John Brown
(1800-1859)
American Abolitionist

One may question why John Brown, most noted for his ill-conceived 1859 raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, has a place in this issue of The Chronicle – which is dedicated to local persons within United Methodism having a connection to the Battle of Gettysburg. This article first gives a brief and perhaps oversimplified biographical sketch of John Brown, and then relates his connections to south-central Pennsylvania and United Methodism.

Biographical Sketch

John Brown was born at Torrington, Connecticut, on May 4, 1800, to Owen Brown and Ruth Mills Brown. A religious youth, Brown studied briefly for the ministry but then dropped out to learn the tanner's trade from his father. He married Dianthe Lusk in 1820, and the couple had seven children before her death in 1832. In 1833 he married Mary Ann Day, with whom he had thirteen children in the next twenty-one years. Of Brown's twenty children, twelve survived.

When Brown was twelve years old, he saw an African American boy mistreated – an incident, he said, that led him to declare "eternal war with slavery." Believing that slavery could be destroyed only with bloodshed, he decided in 1839 that the South should be invaded and the slaves freed at gunpoint. For the next decade, he attempted a number of business ventures, none successfully. He moved his family ten times, until settling in 1849 on a farm in North Elba, New York.

When the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 gave the citizens of those territories the right to choose whether they would enter the Union as free or slave states, Brown traveled through the East urging an end to slavery in Kansas and gathering money for weapons to help achieve that end. In September he settled near Osawatomie, Kansas, declaring, "I am here to promote the killing of slavery." In 1856 he led a raid on a proslavery settlement at Pottawatomie, Kansas, killing five men before escaping.

Brown spent the summer of 1856 in New England collecting money for his fight against slavery. Prominent public figures, some unaware of the details of his activities, were impressed by his dedication and helped him gather recruits, guns, and money. In August, he and his supporters fought with settlers at Osawatomie, and his son Frederick was killed. "I will die fighting for this cause," Brown wrote. "There will be no peace in this land until slavery is done for," he stated. He went east in early 1857 with plans to invade the South – gathering
supporters for training at Tabor, Iowa, and holding meetings with eastern abolitionists.

Early in 1858, he sent his son John Jr. to survey the country around the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. In April, he held a meeting of his men in Chatham, Ontario, Canada. He explained that he planned to invade the South, arm the slaves, and set up a free state under a new constitution – and then he returned to Kansas using a different name and led a raid into Missouri, killing one man and bringing some slaves back to Canada.

While Brown was now considered a criminal in the eyes of the state of Missouri and the U.S. government, and both offered rewards for his capture, in parts of the North he was a hero – and donations poured in. In early 1859 he toured the East again to raise money, and in July he rented a farm five miles north of Harpers Ferry, where he recruited twenty-one men for final training. While he hoped to seize the arsenal and distribute arms to the slaves he thought would support him, Harpers Ferry was an isolated mountain town, with few slaves nearby.

On the night of October 16, 1859, Brown set out for Harpers Ferry with eighteen men and a wagon full of supplies, leaving three men behind to guard the farm. Shooting broke out early on October 17, 1859, between Brown's men and local residents, and soldiers soon arrived from Charles Town. By nightfall Brown's group was trapped in the armory's engine house – and all but five were wounded. That night ninety marines arrived from Washington DC, and the next morning they stormed the engine house. Of Brown's original party, ten died and seven were captured; the victims on the other side included a marine and four other men, one of them a free African American killed by mistake.

Brown was jailed at Charles Town. His trial took place a week later and he was convicted of treason, conspiracy, and first-degree murder. His only defense was that "I believe that to have interfered as I have done, in behalf of His despised poor, I did no wrong, but right…. I am ready for my fate." On November 2, the court sentenced Brown to death – with the execution to occur one month later.

News of Brown's deed shocked the nation. While some praised him – including Ralph Waldo Emerson, who called him "that new saint who will make the gallows like a cross" – most were abhorred by his actions. Seventeen of Brown's acquaintances sent letters on his behalf to Governor Wise of Virginia, but Wise ignored them.

Brown was hanged at Charles Town on December 2, 1859, with four of his men. On his way to the gallows he handed a note to his jailer which read: "I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with Blood." He was buried in North Elba NY, a hero among abolitionists. “John Brown’s Body” soon became a popular rallying song, and the Battle of Gettysburg proved to be the turning point John Brown never lived to see.
Mid-state Connections

John Brown’s connection to mid-state Pennsylvania comes from the fact that he lived in Chambersburg during the summer of 1859, while planning and gathering supplies for his raid on Harpers Ferry, under the alias of Isaac Smith. In August of 1859 Frederick Douglass came to Chambersburg, at Brown’s request, to discuss the planned raid. Douglass reported to a local Negro barber, who directed him to the quarry where the meeting took place. Brown, disguised as an old fisherman, revealed his plans to Douglass and asked for his presence and support. When Douglass saw that Brown could not be persuaded to abandon the plan, he left for Canada so that he could not be connected in any way with the raid. The following excerpts from The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1881) describe that meeting in Douglass’ own words.

