



*History*

## Old John Brown's Freedom Ride

*An American Outlaw  
& Twelve Fugitive Slaves*

*Springs Toledo, Author & Essayist*



**I**t was the bleak midwinter, 1859. They were holed up inside two log cabins along Straight Creek near Holton, Kansas—12 slaves on the run and a handful of white men who had freed them. A U.S. Marshal and his men were on the north side of the creek, reinforced by a posse of “law-loving citizens.” Their objective? To arrest the thieves and return the chattel to Missouri. “There was about seventy-five of them,” said Samuel Harper, one of the slaves. “We was all afraid we were going to be took for sure.”

The outlaw who led them should have been dead already. At 58 years old, John Brown was 20 years past the average life expectancy at the time and had been surrounded by violence for three years. He was stooped, grizzled and gaunt, with a matted beard and holes in his boots. The underclothes he wore were donated by a friend who saw him shivering on a ferry as the group crossed the Kansas River. He was nothing but a poor farmer, 1,000 miles

Above, the four-panel mural painted by Arthur Covey (between 1933 and 1939) for the former post office building in Torrington, CT, depicting “episodes in the life of John Brown, who was born in Torrington.” The project was financed—for a total cost of \$350—by the Public Works Administration, a New Deal government agency created to reduce unemployment during the Great Depression.

from home, though Harper saw an archangel. “He was a great big man, over 6 feet tall with great big shoulders and long hair white as snow,” he said. “A very quiet man, awful quiet. He never even laughed.”

An alert reached Topeka. A half-dozen Free State settlers left Sunday service and hurried to the creek. The old man lined up his ragtag band on either side of a covered wagon and stood at the front with a carbine. “Get ready boys and we’ll whip them all,” he said.

Whip them all? Harper and the others traded anxious looks as they followed him to the ford, straight for the federal posse watching from rifle pits.

It was the bleak midwinter, 1859, and the wind was whispering through the pines and rattling branches.

## “Old Brown is coming!”

In Syracuse, an antislavery convention was called to order in June 1855. Letters were read from supporters, including a chief justice in Vermont and the editor-in-chief of the *Herald of Freedom* in Kansas Territory. A motion to amend the statement “Slavery annihilates all natural rights” to “Slavery invades all natural rights” in the declaration of principles failed, while the condemnation of the institution as an affront to civilization was affirmed. But it was only words.

On the morning of the convention’s second day, Brown was invited to speak. He asked for funds to buy guns so that he might join his five sons in “Bleeding Kansas.” A letter from one of his sons was read. “We need them more than we need bread,” it said.

Brown had been beckoned down from the Adirondacks by a senator from Illinois, as much as by his sons’ cries for help. Two months after the antislavery Whigs formed the Republican Party, the bombastic Stephen A. Douglas pushed the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 all the way to the desk of President Franklin Pierce, who thought it “demonstrably right and patriotic” and signed it. The consequences were immediate. It retired the old Mason-Dixon Line—the schoolmarm that had been separating the unruly children of the North and South for a generation. Kansas went up for grabs and became a battleground for two irreconcilable positions; in its fate, the fate of millions whom Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, unclaimed hero of judicial activism, would soon declare had “no rights which the white man ought to respect.”

Senator David Rice Atchison (D-MO) led the charge. If the South fails to take Kansas, he warned, “It is an omen that the institution of slavery is to fail in this and the other Southern states.” Private correspondence claimed that about 10,000 Missourians were “on the move,” exhorted by that state’s former attorney general “to enter every election district of Kansas . . . and vote at the point of bowie knife and revolver.” Not a few sported hemp on their hats as a

symbol of their intention to hang any “Black Republican” who tried to block their self-declared right to cast illegal votes.

When Brown finished his appeal at the Syracuse convention in June, a collection was taken up to aid him in his objects, said *The Liberator*, “pistols and all.” He drove his wagon westward, accompanied by a son and son-in-law. By the time Brown got to Missouri, \$60 in donations was down to a few coins. But there were arms stowed in the back—a lot of them. A stranger approached before they crossed the border from Missouri into Kansas Territory. “Whar you going?” he asked.

