

JOHN BROWN'S TEN YEARS IN NORTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

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MUCH has been written about John Brown of anti-slavery fame, today popularly known as "Ossawatimie Brown" and "John Brown of Harper's Ferry." The fact that he lived for ten years, or a little more than one-sixth of his life, in Randolph Township of Crawford County, Pennsylvania, has generally been overlooked.¹ Yet enough material exists to enable his life in Pennsylvania to be reconstructed with considerable accuracy. It is surprising that this formative period in his life has been dismissed by most scholars, and that they have often passed it by with a brief paragraph or two and with little attempt to point out Brown's proclivities or accomplishments.

Brown was living at Hudson, Ohio, when he married the widow of Amos Lusk on June 21, 1820. He was just over twenty at this time. During twelve years of marriage, Dianthe Lusk Brown bore her husband seven children. But more important, she added to the Brown family an additional streak of insanity that was already apparently established in that blood.² Practically all writers have glossed over this subject but the facts are rather well supported.

The first of some ten migrations by Brown was made in 1826.

¹ If we consider that Brown reached maturity at the age of twenty, then he spent over a quarter of his adult life in Pennsylvania. He was born in 1800 and was hanged for treason against the government on December 2, 1859.

² Mental weakness in the Lusk family is supported by the statements of Mrs. Annie Brown Adams, Petrolia, California, October 2, 1908; by Benj. Kent White, Columbus, Ohio, December 26, 1908; by Mrs. Nelson Waite and by Mrs. Henry Pettingill Hudson, December 1908; all were made to K. Mayo for Oswald G. Villard.

Insanity in the Brown family commences, as far as is known, with Brown's mother, Ruth Mills. She was insane and died insane as did her sister. Three of her nephews were confined to asylums, and two sons of another brother were judged insane. See, Statement of Gideon Mills. Also, *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1929), III, 131-134.

During Brown's trial in 1859, seventeen neighbors and relatives made affidavits to the effect that Brown and various members of his family were insane. Governor Wise refused to permit alienists to examine the prisoner. See *Letters and Recollections of John Murray Forbes* (New York, 1899), I, 179. Also, *Dictionary of American Biography*, as above.

He moved to four hundred acres of land he had purchased in Crawford County, twelve miles east of Meadville and along the state road.³ On tract 1432 he had secured this uncleared land at an attractive price; the low price resulted because Randolph Township land had been set apart by the state in payment to her Revolutionary soldiers for their services, but no veteran selected this for home or wanted the land.⁴

Between his arrival in Pennsylvania in May and the first of October, Brown had industriously cleared five acres of ground, erected a tannery, put in eighteen vats, and had started tanning leather. This was a gigantic task to have done in less than five months. Having learned the tanning business from his father, John no doubt selected his Pennsylvania land with a view to the low cost, the abundance of oak and hemlock bark for use in tanning, and the good possibility of securing an adequate supply of hides from Ohio's Western Reserve lands.

The tannery measured 26 x 50 feet and was of two floors; the lower floor was built of native stone with walls two feet thick while the top floor was of wood construction. After finishing this substantial building, the next work was the erection of a log house and a fairly large barn. In the hay mow of the barn, Brown built a secret room with a trap door carefully concealed. The room was well ventilated and was used for hiding fugitive slaves who were trying to escape to Canada and other northern points.⁵ Even at this early date, Brown was doing his part to break up slavery.

What has come to be known as the "Masonic story" concerning John Brown seems to have stemmed from a visit of several days, plus several interviews, by a newspaper reporter of Cleveland who stayed briefly with John Brown, Jr., the oldest of Brown's children, who lived at Put-In-Bay, Ohio, until his death on May 2, 1895. John Brown, Jr., told the reporter:

Father had been a Free Mason for years. You have read about the great excitement over the disappearance of

³ The state road had been laid out in 1817 and part of Brown's land bordered the road. The settlement has had various names. It has been called Richmond, Randolph, Clark's Corners, and finally New Richmond. Brown did not, however, locate at nearby Blooming Valley as one historian has stated. See Reynolds, John E., *In French Creek Valley* (Meadville, Pa., 1938), p. 268.

