

CORNWALL DICKINSON AND JOHN BROWN

“On Sunday, December 19, 1858, a negro man came from Missouri to Brown's camp and begged that his wife and family be rescued from slavery before they were sold to be carried South. The following Monday night Brown, with a number of men from his company, made a foray into Missouri, and secured these slaves, eleven in number, and carried them into Kansas.”

“They were carried to the Pottawatomie and kept in a cabin on the open prairie for more than a month, while every ravine and thicket swarmed with people searching for them. No one thought of their being concealed in the deserted old cabin in plain view of a number of houses, and they escaped without detection.”

“This raid created much commotion in Kansas and Missouri. The governor of the latter offered a reward of \$3000 for the capture of Brown, to which President Buchanan added \$250. To show his contempt for their efforts, Brown, according to Connelley, "immediately had printed a small handbill in which he publicly proclaimed that he thereby offered a reward for Buchanan, declaring that if any lover of his country would deliver that august personage to him, well tied, at Trading Post, he would willingly pay such patriot the sum of two dollars and fifty cents. It is said that reflection upon the matter afterwards convinced him that this sum was more than the President was actually worth for any purpose.”

“The eleven slaves were now free and temporarily concealed in Kansas, but the enterprise that John Brown had on his hands was about as unpromising and visionary as any that he had ever conceived. These slaves were to be provisioned and conveyed through the dead of winter over one thousand miles to freedom under the British flag. He started with a plodding ox team, almost alone, poorly clothed and confronted at every town on the way with premium notices posted for his arrest. Many dangers confronted him and the difficulties to be overcome seemed almost insurmountable; but the stern old Puritan did not falter. Over frozen roads and through blinding blizzards the wagons moved slowly toward the goal of freedom.”

“Samuel Medary, from Ohio, had been appointed governor of Kansas by President Buchanan and was now striving to arrest Brown as he moved northward with his liberated slaves. The sudden rising of a stream halted Brown and his charges and Medary gleefully notified Buchanan that the capture of Brown was assured. On January 31, 1859, the men sent to make the arrest were suddenly fired upon by Brown and some reinforcements sent to his aid from Topeka. At the first volley the posse sent by Medary were panic stricken and fled in confusion to escape "the old terror," some leaping on behind their mounted comrades and others clinging to the horses' tails in their wild scramble to get away. Brown captured three of the men sent to arrest him, four horses and abandoned arms, while Medary and Buchanan were left empty-handed. Colonel Richard J. Hinton facetiously called this final fight of John Brown's on Kansas soil the "Battle of the Spurs," and it has ever since been so known in the history of that Territory.”

“Brown proceeded on his journey by way of Nebraska City, Tabor, Aurora, Des Moines, Grinnell, Iowa City and Springdale to West Liberty, where he boarded a train with his colored cargo for Chicago. Then they proceeded to Detroit and crossed to Windsor, Canada, where the slaves were finally delivered from the land of bondage. They had come in eighty-two days a distance of 1100 miles, 600 of which had been covered in wagons through the rigors of a northwestern midwinter.”

“From Canada Brown went to Cleveland, Ohio, where he sold the horses that he had captured at the "Battle of the Spurs." In offering them for sale he explained that "the title might be a little defective" but that they were "abolition horses." Asked how he knew this, he answered that he was certain of it because he had "converted" them. They brought a good price, however, as there were

purchasers in Cleveland who were eager to get Buchanan horses from Kansas that had been "converted" by John Brown."

Cornwall Dickinson farm, between Des Moines and Grinnell:

"After resting overnight the John Brown party continued eastward across Polk County. On February 18, 1859, the group arrived at Brian Hawley's farm, near present day Runnells. They stayed there one night before continuing the journey to freedom. Hawley was a 49 year old saw mill owner and carpenter. He lived just west of Yellow Banks Park, a Polk County Conservation site."

"Brown's group rested at Hawley's overnight and then crossed the partly thawed Skunk River marsh bottoms and the river. Beyond the crossing Brown's party drove the heavily loaded wagons up the bluff line. After two days of mild weather that caused them to struggle through the thawing swamp bottoms of the Skunk River, they reached higher ground and the farm of **Cornwall Dickinson**, just west of Grinnell. Dickinson, a forty-five-year-old farmer, had originally come from strongly antislavery Ashtabula County in northeastern Ohio. Brown's party stopped for a period of needed rest and food and then, still favored by mild winter weather, proceeded to the five-year-old Congregationalist settlement of Grinnell."

"The **Dickinson** farm where Cornwall and his family of six lived was located where the eastbound Interstate 80 rest stop now stands (at about milepost 180) in Jasper County, Iowa."

