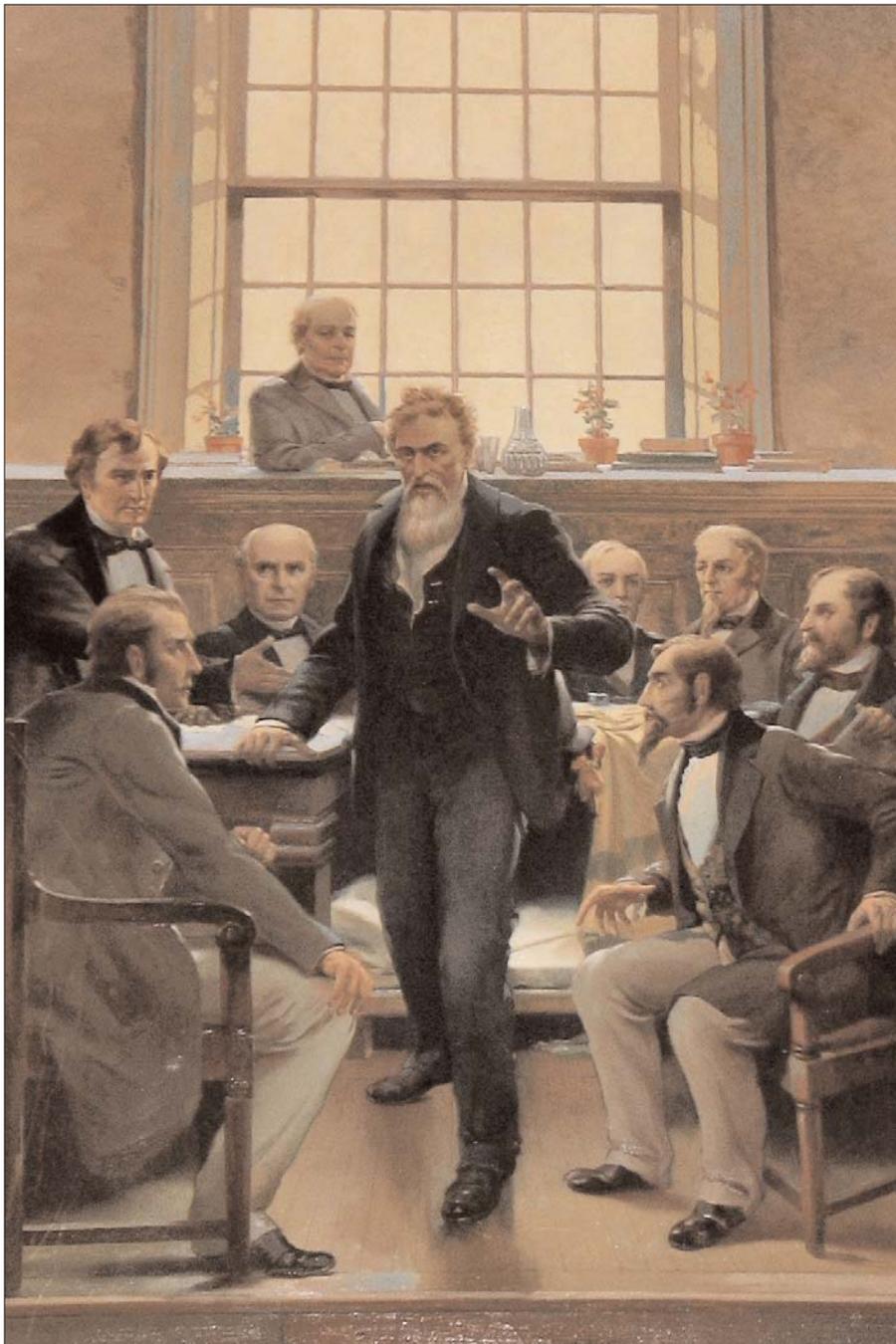


John Brown, revisited & revised

Words & pictures by Lee Manchester
Lake Placid News, April 8, 2005



The legacy of John Brown, arguably North Elba's best-known citizen, was recently given a big boost, courtesy of grants from the state Underground Railroad Heritage Trail program.

