

Mary Brown, Ruth Brown, and the Enslaved Mother and Child

In the summer of 2010 New York art historian and archivist Warren F. Broderick was examining the Louis Ransom Papers donated by the family to the Herkimer County Historical Society in the town of Herkimer. He was researching the artist to write about the mural which Ransom created in 1860 which depicted Brown on his way to the gallows meeting an enslaved woman and her child on the steps from the prison. Later artworks with the same theme have Brown blessing and even kissing the child.

There at the bottom of the last box Warren Broderick found a salt print photograph of Brown, the famous (and only) bearded photo sitting. There is a pasted autograph on the front: “Your friend John Brown.” The mount has an oval studio stamp by the photographer, “Lawrence’s Photographs 381 Broadway Cor White St. New York.” This is a blind stamp, which the photographer printed photographs and cut them to fit an opening in an embossed mounting with the studio name.

Mr. Broderick contacted me when he found references to my curated exhibition “John Brown Photo Chronology.” Our lively correspondence—which continues to this day—revealed that the Herkimer County Historical Society photo is one of three known extant original prints of the bearded John Brown by Martin M. Lawrence (1808-1859) of New York which have the pasted autograph “Your friend John Brown.”¹ The Herkimer County photo is unique in that it has a mysterious and almost undecipherable handwritten message on the back which begins “I would not speak of love even (*to* or *tho*) my father and my mother...” With this clue I asked handwriting expert Marcel Matley of San Francisco to compare letters (available online) by Oliver, Salmon, Annie and Ruth. Mr. Matley identified Ruth as “the likely culprit.”²

The last line of the faded verso salt-print inscription: “no mortal eye could penetrate,” provides the title for the definitive article by Warren F. Broderick in the new issue of the *Hudson River Valley Review* (Vol. 29.1 Autumn 2012: 26-53) “No Mortal Eye Can Penetrate: Louis Ransom’s Commemoration of John Brown.” Mr. Broderick lives in Lansingburgh (now part of Troy) where he is the Historical Society Curator and Archivist. He is recently retired as an archival analyst for the State of New York. He has written five books about New York artists and contributed widely with introductions and journal articles in the fields of ceramics and botanical history of New York as well.

Louis Ransom began creating his mural commemoration of John Brown meeting the enslaved mother and child in his studio in Utica in December 1859. The Utica *Herald*, a strongly anti-slavery and pro-Republican newspaper, excerpted the interview with Mary Brown held on December 1 reported in the New York *Daily Tribune* on December 3 on the same day:³

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.

With painstaking research the author details the life and work of Louis Ransom (1831-1926), “a true Renaissance man—an artist, inventor, author and debater.” Broderick develops the likely source of the bearded portrait photograph logically through the proximity of Gerrit Smith, who was under treatment at an asylum in Utica directly across from Ransom’s studio in December 1859.

As well as his art career we learn of Ransom's patented 1877 invention of a steam-powered streetcar, which was commercially unsuccessful, preceded by an even more unsuccessful pneumatic, or hydraulic self-propelled streetcar, complete with drawings. His two wives, by whom Ransom had sons thirty years apart in age, are drawn with equal research that lifts the story into the present. As well as New York, the artist had a long history in Akron, Ohio, that the author develops with attention to detail and suggests further avenues.

The visual examples of John Brown with the enslaved mother and child have created John Brown's legacy. As Mr. Broderick writes:

Louis Ransom was the first artist to represent John Brown as more than a mere man—a former fighter who had become gentle and Godlike—thus echoing Wendell Phillips's characterization of Brown in his famous funeral sermon. When the painting first was shown in Utica in 1860, Ransom informed a newspaper correspondent that he had intentionally depicted the yellow banner of the State of Virginia so, ironically, it formed a bright halo over the head of a clearly deified figure.

Warren F. Broderick's essay "Louis Ransom's Commemoration of John Brown" in the Autumn 2012 (Vol. 29.1) *Hudson River Valley Review* is highly recommended by this contributor to the study. The journal is published at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, <http://www.hudsonrivervalley.org/review/index.html>

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Notes

¹ <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2009633567/> correct Library of Congress entry for Martin M. Lawrence original print that matches the Herkimer County discovery. The third extant print with pasted autograph and Lawrence Studio blind stamp is at the Kansas Historical Society, Kansas Memory Item 208930. It was originally owned by Dr. Thomas Webb, of Boston, who sponsored the sitting in May 1858 following Brown's recruitment Convention in Chatham, Canada West .

² Marcel Matley has since confirmed that the identification on the Sharps carbine purchased by Mick Konowal of Washington in November 2011 from the estate of Major William Worthington Russell, who confiscated the rifle from Dauphin Thompson during the battle with John Brown and his forces in Harpers Ferry on October 18, 1859, was indeed Thompson's handwriting, compared with a letter. Dauphin Thompson was killed by the Marines in the encounter. His older brother Henry Thompson and Ruth Brown were married in North Elba in 1850.

³ "Mrs. Brown's interview with her husband," in the *New York Daily Tribune*, Saturday, December 3, 1859, page 7. Transcribed by Jean Libby and published verbatim in *John Brown's Family in California* (2006):13-15. http://www.alliesforfreedom.org/files/Mary_Brown_Interview.pdf