

# Remembering John Brown

*Last weekend's commemoration of John Brown's birth was the latest in a long series of annual visitations to the abolitionist's North Elba gravesite*

STORY BY LEE MANCHESTER, LAKE PLACID NEWS, MAY 20, 2005

John Brown, the radical abolitionist whose last home was here in North Elba township, was born on May 9, 1800.

Since 1923, people have made pilgrimages almost every May to Brown's grave in North Elba.

Last Saturday, a group organized by Newcomb schoolteacher Martha Swan gathered once more at the John Brown farm to remember him.

How did these gatherings start? How have locals felt about them? And how have they changed over the years?

Those are the questions we'll be approaching in this story. Some of them, we'll answer; others, we can only ask.

## **John Brown's body**

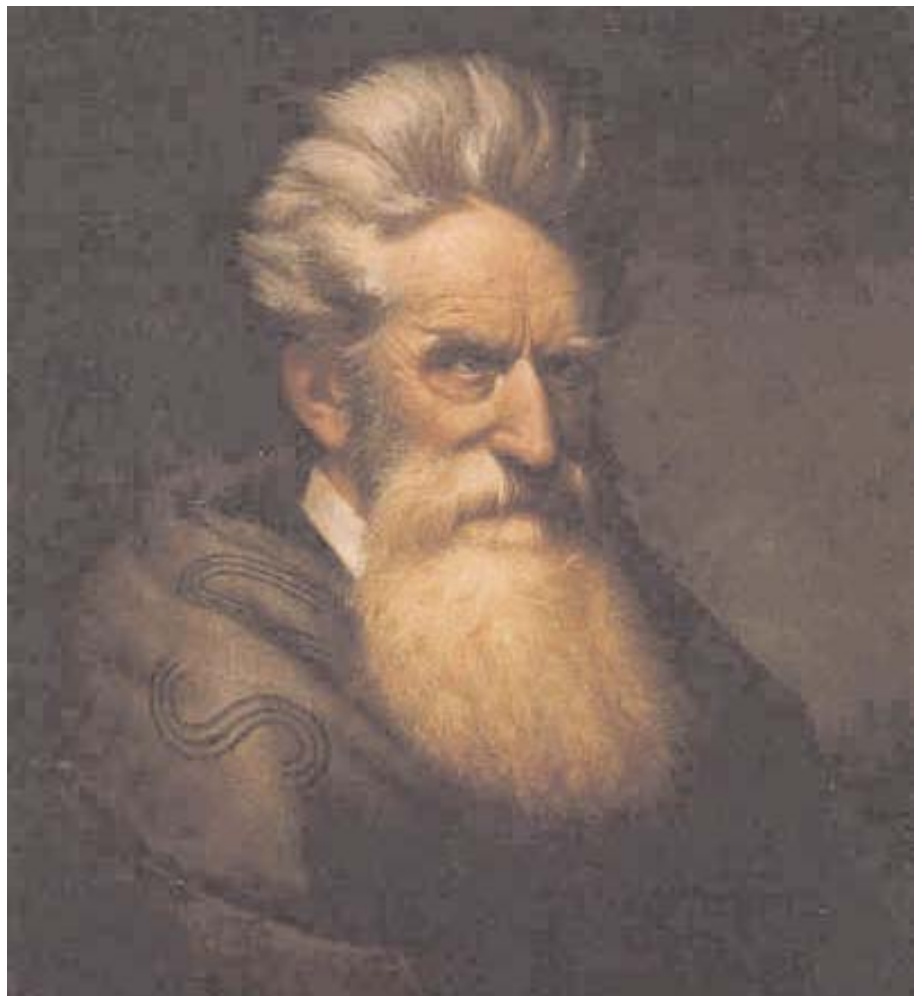
Born in Connecticut but raised in Ohio, John Brown was the son of a deeply religious man who hated slavery. As an adult, Brown was notoriously unsuccessful in business. He moved his family again and again, from Pennsylvania to Massachusetts to Ohio.

In May 1849, the Browns came to our own North Elba, living in a rented house that once stood on Route 73 at the edge of what is now the municipal golf course. Before leaving North Elba for Ohio in 1851, Brown bought the farm now associated with his name, where son-in-law Henry Thompson built a house for him in his absence.

In August 1855, Brown answered a call from five of his sons (he had 20 children, in all) to come to Kansas, where a guerrilla battle was waging

over whether that territory would become a slave or free state. On the night of May 23, 1856, Brown and six followers raided the homes of several pro-slavery men along Pottawatomie Creek, dragging them outside and hacking them to death in front of their families.

