

## Yankee Abolitionist

John Brown's wife Mary rose nobly to the occasion of her husband's execution. Going against the expressed wishes of Brown, she was determined to see him again. Mary traveled first to Boston with Rev. Thomas W. Higginson, visited the poet Theodore Tilton (later the editor of *The Independent*) in Brooklyn, staying at the homes of notable abolitionists and women's rights pioneers—Marcus and Rebecca Spring, in New Jersey, and in Philadelphia at the home of Lucretia Mott and the Underground Rail road stationmaster William Still. During two full weeks at the Still home in late November, another guest on the premises was the poet Frances Watkins, the first African American woman novelist. <sup>1</sup>



Mary's letters to her husband as she approached Virginia were admiring and passionate. She praised him for his abolition leadership, said "everyone is talking about" his speech before the court, and expressed sorrow that Rebecca Spring had been able to see and touch him, but she could not. <sup>2</sup> In this interview in the New York *Tribune*, it can be seen that respect was building for her that would not die, and she was more than an object of pity, but a Christian abolitionist of fervor. The young men whose bodies were requested were her two sons Oliver and Watson, who were killed in the battle of October 17, 1859. Although Governor Wise of Virginia wrote a letter allowing her to claim them and bring them North with the coffin of her husband, it was not granted. <sup>3</sup>

The Thompson brothers, New York neighbors, also killed. The Thompson family intermarried extensively with the Browns. Her son Oliver and Will and Dauphin Thompson were buried in boxes in the Loudon Heights, across the Shenandoah River. Watson, who died about twenty-four hours after his father was captured, was treated with humanity by the correspondent of the Baltimore *Clipper*, Clifton W. Tayleure, the same man who kept the red leather book with John Brown's manuscript copy of "Sambo Mistakes" he found at Brown's farmhouse headquarters and later donated it to the Maryland Historical Society. <sup>4</sup> John Brown brought the 1848 essay to Harpers Ferry for moral instruction in the "good Town" he hoped to establish with free black men as leaders of communities of former slaves. <sup>5</sup>



**Adolphus Thompson**



**Oliver Brown**



**Watson Brown**



**William Thompson**

Mary Brown was accompanied to Harpers Ferry by the Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Committee of Pennsylvania, J. Miller McKim, his wife, and also by Hector Tyndale, a member of the Republican Committee of Philadelphia. In a scenario as prescient as that of Robert E. Lee and J.E.B. Stuart managing John Brown's capture, the principals in Mary Brown's visit to her husband in jail are equally notable.

Charlestown in November, 1859, was under military law. The governor, Henry A. Wise, saw the numbers of fugitives and incendiary fires made by local slaves, and knew that the local commander, John T. Gibson, could not handle the potential insurrection. <sup>6</sup> "Hundreds" were aided through the small community of free blacks on the hills above the Shenandoah River. Wise called in William Booth Taliaferro from Gloucester County, who arrived on the 24<sup>th</sup> of November, to enforce martial law. The Virginia governor knew that an insurrection of enslaved persons in Gloucester County was put down in 1836. By a petition to the General Assembly the leading citizens had asked that the free Negroes of the county be removed. That is why Governor Wise called him. <sup>7</sup>



General Taliaferro was in charge of the armed escort of Mary Brown from Harper's Ferry to Charlestown for the four-hour visit the couple were allowed at the home of Captain John Avis, the jailer, on the evening of December 1, 1859.

Mary Brown's escort was carefully selected by abolitionists because of the danger of assassination to herself, and therefore to the persons who accompanied her into Virginia.

Historians have frequently remarked on the irony of the capture of John Brown and his conviction for treason to the Commonwealth of Virginia by Robert E. Lee, who would

**W. B. Taliaferro** become head of the secession forces. Equally prescient is Hector Tyndale, who escorted Mary Brown and Mr. and Mrs. J. Miller McKim, of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, to Harpers Ferry. Tyndale was at the time a glassware merchant and a member of the first Republican Committee in Philadelphia. His wife Sarah was on the board of directors of Eagleswood School operated by Marcus and Rebecca Spring in New Jersey. Tyndale agreed to the dangerous mission (the group were fired upon) of escorting Brown's coffin, and carried both Mrs. Brown and John Brown's body to safety.

Tyndale became an officer in the United States army, the 28<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania regiment, in June, 1861. He was placed in charge of the area of Sandy Hook, Maryland, directly opposite Harper's Ferry. <sup>8</sup>



Hector Tyndale

**"Mrs. Brown's interview with her husband," in the New York *Daily Tribune*, Saturday, December 3, 1859, page 7.**

Transcribed by Jean Libby

MRS. BROWN'S INTERVIEW WITH HER HUSBAND.