Cape-Mauer Reunion 2022



Fighting Slavery - Aiding Runaways

John Brown's Last Iowa Trip 1859

On February 19, 1859 John Brown, with twelve men, women, and children escaping slavery from Missouri, plus his own men, stopped near here at the farm of the Cornwall Dickinson family.

The forty-five year old farmer, who had originally come from strongly antislavery Ashtabula County, in northeastern Ohio, lived on the farm where today this rest stop is located. Brown's party rested at Dickinson's place overnight and then, favored by mild winter weather traveling across Iowa, headed to Josiah B. Grinnell's house in Grinnell. From there they continued towards Iowa City and beyond in their three month trek toward Detroit at which the group crossed by ferry to freedom in Windsor, Canada.

Ten months later Brown was dead, having been captured and hung after the former Kansas fighter and his band (including four Iowans) on October 16, 1859 carried out a failed attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. The brash action ignited great controversy and became a catalyst leading to Civil War.

Brown's action as part of Kansas Troubles

The Kansas-Nebraska struggle arose after 1854 over whether the territories would become slave or Free states. This made western Iowa an important staging area for Free State forces and also for those engaged in aiding fugitives escaping enslavement. In the forefront of antislavery and Underground Railroad activity during these years were persons of Congregational, Quaker, Baptist, and Wesley Methodist faith.

The northward flight of persons from enslavement in western Missouri often brought them first to a rural Iowa hamlet known as Civil Bend, just upriver from Nebraska City. From there they would be directed to Tabor and then eastward across Iowa toward Chicago and Canada.

For Iowa residents this participation was a dangerous and illegal business. Many wanted to avoid involvement in the slavery issue and keep black settlement out of the state, while others saw the state standing forth as a beacon of anti-slavery hope.

This outward flow of runaway slaves spread tension in Border States while the larger Kansas conflict enraged both North and South, killed the Whig Party, made the Republican Party, split the Democratic Party and guaranteed Lincoln's election.

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The Underground Railroad

Was Cornwall Dickinson's farm an established stop on the Underground Railroad? Some literature supports this claim.

"In this manner fugitives passed through the various towns—from Percival to Tabor, through Lewis and Des Moines to Grinnell. Here it was almost certain that the well known J. B. Grinnell would take care of the fugitives. He had a room in his home which was very appropriately called the "liberty room" and was devoted to the harboring of passengers on the Underground Railroad. No doubt this made a very comfortable station. When John Brown came to Grinnell with his band of fugitives from Missouri on that cold night in the winter of 1858-1859, it was in this room that the fugitives were cheered and given an opportunity to rest. Thus with rests at frequent intervals the fugitives continued their journey from town to town. After Grinnell came Iowa City, then West Liberty, Tipton, Low Moor, and finally Clinton." Jacob Van Ek, 1921

"On the eleventh the slaves were conveyed on their journey, guarded by their well armed liberators, along the line of the "Underground Railroad." On the Thirteenth they stayed with Lewis Mills, on the Fifteenth with Mr. Murray, on the Seventeenth with James C. Jordan and on the Eighteenth they passed through Des Moines, John Teesdale, of the *State Register*, paying their ferriage across the Des Moines River. On the Twentieth the party reached Grinnell and were warmly welcomed by Senator J. B. Grinnell and the citizens generally." Benjamin F. Due

These articles imply that John Brown was transporting his last group of fugitive slaves along the established route. This would be expected, since he had a cool reception in Tabor, Iowa, and would not be looking for additional difficulties or unpleasant encounters on their journey.

Underground Railroad steps from Des Moines to Grinnell, Iowa

(1) James Jordan Farm: Walnut Creek Township, Polk Co., Iowa

'Jordan was actively engaged in the abolitionist movement locally, becoming the "chief conductor" of the Underground Railroad in Polk County. Jordan knew that involvement in the Underground Railroad was dangerous and illegal. Nevertheless, he became directly involved in sheltering and aiding fugitive slaves from his Walnut Township farm.'

(2) Ferry across the Des Moines River

(3) Brian Hawley's farm: Runnells, Polk Co., Iowa

See above, it is about 14 miles in a straight line from Jordan's to Hawley's.

(4) Cross the Skunk River

(5) Cornwall Dickinson's farm: Rock Creek Township, Jasper Co., Iowa

It is about 38 miles in a straight line from Hawley's to Dickinson's, and about 8.5 more miles to the Grinnell house

(6) J.B. Grinnell house: Grinnell, Poweshiek Co., Iowa

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