

Summer of 1859

Before his attack on slavery which began in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in October 1859, John Brown moved his men and weapons into a rented farmhouse in the Maryland Heights overlooking the Potomac River. The documentation of his first night in the land of slavery is in a Hotel Register for the Washington House in Hagerstown, in juxtaposition with his letter to "John Henrie Esqur" (John Kagi) on June 30, 1859.

John Brown was accompanied by his sons Owen and Oliver, and Jeremiah Anderson, a Kansas emigrant who had joined Brown's company in 1857 and remained close since that time. Brown set the weapons into motion (by way of canal, then train) to Chambersburg, Pennsylvania with his son John Jr., in Ashtabula, Ohio in charge.

John Kagi, a journalist who fought and traveled with John Brown in Kansas, was the Secretary of War of the Provisional Government. He was chosen to be the manager at Chambersburg, close to the Mason-Dixon line.¹ Brown and three "sons" arrived from western Pennsylvania on June 28th, boarding at the home of Mrs. Mary Ritner, the widow of the antislavery governor of Pennsylvania Abram Ritner, at 225 King Street.² The group transformed themselves into "I. Smith & Sons" to move into a slave state, Maryland, on the 30th of June. His choice of the Washington House was a deliberate action to begin this public identity. The register of the Washington House, February 1, 1858-December 11, 1861, was bound in a plain cover that made it resemble hundreds of county reports which were destined for destruction when it was spotted by archivist John C. Frye in the Washington County courthouse in 1981.

Chambersburg, Pa., 30th June, 1859

JOHN HENRIE ESQR

DEAR SIR

We leave here to-day for Harpers Ferry; (via) Hagerstown.

When you get there you had best look on the Hotel register for I. Smith & Sons without making much enquiry. We shall be looking for cheap lands near the Rail Road in all probability. You can write I Smith & Sons at Harpers Ferry should you *need* to do so.

Yours in truth

I Smith³

Although referred to as a “tavern,” the Washington House in Hagerstown was a four-story building that was built in 1856, with forty-three rooms. There was a “fashionable saloon” in the front, and the entire front lobby was an emporium of where local residents as well as travelers could shop for “fancy and staple dry goods” purchased by S. Ogilby in New York and Philadelphia, and “a rich selection of carpets, floor oil cloths, and mattings sold as cheap as they can be sold in Baltimore to *cash and prompt credit* buyers.”⁴ A later newspaper account of the opening ceremonies tells us that, “Thirteen official toasts were made, with appropriate music accompanying them.” The sixth was made to “Kansas—the expected daughter of ’56—may she soon be born into the family of states uninjured by the travail—and free from all odious restrictions...”⁵

Register of the Washington House, Hagerstown, Maryland, with John Brown’s signature as “I. Smith & Sons,” June 30, 1859. Western Maryland Room, Washington County Free Library, Hagerstown. Photograph of the original document by Jean Libby.

H. FINGLING		WASHINGTON HOUSE.		PROPRIETOR.	
DATE	TIME		ROOM	RESIDENCE	
Thursday	conty	I. Smith & Sons	6	New York	
"	20	J. G. Anderson	10	New York	
"	20	H. Dr. Muzik		Wash. Co	
"	20	J. M. Chancy		Princeton Collyer	
"	20	J. M. Little		do	
"	20	J. A. M. Alee		do	
"	20	J. Owen Smith	6	New York	
"	20	Owen Smith	10	do	
"	20	J. W. Brumbaugh		Washington Co.	
Friday July 1 st 1859					
Friday	July 1 st	W. M. McAttee & daughter		Clear Spring	
"	"	J. L. McAttee		" "	
"	"	J. L. & P. P. P. P. P.	6	N. N. B.	
"	"	Sam. P. P. P. P.	10	Hancock	
"	"	J. L. & P. P. P. P.		Washington Co.	

Summer of 1859

Document History

by Marsha Lynne Fuller
Washington County Free Library 2001

The ledger from the Washington House, showing John Brown's well-known "Isaac Smith" signature, narrowly averted destruction little more than a century after Brown's famous visit to Hagerstown, Maryland.

John C. Frye, current director of the Western Maryland Room at the Washington County Free Library, was, providentially, working at the Washington County Courthouse during the 1980s. As Director of the Map Department, a part of the Tax Assessment Department, he ran across the ledger in 1981 while looking through some ledgers in the basement of the courthouse. Frye claims he "hasn't the slightest idea why he noticed it on the shelves." He believes that the only reason it had not been thrown out previously was that it looked exactly like a tax assessment book.