“To Osawatomie,” came the answer.

“Whar you from?”

“New York.”

“You’ll never live to get thar.”

Brown looked at him. “We are prepared not to die alone.”

His name and exploits soon spread like a prairie fire throughout the region, this strange white man who earned the honorary title “Captain,” called himself “Old Brown” and had several aliases. “He has been ubiquitous,” said *The Lawrence Republican*, “turning up wherever danger seemed most threatening, or assistance most needed.” By his own count, 30 guns were discharged at him in the war-torn territory, “but they only touched my hair.”

He drove a wagon. What drove him?

Harper would soon learn what freemen in the North already knew—that Brown sought to upend American slavery itself. Driven by a combustible mix of patriotic indignation and Christian compassion, he understood slavery for what it was: “a most barbarous, unprovoked and unjustifiable war of one portion of citizens upon another portion;” a “*rotten whore*” of an institution, a betrayal of the American promise, a blasphemy against God’s universal fatherhood.

His way of thinking was not far from John Locke’s ideas about higher law, and Locke’s was not far from Thomas Jefferson’s justification of violence against tyrants. Brown saw not himself but a federal government, corrupted by the expansionist South, as the true outlaw and was convinced that his role had been outlined centuries before. Sometimes, wrote John Calvin in 1536, God “raises up manifest avengers” to “deliver his people from calamity when they are unjustly oppressed.” Brown, a brimstone Calvinist if there ever was one, rose up—with a sword. Mahalia Doyle never got over the loud knock on the cabin door late on a May night in 1856, when her husband and two oldest sons were taken from hearth and home, escorted to the banks of the Pottawatomie Creek, and massacred along with two other pro-slavery collaborators. Brown did it, he said, “to regulate matters” three days after Lawrence, the Free State capital of Kansas, was sacked by Missourians

waving blue and white banners that said “Supremacy of the White Race” and “Southern Rights to All.” Two days later, Charles Sumner (R-MA) was brutally assaulted to within an inch of his life by Preston Brooks (D-SC) in the Senate chamber. The hue and cry over what history remembers as the “Pottawatomie Massacre” sent Brown and his men into hiding for a month.

His reputation went viral. To Southerners already plagued by visions of “black devils” exhorted by abolitionists, the very idea of him was a terror. He was raised up from every prairie and thicket, said a contemporary, and the cry “Old Brown is coming!” was enough to send whole bands of well-armed Missourians running for their lives and misbehaving children running to bed.

## Running Rebels

When the slaves on Harvey Hicklin’s farm got wind that Brown was near the border in 1858, they cheered. Quietly.

“We kept hearing that the Captain was taking slaves away and sending them North, ’til finally, about Christmas, we heard that the Captain was nigh to the farm we was working,” said Harper. “So we sent word.” They sent Jim Daniels.

On Sunday December 19, Daniels crossed the border to sell brooms and then made a detour. Brown was delighted. He’d been preparing to invade Virginia when a betrayal of the plan (which would become the Harpers Ferry Raid of high school textbooks) forced a delay. Raiding Missouri was the perfect feint.

Daniels returned to his owner and told him he’d gotten sidetracked by squaws. Then he told Harper and his wife—who was eight months pregnant with their third child—that “the day of jubilee was coming.”

Brown hastily formed two companies and careened into Vernon County, Missouri, the next night. It was snowing. Hicklin was startled awake by an ominous knock not unlike what Mahalia Doyle heard two years earlier. The farm was looted while Brown spent 30 minutes explaining himself. “He said he would take off all the Negroes and free them,” Hicklin said, “and he was also going to take provisions for them and property enough to bear their expenses for freedom.” It was, said Brown, “the Lord’s work and he was not ashamed.” Furthermore, he invited the whole United States to follow him.

Hicklin’s losses were recorded in an affidavit: “five Negroes, one sorrel horse, one bay horse, one large yoke of oxen, one large wagon, two horse collars and two blind bridles, and one lock chain”—a fortune. The slaves alone were worth \$109,176.29 in today’s currency. Whether they said goodbye went unrecorded.

