

The historical marker commemorating the Chambersburg meeting between John Brown and Frederick Douglass in August 1859.

(THIS HISTORICAL MARKER IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF THE PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL AND MUSEUM COMMISSION AND THE MARKER TEXT IS COPYRIGHT PROTECTED. THE IMAGE OF THIS MARKER IS BEING USED WITH PERMISSION.)

Hagerstown

CHAMBERSBURG TO CHARLES TOWN

THE JOHN BROWN TRAIL

Anna Pritt

“Slavery,” wrote John Brown, “throughout its entire existence in the United States, is none other than a most barbarous, unprovoked, and unjustifiable war of one portion of its citizens upon another portion.”¹ Unlike many abolitionists at the time, Brown was convinced that peaceful measures were not sufficient to abolish slavery. In 1856, he and other abolitionists attacked a group of pro-slavery settlers near Pottawatomie Creek in Kansas. Three years later, Brown led another uprising, this time in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. The local story of the October, 1859 raid begins in the summer of that year, in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.²

Start the tour in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. At 225 East King Street in Chambersburg stands a house with white siding and dark shutters, currently occupied by the American Heart Association. In the 1850s this building was a

boarding house owned by Mrs. Mary Ritner. It became known as the John Brown House after the famous abolitionist lived here during the summer prior to his raid on Harpers Ferry. There are exhibits on John Brown on the second floor of the building. To arrange a tour, contact the Franklin County Historical Society: (717) 375-2345, history@pa.net.

On June 27, 1859, a tall, bearded, white-haired man arrived in Chambersburg and rented the second floor of this boarding house. The stranger introduced himself as Dr. Isaac Smith, a prospector planning to develop iron mines in Maryland and Virginia.³ The landlady was the daughter-in-law of Joseph Ritner, a former governor of Pennsylvania and an outspoken abolitionist. Perhaps it was no coincidence that Dr. Smith chose to stay in this particular house. He was actually John Brown, already famous for his fanatical commitment to abolishing slavery

and wanted for the murders of five anti-abolitionists in Kansas.⁴

Isaac Smith rarely conversed with the townspeople, occasionally received visitors at his boarding house, and frequently waited at the post office to watch for the arrival of the train. Alexander McClure, a Chambersburg attorney, never doubted that Smith was “a quiet business man who decided to develop the mineral wealth of Western Virginia.”⁵ This Dr. Smith also opened a sawmill, supplied charcoal to furnaces in the area, led Sunday School classes at Emmanuel Chapel, and once preached at Falling Spring Presbyterian Church.⁶

None of Chambersburg’s residents suspected that Brown was also aiding fugitives on the Underground Railroad and developing a plan for his assault on Harpers Ferry. Several of Brown’s accomplices, including three of his sons, were living in Chambersburg at the same time. Box after box of

HARPERS FERRY AND VIC
1859

“mining equipment” was delivered by train to “Smith and Sons.” These cartons actually contained arms, ammunition, and other equipment necessary for the raid. The shipments were stored in the nearby Oakes and Cauffman Warehouse and secretly conveyed by wagon fifty miles south.⁷

Go west on East King Street about 0.1 mile, then turn left onto Philadelphia Ave. (N. Main St./US-11 S). After 0.3 miles, turn right onto West Washington

recognized Douglass and urged him to give a speech. He did so, then went to a barbershop owned by Henry Watson, who led him and his companion to the quarry. Brown was waiting for them there, disguised as a fisherman, with John Henry Kagi.⁸

The four men spent two days talking and arguing. Again and again Brown urged Douglass to join him in the assault on Harpers Ferry. Douglass refused, and attempted to talk Brown

Take I-81 South 23.7 miles. Merge onto I-70 East. After about 4 miles, take the MD-65 S exit (Exit 29A) toward Sharpsburg. Turn right onto MD-65 South. After about 10 miles, MD-65 will become N. Church St., then Burnside Bridge Rd. Turn right onto Mills Rd for 1.7 miles, then left onto Harpers Ferry Rd for 2.3 miles, and left on Mt. Lock Hill Rd for 0.9 miles. Make a right on Chestnut Grove Rd. End at 2406 Chestnut Grove Rd., the property known as Kennedy Farm

“John Brown’s Fort,” Harpers Ferry, circa 1889-1892.

The Jefferson County Courthouse in Charles Town, WV, where John Brown was tried and convicted in 1859.