⁴ Bates, Samuel P., *Our Country and Its People: Crawford County, Pennsylvania* (Boston, 1899), p. 202.

⁵ Erf, Edward, "An Abolitionist," *Pittsburgh Post*, May 28, 1899.

Morgan, who had threatened to expose the secrets of Masonry? Well, father denounced the murder of Morgan in the hottest kind of terms. This was when we lived over in Pennsylvania. Father had occasion to go to Meadville. A mob bent on lynching him surrounded his hotel, but Landlord Smith enabled him to escape through a back entrance.⁶

Since this interview appeared in print, it has been a matter of dispute whether or not Brown was a Mason, and if so, where he was made a member of the Masonic fraternity. It is certain he could not have joined in Pennsylvania for there was no lodge in his vicinity during his stay.⁷ Part of the confusion can be attributed to the fact that the earliest Masonic lodge at Hudson, Ohio (Brown's home before his removal to Pennsylvania), was granted a charter January 16, 1823, but the lodge expired in 1828 and its minutes and records all were lost.⁸

Recently a record showing Brown's affiliation has been found, which clarifies the query once and for all. The archives of the Grand Secretary of Ohio (Masons) have revealed that John Brown was made a Mason in this ancient Hudson Lodge No. 68, on May 11, 1824, and during the following year he even served as a minor officer in that lodge.⁹ In view of these facts, the story of Brown's trouble with Masonic sympathizers during his Meadville visit is most likely. He probably spoke openly and loudly regarding the alleged disappearance of William Morgan of Batavia, New York, who did suddenly vanish after concocting a book wherein he claimed to present the secrets of Masonry.¹⁰

While John Brown was not, by his own account, a man of much formal education, his letters, communications, and ability as a public speaker, attest that he was keen of mind and quick to learn.¹¹ His education was based largely on his own experiences and his retentive memory.

⁶ "His Soul Goes Marching On," *Cleveland Press*, May 3, 1895.

⁷ Crawford Lodge No. 234, Meadville, Pa., was not constituted until 1848, according to Mr. John H. Pendleton, Secretary of the lodge.

⁸ *The Masonic Beacon*, October 7, 1946, p. 7.

⁹ Letter, Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Ohio, to Mr. Arthur H. Bryant, Secretary, Hudson Lodge No. 510, Hudson, Ohio, January 17, 1947. Mr. Bryant supplied this information to the writer.

¹⁰ This book was: Morgan, William, *Illustrations in Masonry* (David Miller, Batavia, N. Y., October 1826).

¹¹ Letter, John Brown to Henry Stearns, Red Rock, Iowa, July 15, 1857.

Upon arriving in Pennsylvania, the Brown children consisted of John, Jr., aged five; Jason, aged three; and Owen, who was about two. Several years after settling at Richmond, Brown decided that his children should receive some organized schooling. An arrangement was made with Thomas Delamater whose log house was eight miles east of Meadville and four miles from Brown's. According to George Delamater, a son, and one of the students, the Delamater children lived and boarded at Brown's during the cold months while in warmer weather, the Brown children resided with the Delamaters. A regular teacher was employed to conduct the school.¹² She was Miss Sabrina Wright, and her efforts must have been of acceptable quality for John Brown, Jr., later attended the Austinburg Institute, and George Delamater successfully completed his work at Oberlin College.¹³

There has been some disagreement about Brown's religious affiliations. James Redpath, his first biographer and a personal friend of Brown's during his Kansas years, stated that he had joined the Congregational Church at the age of sixteen in Hudson, Ohio, but transferred to the Presbyterian faith after he came to Pennsylvania.¹⁴ But James Foreman, who wrote a manuscript on Brown less than four weeks after his death, and who had worked as a Brown employee for years, reported that in Ohio, Brown was a Presbyterian.¹⁵

At Richmond he is reputed to have established an Independent

¹² Delamater, George B., "Old John Brown," *Meadville Republican*, May 11, 1888. According to Villard, there was a manuscript prepared by George B. Delamater that was in the possession of Miss Mary E. Thompson, a grand-daughter of Brown's, and a resident of Pasadena, Calif. She died July 8, 1938, at the home of a nephew, Mr. Arthur J. Thompson. On November 22, 1946, Mr. Thompson wrote me that he knew of a Delamater manuscript, but that it was now in the possession of another of Brown's grand-daughters, Mrs. Ella J. Towne of Los Angeles. However, Mrs. Towne informed me she never knew of such a paper. It is possible that the Delamater manuscript was the original, or a copy of it, of the article, that he prepared and that appeared in the Meadville paper mentioned here.