Less than a mile away was Isaac Larue’s house. Brown again made his intentions clear and gave those inside a choice: “We have come after your Negroes and their property. Will you surrender or fight?” Five more slaves

*Always remember  
that a soldier’s pack  
is lighter than a  
slave’s chains.*

David O. McKay

were liberated. Six horses and a team of oxen were converted to the cause of abolitionism, and a wagon, bedding, clothes, boots and foodstuffs were taken, as were Larue's son and a boarder who were soon released with an over-the-shoulder challenge to "follow as soon as they chose to."

Hicklin left for Larue's shortly after Brown left. When he got there, he could still hear the wagons clattering off in the distance. He found Larue staring blankly at the fire.

Earlier that night, the other company rode up to David Cruise's farm in Bates County. They weren't as clean about it. One account says that they tried to get in on a ruse and Cruise, a 60-year-old veteran of the Black Hawk War, reached for a gun to shoot through the door but it got entangled in a ribbon and wouldn't fire. Several armed men crowded in and Cruise was shot dead.

Two slaves lived on that farm. One of them had slipped out to get to another farm where he was "sparking" a woman named Charlotte. A middle-aged slave named Jane was there that night. She laughed when she saw her liberators and hurried to the kitchen where she packed up her bedclothes, bedding and \$60 that Brown would assert was only a token of what was owed her.

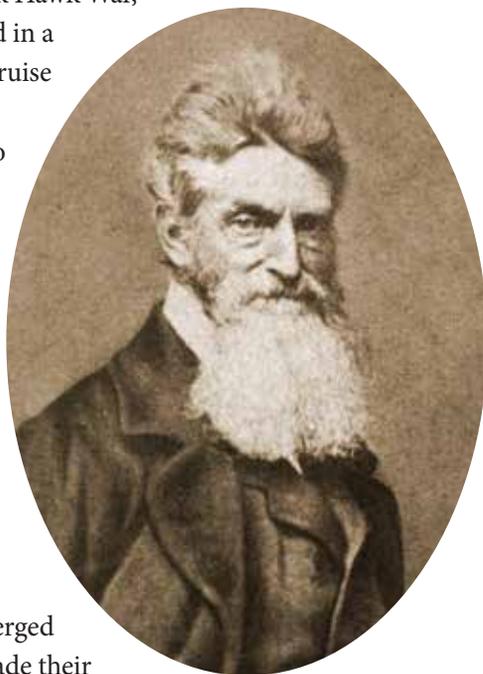
Two horses, a yoke of oxen and eleven mules were confiscated. Spotting a wagon, the men loaded it with provisions and took that too. Jane was right there loading it alongside them. "Brown wanted to know if we wanted to be free," she recalled years later, "and said he'd take us where we'd be free."

When the sun rose, the raiders and the liberated slaves converged in Kansas and hid out in a wooded ravine. At nightfall, they made their way north to Mound City.

Brown turned back to engage any Missourians bold or stupid enough to pursue him, and the caravan continued northward, creaking into Osawat-omie on Christmas Eve. The fugitives, frightened and clinging to their faith, spent the holy day hiding in the kitchen of a minister's cabin.

Meanwhile, slaveholders in western and northern Missouri were in a frenzy. Was the raid the beginning of a full-scale invasion? They began shipping their human chattel out of reach, bound away across the wide Missouri River and as far south as Texas. Bills were reportedly introduced to expel all free blacks from the state within a year. Other petitions flirted with emancipation.

In Indiana, the Randolph Journal and its Quaker readership applauded the irony. "Only three years since the slave propagandists predicted that our fair and fertile soil would be worked by slave labor," said its Kansas correspondent, "—alas! How changed! Kansas is not only free from the polluting



Salt print reproduction of a daguerreotype, three-quarter length portrait of John Brown by Martin Lawrence in 1859, Library of Congress.

influence of Slavery, but one old man . . . by a bold stroke in defiance of the slave laws, in the night, should drive slavery out of her stronghold.” Free State leaders were unenthused, primarily because Brown’s raid had disrupted the recent peace along the border. “Brown should be arrested and set to work on the public improvements in Missouri’s Jefferson City, until he is restored to reason,” said the Herald of Freedom.

