

John Brown's body

A new guidebook leads you on the trail taken by the radical abolitionist's coffin in December 1859 on the way home to North Elba after the Harper's Ferry raid

by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, December 9, 2005

A new guidebook looks forward to the 150th anniversary, four years from now, of radical abolitionist John Brown's burial at his North Elba farm outside Lake Placid.

The 24-page illustrated booklet, "On the Trail of John Brown: What Mary Brown Saw," was published this summer by the Essex County Historical Society and Adirondack Architectural Heritage.

The guidebook is based on a historic tour AARCH has offered for the last three years. The tour retraces the last stages of Mary Brown's journey home from Harper's Ferry, Va., with the remains of her abolitionist husband after his disastrous assault on the federal armory there.

Though the AARCH tour now starts in Vergennes, Vt., we followed it only from the point where it picks up in Essex County, at the former Lake Champlain ferry landing on Barber Point in Westport township.

JOHN BROWN, a tanner, surveyor and abolitionist, came to North Elba from Ohio in 1849 to lend his support to a colony of free Black New Yorkers who'd been given land by philanthropist Gerrit Smith.

Brown left North Elba in 1856 to join in the bloody guerrilla war being waged against those who wanted Kansas to become a slave state.

Three years later, Brown set out from North Elba with a party to raid a federal munitions dump in Harper's Ferry, Va. He hoped to arm local slaves, thereby triggering a nationwide revolt that would end the institution of slavery forever in America.

Instead, Brown's raid ended in dis-

mal failure. Ten of his men were killed, two of them his own sons (a third had died earlier in Kansas). Other members of the party, including Brown himself, were captured and put on trial for treason.

John Brown's raid began on Oct. 17, 1859. It lasted less than 36 hours, ending when federal troops commanded by Col. Robert E. Lee surrounded the armory. By the end of October, Brown had been tried and sentenced to death.

Despite pleas for his life from such prominent abolitionists as Henry David Thoreau, John Brown was executed on Friday, Dec. 2, in Charlestown, Va., the gallows guarded by 1,500 troops and

militiamen.

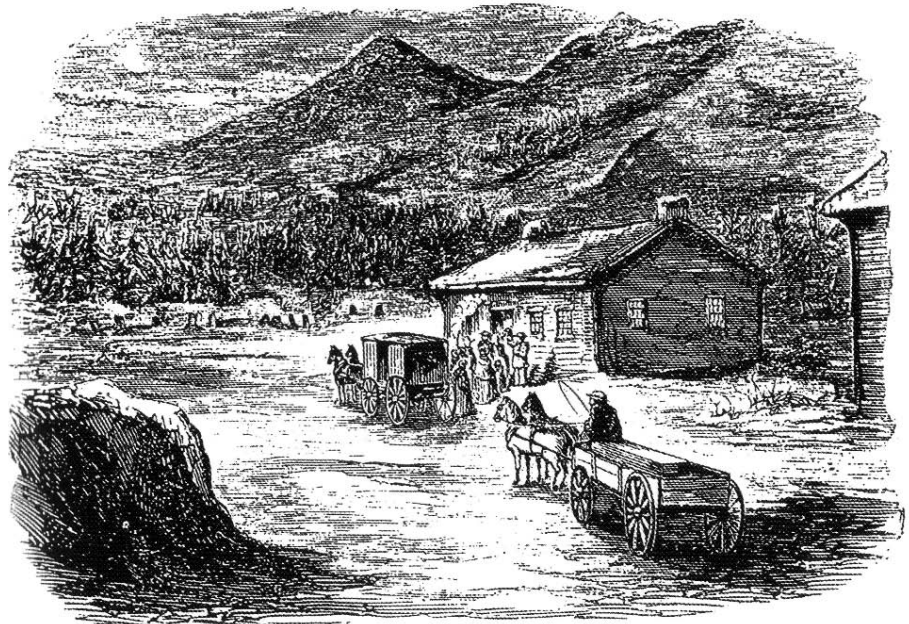
At the moment scheduled for his execution, a 100-gun salute was fired in Brown's honor in Albany.