¹³ *Cleveland Press*, May 3, 1895. Villard, Oswald Garrison, *John Brown, 1800-1859* (Boston, 1910), pp. 23-24.

¹⁴ Redpath, James, *The Public Life of Captain John Brown* (Boston, 1860), p. 32.

¹⁵ MS letter, James Foreman, Youngsville, Warren County, Pa., to James Redpath, December 28, 1859. Foreman wrote the letter at the request of Redpath who had been designated as John Brown's official biographer by the Brown family, but for some unknown reason, he made no use of the missive. The original manuscript is owned by the Kansas State Historical Society who supplied an exact copy and gave permission for its use. It is included with the Hinton Papers.

Congregational Society which took form on January 1, 1832. Meetings were held in the second floor of the tannery. Brown drew up the articles of faith and served as clerk until he left the state.¹⁶ Delamater wrote in 1888, that the original papers of this society, in Brown's handwriting, were deposited in the library of the Crawford County Historical Society at Meadville.¹⁷ If they were so placed, they are not there now and no record of them exists.¹⁸

While it is difficult to determine which faith Brown embraced at various periods during his life, it has been universally agreed that few men have seemed more deeply religious than the energetic tanner. His family held devotional services every morning right after breakfast; each person had a Bible and each read verses as directed by Brown who served as the leader. Next, Brown led in a prayer and then the group was dismissed, the children to go to school and the others to go about their work.¹⁹ His acts of kindness to families in dire need or trouble in his immediate neighborhood have been recorded with the highest praise.

Busy John Brown was a valuable addition to the early settlers at Richmond. His tannery virtually created a new industry for the scattered families and at times as many as fifteen men worked for him. The quality of his product has been described by one of his workers in these words:

Such was his perseverance in business matters and so strict was he that his leather should be perfectly dry before sold that a man might come ten miles for five pounds of sole leather and if the least particle of moisture could be detected in it, he must go home without it. No compromise as to the amount of dampness could be affected.²⁰

Two years after moving into Pennsylvania, Brown became interested in bringing blooded stock into the region, and it was he who brought the first such stock from Ohio. To Waterford, in Erie County, he delivered a blooded bull which he promptly sold

¹⁶ Lingo, William R., *The Pennsylvania Career of John Brown* (Corry, Pa., 1926), p. 20.

¹⁷ *Meadville Republican*, May 11, 1888.

¹⁸ Letter, Miss Sara L. Miller, Secretary, Crawford County Historical Society, Meadville, Pa., to the writer, December 1, 1946.

¹⁹ Delamater Manuscript. Quoted in Villard's *John Brown*, p. 24.

²⁰ MS letter, James Foreman, December 28, 1859.

for \$100, and from this animal stemmed future stock of an excellent quality.²¹

During the same year, 1828, a post office was established and named Randolph. This office opened January 7, with John Brown as the postmaster and he retained the office until May 27, 1835. He probably resigned only when he had determined to leave Pennsylvania for Ohio, and for seven years Brown carried the mail between Meadville and Riceville, Pa., a distance of twenty miles over rough country.²²

With the birth of Frederick, I, on January 9, 1827, followed by Ruth and Frederick, II, born February 18, 1829, and December 31, 1830, respectively, and an unnamed son, born August 7, 1832, the Brown family increased steadily. But three days after the birth of this youngest son, double disaster struck John Brown. The new baby died, and so did Dianthe, who was only thirty-one years old.²³ The infant and his mother were laid to rest side by side on the highest part of the farm.

