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 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 disaster. 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.”

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.

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 cortège 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 cortège 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 traded their sleigh in for a wagon at 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-
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 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-
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.”