

## The Documents Chase—Records Pertaining to John Brown at the National Archives and Records Administration

In mid-December of 1859, pursuant to a Senate Resolution dated 14 December, Senator James M. Mason (D-VA), was busy organizing the committee that was to “inquire into the facts attending the late invasion and seizure of the Armory and Arsenal of the United States at Harper Ferry, in Virginia, by a band of armed men...”<sup>1</sup> Hearings were to be held, documents entered into evidence, and testimony given by witnesses. Finally, committee findings had to be reported. Obviously, Mason was interested in securing for the Select Committee those papers that were taken from John Brown upon his arrest or subsequently found elsewhere. He wrote to Governor Wise of Virginia requesting that any papers relating to the event at Harpers Ferry be forwarded to Washington for committee consideration. Mason attested in his letter that he would “be responsible for their safety.”<sup>1</sup>

Despite the guarantee, Wise did not comply. Secretary of the Commonwealth of Virginia, George W. Munford, informed Mason by letter on December 17, 1859, that the papers were scattered. He wrote that

He (Wise) regrets that these papers cannot be furnished. Most of the originals are filed. Thave (*sic*) become facts of the records of the Court in Jefferson. Some of them were sent by Col. Lee to Washington: Some were carried by privates of the military Companies to Baltimore & some maps were sent to Southern States. He has caused copies of the most important which were in evidence at Charlestown, to be submitted to the General Assembly. These have been ordered to be printed and are now in the hands of the public printer. When printed, they have been referred to a committee of the Legislature & will be under investigation by it. The originals are in the custody of Andrew Hunter Esq or of the Clerk of the Circuit Court and will be wanting in the trial of Stevens and Haslett two prisoners who are yet to be tried.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite additional efforts to gain custody of the papers, Mason was unsuccessful. On December 23, 1859, Munford, again at the direction of Wise, wrote that the papers were in the

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<sup>1</sup> Senate Resolution dated 14 December 1860. Record Group 46, Records of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on the Invasion and Seizure of Harpers Ferry, 36<sup>th</sup> Congress, box 12. National Archives and Records Administration. Washington, DC. Debate on the resolution can be located at the Library of Congress American Memory Web Site under Journal of the Senate of the United States, 1789-1873. James Mason (VA), Jefferson Davis (VA), and Graham Fitch (IN) were Democrats whereas James Rood Doolittle (WI) and Jacob Collamer (VT) were Republicans. Mason and Davis left the Senate in 1861 to join the Confederacy while Fitch remained in the Union and raised troops for the war in Indiana. Doolittle remained in Senate for the duration of the war but switched back to the Democratic Party in 1871. Collamer, too, remained in the Senate for the duration of the war. (<http://bioguide.congress.gov> , accessed 8/6/2001).

<sup>2</sup> Munford to Mason, 17 Dec. 1859. Record Group 46, Records of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on the Invasion and Seizure of Harpers Ferry, 36<sup>th</sup> Congress, box 12. National Archives and Records Administration. Washington, DC.

hands of the Commonwealth of Virginia and that it would take action by the General Assembly to have them turned over to the federal government.<sup>3</sup>

An ardent states' rightist, Wise was suspected of obstructing the power of the Senate Committee. One committee member, Sen. Jacob Collamer (R-VT), twice attempted to have the Select Committee summon Governor Wise, but evidently failed because Wise does not appear as a witness.<sup>4</sup> Mason rejected Collamer's request.<sup>5</sup> Collamer's request also failed to receive a majority vote.

A printed version of the papers, evidently from Richmond, is a document entitled "The Brown Papers" that was found in the Committee files. There is a Journal entry that states "The papers in the custody of Andrew Hunter, Esq. and the printed report to the legislature of Virginia above referred to, were all subsequently before the committee."<sup>6</sup> In the absence of any other file collections directly connected to the evidence, "The Brown Papers" are the only ones that most likely came from Richmond. If the originals were submitted to the committee, there is no evidence of them in the Senate papers.