James Foreman, one of Brown's workers who came to Pennsylvania with him from Ohio, had been married early in 1832, and following Mrs. Brown's death, John Brown and his children moved into the Foreman home and lived there until a housekeeper could be found.²⁴ The housekeeper finally came and she was a daughter of Charles Day, a blacksmith who resided fifteen miles from Richmond, in Troy Township. Soon, this hard working woman brought her younger sister, Mary Ann Day, to Brown's home to assist her with the work. In about a year, Mary became the second Mrs. Brown; the young bride was seventeen years old at the time of her marriage, July 11, 1833.²⁵

During her married life, Mary Day Brown was the mother of thirteen children, but only one of them, a daughter Sarah, was born in Pennsylvania. Her birth was on May 11 of 1834.²⁶

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Letter, A. H. Leavitt, Acting Chief Division of Post Office Department Archives, National Archives, Washington, D. C., to the writer, November 19, 1946.

²³ Lingo, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

²⁴ MS letter, James Foreman, December 28, 1859.

²⁵ Duncan, Rev. John S., "John Brown in Pennsylvania," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, January 1928, XI, 50.

²⁶ Of the thirteen children born of this union, nine died before reaching six years of age and a tenth died before reaching ten years of age. Mary Day Brown died at San Francisco, February 29, 1884.

John's brother, Frederick, had visited the Pennsylvania homestead early in 1834, and John wrote one of his most important letters to Frederick from Randolph under date of November 21, 1834. After asking about the health of his father, John continued:

Since you left me I have been trying to devise some means whereby I might do something in a practical way for my poor fellow-men who are in bondage, and having fully consulted the feelings of my wife and my three boys, we have agreed to get at least one negro boy or youth, and bring him up as we do our own,—viz., give him a good English education, learn what we can about the history of the world, about business, about general subjects, and above all, try to teach him the fear of God. We think of three ways to obtain one; First, to try to get some Christian slaveholder to release one to us. Second, to get a free one if no one will let us have one that is a slave. Third, if that does not succeed, we have all agreed to submit to considerable privation in order to buy one. This we are now using means in order to effect, in the confident expectation that God is about to bring them all out of the house of bondage.

. . . I have for years been trying to devise some way to get a school a-going here for blacks, and I think that on many accounts it would be a most favorable location. Children here would have no intercourse with vicious people of their own kind, nor with openly vicious people of any kind. . . . Write me how you would like to join me, and try to get on from Hudson and thereabouts some first-rate abolitionist families with you. . . .

. . . The laws of this State are now such that the inhabitants of any township may raise by a tax in aid of the State school-fund any amount of money they choose to vote, for the purpose of common schools, which any child may have access to by application.²⁷

This is evidence that Brown had given much thought to his desire to better the plight of the slaves and that he deemed northwestern Pennsylvania a good spot for his experiment.

Zenas Kent of Franklin Township, Portage County, Ohio, now began entreating John Brown to return to Ohio, to settle at Franklin Mills, and to enter into a working partnership with him for the

²⁷ Quoted in Sanborn's *Life and Letters of John Brown*, pp. 40-41.

erection and operation of a tannery.²⁸ Brown's decision to leave Pennsylvania might have been hastened by his need for money. In April, 1835, he wrote Kent:

Yours of the 14th was received by last mail. I was disappointed in the extreme not to obtain the money I expected; & I know of no possible way to get along without it. I had borrowed it for a few days to settle up a number of honorary debts which I could not leave unpaid and come away. It is utterly impossible to sell anything for ready cash or to collect debts. I expect father to come out for cattle about the first of May and I wish you without fail to send it by him. It is now too late to think of sending it by mail. I was intending to turn everything I could into shingles as one way to realize cash in Ohio, before you wrote me about them. 25 dollars of the money I want is to enable me to carry that object into effect. . . .²⁹

Brown secured the funds in May, resigned as postmaster, and took his family to Ohio where he superintended the building of a tannery at Franklin. About the time the building was finished and the vats placed, however, Zenas Kent rented it, and the firm of Kent & Brown never actually started work.

Reputedly, Brown returned to Richmond and Meadville several times, but his stays were only short visits. In 1859, he plotted the raid at Harper's Ferry from his headquarters at Chambersburg and this ended his connection with Pennsylvania. In *Pennsylvania—A Guide to the Keystone State*, one of the American Guide Series of books, appears this statement: "Always an ardent abolitionist, he had conducted a station of the Underground Railroad at Richmond, Ohio."³⁰ This erroneous sentence would hardly indicate that Brown had lived at Richmond in Pennsylvania for ten years; the 400-word article on Brown's life fails to mention that he spent *any* time in Pennsylvania, thereby representing a serious oversight in a widely read volume.