“When I reached Chambersburg… I called upon Mr. Henry Watson, a simple-minded and warm-hearted man to whom Captain Brown had imparted the secret of my visit, to show me the road to the appointed rendezvous. Watson was very busy in his barber’s shop, but he dropped all and put me on the right track.

“I approached the old quarry very cautiously, for John Brown was generally well-armed, and regarded strangers with suspicion. He was under ban of the government, and heavy rewards were offered for his arrest...

“As I came near, he regarded me rather suspiciously, but soon recognized me, and received me cordially. He had in his hand when he met me a fishing tackle… The fishing was simply a disguise, and was certainly a good one. He looked every way like a man of the neighborhood, and as much at home as any of the farmers around there. His hat was old and storm-beaten, and his clothing was about the color of the stone quarry itself...

“His face wore an anxious expression, and he was much worn by thought and exposure. I felt that I was on a dangerous mission, and was as little desirous of discovery as himself, though no reward had been offered for me.

“We sat down among the rocks and talked over the enterprise which was about to be undertaken. The taking of Harpers Ferry, of which Captain Brown had
merely hinted before, was now declared as his settled purpose, and he wanted to know what I thought of it. I at once opposed the measure with all the arguments at my command... Captain Brown did most of the talking on the other side of the question... I told him, and these were my words, that all his arguments, and all his descriptions of the place, convinced me that he was going into a perfect steel-trap, and that once in he would never get out alive... He was not to be shaken by anything I could say, but treated my views respectfully...

“In parting he put his arms around me in a manner more friendly, and said, ‘Come with me, Douglass; I will defend you with my life. I want you for a special purpose. When I strike, the bees will begin swarm, and I shall want you to help hive them.’ But my discretion or my cowardice made me proof against the dear old man’s eloquence – perhaps it was something of both which determined my course.”

United Brethren Connections

John Brown’s experiences and determined anti-slavery convictions are similar to those of at least two Pennsylvania-connected United Brethren clergy featured in previous volumes of The Chronicle.

Benjamin Hanby (1833-1867) was received as a member of the Pennsylvania Conference at its annual 1859 session held in Mechanicsburg, Cumberland County. Best known as the author of Darling Nellie Gray, he based that moving anti-slavery ballad on an incident involving the death of fugitive slave being sheltered in his boyhood home. Hanby’s story is told in the “Hymns of Central Pennsylvania” article on pages 5-27 of the 1999 issue of The Chronicle.

Samuel S. Snyder (c1824-1863) of Huntingdon County PA was received by the Allegheny Conference in 1844. He volunteered to start the United Brethren work in Kansas in 1854, the very year that the Kansas-Nebraska bill passed and began the bloody slave-free conflict in that territory. A firm, but peaceful, voice against the evils of slavery, he was deliberately singled out to be the first one killed in the infamous 1863 four-hour raid of the Lawrence KS area by pro-slavery activist William Quantrill that left 180 dead, created 80 widows and 250 orphans, and caused property damages estimated at $1,500,000. Snyder’s story is told in the “John S. Gingerich” article on pages 16-30 of the 2010 issue of The Chronicle.

The strong Mennonite influence in the early United Brethren Church instilled in many of its followers the willingness to stand up to and to suffer persecution (or even martyrdom) as voices against injustices and for the cause of Christ. There is no evidence that John Brown was influenced by United Brethren preaching or teaching during his formative years – but he was undoubtedly aware of the denomination’s positions, and did cross paths with the United Brethren on at least one significant occasion.
The raid on Harper’s Ferry began the evening of October 16, 1859. United Brethren historian Paul Holdcraft reports in his 1939 History of the Pennsylvania Conference, pages 393-394, that John Brown chose to attend a United Brethren worship service earlier that day at Sample’s Manor Union Church. The preacher was Joseph S. Grimm (1812-1892) [father of three Pennsylvania Conference preachers named Luther Grimm, John Wesley Grimm, and William Otterbein Grimm!], and his text was John 9:4 – “I must work the works of him that sent me while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work.”

Finally, John Brown had at least one indirect connection to the United Brethren Church. John Henry Kagi (1835-1859) was John Brown’s right hand man, and he was present at the quarry meeting between Brown and Douglass. The most educated of Brown’s conspirators, he was killed during the second day of the confrontation at Harpers Ferry when he tried to escape across the Shenandoah River. His family was originally part of the large Mennonite/United Brethren community in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, but they had to leave because of their strong anti-slavery sentiments. Kagi helped to organize a station on the Underground Railroad in a cave at the home of his sister Barbara Ann Kagi Mayhew in Nebraska City NE, that state’s only officially documented such site. United Brethren preacher Thomas Chapman was the one who arranged for the slaves to be transported to and from that station. This indirect United Brethren connection was part of the cumulative background influences on John Brown and his men.

A contemporary lithograph of the U.S. Marines’ counter-attack at Harpers Ferry.