Brown's family returned to North Elba, setting up housekeeping in their new home while Brown went on tour, raising money and support for what would become his final operation: an assault on the federal armory in Harper's Ferry, Virginia. The idea was to seize sufficient weaponry to arm a slave rebellion that would trigger a revolution, overthrowing by force what the abolitionist movement could not do by politi-



NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Ole Peter Hansen Balling imagined John Brown, wrapped in a U.S. Army blanket, awaiting execution in his Virginia prison cell in 1859. Balling's portrait, however, was not painted until around 1873.

cal means.

Brown and his men initiated their assault on the night of Oct. 16, 1859. Taking the armory, they holed up in a nearby firehouse. Two days later, Brevet Col. Robert E. Lee (yes, *that* Robert E. Lee) led the U.S. Marines and several militia bands in a counterassault. Brown was captured, tried for treason by the state of Virginia, and executed on Dec. 2, 1859. His body was delivered to his widow Mary, who brought him home to North Elba. John Brown was buried on Dec. 8 next to a huge boulder, a glacial erratic, lying but a short distance from his house.

Anti-slavery politicians immediately distanced themselves from Brown.

Abraham Lincoln, for instance, was campaigning in Atchison, Kansas, on Dec. 2, 1859. After hearing of Brown's hanging, Lincoln said, "Old John Brown has just been executed for treason against the state. We cannot object, even though he agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong. That cannot excuse violence, bloodshed and treason. It could avail him nothing that he might think himself right."

Henry David Thoreau, however, looked upon John Brown as a kind of saint. In a eulogy essay titled "The Last Days of John Brown," published in the July 27, 1860 issue of *The Liberator*, Thoreau wrote, "Of all the men who were said to be my contemporaries, it seemed to me that John Brown was the only one who had not died. ... I never hear of any brave or particularly earnest man, but my first thought is of John Brown, and what relation he may be to him. I meet him at every turn. He is more alive than he ever was. He has earned immortality. He is not confined to North Elba, or to Kansas. He is no longer working in secret. He works in public, and in the clearest light that shines on this land."

Brown continued to be a contro-



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

This photograph of John Brown was taken by a Washington, D.C. portrait photographer in 1850, a year after Brown and his family first moved to North Elba. According to a handwritten notation at the bottom of the print, it was his family's favorite photograph of him.

versial figure, but gradually Thoreau's view prevailed over Lincoln's. By the 1870s, tourists were making their way to remote North Elba for the specific purpose of visiting John Brown's gravesite.

In August 1897, President William McKinley and several members of his cabinet made the pilgrimage to North Elba. As the president was leaving the grave enclosure, the story goes, someone began singing

"John Brown's Body" in low tones, and all present joined in the refrain.

It was not until the 1920s, though, that a regular, annual program commemorating John Brown was begun here.

#### **The first commemoration**

John Brown Day was the creation of J. Max Barber of Philadelphia, a prominent Civil Rights leader of the early 20th century.



COURTESY FREDERICK DOUGLASS CHAPTER, JOHN BROWN MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION

Members of the John Brown Memorial Association are gathered in July 1959 at the Brown gravesite to mark the 100th anniversary of his death.

Shortly after graduating from Virginia Union University in 1903, Barber became managing editor of a new journal, called *Voice of the Negro*, first published in January 1904 in Atlanta. The following year young Barber was one of the signators of the Niagara Declaration, a document that laid the way for the NAACP's creation four years later.

Barber was forced out of Atlanta after that city's race riots in September 1906, and the *Voice* ceased publication in 1907. Barber left the field of journalism and became a dentist, but continued his social activism.

Having moved to Philadelphia, in May 1922 Barber and a companion,

Dr. T. Spotuas Burwell, came alone to North Elba to lay a wreath on John Brown's grave "in the name of Negro Americans." They were met by a welcoming delegation from the local Chamber of Commerce and school children who had been released from school for the day so that they could witness the wreath-laying ceremony.

The next year, a group came along with Barber for the Brown Day ceremonies.

By 1924, Barber's pilgrimage had spawned an organization, the John Brown Memorial Association. The local chapter was led for many years by Harry Wade Hicks, a former YMCA secretary and missionary executive who had become secretary

of the Lake Placid Club — ironic, considering the vehement racism of Club founder Melvil Dewey.