Late that afternoon, his body was delivered by rail to Harper's Ferry, eight miles from Charlestown, where his widow waited.

The passage of Brown's body home to North Elba became a focal point of sentiment both for and against slavery. When his coffin arrived in Philadelphia, a riot nearly ensued. By the time it reached New York, however, on Saturday, Dec. 3, Mary Brown was met only with support.

"Mrs. Brown and her friends remained in New York over the Sabbath, proceeding northwards at 5 a.m. of Monday," reported the Elizabethtown Post in its Dec. 10, 1859 issue. "They reached Troy by noon and left that place for Vergennes at 6, where they arrived on the morning of Tuesday.

"At Vergennes, a large number escorted the sad cortege out of the city. The party crossed the lake to Westport, at Barber's Ferry, and there were furnished with conveyances for North Elba."



An engraving of political cartoonist Thomas Nast's on-the-spot sketch of John Brown's funeral cortege arriving at the Brown farm in North Elba on Dec. 7, 1859, published in the Dec. 24, 1859 issue of the New York Illustrated News. Nast is best known today for his classic engraving of Santa Claus for the cover of the January 3, 1863 issue of Harper's Weekly.

TODAY, BARBER POINT is still in the hands of the Barber family, but it no longer receives ferry boats from Vermont. An RV campground occupies part of the site, and a cabin watches over the ferry landing.

Just down the road stands the Barber Point Lighthouse. Built in 1873, it was decommissioned in 1936. Since then, it has been used as a private residence.

To reach Barber Point from Westport, head south on state Route 9N toward Port Henry, then turn left on Camp Dudley Road. Go about 1 mile to Barber Lane, then turn left. Just after passing the Barber farmhouse on your left, you will see the Barber Homestead RV Park on your right, on Ferry Landing Way.

The Brown funeral cortege rode from Barber Point in a sleigh sent from Westport, driven by a Mr. Milholland, who took them all the way to Elizabethtown that day.

Shortly after turning out of Barber Lane toward the Westport-Port Henry Road, Mary Brown and company passed a tiny, stone schoolhouse, standing by itself in a field. Built in 1816, it stands there still, the oldest surviving school building in Essex County. That day, according to the new guidebook, “the cortege received much attention from the school children.”

Arriving shortly in Westport, the party took lunch at Person’s Hotel, one of the many downtown buildings that perished 17 years later in a massive fire. The brown shingle Westport Library, now standing up on the hill behind the former hotel site, was built in 1888.

HEADING WEST from Westport on Route 9N, modern-day travelers join the historic Northwest Bay-Hopkinton Turnpike. Built between 1787 and 1810, it was the first major road carved into the heart of the Adirondack wilderness, making possible the settlement of many communities, including North Elba and Lake Placid.

On Tuesday, Dec. 6, 1859, Mary Brown and company also took the Northwest Bay Road toward Elizabethtown, seven miles away, where they would spend the night. They had traded their sleigh in for a wagon at



Thomas Hovenden’s painting, “The Last Moments of John Brown” (1884), hangs in the deYoung Museum, San Francisco. The painting depicts Brown kissing an African American baby as he is led to the gallows — an event that never happened. The account was contrived by a New York newspaper for its highly dramatized rendition of Brown’s execution in Charlestown, Va.

Westport, since the morning’s sleet had turned to rain.

“About 6 o’clock in the evening of Tuesday, in a dreadful storm of wind and rain, they entered our village,” reported the Elizabethtown Post, “Mrs. Brown and Messrs. Wendell Phillips of Boston and Miller McKim of Philadelphia in one carriage, soon followed by another containing the remains of the deceased.”

Phillips and McKim were nationally known abolitionists.

“They stopped at Adam’s Hotel,” the Post continued, “where every attention was paid to the weary travelers by the kind landlord and his lady; and the body was taken to the Court House, and

there given in charge for the night to several of our young gentlemen, who freely offered their services.”

Adams’ Hotel, originally built on another site in 1808, had been moved in 1830 to a site across from the courthouse. When a huge expansion called the Mansion House was constructed next to it in 1872, the original inn became known as The Annex until 1968, when the expansion was razed to make way for a new grocery market.

