

Slavery was subject to increasing attack by Vermont abolitionists in the 1830s and 1840s. Vermont formed the first state auxiliary of the American Anti-Slavery Society, with the help of Rowland T. Robinson, and by 1837 had more local societies—89—than any other New England state, despite its relatively smaller population.<sup>8</sup>

This interpretation of the Underground Railroad at Rokeby—and, by extension, Vermont—is not what visitor expect. For many, the romance of the Railroad is inextricably tied to notions of danger and secrecy. At Rokeby we have come to see the Robinson's contribution in a new light. Rather than providing mere shelter for a night, Rowland and Rachel Robinson took former slaves into their home, gave them employment on the farm, taught them to read and write, and gave them the chance to start life anew. Fugitive slaves escaped with little more than their own courage and determination; at some point they had to stop running and begin new lives as free men and women. This was the opportunity offered by the Robinsons and Rokeby.

#### References

- <sup>1</sup> "Rokeby" was the name the Robinsons gave to their family home and farm. The private Museum was named for it.
- <sup>2</sup> Robinson's son Rowland Evans Robinson was a popular Vermont author at the turn of the century.

He wrote one or two Underground Railroad stories that include the usual themes of pursuit, hiding, and the need for extreme secrecy. These have generally been assumed to be factual, given his family background, even though he was a child during the 1830s and 1840s (he was born in 1833), and his tales are not supported by the historical record.

- <sup>3</sup> Joseph Beale to Rowland T. Robinson, July 12, 1844, Rokeby Collection.
- <sup>4</sup> David Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*. New York, 1939, p. 135.
- <sup>5</sup> Marion Gleason McDougall says in *Fugitive Slaves, 1619-1865* (New York, 1967, p 36), that "The risk and trouble of transporting slaves across free states were so great, that up to 1850, we seldom hear of kidnapping cases, and rarely of the capture of a genuine fugitive in the New England states."
- <sup>6</sup> A Vermont historian, Ray Zirblis, was, at the time of this writing (September 1996) just finishing a major research report on the Underground Railroad in the state.
- <sup>7</sup> Ludlum, 135.
- <sup>8</sup> Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830-1860*, New York, harper & Brothers, 1960, p. 67.

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## The John Brown Fort African-Americans' Civil War Monument

The armory engine house, which later became known as the John Brown Fort, is the structure in which Brown and his men took refuge during their failed attempt to capture Harpers Ferry. While John Brown's raid failed, his efforts were revered by abolitionists and he became a martyr in the fight against slavery.

Today, the John Brown fort is a well preserved structure that sits in the heart of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. It is well situated in the landscape and it can easily be seen by visitors who enter the downtown district of the park. Its placement seems intentional, positioned in the midst of a monumental landscape. Without knowing the structure's history one can easily believe that its appearance and symbolic meaning is timeless, rooted in the abolitionist cause for equal

rights. But this is not necessarily the case. The structure was not always revered by the majority of Americans. It has taken refuge at several oases in its 150-year existence, for display and for reverence, only to be moved again.

After the Civil War, the structure stood neglected on the abandoned armory grounds in Harpers Ferry. It was transformed into a major tourist attraction, as visiting Civil War sites became a major American leisure time activity beginning in the late 19th century. In 1892, the fort's owner sold it to the John Brown Fort Company for display near the Chicago exposition. The exhibit opened with only 10 days left in the exposition. With only 10 paid admissions at 50 cents a piece, the company lost about \$60,000 on this venture. The John Brown Fort Company deserted the structure.<sup>1</sup>

At the height of the Jim Crow era the John Brown Fort lay dismantled in Chicago and in 1895 *The Chicago Tribune* (1 April 1895) published the "Ignoble use of John Brown's Fort," stating that the fort was being moved so that it could become part of a department store stable for delivery wagons. Mary Katherine Keemle Field, active in social reform issues and concerned with the problems of post-Civil War African Americans, saw this as an opportunity to move the fort back to Harpers Ferry, to be close to Storer College, a school established in 1865-1867 primarily for the education of newly freed African Americans.<sup>2</sup>

Field's campaign contacted Alexander Murphy of Jefferson County, West Virginia, about setting aside five acres of his farm, Buena Vista, for the fort. The location was several miles from its original location and railroad line. Alexander Murphy (In Fairbairn 1961: appendix) convinced Kate Field that his farm would be a suitable place for the fort.

