba, which local historian Mary MacKenzie also covered in her study of the North Elba Black colony. The escaped slave, whose name was Cyrus Thomas, had appeared on the Brown doorstep the very first morning after the family’s arrival in North Elba in May 1849. In Sanborn’s “Life And Letters of John Brown” (1885), Ruth Brown Thompson described the occasion:

“We all slept soundly; and the next morning the sun rose bright, and made our little home quite cheerful. Before noon a bright, pleasant colored boy came to our gate (or rather, our bars) and inquired if John Brown lived there. ‘Here is where he stays,’ was father’s reply. The boy had been a slave in Virginia, and was sold and sent to St. Augustine, Florida. From there he ran away, and came to Spring-field, where by his industry and good habits he had acquired some property. Father hired him to help carry on the farm, so there were ten of us in the little house; but Cyrus did not take more than his share of the room, and was always good-natured.”

From Ruth Brown’s account, it does not look like the appearance of a runaway slave on the Brown doorstep was something they expected, but it was certainly taken in stride. The young man, then 22, had clearly known that Brown was in North Elba and had been sent there by someone else, but not apparently with John Brown’s foreknowledge.

The fact that Ruth Brown presents the story of Cyrus Thomas’s appearance so matter-of-factly, but records no other appearance of runaway slaves — ever — during the family’s sojourn in North Elba, would also tend to indicate that no other runaway slaves presented themselves to John Brown in North Elba for help in escaping to Canada, at least to Ruth Brown’s knowledge.

Cyrus Thomas appears only on the 1850 North Elba census, as Black, living in the John Brown household, age twenty-three, laborer, born in Florida. He was not granted land by Gerrit Smith and his stay in North Elba was probably of short duration.

TO BE SURE, Brown was a known Underground Railroad conductor in Springfield, Mass., immediately before coming to North Elba.

Furthermore, during his involvement in the guerrilla skirmishes in Kansas, he conceived the notion of using the Underground Railroad to take weapons into the South to arm fortified outposts of freed Black revolutionaries who would wage war on slaveholders. One goal of his raid on the federal armory in Harper’s Ferry was to capture arms for his Underground Railroad fortresses.

It is for these reasons that Heritage New York has decided to include the John Brown Farm site and the Old Essex County Courthouse as part of New York’s Underground Railroad Heritage Trail program.

But the point of our April 8 article remains: There is no credible documentary evidence that either John Brown or anyone else in North Elba actively operated an Underground Railroad station here.