A supporting clue that "The Brown Papers" came from Richmond is provided by the handwritten "Rich" that appears at the top of the documents. A description of the contents of the documents collection was printed at the beginning. In italics it reads:

#### THE BROWN PAPERS

*Consisting of the Journal of the Constitutional Convention at Chatham, Canada W.; Brown's Declaration of Independence; Kagi's Draft for a Provisional Army; Correspondence and Plans of Brown's Men; letters from their friends, and from persons furnishing means; Memoranda, Hints and Suggestions; Extracts from Letters, Diaries and Journals; commissions issued under the Provisional Army Regulations; Lists (of) Members of the Provisional Convention, and Government &c. &c.—Copied from the Originals at Charlestown, by order of the Executive Department of the State of Virginia.—Nov. 16<sup>th</sup>, 1859.<sup>7</sup>*

So the Senate Select Committee did indeed receive printed versions of the documents and these were reprinted in the appendix to the Committee's Report after being marked up to delete certain materials, including that provided above. It is known from the above where the originals were on November 16, 1859. This, of course, conflicts with Mr. Munford's contention that the documents were at the printers on December 17<sup>th</sup> unless for some reason

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<sup>3</sup> Munford to Mason, 23 Dec. 1859. Record Group 46, Records of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on the Invasion and Seizure of Harpers Ferry, 36<sup>th</sup> Congress, box 12. National Archives and Records Administration. Washington, DC.

<sup>4</sup> Proposition of Mr. Collamer to summon Governor Wise of Va, 13 Feb. 1860 and Proposition dated 30 March 1860. Record Group 46, Records of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on the Invasion and Seizure of Harpers Ferry, 36<sup>th</sup> Congress, box 12. National Archives and Records Administration. Washington, DC.

<sup>5</sup> Mason's rejection to Collamer's proposition to summon Wise. Record Group 46, Records of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on the Invasion and Seizure of Harpers Ferry, 36<sup>th</sup> Congress, box 12.

<sup>6</sup> Committee Report Number 278. Reports of the Committees of the Senate of the United States for the First Session of the Thirty-sixth Congress. Vol. 2. Washington: George W. Bowman Printer, 1860, p.37.

<sup>7</sup>Doc. No. 1. The Brown Papers, 87. Record Group 46, Records of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on the Invasion and Seizure of Harpers Ferry, 36<sup>th</sup> Congress, Box 13. National Archives and Records Administration. Washington, DC. (Note: 87 is crossed out on the document and 5 is handwritten next to it as the page number.)

they were being reprinted which seems unlikely. Munford was either in error or untruthful. Further, if all the papers held by Hunter were delivered to the committee, then Hunter didn't have any handwritten documents from John Brown.

There are, however, several peculiarities within the document collection. For instance, there is a folder with a handwritten list of Brown's men. The folder is labeled in print "List of Brown's Men as Given by John E. Cook, one of the Raiders." The word "Raiders" had a line run through it and the word "Insurgents" is handwritten after it. It's unclear from the list if Cook actually wrote it or if he dictated it. It is, however, an original document within the Senate Files. Cook was taken prisoner as the list shows.<sup>8</sup> The Senate Select Committee files are available on microfilm number M 1196, 3 rolls.

The same difficulty that was encountered by Senator Mason and the Select Committee confronts the John Brown researcher today. The transcribed papers that were used by the committee during its hearings are the ones contained in the appendix to the committee report. These include Lee's report, *The Soldiers' Duty*, the Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the people of the United States, and other related documents as listed above. The handwritten version of the Select Committee journal, witness testimony, correspondence, and majority and minority reports are also preserved within the four boxes at the National Archives.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the published version of these documents was released in 1860 in the Report of the Select Committee.<sup>10</sup> There were no original documents written by John Brown found within the boxes. The author was permitted to access the actual documents that Senate Select Committee used in its deliberations and sought any documents created personally by John Brown.<sup>11</sup> The records described above are at the National Archives building in Washington DC at 7<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania Avenue and are maintained by the Legislative Records Department

But these are not the only records being preserved at the National Archives. The other major collection consists of those records received by the War Department in 1859-1860. The trail of these documents is quite simple. As Munford correctly observed, Col. Lee's papers were forwarded to the War Department. The War Department received records that were either generated or acquired by the military. These were forwarded to Secretary of War John B. Floyd who directed that they be filed by the Adjutant General's office. Lee's report was transcribed and included in the Senate Select Committee's report appendix. In this case, then, there are two official versions of Lee's report, the handwritten version in the Adjutant General's file and the

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<sup>8</sup> List of names of Capt. Brown's Men. Record Group 46, Records of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on the Invasion and Seizure of Harpers Ferry, 36<sup>th</sup> Congress, box 12. National Archives and Records Administration. Washington, DC.