On the other side of the argument was blind outrage. “Robbers!” “Assassins!” shrieked the Harrisonville Democrat. “The mind grows dizzy with horror,” moaned the Missouri Democrat. A wealthy Missourian with free-soil tendencies was driven out of the county faster than Candace Owens was driven out of the Green Eggs Café, and his property was set on fire by neighbors. The governor of Missouri was authorized by the state legislature to offer \$3,000 for Brown’s arrest, and troops spilled over the border and camped along the Wakarusa River. President James Buchanan posted a \$250 reward for Brown’s head. Brown countered with a \$2.50 reward for Buchanan’s head and wrote an open letter excoriating them all. It appeared in the New York Tribune in January 1859 and reminded everyone that what the South and their tools condemned as a “dreadful outrage” was 11 persons restored to their “natural and inalienable rights.”

And 11 soon became 12.

## Shoot the Hemp off a Hat

Not long after Brown posted the letter, he led the wagons off course to Garnett, Kansas, where Dr. (and future Union Major General) James Gilpatrick Blunt resided. The fugitives were hidden in log cabins on an open prairie, and it was under Dr. Blunt’s care that Mrs. Daniels gave birth a baby boy. She gave him the name *John Brown Daniels*, and he became the first of many namesakes appearing in the black community well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

By January 14, Brown was 50 miles north in Lawrence trading off an ox team and staying at Joel Grover’s farm. A schoolteacher boarding at the farm kept a diary that was discovered and transcribed by his great grandniece in 2014. “Brown is sitting near me reading the Lawrence Republican. There is a young man with him. Both are armed to the ‘teeth,’” reads one entry. “One of the happier events of his life, he says, was the lib[erty] of those slaves a few days ago, and he will readily tell it to a slaveholder as to a free statesman.” The schoolteacher saw Brown and the caravan off on the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup>. “I gave him a good shake of the hand just as he left.”

“It was mighty slow traveling,” Harper remembered. “You see there was several different parties among our band, and our masters had people looking all over for us.” The traveling got slower still when they ran into a snow squall on the way to Holton, 40 miles south of the Nebraska state line. They stopped at a tavern, but word got out fast and they took shelter in

cabins near Straight Creek. Their enemies, led by a U.S. Marshal, gathered like storm clouds.

“He is surrounded,” went a report to Washington D.C. “They are coming over from Platte County, Missouri, to rescue the Negroes and take old Brown ... [E]verything looks like a fight. Brown will fight, and he is well armed and in two cabins.” One detail went unmentioned. Brown had armed the black men and women with him and was teaching them to shoot the hemp off a hat.

## Battle of the Spurs

As it was, no one fired a shot. The grim train rumbled closer and closer toward the rifle pits as the federal posse moved back farther and farther until, said the Lawrence Republican, “discretion overcame valor and away they went.” The Marshal was the first to flee. “The scene was ridiculous beyond description; some horses were hastily mounted by two men. One man grabbed tight hold of the tail of a horse, trying to leap on from behind, while the rider was putting the spurs to his sides; so he went flying through the air, his feet touching the ground now and then.”

Jane was still laughing years later. “They wouldn’t face old Captain Brown, no way. You coulda played marbles on their coattails.”

Three were taken prisoner. “They all had nice horses,” said Harper. “The Captain told them all to get down” and then upended their world by inviting the slaves to ride while they tramped ankle-deep in mud, cursing the whole time. Reports were circulating that Brown was hanging his prisoners, but he merely lectured them on morals and required them at prayer where they stood side-by-side with hated abolitionists and the slaves they’d set out to capture. One of them, a “wild, rattling, devil-may-care kind of fellow,” was asked to lead prayers one evening. “By God!” he said, “I can’t pray!” Brown urged him to recall one his mother taught him, and he relented: “Now I lay me down to sleep ...” After his release the next day, he said Brown “talked to him like a father” and was “the best man he had ever met,” though he resented being guarded by “damned niggers.”