HISTORIC PHOTO COLLECTION, HARPERS FERRY (NHP)

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL KELLER, WEST VIRGINIA DIVISION OF CULTURE AND HISTORY

Street. You will see Southgate Mall on the left. In 1859 none of these stores, cars, or busy shoppers existed. There was only a quiet old stone quarry. A historical marker behind the shopping center on West Washington Street marks the site of a meeting between John Brown and Frederick Douglass.

Frederick Douglass, a former slave and ardent abolitionist, arrived in Chambersburg on August 19, 1859, accompanied by a fugitive slave named Shields Green. The meeting with Brown was supposed to be a secret, but the townspeople immediately

out of the plan. Certain that the raid would end in failure, he warned Brown that “Virginia would blow him and his hostages sky-high.” He also feared that the raid would not only fail to free any slaves but would actually “rivet the fetters more firmly than ever on the limbs of the enslaved.”⁹

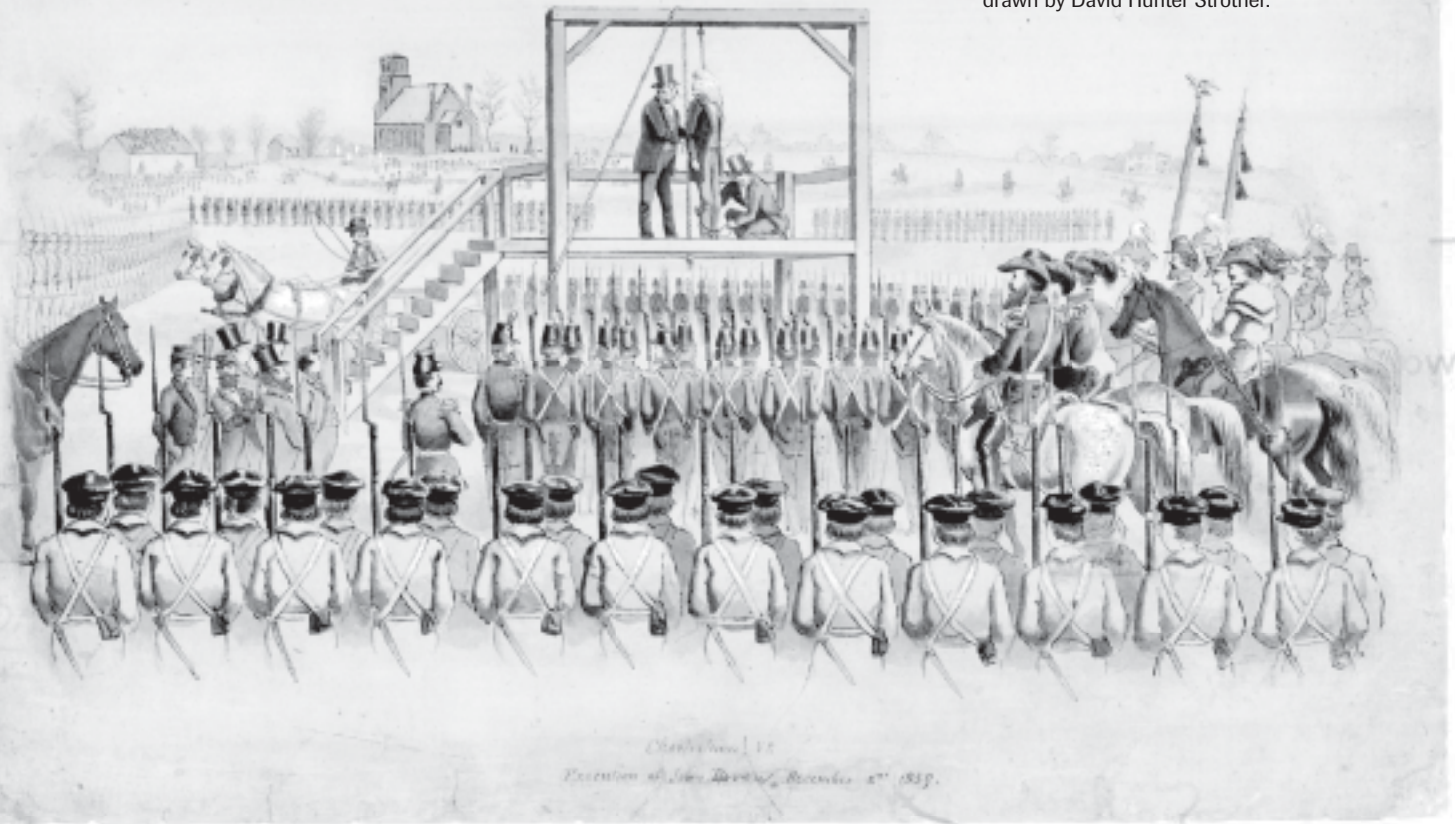
Finally the four men parted. Brown and Kagi were still determined to carry out the raid. Shields Green joined them, announcing, “I believe I’ll go with the old man.” Douglass, still convinced that the plan would be disastrous, returned to Rochester.¹⁰

in the mid-nineteenth-century, which John Brown used as his headquarters from July to October in 1859. Contact the farm’s current owners at captain@johnbrown.org to arrange a tour.