Or was it?

GOV. GEORGE PATAKI's office announced on March 10 that \$1.4 million in grants had been made to fund Underground Railroad Heritage Trail sites throughout New York state.

Without contacting Heritage New York to check into the details of the listed grants, but wanting to localize the governor's press release, a brief in the Adirondack Daily Enterprise said that, "Of the nearly 20 sites and projects honoring the importance of the Underground Railroad — the network of safe houses and hiding places through which slaves moved north to freedom in the 19th century — John Brown's Farm outside Lake Placid is set to receive \$35,100 ... for site improvement."

(The grant, as it turns out, is to help pay for the construction of a year-round restroom facility at the state historic site.)

Later last month, a Press Republican writer was even more enthusiastic about the grant program.

"Nobody posted signs saying, 'Stop here on the Underground Railroad.'

"Until now," the article read.

"Four documented sites in the North Country will be recognized on the New York Underground Railroad Heritage Trail: the John Brown Farm, Essex County Courthouse, the First Presbyterian Church in Plattsburgh and the Congregational Church in Malone.

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

“State funds will pay for special signage at each.”

Capping off the Underground Railroad grant coverage, a March 29 editorial in the Press Republican invited readers to imagine themselves at the sides of Underground Railroad passengers making their way through E’town and North Elba in the mid-19th century.

“Think of the activity as escaping slaves were hustled into buildings right in our midst: the Essex County Courthouse in Elizabethtown, the John Brown farm outside Lake Placid ... ”

All of which would make for a wonderful story, if it weren’t for one, simple problem: *it wasn’t true.*

Historians are in agreement: Neither the Old County Courthouse in Elizabethtown, nor John Brown’s farm nor anywhere else in North Elba was ever used as a sanctuary for runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad.

So what is the state grant money for, then, you ask?

A LITTLE OVER a year ago, a man from Albany named Cordell Reaves visited Plattsburgh to talk with regional historians about a new grant program.

Heritage New York, which already operated four programs designed to raise awareness about various aspects of New York history — the Revolutionary War, Theodore Roosevelt, Women, and Labor — had created a new Underground Railroad Heritage Trail program. Reaves said that a little over \$1 million would be available to place signage and improve facilities related to Underground Railroad activity in New York state.

“It’s not a lot of money,” Reaves said, underscoring the importance of fully documenting the Underground Railroad sites that were to be supported by the new program.