After the so-called Battle of the Spurs, Brown’s wagons traveled in open defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act, which made it a federal offense to assist runaways. “Old Brown,” the Leavenworth Times taunted, “is not to be taken by ‘boys,’ and he cordially invites all pro-slavery men to try their hands at arresting him.”

When they reached the end of what Brown called Liberty Road and crossed the Nebraska border, the emancipated slaves erupted with joy and “cut up all kinds of foolishness.” Brown, Harper noted, stood by, “as solemn as a graveyard.” They stayed a night on the Sac and Fox Reservation and

*Adversity is the trial of principle. Without it, a man hardly knows whether he is honest or not.*

Henry Fielding



MINNESOTA

WISCONSIN

IOWA

Madison

Sioux City

Rockford

Cedar Rapids

Des Moines

Davenport

Omaha

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

ILLINOIS

Springfield

Kansas City

St. Louis

Topeka

5

4

2

3

Jefferson City

1

MISSOURI

Springfield

KANSAS TERRITORY



## John Brown's Journey: Step-by-Step

*On the night of December 20, 1858, John Brown and several of his men crossed the Kansas border into Vernon County, MO, to free slaves. The following day, he began the freedom ride to Canada with 12 liberated but endangered slaves.*

- |   |   |    |                                     |
|---|---|----|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Vernon County, MO, December 20, 1858        | 8  | Casey, IA, February 14-15           |
| 2 | Osawatomie, KS, Christmas Eve, 1858         | 9  | Des Moines River, February 18       |
| 3 | Garnett, KS, early- to-mid January 1859     | 10 | Newton, IA, February 19             |
| 4 | Lawrence, KS, January 14-24                 | 11 | Grinnell, IA, February 20           |
| 5 | Holton, KS, Battle of the Spurs, January 31 | 12 | Iowa City, IA, February 24          |
| 6 | Nebraska City, NE, February 4               | 13 | Springdale, IA, February 25-March 9 |
| 7 | Tabor, IA, February 5-12                    | 14 | West Liberty, IA, March 9           |
|   |   | 15 | Davenport, IA, March 10             |
|   |   | 16 | Chicago, IL, March 11               |
|   |   | 17 | Detroit, MI, March 12               |
|   |   | 18 | Windsor, Ontario, March 12          |

the next morning found the Nemaha River not frozen enough to bear the wagons. So they were disassembled and the timber used to construct a makeshift bridge for the horses. The wagons were reassembled on the other side. Before entering Nebraska City, they had one of many narrow misses with an armed posse, this one 50-strong, and soon crossed the frozen Missouri River. They found shelter in Civil Bend (now Percival), Iowa.

On February 5, they were in Tabor, where churches announced a public meeting to be held to discuss the raid and Brown's presence. The opinion went against him. He walked out without a word.

By the 9<sup>th</sup>, the strain of constant travel, danger, cold and probably malnourishment did what no marshal could do and put him down. Their departure was delayed three days as he recovered from chills and a fever.

On the 12<sup>th</sup>, they stayed the night at Malvern and then headed north in a snowstorm toward Lewis, where Brown's cousin provided shelter on the 13<sup>th</sup>. On the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, they stopped not far from what is now Atlantic and stayed the night at the Porter Hotel in Casey, the site of the Dalmanutha Cemetery today. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, they were just east of Redfield and, on the 17<sup>th</sup>, were sheltered in a timber outside of West Des Moines. The editor of the Citizen paid the bridge toll across the Des Moines River on the 18<sup>th</sup>, and they rested on a farm just west of Yellow Banks Park. From there, we know they were in Newton because a letter appeared in the Davenport News confirming that Brown passed through that town, and a collection was taken up to aid him on his way.

Twenty miles east of Newton is Grinnell, named for future Republican Congressman Josiah Bushnell Grinnell, who received them into his home on the 20<sup>th</sup>. "I am the 'awful Brown' of whom you have heard," was the introduction. The slaves received clothing and bread, meat, cake and pies were prepared. Brown joined a public thanksgiving and, after helping the women into the wagons, including the still-ailing Mrs. Daniels, he took his seat at the lead. Grinnell saw him holding the infant named for him in his arms.