This farm was named after Dr. Robert F. Kennedy, who purchased the 194 acres of land from Antietam Iron Works in 1852. Kennedy died seven years later, in the spring of 1859. The farm remained empty for several months.¹¹ In the middle of July, John Brown, alias Isaac Smith, rented the property for nine months and began living there with his two sons Owen

COURTESY OF WEST VIRGINIA AND REGIONAL HISTORY COLLECTION, WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

The execution of John Brown in Charles Town, [West] Virginia, on December 2, 1859, as drawn by David Hunter Strother.



Execution of John Brown, December 2nd 1859.

and Oliver and another accomplice, Jeremiah Anderson. Throughout the following weeks, more of Brown's companions gradually arrived until there were more than twenty men living at the farm.¹² Brown's sixteen-year-old daughter Annie and young daughter-in-law Martha came to do the cooking and cleaning and to keep a sharp lookout for suspicious neighbors.¹³

The men stayed in the farmhouse all day, keeping busy by reading, writing letters, playing checkers, and polishing their rifles. At night they went outside for fresh air and exercise and to drill with Lieutenant Jeremiah Anderson in preparation for the raid. If any stranger came near the house, one of the girls would detain the visitor while the men went up to the attic to hide.¹⁴ In late September the two girls were sent home and Brown's "Provisional Army of the United States" prepared to set off for its next destination: Harpers Ferry.

Leaving Kennedy Farm, go southwest on Chestnut Grove Rd, and make a slight left onto Harpers Ferry Rd. After 5.5

miles, turn left onto Keep Tryst Rd, then make a left on US-340 West. After 2.7 miles, turn right onto Shenandoah Street in Harpers Ferry.

On Shenandoah Street stands the only surviving building of the town's original armory. It is a small, roughly square, one-story brick building with wide arched doorways, a slate roof, and a white open belfry. This structure was the armory's "engine and guard-house," built in 1848. At the time of John Brown's raid it was located about 150 feet west of its current location, near the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad depot. The building escaped destruction during the Civil War, was dismantled and moved several times, and was finally acquired by the National Park Service in 1968 and moved to a place as close to its original site as possible. It is known as "John Brown's Fort."

Brown and his followers barricaded themselves and nine hostages in this building early in the morning on Monday, October 17, 1859. The night before, they had crossed the Potomac and entered Harpers Ferry at about 11 P.M., slashed telegraph wires to keep

news of the raid from spreading, and captured the local armory, arsenal, and rifle factory. They had also taken about 40 townspeople as hostages and placed guards throughout the town. But they had made the mistake of allowing a train passing through Harpers Ferry to continue on to Baltimore and raise the alarm. Troops from Charlestown, Shepherdstown, and Martinsburg arrived and joined the local militia in surrounding the armory. They were followed by companies from Frederick, Baltimore, and Washington. A detachment of marines under Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee arrived on the evening of October 17.¹⁵

Fearing for the safety of Brown's hostages, the troops did not storm the engine house right away but waited until daylight on October 18. Under Lee's orders, Lieutenant J. E. B. Stewart approached the engine house with a white flag and delivered a written summons to the insurgents, ordering them to "immediately deliver up their arms and release their prisoners." As Lee expected, Brown refused to accept the surrender terms. A "storming

party” of twelve men under Lieutenant Green attempted to break down the doors of the engine house with sledge-hammers, but Brown’s men had fastened the doors with ropes and blocked them with fire engines. Lee’s troops found a heavy ladder to use as a battering ram and “dashed in a part of the door.” They entered the engine house with swords and bayonets, and “the whole was over in a few minutes.”¹⁶

From Harpers Ferry, take US-340 South to Charles Town. At 100 East Washington Street stands the Jefferson County Courthouse, built in 1836. It was damaged by shells during the Civil War, but was later restored and is still in use today. The courtroom is open to the public on weekdays.