CHARLESTOWN, Friday, Dec. 2, 1859

The interview between Brown and his wife last from 4 o'clock in the evening, when Gen. Taliaferro informed them that the period allowed had elapsed, and that she must prepare for departure to the Ferry. A carriage was again brought to the door, the military took possession of the square, and with an escort of twenty mounted men, the cortege moved off, Capt. Moore of the Montgomery Guards accompany her. The interview was, I learn, a very affecting one—rather of a practical character, with regard to the future of herself and children, and the arrangement and settlement of business affairs. They seemed considerably affected when they first met, and Mrs. Brown was, for a few moments, quite overcome; but Brown was as firm as a rock and she soon recovered her composure. There was an impression that the prisoner might possibly be furnished with a weapon or with strychnine, by his wife, and before the interview her person was searched by the wife of the jailer, and a strict watch kept upon them during the time they were together. At the time of separation they both seemed to be fully self-possessed, and the parting, especially on his part, exhibited a composure either feigned or real, that was truly surprising. I learn from Captain Moore that she rather repelled all attempts on his part to express sympathy with her under her afflictions.

She resented the idea that Capt. Brown had done anything to deserve death, or to attain his name with dishonor, and declared that the ignominious character of the punishment that was about to be inflicted upon him was as cruel as it was unjust. She regarded him as a martyr in a righteous cause, and was proud to be the wife of such a man. The gallows, she said, had no terrors for her or for him.

The character of the interview may be judged to some extent from this conversation with Capt. Moore, which took place previous to it.

She stated that she had not seen him since last June, about six months ago, and that they had been separated with the exception of a few days for nearly two years. They had, however, corresponded, and she had always felt a deep interest in the cause in which he was engaged.

I learn from Capt. Avis, the jailer, that the interview between the prisoner and his wife was characteristic of the man, and the direction given for the management and distribution of his property embraced all the minor details of his last will and testament.

Gen. Taliaferro was also present, and Capt. Brown urged that his wife be allowed to remain with him all night. To this the General refused to assent, allowing them but four hours.

On first meeting, they kissed, and affectionately embraced, and Mrs. Brown shed a few tears, but immediately checked her feelings. They stood embraced, and she sobbing, for nearly five minutes, and he was apparently unable to speak. The prisoner only gave way for a few moments, and was soon calm and collection, and remained firm throughout the interview. At the close, they shook hands, but did not embrace, and as they parted, he said, "God bless you and the children." Mrs. Brown replied, "God have mercy on you," and continued calm until she left the room, when she remained in tears a few moments, and then prepared to depart. The interview took place in the parlor of Captain Avis, and the prisoner was free from manacles of any kind.

They sat side by side on a sofa, and after discussing family matters, proceeded to business. He stated that he desired his property to pass entirely into her possession, and appeared to place full confidence in her ability to manage it properly for the benefit of his younger children. He requested her to remain at North Elba, N.Y., on her farm, where she now resides, and which belongs to her. He desired that his younger children should be educated, and if she could not obtain facilities for their education at home, to have them sent to a boarding school. He then gave directions and dictated to Sheriff Campbell a will, which directed that all his property should go to his wife, with the exception of a few presents and bequests which he made. To one of his sons he gave a double spyglass and a watch, while a third was directed to take a tomb, or monument, that marks the grave of his father at North Elba, and have his name, age, and the manner of his death, together with the cause for which he had suffered inscribed thereon. He directs that it shall remain at North Elba as long as the family continues to reside there. To each of his children he bequeathed the sum of \$50, and to each of his daughters a Bible, to cost \$5, to be purchased out of money coming to him from his father's estate. Also, he directs that a Bible, to cost \$3, shall be presented to each of his grandchildren, and that \$50 each be paid to three individuals, whom he named, if they can be found, and if not, to their legal representatives.

During the course of conversation, Mrs. Brown asked him if he had heard that Gerrit Smith had become insane, and had been sent to the Asylum at Utica. He replied that he had read of it in the papers, and was sorry to heard it, but immediately changed the subject.

The subject of the death of his two sons was spoken of, and Mrs. Brown remarked that she had make some efforts while at Harper's Ferry for the recovery of their bodies, to which end, she said, Col. Barbour had kindly consented to give his assistance. Captain Brown remarked that he would also like the remains of the two Thompsons removed if they could be found, but suggested that it would be best to take his with the bodies of all his four sons, and get a pile of pine logs and burn them all together; that it would be much better and less expensive to thus gather up all their ashes together, and take them to their final resting place. Sheriff Campbell told him that this would not be permitted within the State, and Mrs. Brown objected to the proposition altogether.

The prisoner said that he contemplated his death with composure and calmness. It would undoubtedly be pleasant to live longer, but as it was the will of God he should close his career, he was content. It was doubtless best that he should be thus legally murdered for the good of the cause, and he was prepared to submit to his fate without a murmer. Mrs. Brown becoming depressed at these remarks, he bade her cheer up, telling her that his spirit would soon be with her again, and that they would be reunited in Heaven.