"We are far on our journey and are ready to die on open field, but to go back, never, white or black," he said before leaving. "We can shoot 60 times a minute and everyone, even the women, is a dead shot."

Thirty-five miles east of Grinnell is Marengo, where they stopped at a farm, and 33 miles east of that is Iowa City.

And so the wagons clattered on, the frozen prairie a spinning wheel brightening and fading black. The old man, sleepless, up front, scanning the horizon with the baby on his lap. The fugitives huddling, shivering, singing their hymns. Wolves howling in the distance. At sunrise, the children awakened first, the rest soon afterward, and all hands shared the chores—

gathering wood, cooking, patching clothes, repairing the wagons, taking care of the horses and mules.

Iowa City proved to be full of friends, enemies and frenemies. An aspiring politician, determined to rid the still-new Republican Party of the abolitionist albatross, headed for a saloon in University Square and there recruited a posse to get Brown. Later seen shooting targets and drinking courage, some among them carried a rope and an empty promise to hang “the damned nigger-thief of Kansas.” Brown drove his wagon with a blanket draped over his head and shoulders and was only later told of their fizzled attempts to arrest him. “Ah!” he said and smiled.

On February 25, they were 15 miles east in the village of Springdale, where they stayed two weeks. “They are out of funds,” said the Vermont Journal. They were, in fact, destitute. To help raise funds, Springdale residents purchased the wagons and mules. One of them noted Brown’s boots coming apart at the seams and purchased a new pair for him. Brown gave them to one of the slaves who had no shoes at all.

“The Twelve,” researcher Cathleen Briley’s sobriquet for them, stayed out of sight on a farm and made their marks on a bedroom wall with a pencil under an inscription that read “Captain Brown’s Little Band.” For years it was preserved by the locals. When “a Buchanan marshal” went sniffing around, Quakers hid them in a grist mill and, pacifists though they were, stood guard.

In the midst of all of this, Samuel Harper and Jane were married by a justice of the peace.

## Detective Pinkerton

On March 9, the Twelve spent a restless night in a steam mill in West Liberty. A railway boxcar was left close to the mill, compliments of a pair of Republican newspaper editors, and secretly stocked and never billed. Brown climbed in and arranged clean straw and checked the locks on the sliding door. A small crowd gathered as the Daniels children were handed up to him and the others followed. At 11:00 a.m., the Chicago train arrived and was coupled to the boxcar, the conductor unaware that he’d just been commissioned an agent on the Underground Railroad.

In Chicago early on the morning of March 11, Detective Allen Pinkerton was asleep in his bed. Outside in the frigid air, a weary and ragged group trudged up Adams Street and knocked on his front door. Pinkerton bolted up and answered it, a loaded gun at the ready. Recognizing Brown, he hustled everyone in out of the cold. They were then separated and hidden.

Brown stayed with John Jones, one of the hundreds of unsung Underground Railroad agents and a close friend of Frederick Douglas, on Dearborn Street. Pinkerton housed several in his own home and scattered

the rest to other agents in the neighborhood. After an attempt to raise money at the Chicago Judiciary Convention proved a delegated failure later that day, he barged in and said that if he did not collect a substantial sum then and there, he would bring Old Brown himself to the meeting. Pinkerton walked out with \$600 in a hat. That afternoon, he was driving a wagon through the neighborhood, collecting everyone from their hideouts and transporting them to the depot at the foot of Lake Street. The train left for Detroit at 4:45 p.m.

*Detroit.* The city had a code word on the Underground Railroad: “Midnight.” Its black community was well organized, well-funded and experienced in all things abolitionist. Led by George DeBaptiste and William Lambert, it had been flouting the Fugitive Slave Act since 1850, and by the end of the decade, the Colored Vigilant Committee was spiriting over 1,000 runaways annually across the Detroit River into Canada. Overmatched slaveholders were reduced to spreading daffy rumors that the river, three miles from shore to shore at its widest, was 3,000 miles wide, and that Canadian soil was only good for black-eyed peas.