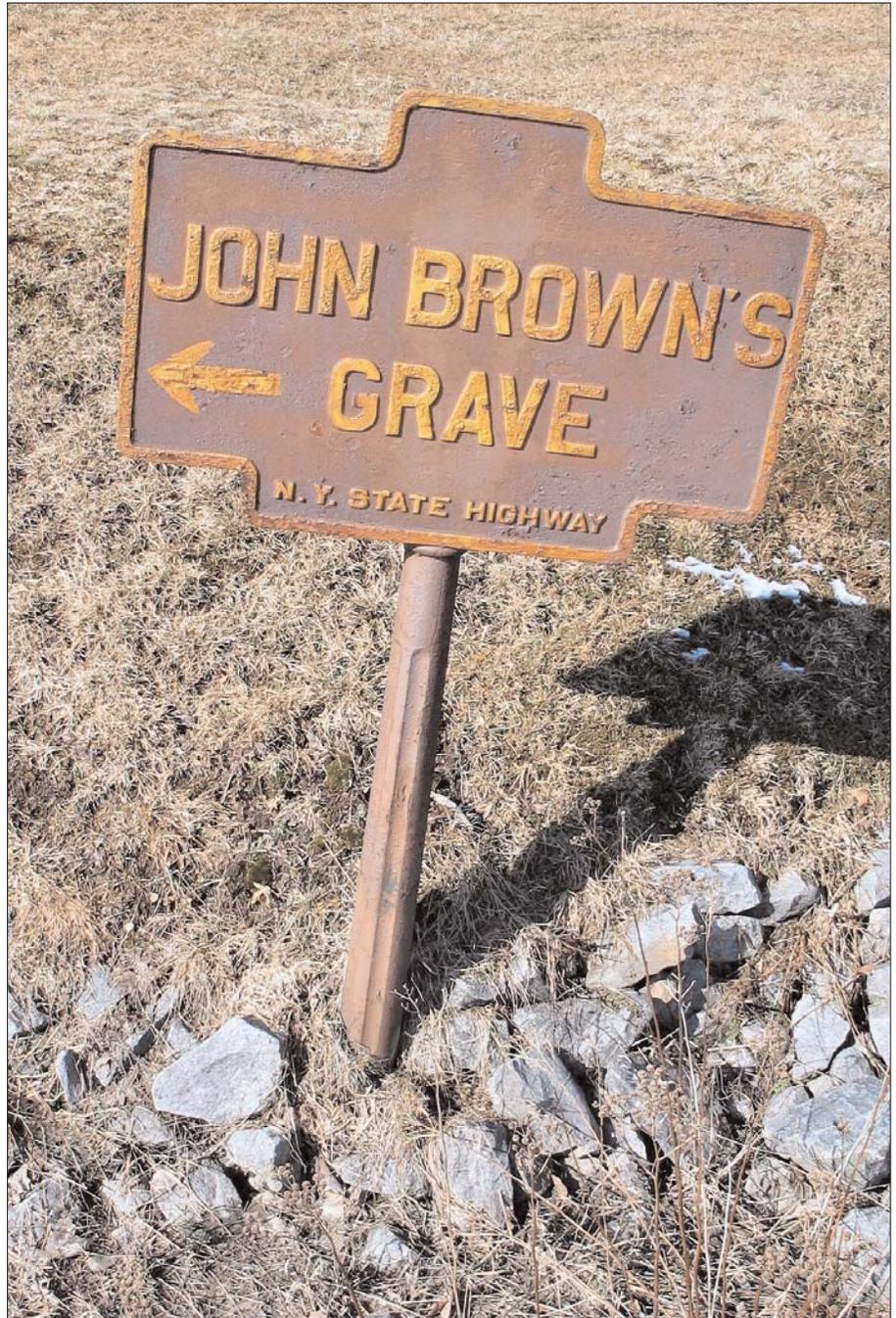
“We don’t want to develop a lot of

signage and other materials,” he said, “and then just have to go back and take it all down when better research comes forward.”

Don and Vivian Papson, of the Red Hummingbird Society, and Margaret Gibbs, director of the Adirondack History Center Museum in Elizabethtown, were among those attending that January 2004 meeting in Plattsburgh. All of them had made prior efforts to educate local folks

about the history of anti-slavery activity in the North Country — the Papsons with several plays and books, Gibbs through sponsorship of the “John Brown Lives!” exhibition at the E’town museum.

With the help of several other notable regional historians, Gibbs and the Papsons created the North Country Underground Railroad Historical Association after Reaves’ visit to Plattsburgh.



The association's carefully documented grant application to the Underground Railroad Heritage Trail program includes requests for two new signs, said Andrea Lazarski of Heritage New York: one at the John Brown State Historic Site, the other at the Old County Courthouse in Elizabethtown.

Lazarski said, however, that the documentation for both signs was very clearly worded concerning John Brown and the Underground Railroad: "Although John Brown was a lifelong participant in the Underground Railroad, there is no evidence that there was any slave smuggling related to [these] particular site[s]."