With regard to his execution, he said that he desired no religious ceremonies, either in the jail or on the scaffold, from ministers who consent or approve of the enslavement of their fellow-creatures, that he would prefer rather to be accompanied to the scaffold by a dozen slave children and a good old slave mother with their appeal to God for blessings on his soul, than all the eloquence of the whole clergy of the Commonwealth combined.

During the past week several letters containing checks and drafts had been forwarded to him by his friends in different sections of the country. These he indorsed, and made payable to his wife Mary A. Brown (one of them was for \$100 and one for \$50) and handed them to her.

**Portrait History.** Mary Brown's portrait is in the Boyd Stutler Collection at the West Virginia State Archives in Charleston. It was chosen by Alice Keesey Mecoy, who is a direct descendent of John and Mary Brown and their daughter Annie Brown Adams. William and Adolphus Thompson's portraits are from Richard Hinton, *John Brown and His Men* (1894); Oliver and Watson Brown are from Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown* (1910). William B. Taliaferro's portrait is from Francis Trevelyan Miller, *The Photographic History of the Civil War In Ten Volumes* Vol. 10 (1911). Hector Tyndale's portrait was originally in *Appleton's Encyclopedia*.

### Notes and Sources.

<sup>1</sup> William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (1873, 1883, reprint Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968), 762.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Brown's letters were found folded in a book written by Alexander Milton Ross, a Canadian white abolitionist who was waiting in Richmond for the raid to succeed in October, 1859. The first was from Perth Amboy, New Jersey, "Eaglewood, Perth Amboy, New York, November 13, 1859"—the second from "near Philadelphia" on November 24, 1859. Copies are in the Richard Boyer Collection at the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the Villard Papers at Columbia University. Brown replied to his wife by giving the letter to Rebecca Spring, folded to be the same size as a page of a book, when Spring and her son Edward visited him in jail in mid-November. A lost drawing by teenage Edward Spring was rediscovered by Jean Libby in the summer of 2002 at Stanford University's Dept. of Special Collections. It was made for the purpose of assisting in a jail rescue, which John Brown refused for himself but proceeded without success for the surviving members of his men in prison. All were eventually executed.

<sup>3</sup> The letters between Mary Brown (November 21, 1859) and Governor Wise (November 26, 1859) were scanned and published online in an exhibition by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in May 2010. <http://www.hsp.org/default.aspx?id=1437> Accessed June 23, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Manuscript 155, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore was donated by Tayluere in 1883. Unfortunately, the body of Watson Brown was taken to the medical school in Winchester, Virginia, where it was rudely displayed. The remains were liberated by Union soldiers (and the school burned) during the Civil War. Mary Brown made her last journey to North Elba in 1882 to the burial of her son Watson with his father and grandfather at the farm home that Henry Thompson (Ruth's husband) built for the family in 1855. Watson was the only male Brown remaining while the others emigrated to Kansas and his father brought guns to protect the abolitionist settlement; he married Isabella Thompson, the sister of William and Adolphus Thompson who also died at Harpers Ferry. She later married a cousin, Salmon Brown. Edwin Cotter, "The History of John Brown of North Elba," *High Peaks Life* (May 5, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> John Brown to Rev. J.W. Loguen, [from] Boston, May 17, 1859. *The Rev. J. W. Loguen as a Slave and as a Freeman.*, published his autobiography in 1859, including this letter of planned liberation by John Brown at the end of the volume.

<sup>6</sup> His letter of November 17, 1859, in the Wise Collection at the Library of Congress indicates "hundreds" were moving across Snicker's Gap into eastern Virginia and the port city of Alexandria. On November 16, the barns and stabling of Walter Shirley, foreman of the jury that convicted John Copeland, were burned—it was the night of Copeland's conviction. Later a petition for restitution from the Commonwealth of Virginia for Shirley's losses because of "insurrection" was signed by many local slaveholders. John Brown guardedly sought action from abolitionists for the local slaves through his censored letters from prison, to no avail.

<sup>7</sup> This insurrection was cited in Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*. The legislative petition to "borrow a sum of money for removing the free Negroes from sd. County" of January 13, 1836, was found by a descendant of persons enslaved to the Taliaferro (pronounced "Toliver") family, Judith Grevious Cephas, while organizing a family reunion in 2001. The enslaved people were separated, some brought from Virginia to Kentucky. They invented the name "Grevious" to recognize each other in succeeding generations. The Grevious family is now reunited and share memories and accomplishments at annual reunions. Migration documented in Charles Taliaferro, Sr., *The Taliaferro Family; Three Centuries in America* (1998), 80.

<sup>8</sup> Major Tyndale was appointed brigadier-general of volunteers following the battle of Antietam in September, 1862, and in 1865 was "brevetted major-general of volunteers for gallant and meritorious service during the war," during which he was wounded on several occasions. See the *Edited Appleton Cyclopedia*.