Today, “Adam’s” is known as the Deer’s Head Inn.

Across the street, the Old County Courthouse — where John Brown’s body was given sanctuary the night of Dec. 6, 1859 — has an even more com-

plex architectural history.

Essex County's first courthouse was built on an acre of land in 1809, but it burned shortly thereafter. Another was built in 1823; it, too, burned down.

The third time, though, seems to have been the charm. The first story of the existing brick building was erected in 1823 and 1824. A second story was added in 1843, and court was actually held for a time in the upper room. Today, the second story has been removed from the inside, and the single large, open chamber is used for the Essex County Board of Supervisors' monthly meetings.

Inside the Old County Courthouse, visitors will find a bold reminder of the night John Brown's body sojourned there: a huge oil painting, "John Brown's Trial at Charlestown, Va.," by David C. Lithgow, commissioned in 1923 by the county.

'ABOUT 4 O'CLOCK on Wednesday morning, although it was dark and storming furiously, young Mr. [Henry] Adams [son of Sheriff Elisha Adams, the hotel proprietor] started for North Elba as avant courier," reported the Elizabethtown Post, "to apprise the

family and friends of their approach and that the funeral would take place on Thursday. ... At about 6 o'clock, Mrs. B. and her companions resumed their journey, followed by the corpse."

The funeral cortege that left Elizabethtown that morning continued along the Northwest Bay Road. Called Water Street today, the turnpike joins Route 9N just outside the hamlet of Elizabethtown before steeply climbing to the top of Spruce Hill, then dropping even more steeply toward Keene Center. The descending road provides one of the best roadside views available of the Adirondack High Peaks.

Turning right onto state Route 73 at a "T" intersection near a cemetery, the road passes through Keene hamlet and crosses a bridge.

While modern-day Route 73 continues uphill over the Au Sable River bridge, the old Northwest Bay Road turns right onto Church Street. The old road climbs long and steeply by the side of an old brook before briefly rejoining Route 73.

The old road turns again onto Alstead Hill Lane at the signs for the Bark Eater Inn and the Adirondack Rock & River Guide Service. It passes

through the Sentinel Range wilderness north of Pitchoff Mountain before reaching, at last, North Elba.

Local historians have been uncertain if Mary Brown and friends actually used the old road for the final leg of her journey, or instead took a new bypass running south of Pitchoff, skirting the Cascade Lakes, that had been completed just the year before.

The old road between Keene and North Elba was incredibly rugged, referred to by old-timers as "6 miles, 6 hours."

The Cascade bypass, however, was not much of an improvement and was labeled downright dangerous by many an early tourist. One wayfarer said it was "ten miles of rocks and mudholes," and the stretch past the lakes, wedged between precipitous mountains, "so narrow that the hubs of the wheels almost impended over the water."

Which way did John Brown's body take?

The abolitionist Wendell Phillips, who accompanied Mary Brown, left an account of their journey that clearly identifies the route they traveled from Keene to North Elba: the northern route, now long-abandoned, affectionately known here as the Old Mountain Road.

"Two miles beyond Keene we begin to ascend the mountain in good earnest," Phillips wrote. "When we got to the steepest part, mercy to the horses induced us to alight; nor did we reenter the vehicle until we had passed the crest of the mountain.

"Near the top we came to a lily pond, from whose southern border Pitch-Off Mountain raises almost perpendicularly several hundred feet in height; the scenery is here truly majestic, the gorge is narrow, that the really towering mountains on either side seem more overshadowing than they really are."

To have seen along their way "a lily pond from whose southern border Pitch-Off Mountain raises," the Brown funeral cortege must have traveled by a route that went north of Pitchoff: the Old Mountain Road.

Motorists following the trail of the Brown party should note, however, that



On Dec. 6, 1859, the John Brown funeral cortege passed this 1816 stone schoolhouse near Barber Point, in Westport township, on its way home to North Elba.

the roughest patch of the Old Mountain Road — a four-mile stretch between the end of Alstead Hill Lane and the beginning of North Elba's Mountain Lane — is now a hiking and cross country ski trail, impassable to motorists.