John Brown was tried in this building beginning on October 25, 1859. Brown had been brought to Charles Town from Harpers Ferry five days before. He was weak and ill from a sword wound and had to lie on a cot in the courtroom during his trial. He was found guilty of treason and sentenced to death by Judge Richard Parker.¹⁷

From the courthouse take US-340 BR Northeast; turn right on S. Samuel Street. At 515 S. Samuel St. is the Gibson-Todd House, a brick Victorian home built by Colonel John Thomas Gibson in 1892. A historical marker in the yard notes the spot where a gallows once stood, just to the north of where the house now stands.

On December 2, 1859, John Brown was brought here in a furniture wagon to be hanged. More than a thousand troops were assembled in Charles Town, for Virginia’s governor feared opposition from abolitionists, and there had been rumors of plans to rescue Brown.¹⁸ His raid and arrest had already provoked widespread controversy. Some saw him as a “miserable old traitor and murderer,”¹⁹ others as “an angel of light.”²⁰

To the end, John Brown remained convinced that he was in the right. George Mauzy, a Harpers Ferry resi-

dent who was in Charles Town on the day of the execution, wrote that the “old fanatic made no confession whatsoever, nor concession that he was wrong, but contended that he was right in everything he had done, that he had done great service to God.”²¹

Brown was executed shortly before noon. He left behind him the ominous words: “I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood.”²²

Other regional sites related to John Brown:

Emmanuel Chapel in Mont Alto, PA.

While he was living in Chambersburg during the summer of 1859, Brown attended church services here and taught a Sunday School class for African American children. The Chapel is now owned by Penn State University. For information, call (717) 749-6000

Washington County Free Library in Hagerstown, MD.

From Chambersburg, Brown made several trips south with a wagon, moving boxes of “mining equipment” (actually weapons). On June 30, 1859, probably on one of these trips, Brown stayed at a hotel known as the Washington House in Hagerstown, MD. The building burned down in 1877, but the Western Maryland Room in the Washington County Free Library owns the hotel register signed by “I. Smith” (John Brown), his sons, and the names of several of Brown’s accomplices who also stayed there. The Western Maryland Room is open on Mondays 2–6 p.m. and 7–9 p.m., and Thursdays and Fridays 9 a.m.–12 noon and 1–5 p.m. For information, call (301) 739-3250

The Jefferson County Museum, at 200 East Washington Street in Charles Town, WV.

The museum owns John Brown’s copy of his Provisional Constitution, the wagon that conveyed him from prison to the gallows, and one of the pikes he planned to distribute to freed

slaves. Open Tuesday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., April through November. For information, call (304) 725-8628

Anna Pritt is an intern at the Catoctin Center for Regional Studies.

- 1 John Brown, “Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States” (1856), <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/johnbrown/brownconstitution.html>
- 2 A time line of John Brown’s movements from June to December, 1859 can be found at http://www.johnbrown.org/time_line.htm
- 3 <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/pa2.htm>
- 4 <http://www.cvcon.com/aaaajB%27s%20Journey/titleb.html>
- 5 Alexander K. McClure, *Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company, 1905), 360–371.
- 6 <http://www.cvcon.com/aaaajB%27s%20Journey/titleb.html>
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, reprint, New York: Pathway Press, 1941), 350–354.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 <http://www.johnbrown.org>
- 12 Franklin Sanborn, *Life and Letters of John Brown* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891), 527–529, 546.
- 13 Annie Brown Adams, letter describing the time at Kennedy Farm (1887), http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/documents/documents_p2.cfm?doc=35
- 14 <http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/jbrown/kfarm.html>
- 15 Sanborn, *Life and Letters*, 553–557; Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800–1859: A Biography Fifty Years After* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910), 426–432.
- 16 Robert E. Lee, account of Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry (1859), <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/johnbrown/leereport.html>
- 17 Villard, *Fifty Years After*, 470–499.
- 18 Ibid, 519–522.
- 19 Richmond *Whig* newspaper editorial (Nov. 18, 1859), in Villard, *Fifty Years After*, 500.
- 20 Henry David Thoreau, “A Plea for Captain John Brown” (Oct. 30, 1859), http://www.transcendentalists.com/thoreau_plea_john_brown.htm
- 21 George Mauzy, letter to his daughter and son-in-law, James and Eugenia Burton (1859), <http://www.nps.gov/archive/hafe/mauzy.htm>
- 22 Villard, *Fifty Years After*, 554.