Following the close of the Civil War, John Brown, Jr., went to Richmond and had grave stones erected over the graves of his mother and brother. These are still standing and the inscriptions are plainly visible.

²⁸ "John Brown of Harper's Ferry," Kent (Ohio) *Courier*, September 14, 1906.

²⁹ Quoted in Villard's *John Brown*, p. 26.

³⁰ *Pennsylvania; A Guide to the Keystone State* (New York, 1940), pp. 446-447.

What happened to John Brown's tannery? The Reverend Butt, a Methodist minister, operated it briefly and then sold it to a Mr. Quiggle, who in turn sold to Mr. Morrison McClaughry. His nephew, Nathan, was the next owner and operated the tannery one year when it became the property of Ira Clark, the keeper of the general store at Richmond; Clark was the last person to use it as a tannery. The place then was used as a cheese factory, and in 1883 was converted into a jelly factory, and then into a grist mill. Still later, Mr. Austin Cannon lived in the upper story of the building and operated the lower as a mill. The wooden second story was destroyed by fire in 1907.³¹ About 1920, the tannery site was purchased by Frank Allsben of New York City, and Frank A. Loveland, Guy D. Heath, and Joseph Desmond, all of Corry, Pa. A year or so later it was presented by this group to the John Brown Memorial Association, a Crawford County organization.³² Under the auspices of this association, picnics and annual gatherings were held at the site.

John C. Looker, an oil man from Bradford, Pa., purchased most of the Brown farm about 1925. He at one time considered giving the farm either to the John Brown Memorial Association or to the state as an historic site, but adverse circumstances caused a change in his plans. One writer went so far as to state: "A farm constituting a part of the original tract of land owned by John Brown has been purchased by Mr. John Carlton Looker of Bradford, Pa., and has been turned over to the recently formed John Brown Memorial Association of which Mr. Irvin W. Sabin of New Richmond, Pa., is President."³³ This was not the case. Looker wanted \$10,000 for the hundred acres and the price was rejected as fantastic inasmuch as the Association already owned the one-half acre tannery site and the farm added little but land to the place.³⁴

³¹ Erf, Edward, "An Abolitionist," *Pittsburgh Post*, May 28, 1899, p. 29.

³² Prather Papers. Honorable Thomas J. Prather, former Judge of Crawford County, has been interested in John Brown for years. His extensive accumulation of letters, pictures, newspaper clippings, photostats, and personal writings regarding John Brown, this writer has termed *the Prather Papers*, chiefly for easy reference. They include an 8,000 word lecture on Brown which was presented to the Literary Union, Meadville, Pa., September 13, 1935, and with additions, to the McKean County Historical Society at Kane, Pa., on October 18, 1945.

³³ Lingo, William R., *op. cit.*, p. 12.

³⁴ Prather Papers. Of special interest were two letters: Judge T. J. Prather to Frank W. Melvin, Chairman, Pennsylvania Historical Commission, Meadville, Pa., March 26, 1936, and Melvin to Prather, Philadelphia, Pa., March 28, 1936.

Following Looker's death, his heirs, according to one of them, Mrs. Myrtle Looker Dennis, sold the Brown farm to one Rex Carpenter who found it of value chiefly for the timber on it; this sale was completed in 1945.

By an Act of 1931, the Pennsylvania Legislature arranged for the John Brown Memorial Association to deed the tannery property to the state, but unluckily, the Act referred to the Association as a "corporation" and it was not. The transfer could not legally take place so the deed, sent to the state in July, 1935, was returned and the ownership still rests with the Association. The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission has placed one of its new roadside markers near the tannery.

In August, 1935, after the tannery wall had been repointed, a stone wall built along the road as protection, the lawn graded, trees planted, and bronze markers prepared, the site was dedicated with a crowd of over five hundred attending.³⁵ Just one hundred years after Brown left Richmond, Pennsylvania had finally been added to the list of the four other states that had remembered the activity of John Brown while living within their borders.

³⁵ "John Brown Tannery Site Dedicated," *Titusville Herald*, August 5, 1935.