On July 23, 1895, Kate Field signed a contract with Alexander Murphy and his wife who deeded five acres of their farm for one dollar.<sup>3</sup>

Alexander Murphy played a major role in the construction of the fort on the five-acre parcel. In an interview with Alexander Murphy's daughter-in-law, Mrs. Will Murphy, she noted that Murphy had to drain a spring on the property in order to make a decent location for the building's construction. The building was to overlook the Shenandoah Valley. While all of the bricks from the fort were on the grounds, an additional 8,000 bricks were purchased in Charles Town. Many of these were probably used in the fort's reconstruction since the 8' deep foundation consisted of stone. If they were all used in the fort, as much as 3 1/2 to 4' of the fort consisted of newly purchased bricks from Charles Town.<sup>4</sup>

*Photograph of a Storer College class adjacent to the John Brown Fort on the Storer College Campus, ca.1930s ( HF-1098).*



Further expenses were incurred when a caretaker was hired to maintain the building and to receive visitors. The caretaker fended off souvenir hunters. Visitors sometimes climbed over fences and littered the fields and carriages trampled Murphy's crops. Kate Field had verbally agreed to reimburse Murphy for these expenses, although she died suddenly in 1896. Field had not left an estate to draw money necessary for the upkeep of the John Brown Fort.<sup>5</sup>

While the fort was a rallying point for federal troops during the war, and many middle class tourists visited the building through the Reconstruction Era, the structure's meaning transformed during the Jim Crow Era. While African American may have implicitly revered the John Brown Fort as a symbol of their abolitionist struggle, the structure became an explicit and prominent symbol among African Americans from this point. For instance, in July 1896, the first national convention of the National League of Colored Women met in Washington, DC, and took a day trip to the John Brown Fort at the Murphy Farm. This meeting, led by Mary Church Terrell, is the first known event of African Americans explicitly embracing the fort as a symbol of their struggle for freedom and equality

In August 1906, the Second Niagara Convention was held in Harpers Ferry and members visited the John Brown Fort on the Murphy farm. The organization was founded in Fort Ontario, Canada on July 11-13, 1905, with 54 members from 18 states.<sup>6</sup> Nearly 100 visitors came to Harpers Ferry for the second meeting of the Niagara Movement. While in town they celebrated John Brown's Day and came to the fort on August 17, 1906, to commemorate their hero. Many believed that Harpers Ferry was the symbolic starting point of the Civil War. The participants listened to a prayer led by Richard T. Greener. He remarked about his personal recollections of John Brown and told the crowd that when he served as consul at Vladivostok he heard Russian troops burst into song, "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave".<sup>7</sup>

Max Barber (1906:408), one of the founders of the Niagara Movement, wrote about his experience at Harpers Ferry and the John Brown Fort:

I have heard men speak of the peculiar sensation, the thrill which comes to one as he stands in the shadow of some mighty structure or on a spot where some great deed was wrought that perceptibly advanced the world. Men have journeyed to the other side of the world to drink a draught of air that played around a Calvary, Trafalgar, or a Runnymede, and they have felt well paid for their trouble. I too have known what it meant to mediate

at Valley Forge, Queenstown, and Gettysburg. But I must confess that I had never yet felt as I felt at Harpers Ferry.

Later that day at the conference DuBois read the *Niagara Address* to the delegation, a speech that was heard around the nation. Max Barber (1906:408) noted that the address “was profound and scholarly and claimed the intellectual admiration of the entire convention.” DuBois’ tone allowed others in the press to label him as a militant and agitator.

How many other visitors actually came to the fort is unclear from the historical documentation, but it does appear that the structure was accessible to the African-American community and it served as a place of homage for people who revered John Brown and the ideas of social reform. Classes from Storer College visited the fort while on the Murphy farm.

At the peak of Jim Crow and with the southern revisionist history in full force, blacks continued to use the fort as a symbol of their cause for social justice. In 1909, the College Trustees of Storer College voted to buy the John Brown Fort. Members of Storer College agreed to pay \$900 which cleared Murphy’s purchase price and court costs. Dismantled in 1910, the structure was rebuilt near Lincoln Hall on campus grounds

The fort remained at Storer College after it closed in 1955. In 1968, it was moved again, this time by the National Park Service. Unable to place the fort upon its original foundations, which are now under 14 feet of fill on railroad property, the National Park Service relocated the fort to the former Arsenal Yard that Brown had briefly captured over 100 years before.

