

Tour retraces trail taken by John Brown's body

By LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, August 16, 2002

What if a pair of glasses could let you see the past alongside the present, wherever you looked, all around you?

That's just what a series of 29 tours organized by Adirondack Architectural Heritage is doing this summer. Tour guests get a new view of the old Adirondacks, still alive in the architecture of its early settlers.

On Monday, AARCH — the short name for the 12-year-old heritage organization based in Keeseville — took about 20 guests on a unique tour from Elizabethtown through Keene to a 19th century farmhouse in North Elba township outside Lake Placid. The tour retraced the final stages taken when John Brown's widow, Mary Brown, returned home in December 1859 with her husband's body.

JOHN BROWN, a tanner, surveyor and abolitionist, came to North Elba from Ohio in 1849 to lend his support Timbuctoo, a settlement made up of free black farmers who'd been given land by philanthropist Gerrit Smith.

In 1856 Brown traveled to Kansas 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 dismal 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, 8 miles away, 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, Mary Brown was met only with support.

MONDAY'S AARCH tour followed the progress of John Brown's body from its arrival in Elizabethtown on Tuesday, Dec. 6, 1849, until its return to the Brown farm after dark the following day.

The tour's focus was twofold. Paula Dennis, AARCH program director, had originally created the tour because of her interest in the Northwest Bay Trail — the original 19th century

turnpike that connected Westport, Elizabethtown, Keene, Lake Placid and Saranac Lake — and the historic architecture that had sprung up along it.

Freelance author Sandra Weber, on the other hand, was interested in the life of Mary Brown. Weber's latest project is a biography of Brown's widow. The writer served an internship last year at Harper's Ferry doing research, and she has created a character in period dress who tells the story of Mary Brown in a performance piece of her own design.

THE TOUR STARTED at the Adirondack History Center Museum, housed in the old school building at the corner of Route 9N and Church Street in Elizabethtown. The 20 or so participants in the tour — mostly retirees, mostly AARCH members — were given a presentation on the “Dreaming of Timbuctoo” exhibit that is on display through Oct. 14 at the museum.

A creation of John Brown Lives!, “Dreaming” was first opened three years ago to revive public awareness of the Timbuctoo experiment. In that time it has been on display all over New York state.

“Hopefully, it will be touring for the next couple of years,” said Martha Swan, executive director of John Brown Lives! “It's bringing this little-known story back to life for many, many people.”

DOWN A PATH behind the museum and a short walk through a small wood, museum director Margaret Gibbs led the group to its next stop: the Hand House. It was built in 1849 by Augustus Hand, a prominent local politician who had just been elected to a seat on the New York state Supreme Court.

According to Dennis, the house is an example of a transitional period in home architecture. The gables of the two-story brick house reflect the Federal style; the columns, Greek Revival; and the large, open central hall and stairway inside, the Georgian mode.

The Hand House has been restored and preserved as a kind of living museum by the Bruce L. Crary Foundation, a scholarship organization that uses the house as its headquarters.

Besides having the Northwest Bay Trail running through its front yard, the Hand House has an even more direct connection to the homecoming pilgrimage of John Brown's body. Judge Hand's 20-year-old son, Richard, stood guard over the abolitionist's coffin with three others in the Essex County Courthouse the night it lay there in state before its final trek to North Elba.

“NO ONE KNOWS the Trouble I've Seen,” sang Sandra Weber, attired in period dress, as she entered the garden behind the Adirondack History Museum, the third stop on the AARCH tour. While the tour group crowded into the shade of a modest gazebo, trying to escape the glaring sun on one of this summer's hottest days, Weber told them a bit about the famous (or infamous) abolitionist's wife.

Born in 1826 in Meadville, Pa., Mary Ann Day was 16 years old when she met the 32-year-old John Brown, a widower with five children. Her older sister, who had gone to work for Brown as a housekeeper, asked Mary to come help. She was taken with the man — and so, evidently, was he with her.

“One day, he walked up to her and handed her a letter,” Weber said. “She knew what it was, and she was afraid, and she put it under her pillow that night before she looked at it.”

Weber spoke a bit of the Harper's Ferry raid:

“Nobody knows for sure why he didn't just take the guns and run,” Weber said. Instead, he and his companions stayed, defending the armory, “until Robert E. Lee came to take him.”