The signs are meant to raise people's awareness, not of John Brown's work here on the Underground Railroad — which never happened — but of Brown's key role in the broader anti-slavery movement and the events connected to that activity which took place here, explained Reaves, coordinator of the Underground Railroad Heritage Trail program, last week.

"People who took runaway slaves into their homes were not the only ones who contributed to the anti-slavery movement," Reaves said. "It took *all* of the people involved in anti-slavery activities to make the Underground Railroad run."

CONFUSION AND misinformation about John Brown, North Elba and the Underground Railroad are nothing new.

The earliest known fabrication about John Brown's supposed Underground Railroad activity was published in the July 1871 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* in an article entitled, "How We Met John Brown," by Richard Henry Dana Jr.

Dana established his literary reputation in 1841 when he published his novel, "Two Years Before the Mast: A Personal Narrative of Life at Sea."



The Old County Courthouse, in Elizabethtown, where John Brown's body lay in state overnight on its way home to North Elba after the Harper's Ferry affair.

In June 1849, just a month after the Brown family first came to North Elba from Massachusetts, Dana came tromping through the Adirondacks on a wilderness getaway hike. His diary provides one of only two extant accounts of the Browns' brief stay at their first North Elba home, which stood on the edge of what is now the Craig Wood Golf Course on the Cascade Road.

Dana's 1849 diary account mentions nothing of John Brown's supposed Underground Railroad activity, something Dana would surely

have noted had he known of it then. Dana, you see, was an ardent anti-slavery activist, and the year before had helped found the Free-Soil Party, an abolitionist splinter group of the national Democratic Party.

Dana's 1849 diary account also mentions by name two African-American members of the Brown household, Mr. Jefferson and Mrs. Waits, but says nothing about either of them being runaway slaves (which they were not).

Twenty-two years later, however, long after John Brown's abortive

December 1859 assault on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Va., and well after the end of the Civil War, Dana's story of his North Elba tour had changed.

John Brown had been turned into an Underground Railroad conductor.

According to Dana's 1871 story, Dana stopped at the Brown house in June 1849 and inquired after its master. A man named Aikens, passing by in a wagon, told Dana that Brown "would be along in an hour or so. 'He has two negroes along with him,' said the man, in a confidential significant tone, 'a man and a woman.' Ruth [Brown, John's 20-year-old daughter] smiled, as if she understood him.

"Mr. Aikens told us that the country about here belonged to Gerrit Smith; that negro families, mostly fugitive slaves, were largely settled upon it, trying to learn farming; and that this Mr. Brown was a strong abolitionist and a kind of king among them. This neighborhood was thought to be one of the termini of the Underground Railroad. ...

"Late in the afternoon a long buckboard wagon came in sight, and on it were seated a negro man and woman, with bundles. ... The man was 'Mr. Jefferson,' and the woman 'Mrs. Wait,'" wrote Dana in 1871.

Ruth Brown, however, explained the presence of Mr. Jefferson somewhat more prosaically in the account she gave to Brown biographer F.B. Sanborn, recorded in his "Life and Letters of John Brown" (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1885). Recalling her family's initial journey to North Elba in May 1849, Ruth said:

"At Westport he [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."

Dana's 1849 diary recalls Mrs. Wait in similarly prosaic terms: "Miss Ruth was very kind, & with the aid of the negro woman, whom all the family called Mrs. Wait, got us an excellent breakfast."

IT TOOK A master, however, to degrade Dana's mere fiction of John Brown's Underground Railroad activity to downright insult.

John Brown came to North Elba in 1849 to aid a colony of free Black settlers who had been given land here by wealthy abolitionist Gerrit Smith. At that time, all white men in New York could vote, but Black men had to own at least \$250 worth of land. Members of the North Elba colony were mostly born in New York state, and born free; none were runaway slaves.