The John Brown Fort is a monument that has physically changed through its 150 year existence. What has not changed significantly is how the fort has been embraced by a large portion of the African-American community. The John Brown Fort serves as one of the only few Civil War shrines/monuments claimed by African Americans. After the Civil War, the nation began constructing monuments, a testimony to moral reformation and the justification of the most violent epoch in American history. Vernacular monuments were placed throughout the American landscape with uncontroversial inscriptions. They do not mention slavery or African Americans, and they generally justify the war as “the cause” or “state sovereignty.” The common soldier portrayed in these monuments is always understood to be white Anglo-Saxon.<sup>8</sup>

Among the thousands of Civil War monuments only three have African-American representation, even though blacks played a major role in the balance of power. Two monuments show a sin-

gle black surrounded by other white soldiers, and the third is the Shaw memorial in Boston, a local white hero who led the first black troops, the 54th Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, into battle. This monument is more of a memorial to Shaw than to the troops. Shaw is elevated on horse back and African-American troops are marching beside him.<sup>9</sup> The introduction of African-American troops into the Civil War played an influential role in changing the tide of the war. Yet the lack of African-American representation among Civil War monuments is noticeable.<sup>10</sup> writes, “public monuments do not arise as if by natural law to celebrate the deserving; they are built by people with sufficient power to marshal (or impose) public consent for their erection.”

There are few African-American memorials that relate to the moral struggles of the Civil War. The John Brown Fort is one such memorial that symbolizes the fight against inequality and it has been embraced by whites and blacks in varying degrees. The histories of John Brown have changed among whites along with the political climate of this country. But the John Brown Fort has always been revered by the black community. Recently, the 50th anniversary celebration of the West Virginia Chapter of the NAACP was held at the fort in 1994.

Today the fort stands in a monumental landscape. It is a bit smaller than its original size, and many new bricks were added when it was placed on Buena Vista, the Murphy farm. Plaques were also placed on the fort when it was rebuilt. The structure contains mementos that recognize the 1895 rebuilding sponsored by “Kate Field,” the 1910 rebuilding on the Storer College Campus, and the stone placed on the fort’s exterior wall by the college’s alumni in 1918 to acknowledge the “heroism” of John Brown and his 21 men. Several times the fort and its meaning has almost vanished completely. But like the phoenix, it rose from obscurity through the help of many ordinary citizens, performing extraordinary feats to save and preserve this symbol of freedom.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Charlotte J. Fairbairn, “John Brown’s Fort: Armory Engine and Guard House 1848-1961.” Harpers Ferry: 1961, Manuscript on file, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. p. 22a.  
John J. Flinn, *Standard Guide to Chicago, Illustrated World’s Fair Edition*, Chicago: Standard Guide Company, 1883, p. 132.  
*Chicago Tribune*, 28 August 1892, p. 25
- <sup>2</sup> Charlotte J. Fairbairn, pp. 14, 31.  
*Spirit of Jefferson*, Charles Town, West Virginia: 1 June 1894, p. 2.

- 3 *Jefferson County Deed Book*, July 23, 1895. On File at Jefferson County Court House, vol 91. pp. 473-474.
- 4 Charlotte J. Fairbairn, Letter, Chambers to Field 4 November 1895, 1961. appendix.
- 5 *Chicago Tribune*, 31 May 1896:6 in Fairbairn 1961, p. 34.
- 6 Philip S. Foner, (Editor), *W.E.B. Dubois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses, 1890-1919*, New York: Pathfinder, 1970 pp. 144-149
- 7 Quarles 1974 p. 4.
- 8 Kirk Savage, "The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Monument." In *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, edited by John R. Gillis, pp. 127-149. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994 p. 135.
- 9 Savage, p. 136.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

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*Spirit of Jefferson* [Charles Town, West Virginia]

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## The Niagara Movement—Lessons Reviewed

On August 23-25, 1996, on the former Storer College campus in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, the past was remembered. During this commemoration of the 90th anniversary of the Niagara Movement's 1906 Conference at Harpers Ferry approximately 500 people attended events co-sponsored by Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, the Harpers Ferry Historical Association, Jefferson County Branch NAACP, West Virginia Homecoming '96, and Shepherd College and Community College.

Presentations by Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Chairman of the Department of Afro-American Studies at Harvard University, and Dr. David Levering Lewis, 1994 Pulitzer Prize winning author of *W.E.B. Du Bois—Biography of a Race*, brought forth the importance of the work started by the Niagara Movement on these grounds ninety years ago—

work started then, but continuing today.

"Niagara Remembered," a panel discussion moderated by Dr. Lawrence Hogan, Professor of African-American studies at Union County College, included Dr. Gates, Dr. Lewis, and special guest, Dr. Du Bois Williams, grand daughter of W.E.B. Du Bois.

Dr. Du Bois Williams reminded those in attendance that now is a time for commitment and action so that the work of our families before us will not have been in vain.

The 90th anniversary of the Niagara Movement at Harpers Ferry was indeed a time for all to look back and yet move forward with renewed spirit, conviction, and courage.

—Marsha Starkey

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park



From left to right: Dr. David Levering Lewis, Dr. Du Bois Williams, and Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. at the 90th Anniversary of the Niagara Movement's 1906 Conference at Harpers Ferry, WV. Photo courtesy Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.