The Harper's Ferry incident polarized the nation, and newspapers were hungry for stories about John Brown. The New York Times interviewed Mary Brown, asking her about widespread speculation that her husband was insane.

"I never knew of his insanity," Mrs. Brown said, "until I read of it in the newspapers."

"Packing clothes to send to her husband in jail, Mary Brown wept," Weber said. "'Poor man,' she cried softly, 'he will not need them long.'

"And he didn't."

AT THE END of the day, Weber spoke again to the tour group about Mary Brown and her relationship with John.

The common wisdom concerning their marriage, according to a 1984 article in Adirondack Life magazine by Robert Gordon, said that "theirs was not a marriage of love ... (but) of convenience."

Weber read the group two letters sent between the Browns that told a very different story of their life together. The first, written by John Brown in 1847 while he was away from home, bespoke a very affectionate, very strong mutual partnership between him and Mary.

The second, written by Mary to John from Philadelphia while she was on her way to visit him in the Harper's Ferry jail, reached him when she did: the day before his execution.

"When you were at home last June," Mary Brown wrote, "I did not think that I took your hand for the last time."

The woman, partner to her husband in their home as well as in their cause, was clearly heartbroken at the prospect of John Brown's impending execution, yet she was also confirmed in the righteousness of their cause.

"You will remember that Moses was not allowed to enter the land of Canaan after Israel's 40 years in the wilderness," she wrote, "nor will you see the fruit borne of what you have done." But fruit, Mary Brown assured her John, there would be.

Within two years of John Brown's execution, the War between the States had broken out. Before it was over, Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing at last the human slaves held in the Confederate states. Many believe that the Harper's Ferry raid was a key factor in the escalation of tensions that made the Civil War inevitable.

THE NEXT STOP for the John Brown tour group was the Deer's Head Inn, situated on Route 9N in Elizabethtown directly across from the Essex County Courthouse. Innkeeper Elisha Adams — also sheriff of Essex County — had invited Mrs. Brown to stay at the Deer's Head the night of Dec. 6, 1859, when she arrived at the end of her long journey that day from Rutland, Vt.

It was Sheriff Adams who suggested that John Brown's body be kept in the courthouse while Mary rested, and his son Henry was one of the four young men who stood watch over the casket that night.

The inn, a simple, two-story frame building, had been built originally in 1808 on another site. It was moved across from the courthouse in 1830. 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.

Across the street, the courthouse where Brown's body was kept has an even more complex architectural history. The first courthouse, built on an acre of land in 1809, 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' bimonthly meetings.

AFTER A PIT stop at a nearby convenience store, the group started on their journey up the old Northwest Bay Trail to Keene. Most of the trail is still open; only a one-mile stretch, halfway between Keene and North Elba, is no longer maintained for vehicles. That stretch is still traversed by cross-country skiers each winter, however, as part of the Jack Rabbit Trail.

Knowing we were driving our cars on a road first laid out between 1787 and 1810, a question naturally arose as our eyes were cast upon house after house: Was this there then? As Dennis of AARCH observed, there is a distinct character to the homes along Water Street in Elizabethtown, a portion of Route 73 in Keene, and the Church Street cutoff from the state highway where the Northwest Bay Trail ran.

The old trail turns off 73 again almost as soon as it steeply rejoins the highway from Church Street, taking a right onto Alstead Hill Road. The 19th century turnpike runs past the Bark Eater Inn, circa 1790, a former stagecoach stop, to a trailhead about 3 miles farther down the road. The trailhead is maintained by a private guide company, the Adirondack Rock and River Guide Service. One of the houses standing by the trailhead dates from the early 1800s.

On the other end of the closed, one-mile stretch of the Northwest Bay Trail, the dirt-and-gravel Old Mountain Road picks up, connecting again to Route 73 just past the entrance to ORDA's Mount Van Hoevenberg facility on the way to Lake Placid from Keene.

Historians are not sure whether Mary Brown traveled the Northwest Bay Trail on the final day of her journey home with John Brown's casket, or if she took the Cascade Road — now Route 73 — which had been started the year before. The Bay Trail was rocky and steep — “six miles, six hour,” said local historian emeritus Mary MacKenzie about the Keene-North Elba segment.