To complete their journey to the John Brown Farm State Historic Site, motorists will have to turn around at the Rock & River trailhead's parking area, return to Route 73, and take the "new" 1858 Cascade Road up to North Elba.

At a fork in the road just past Lake Placid's Olympic ski-jump towers, take a left, and then turn left again onto John Brown Road. An old cast-iron marker on the corner points the way to John Brown's grave.

'MRS. B AND her companions ... followed by the corpse ... reached their destination at night fall the same day," reported the Elizabethtown Post. "The meeting of the mother and children and bereaved daughters-in-law, with the coffin in their midst, was, it is said, most deeply affecting."

Bill Nye, a local guide who had become a close friend of the Brown family, met the cortege upon its arrival.

"When John Brown's body was brought to North Elba," Nye later recalled, "Mrs. Brown requested me to have it carried up stairs and put it in shape for the public to view. She did not want that I should have anyone with me unless it was necessary. She did not know in what condition the body might be in coming over the rough roads from Westport."

According to the Post, Mary Brown needn't have worried on that account.

"The features of the deceased, notwithstanding the length of time, were in wonderful preservation, up to the interment," said the Post.

The funeral took place on Thursday, Dec. 8, 1859, the day after Mrs. Brown, Wendell Phillips and Miller McKim arrived with the casket at the Brown homestead, a plain-board frame house with a single room below and an open, partially finished attic above.

THE FUNERAL SERVICE, held inside the tiny Brown farmhouse, started with the singing of one of John

Brown's favorite hymns, "Blow, Ye, the Trumpet, Blow" by Lyman Epps Sr. and Jr., two members of the North Elba Black colony.

Two men from Burlington, Lucius Bigelow and the Rev. Joshua Young, had arrived at the Brown farm late that morning. The day before, they had decided to attend on the spur of the moment. They had missed the last ferry out of Vergennes, however, and had been forced to wait there overnight.

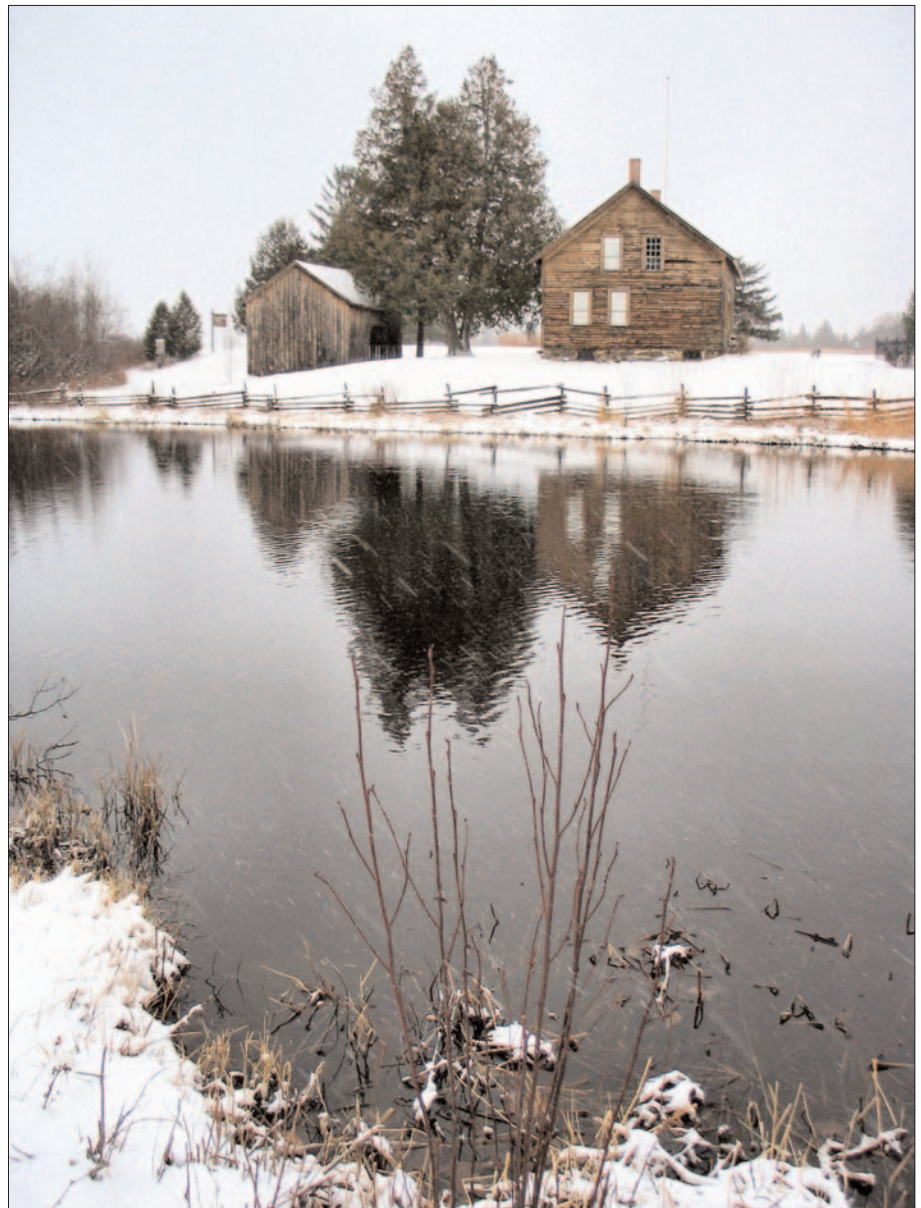
After the Eppses finished singing, Phillips approached Young with a request.