Until Hicks's death in 1960, he was a key figure in every annual commemoration of John Brown Day at the abolitionist's gravesite. Hicks drew every aspect of the Lake Placid community into the Brown Day activities. After his passing, pilgrims lay two wreaths each May 9: first at the grave of Harry Wade Hicks in the North Elba Cemetery, then at the John Brown farm.

The John Brown Memorial Association continued its annual pilgrimages through at least 1986, according to the yearbooks of the society's Frederick Douglass Chapter

in New York City, recently given to the Lake Placid Public Library by Christine E. Hammond, daughter of chapter leader Alma C. Osborne.

But then, at some point, the yearly visits stopped.

### Commemoration revived

It was Russell Banks' novel, "Cloudsplitter," that revived John Brown in the popular imagination. Published in 1998, the novel offered a stirring fictional account of Brown's life and death as seen through the eyes of one of his sons.

It was the publication of "Cloudsplitter" that led to the revival of John Brown Day in 1999. The organization behind the new commemoration was not, however, a genteel society of mostly professional, middle-class African Americans, like the John Brown Memorial Association. Instead, John Brown's banner was taken up by a Boston-based organization called the New Abolitionist Society, whose magazine was called "Race Traitor."

"If the task of the 19th century was to overthrow slavery, and the task of the 20th century was to end legal segregation," read the flier

announcing the *new* John Brown Day, "the key to solving this country's problems in the 21st century is to abolish the white race as a social category — in other words, eradicate white supremacy entirely."

After a couple of years, local organizer Martha Swan created a group called "John Brown Lives!" that took on responsibility for John Brown Day.

Swan, now a schoolteacher in Newcomb, spoke briefly at the beginning of this year's Brown Day program.

"A woman once asked me, 'Why are you glorifying John Brown?' My answer was, 'Because he makes us uncomfortable.' And he damned well should," Swan said.

Activities for the 2005 John Brown Day commemoration, held on Saturday, May 14, took place at two sites: the Old County Courthouse, in Elizabethtown, where John Brown's body lay in state overnight before returning to North Elba, and the Brown homestead outside Lake Placid.

Despite the cool, drizzly weather last Saturday, the Old Courthouse gallery was packed at noon to hear

the featured speaker, Yale historian David Blight. He went straight to the point, examining the concept of celebrating the life of someone like John Brown.

"We are not here because we are nostalgic about the Civil War," Blight said. "We are here because this man acted from conviction, and he acted violently in a way that never makes us easy."

"John Brown forces us to face a whole host of ambivalences: inspiring and disturbing, a man of the highest ideals served by the most ruthless deeds."

The historian quoted a passage from a 1932 speech given at Harper's Ferry by NAACP founder W.E.B. Du Bois, a passage which for Blight best captured the unsettling meaning of John Brown's martyrdom:

"Some people have the idea that crucifixion consists in the punishment of an innocent man. The essence of crucifixion is that men are killing a criminal, that men have got to kill him ... and yet that the act of crucifying him is the salvation of the world. John Brown broke the law; he killed human beings. ... Those people who defended slavery had to execute



LEE MANCHESTER/LAKE PLACID NEWS

Author/actress Sandra Weber portrays 19th century journalist Kate Field, who raised the money to buy the John Brown farm so that it could be preserved as a public historic site.

John Brown, although they knew that in killing him they were committing the greater crime. It is out of that human paradox that there comes crucifixion.”

After Blight’s lecture, a few dozen Brown Day participants packed into their cars to make the 25-mile trek through the mountains to the abolitionist’s final resting place.

At the John Brown Farm State Historic Site, author Sandra Weber was ready for the final act of the day’s program. Standing under a canvas tent erected next to the gravesite, Weber gave a performance portraying journalist Kate Field.

Field, one of the female pioneers of the Adirondacks in 1869, is credited with raising the money needed to purchase the farm in 1870 from Alexis Hinckley, brother-in-law of John Brown’s son Salmon. The property was transferred to the state of New York a quarter century later.

“Field said that she could not leave the Adirondacks without making a pilgrimage to [John Brown’s] North Elba grave,” Weber writes in the current issue of Adirondack Life magazine. “Standing beside John Brown’s tomb, ‘plucking roses and buttercups that sprang from the giant’s heart,’ she envisioned the entire history of America’s Civil War.”