But according to Weber, MacKenzie also expressed her own hope that one day it would be determined that the body of that “old mountain man” had been transported home on the Old Mountain Road. It just seemed fitting, she said.

THE LAST STOP for the John Brown tour was also the last stop for John Brown: his grave site and his home on the farm where he'd left his wife in North Elba earlier that fall.

The Browns' first North Elba home was a log cabin situated on what is now the Craig Wood municipal golf course, several miles back on Route 73 toward Keene. According to Brendan Mills, the caretaker of the John Brown Farm State Historic Site, Brown would probably have preferred to have another log cabin, “but the reason you build log cabins is because you don't have boards. Building with boards is quicker, and when this was built, there was a lumber mill on the site where the ski jumps are now.”

The John Brown Farm is planted at the end of John Brown Road, which runs off Route 73 across from the North Elba Show Grounds. The house has two stories and an earthen-floored basement. On the ground floor are a combination kitchen-dining room-bedroom on one side of the rudimentary central staircase, and an open parlor on the other. Upstairs is a large, open room that was used by the children — John and Mary Brown had many — for sleeping.

The house has been restored so that, today, it looks as it did when Mary Brown brought her husband's body home.

A high, wrought-iron fence surrounds a boulder across from the house that stands sentinel by the gravestone over John Brown's remains. Other members of the Harper's Ferry raid are also buried there, though their remains took much longer to return to North Elba than those of Capt. Brown. Some of their corpses were used for medical experiments, according to Mills; others, for target practice by drunken militiamen.

"That's what they did with criminals back then," Mills said, "and as far as the people of Virginia were concerned, these were the worst kinds of criminals: Yankee abolitionists come to arm their slaves against them."

John Brown's men, however, saw themselves differently.

A simple motto is inscribed on the marker for John Brown's son, Oliver, a casualty of the Harper's Ferry raid whose body was not reburied in North Elba until Oct. 13, 1882. The motto reads: "He died for his adherence to the cause of freedom."

ADIRONDACK Architectural Heritage, or AARCH, was formed in 1990 to promote better understanding, appreciation and stewardship of the unique architectural heritage of the Adirondacks through education, action and advocacy. With offices in the Keeseville Civic Center at 1790 Main St., its telephone number is (518) 834-9328, and its Web site address is aarch.org.



Thoreau's eulogy for John Brown

"On the day of his translation I heard, to be sure, that he was gone, but I did not know what that meant; I felt no sorrow on that account; but not for a day or two did I even hear that he was dead, and not after any number of days shall I believe it.

"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."

— from "The Last Days of John Brown,"
an essay by Henry David Thoreau
published in the July 27, 1860,
issue of *The Liberator* magazine



The John Brown Farm Historic Site

Peterboro philanthropist and abolitionist Gerrit Smith, who owned a huge spread of land in what would later become North Elba township, near the future village of Lake Placid, gave 120,000 acres away to 3,000 free African-American men in the late 1840s so that they would be able to vote under 19th century New York law. All white men had been fully franchised in New York by 1820, but free black men had to own \$250 worth of real estate to be allowed to cast ballots.

Fewer than 200 people from the families of those 3,000 men came to the North Country to settle and develop farms. They named their community Timbuctoo, after the fabled 15th century Moroccan center of trade and learning.

In 1849 an Ohio tanner, surveyor and farmer, John Brown, moved his family to the area so that he could aid the Timbuctoo settlers, surveying their lands and helping them build their homes and plant their crops.

Brown's hatred of slavery drew him to armed guerrilla actions, first in Kansas, then in a raid on a federal armory in Harper's Ferry, Va. Brown and his companions had hoped to arm local slaves and trigger a nationwide war of liberation. Brown's raid ended, however, in disaster. He and most of his followers were either killed or captured. Brown was tried and hung late in 1859, and his body was returned for burial to his North Elba homestead.

Brown's 244-acre farm, including his farmhouse, is maintained as a New York state historical site on John Brown Road off Route 73 just outside Lake Placid. Brown's home, a simple, two-story frame structure, was restored in the 1950s to resemble its appearance when the Brown family lived there a century earlier.

Though the grounds are open all year, visitors can see the inside of John Brown's home only between May and October. For information call (518) 523-3900.