It was raining and sleeting when the train pulled into the station downtown. The Vigilant Committee took immediate charge of the Twelve and hustled them to the wharf. Brown could finally relax. His old bones had led five women, four children and three men out of Missouri, through Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois and Michigan—82 days and 1,151 miles through the Midwestern winter.

He was there to see them off before they were ferried over to Windsor. There is no record of a goodbye, though his fabled stoicism must have faltered with so many arms embracing him.

Soon, his figure was shrinking in their wake.

## The Twelve

Of the Twelve who became a part of Brown’s history, four are identifiable in the historical record: Jim and Narcissa Daniels, John Brown Daniels, and Samuel and Jane Harper. Researchers dug deeper and found the names of the Daniels’ elder children (Missouri Jane and Willie Glee) in probate records. More names appear in an 1861 Canadian census and can be easily cross-checked with the widowed mother, her two daughters, young son, and an unrelated young man mentioned in a March 1859 edition of the New York Tribune. The widowed mother is Phillis Harper, Malinda is the name of one of her daughters, and ten-year-old Mark Harper one of her sons. These are Samuel’s mother and siblings. Malinda’s last name is given as “Hamilton.” She had married a “Sam Hamilton” who is also listed and who was likewise born in the United States and is of African descent. The name “Hamilton”

appears as the surname of Samuel and Jane's daughter in a later census and on a legal document as Jane's maiden name. Sam Hamilton, then, is likely the other "young man" mentioned in the Tribune and Jane's brother. The Harper and Hamilton families had become one.

The name of the widow's other daughter is elusive. In March 1895, the Windsor Star mentions that a "Mrs. Flenoy" was among those liberated in Missouri and had died "a few months" earlier. An Essex County death schedule reveals that a washerwoman and resident of Windsor named Cecilia Flenoy died that past November. She was born in Kentucky around 1830, which would make her too old to be the widow's missing daughter, unless Phillis was at least five years older than the 40 years recorded beside her name in the 1861 provincial census. Phillis may well have been older. An 1850 Kentucky slave census for Isaac Larue lists the age and sex of his slaves and a woman appears on it who is likely Phillis. Her age is given as 35. If that's the widow and the age given is fairly accurate, then the record points toward Cecelia Flenoy as the missing daughter.

## Canada West

On March 12, 1859, we see the Twelve, recognizable now, disembark from the ferries at the foot of Oullette Avenue in Windsor in the British colony of Canada West (formerly Upper Canada). We see them drop to their knees.

There was much to be thankful for. Legislation abolishing slavery in the British colonies went into force on August 1, 1834, and Canadians generally felt duty-bound not to assist bounty hunters or U.S. Marshals in the capture of runaway slaves on their lands. In fact, there was hostility to the idea of it. What's more, Windsor's climate was relatively temperate, labor was needed in Essex County to clear forests and work on the railroads, and it was close to the Detroit marketplace and what was their native soil—what was, despite everything, *home*.

We know that soon after their arrival in Windsor, they were staying in a house owned by Mary Bibb, widow of Henry Bibb, an ex-slave turned author and abolitionist. The Bibbs were major figures in the Fugitive Home Society, and their presence in that house spoke to the priority placed on them by Brown's friends in Detroit. But they were still adjusting to freedom, and their trouble letting go of the old ways caused a disaster. They would burn pine and other inflammable knots for light, as they had done in their slave cabins. One night they left a knot burning after they had gone to bed and the house caught fire. They escaped, though Bibb's house was destroyed. It had no insurance. All of the items given them in Detroit and by friends during their long journey were lost.

By July, the Detroit Advertiser reported that they had recovered. "The

adults are at work, and the little children are kindly cared for,” it said.

On August 1, they were among 7,000 who gathered in a handsome grove in nearby Sandwich to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Emancipation Day. Most of the revelers were American ex-slaves. Two were named: John Brown Daniels, who was 6 months old, and a girl called “Lina” (likely Malinda) who told a journalist that “she liked living in Canada better and better every day” and affirmed that they were all “comfortable now with plenty of work to keep them busy and a great many good friends willing to lend a helping hand.”