"Rev. Young, you are a minister,"

Phillips said. "Admiration for this dead hero and sympathy with his bereaved family must have brought you here, journeying all night through the cold rain and over the dismal mountains to reach this place. It would give Mrs. Brown and the other widows great satisfaction if you would perform the usual service of a clergyman on this occasion."

Young led the gathering in an impromptu prayer.

"Mr. McKim next related many incidents of Mrs. Brown's visit to and experience in Virginia," reported the Post, "and their journey thence after acquir-



The John Brown Farm State Historic Site, outside Lake Placid.

ing possession of her husband's remains."

The main oration, however, came from Wendell Phillips, who likened Brown's abortive raid on the Harpers Ferry armory to the Revolutionary War battle at Bunker Hill, seeing it as the start of a great liberating war that would end in freedom for America's slaves.

"History will date Virginia Emancipation from Harper's Ferry," Phillips said. "True the slave is still there. So, when the tempest uproots a pine on your hills, it looks green for months — a year or two. Still, it is timber; it only breathes — it does not live — hereafter."

History proved Phillips right. Within two years of John Brown's execution, the Civil War had begun, resulting ultimately in the Emancipation Proclamation.

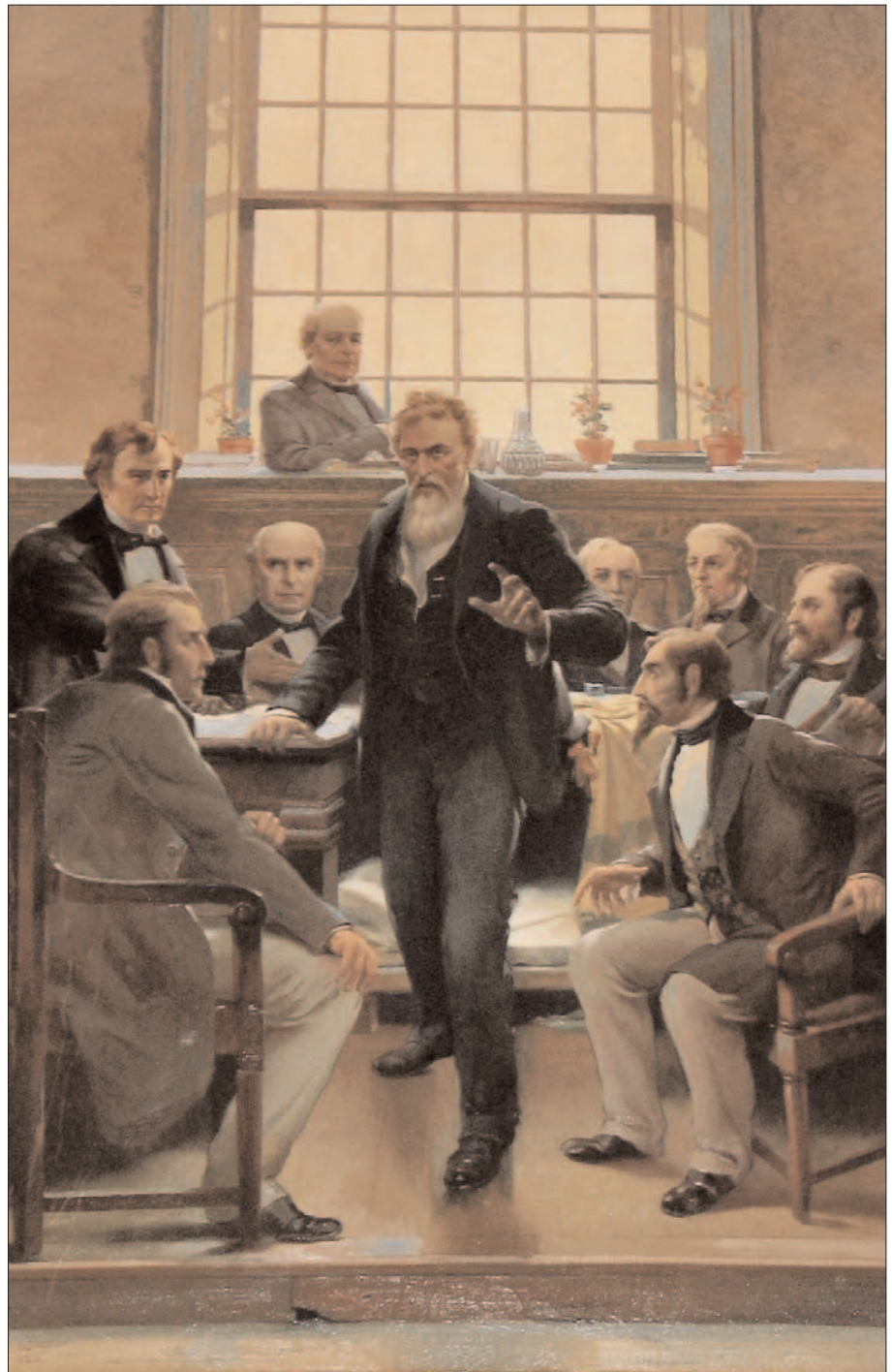
After Phillips' speech, which lasted a little more than 10 minutes, another hymn was sung. Then John Brown's coffin was placed on a table outside the house, laying open for a time before being buried by Bill Nye near a huge boulder in the dooryard.