Being a history *aficionado* and the archivist of the Western Maryland Room at the Washington County Free Library, Frye brought the ledger to the library to preserve it. Since the ledger was not a legal document and didn't belong to the courthouse, it would have been thrown out along with the other tax records that have since been destroyed. Familiar with the Isaac Smith alias that John Brown had used during this period, and being aware that Brown had stayed in Hagerstown before the raid on Harpers Ferry, Frye knew it was likely that Brown would have stayed at the Washington House.

John Frye has a long history of helping researchers and authors at the Western Maryland Room. He has been instrumental in the publication of numerous articles and books, including *We, the Blacks of Washington County* by the late Maguerite Doleman as part of the county's bicentennial celebration, and the Ph.D. thesis of Michael Thompson at West Virginia University in Morgantown, *The Iron Industry in Western Maryland*. Dr. Thompson is now the elected District Attorney for Jefferson County, West Virginia. Jean Libby credits Mr. Frye as mentor in research for *Black Voices From Harpers Ferry; Osborne Anderson and the John Brown Raid* (1979) and *From Slavery to Salvation; the autobiography of Rev. Thomas W. Henry of the AME Church* (1994).

Constructed in 1856 on the site of the old Globe Inn, the Washington House stood along the great National Highway, an important traveling route in the 19th century. A fire destroyed it in the early morning hours of 27 May 1879 but, within five months, construction had begun on the new Baldwin House by "the same men who had built the Washington House."⁶ This new hotel was described by *The Morning Herald* as "the finest hotel in the state, outside of Baltimore,"⁷ and was still standing in 2001. It is the presently proposed site for the University of Maryland educational complex.

The register in use in 1879 was destroyed in the fire. The older ledgers would, no doubt, have also perished if not for their housing in the hotel safe. “The contents [of the safe] were found entirely intact, with the exception of the backs of the ledgers, the glue of which was melted...”⁸ This description may explain why the leather binding of the ledger is peeled away from the spine. The ledger is in fair condition overall, although it looks as if mice may have nibbled on the edge of the back cover, is 15½” tall, 10½” wide, and 1½” thick, and its entries cover the period from 1 Feb 1858 to 11 Dec 1861.

No one knows how the ledger originally got from the hotel to the courthouse basement. If one wanted to speculate, it is possible that items from the hotel safe were stored at the courthouse while the new hotel was under construction on the Washington Hotel site. MLF

Notes and Sources

¹ John Henri Kagi is the subject of a book by a relative, John Wayland, *John Kagi and John Brown* (Strasburg, Va.: Shenandoah Publishing House, 1961). The family was originally from Virginia; Kagi’s father Abraham moved to Bristol, Ohio, in 1830, where John was born. The name is spelled in alternative ways (Keagy, Kagey, Kagi) and the family is still in Virginia as well as Nebraska City, where John’s sister Barbara and her husband Allan settled in 1853. Their log cabin was a major terminus for Free State emigrants to Kansas and for the Underground Railroad during the period of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and its subsequent political unrest and warfare; it was there that John Kagi met John Brown.

² Mary Ritner was probably recommended to John Brown by Martin R. Delany, as Governor Abram Ritner had interceded in a racially motivated law case in his behalf in the 1840s. The King Street home has been restored by local historical associations, the Franklin County Heritage, Inc. and the Kitochtinney Historical Association. It is open to the public as a museum. See Virginia Ott Stake, *John Brown in Chambersburg* (Chambersburg, Pa.: Franklin County Heritage, Inc., 1977).

³ This letter is one of the “carpetbag” documents found at the Kennedy Farm when John Brown was captured in Harper’s Ferry. Villard, *John Brown*, 402.

⁴ Advertisement in the [Hagerstown, Maryland] *Herald of Freedom & Torch Light*, June 29, 1859, the day before “I. Smith & Sons” spent the night in rooms 6 and 10.

⁵ *The Morning Herald*, Hagerstown, Maryland, 16 April 1951.

⁶ *The Morning Herald*, Hagerstown, Maryland, 8 May 1951.

⁷ *The Morning Herald*, 8 May 1951.

⁸ *The Hagerstown Mail*, Hagerstown, Maryland, 6 Jun 1879.

<http://www.whilbr.org/itemdetail.aspx?idEntry=6069&dtPointer=0> Full page color image digitized on WHILBR, the Washington County Library Historical Database