Yet, somehow, Albert Donaldson's (in)famous "History of the Adirondacks" (1921) offered a very different picture of the North Elba Black colony:

"The farms allotted to the

Negroes consisted of forty acres," Donaldson wrote, "but the natural gregariousness of the race tended to defeat the purpose of these individual holdings. The darkies began to build their shanties in one place, instead of on their separate grants. Before long about ten families had huddled their houses together down by the brook, not far from where the White Church now stands. The shanties were square, crudely built of logs, with flat roofs, out of which little stovepipes protruded at varying angles. The last touch of pure Negroism was a large but dilapidated red flag that floated above the settlement, bearing the half-humorous, half-pathetic legend 'Timbuctoo,' a name that was applied to the vicinity for several years.

"Here occasionally, always overnight, new faces appeared and disappeared — poor, hunted fugitives seeking the greater safety of the Canadian line. Those who stayed permanently were roused to spasmodic activity by Brown, who induced them to work for him or some of his scattered neighbors. But, unless directed by him, they did nothing for themselves or for their own land."



John Brown's farmhouse, restored today so that it appears much as it did in 1859, before Brown left North Elba for Harper's Ferry.

MARY MacKENZIE, the late North Elba historian emeritus, addressed Donaldson's insulting account in a 1987 letter to fellow historian John Duquette of Saranac Lake: "A.D. had a completely wrong conception of our Negro colony. From all I can deduce, he formed it from the wild tales of old Tom Peacock, who was a mine of misinformation (another instance of the danger of relying on old-timers). His fugitive slaves and Underground Railroad at Lake Placid are purely imaginative. There was not a single runaway slave in our Black colony. It was totally comprised of free Negroes of New York state — most, if not all, of whom were born in the North and had never been slaves and were fairly well-educated."

MacKenzie did an extraordinary study of the North Elba Black colony, documenting every single known participant from birth, death, tax and census records, and correspondence.

Furthermore, MacKenzie wrote, "There was absolutely no Underground Railroad activity here. Not one shred of evidence exists, in all the voluminous historical data of this period, that John Brown or anyone else maintained a station here. Not one of the John Brown books in print in Donaldson's time mentions such a thing — and he had access to all of them. (I am purposely not going to comment on A.D.'s unfortunate use of the word 'darkie' and uncomplimentary remarks about black-skinned people.)"

VISITORS TO Essex County will, indeed, find two important sites in Elizabethtown and North Elba that speak volumes about the anti-slavery movement here in the mid-19th century, and specifically about the messianic abolitionist fighter John Brown.

They are not, however, Underground Railroad sites.



This glacial boulder inscribed "John Brown 1859," just a few yards from the doorstep of his farmhouse, was the abolitionist's only tombstone for many years.

At the John Brown Farm State Historic Site, visitors will find the Brown family's second North Elba home, built for them by Ruth Brown's husband, Henry Thompson. It has been restored to its 1859 condition: a simple, two-story frame house with a packed-dirt cellar floor. It was from this home that, according to many, John Brown left to light the fuse that eventually exploded as the American Civil War.

In Elizabethtown, you will find a much-altered Old County Courthouse where, on the night of Dec. 6, 1859, four local boys stood watch over John Brown's casket as his widow slept in the inn across the street, resting up before the final stretch of her journey home the next day.

In 1859, the Essex County Courthouse was a two-story building inside, and court was actually conducted on the second floor. Since John Brown's time, however, the second floor has been demolished from within, leaving a large, open chamber with mezzanine where the

Essex County Board of Supervisors holds its regular meetings.

Hanging on the wall of the Old County Courthouse is a huge oil painting that depicts John Brown defending himself in court in Charleston, Va., after being captured in Harpers Ferry. Below the painting by David C. Lithgow, commissioned by the Board of Supervisors in 1923, hangs a brass interpretive plaque. On it is inscribed an excerpt from Brown's summation, delivered on that fateful day in 1859:

"I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done, as I have always freely admitted I have done, in behalf of His despised poor, I did no wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel and unjust enactments, I say, *let it be done.*"