<sup>9</sup> There are some tangential records that are stored with the committee records. Among the most fascinating is found in an untitled document. On pages 56 and 57 is found an exchange of letters between Governor Wise and Governor Packer of Pennsylvania. Wise, in effect, threatened to invade Pennsylvania to subdue alleged co-conspirators. Packer rebuffed Wise. Box 13. National Archives and Records Administration. Washington, DC. *The Berks and Schuylkill Journal*, a Republican newspaper in Berks County, Pennsylvania, poked fun at the confrontation. It states that a cow was mistaken for an abolitionist, was ordered to halt, refused, and was shot. It seems the cow frightened a Pennsylvania militiaman at ten o'clock at night. The article was complete with a graphic of a cow. *Berks and Schuylkill Journal*, 26 November 1859, p.1.

<sup>10</sup> Committee Report Number 278. Reports of the Committees of the Senate of the United States for the First Session of the Thirty-sixth Congress. Vol. 2. Washington: George W. Bowman Printer, 1860. The Committee completed its work on 14 June 1860.

<sup>11</sup> Permission was received from Ms. Katherine Snodgrass, Legislative Records archivist, and the documents were accessed by the author on August 3, 2001.

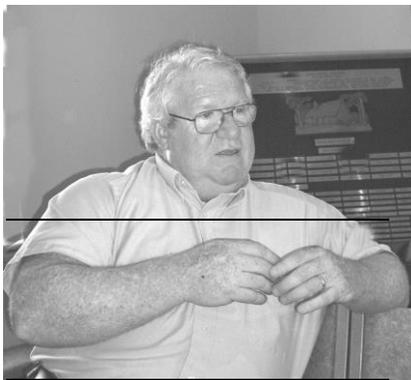
transcription in the Senate Select Committee papers and report. The Adjutant General's correspondence files were transferred to the National Archives in the late 1930s or early 1940s and are also stored at the Washington DC location.<sup>12</sup> These are stored in Record Group 386 File-W (AGO) 1859. The author was shown these records in the stacks at the National Archives on July 20, 2001. These documents were microfilmed by the National Archives on microfilm M 567 roll 618. Microfilming is done to reduce handling of delicate documents and to make them more widely available.

There is a digital source at the National Archives for documents and images related to John Brown. These are digital versions of selected documents and images and can be accessed at the National Archives Information Locator (NAIL) web site (<http://www.nara.gov/nara/nail.html>) using "John Brown" as the search phrase. The search dynamically allocates a file name for the item so it is important to use the control number rather than the URL when citing these documents and images. The dynamic file name will change each time the item is accessed.

It is possible to more narrowly define the search to eliminate extraneous items that will be retrieved. A searcher could use the "AND" Boolean operator and search on both "John Brown" AND "Harpers Ferry". Keep in mind that there was no state of West Virginia at the time. The author managed to locate all the actual documents and images at the National Archives that he used at his "John Brown" web site. It must be kept in mind that NAIL is a prototype and quite selective. For a more comprehensive set of documents, use of the microfilms is recommended.

So the question remains – are these all the documents and all the formats of them at the National Archives? Has the problem that confronted Senator Mason and the Senate Select Committee been resolved? There are other records such as claims from Kansans for recovery of damages attributed to John Brown. There are census records and John Brown should appear on them.<sup>13</sup> Further, documents relating to John Brown could have been misfiled either at the originating agency, through researcher carelessness, or simply by accident in the transfer of records within the federal government.

In a sense, for the John Brown scholar, the above is both good news and bad news. The good news is that the hunt for some original documents continues, as does the enduring value of studying John Brown and his ideals and actions. The bad news is that some original documents may never be found.



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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Mr. Michael Musick, Archivist, July 20, 2001

<sup>13</sup> Undated memo prepared by Mr. Michael Musick, archivist. Mr. Musick was exceptionally helpful and accommodating. His advice was excellent and greatly appreciated.