In the fall, they were readying themselves for the winter and staying busy. Jim and Narcissa Daniels and their three children had moved further inland to Maidstone, and the rest were renting land in Windsor. Samuel Harper and another man, probably Sam Hamilton, team-sawed wood and hired themselves out as day laborers. Mark was helping around the property. Two of the women, described as former field hands in Missouri, spaded an acre of land and grew a fine crop of corn and potatoes, the latter of which they stored in a root cellar behind the house. They produced plenty of onions, carrots, parsnips and “some extraordinary cabbages,” packed neatly in fodder and straw, and owned three hogs they fed on swill collected from neighbors. They had already socked away what would be almost \$600 today.

When their industriousness was not enough, they had each other. And they had their freedom. Its scent was in the harvest, in the timber they stripped; its touch in the coins they earned, in the cool evenings and the heat of the small hearth they gathered around. When nature’s white curtain began descending on 1859, they spent Sundays in Sandwich skating on one of the frozen tributaries.

### “If the Bible was true . . . .”

Old Brown was by then a prisoner in Virginia.

After capturing the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry on October 16, he lingered instead of leading his black and white band to the mountains as planned. When then-Colonel Robert E. Lee demanded an unconditional surrender, he refused. The door to the engine house he had holed up in was breached, Marines piled in and, by some fluke of fate, Brown survived. He lived just long enough to tell the world why he had done what he had done.

On November 2, he stood before the court and delivered one of American history’s great speeches. He said, “I intended certainly to have made a clean thing of [the] matter, as I did last winter, when I went into Missouri and there took slaves without the snapping of a gun on either side, moved them through the country, and finally left them in Canada. I designed to have done the same thing again on a larger scale. I am yet too young to under-

stand 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, was not wrong, but right.”

The judge was unmoved. “The sentence of the law is that you, John Brown, be hanged by the neck until you are dead.” At that, a spectator in the court “clapped his hands jubilantly.”

On November 5, a reporter for the New York Tribune visited the Harpers and Hamiltons at their rented farm. He read them the speech and the sentence of Brown, and they sobbed aloud. Two of the women said they’d be willing to die in his place. “If the Bible was true, he practiced most of it here,” said another, “so he would be rewarded by ‘old Master’ up higher with greater happiness” than he ever knew on earth.

On December 2, Brown’s jail door was unlocked, and he was escorted to the sun-drenched street. There is no truth to the legend that a slave mother waited for him and he kissed her baby, though it might as well have been. The scene followed a grim protocol; only armed men in uniforms stood by as he climbed a wagon that took him not to Kansas or Canada, but to the gallows. He sat on his coffin.

“This *is* a beautiful country,” he said as the wagon rumbled on its way.

Brown was hanged as a traitor but saw himself as a patriot. He numbered among his heroes George Washington and Nat Turner and saw no irony in it and nothing inconsistent about it. “As citizens of the United States of America,” he wrote for a black defensive organization in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1851, “*we will ever be true to the flag of our beloved country, always acting under it*” [emphasis his]. Had he transported those arms out of Harpers Ferry and to the mountains, it would have marked the beginning of a renegade state out of reach of corrupt laws, a free state that would have stayed out of reach until the rest of the nation regained its sanity and honored its principles. The flag was going to be the same his grandfathers fought under during the Revolution.

His 12 friends were never far from his thoughts. The last time he saw them, they were sailing away from this beautiful country—from *their* beautiful country. And as he watched them go, he must have wrestled with a profound and prodding feeling of regret that they *had* to go.

He, and we, might like to know that not all of them stayed gone.

Not 20 years after the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified, John Brown Daniels returned to the United States. He was living in Springwells, just outside of Detroit, and working as a laborer in a brickyard. On July 5, 1886, he married Mary Douglas; he was 27, she 21—the prime of life.

Together they step out of view, their dreams and consolations like whispers through the pines. ♦

*Had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends ... every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.*

John Brown’s last speech to the court (November 2, 1859)