Weber quoted from a lecture Field gave while on tour following her Adirondack expedition, eulogizing John Brown:

“Skilled in mountain strategy, I saw John Brown come to the Adirondacks, in 1849, hoping to find the nucleus of a Black army in the colony of fugitive slaves to whom Gerrit Smith had given lands in Essex County. [By the way, not one of the Black colonists in North Elba were fugitive slaves. Fields was uncritically repeating a legend someone else had shared with her.] I saw him turn to the stouter, sterner mind and muscle of his own sons, reared to

look God and nature in the face, he still clinging to the Adirondacks, as if from them came inspiration.

“The moral of the Adirondacks is freedom!,” Field, in Weber’s person, concluded. “Off with your hats, down on your knees, fire minute guns over the grave, sing the hymn that gave us liberty, for John Brown’s soul is marching on.”

#### Questions remain

This story about John Brown Day 2005, we have to admit, is far from complete. We’ve put together as much information as we could in the time that we had, but this article leaves several questions unanswered. Here are just a few of them:

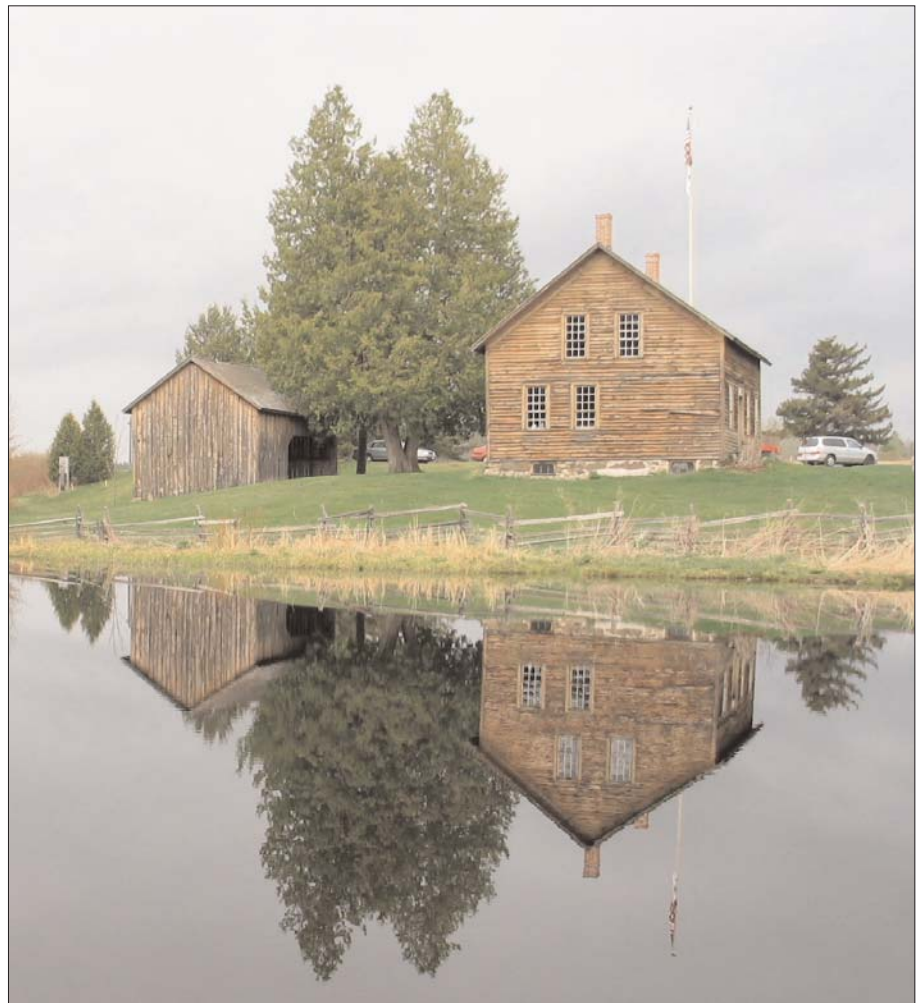
- What happened to the John Brown Memorial Association?

- How did native Placidians view the solemn festivities that took place at the John Brown farm each May 9, from 1922 through the 1980s?

- What was the role of Lake Placid Club Secretary Harry Wade Hicks in organizing the old Brown Day activities — and how did his boss, Melvil Dewey, reconcile Hicks’s involvement with Dewey’s own views on racial matters?

- The modern John Brown Day has been appropriated by people with nearly as radical an outlook as Brown himself. But what do most folks today really know about John Brown, and what do they think about him?

The next time we look in the Lake Placid News at John Brown Day commemorations, we will try to answer some of these questions.



LEE MANCHESTER/LAKE PLACID NEWS

The Brown house at the John Brown Farm State Historic Site, North Elba.