'LET US DRAW the veil over the sad picture," said the Elizabethtown Post at the end of its coverage of John Brown's funeral. "Let us tread lightly over his ashes.

"If, as his friends predict, he will hereafter be honored as a Liberator, a Hero, a Patriot; and his motives approved and blessed by future generations; and his tomb the shrine to which the friends of liberty will make pilgrimages — so be it.

"But if, on the other hand, the darkest obloquy shall settle down and forever rest upon his memory, and all good men condemn him; and his name and deeds be held in deep execration in all time; even then, the energy and firmness of the man will be admired; and there will be lingering hope that his errors were more of the head than the heart.

"But whatever be the final judgment of his fellowmen, his acts and motives are now before a higher tribunal, one that cannot err — and there, we hope, Mercy will ever make up for all failure of duty."



"John Brown's Trial at Charlestown, Va.," by David C. Lithgow (1923), hangs in the Old County Courthouse in Elizabethtown.

You can read "On the Trail of John Brown: What Mary Brown Saw" on the Adirondack History Center Museum's Web site. Go to adkhistorycenter.org and click on the link to "Self-Guided Tour."

You can write for a hard copy of the booklet to Adirondack

Architectural Heritage, 1790 Main St. #37, Keeseville NY 12944, or call them 834-9328.

You can also write for a copy to the Adirondack History Center Museum, P.O. Box 428, 7590 Court St., Elizabethtown NY 12932, or call them at 873-6466.