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Grinnell's role in anti-slavery movement-- A Stop on the Underground Railroad

During the 1850's, Grinnell figured prominently in the anti-slavery movement in Iowa, according to an article by James Connor printed in the Fall, 1970, edition of "Annals of Iowa," a quarterly historical publication. In fact, Grinnell, due largely to

the efforts of its founder, J. B. Grinnell, was an important stop on the so-called Underground Railroad, the route for fleeing slaves. Writes Connor of the Underground Railroad: "Once across the Des Moines River and out of town, the route wended eastward to Lynnville in Jasper County. Here were the stations run by Matthew Sparks and Joseph Arnold. Nothing much is known of Sparks, but Arnold was something of a local institution. A restless Quaker given the title of 'Preacher' by his neighbors, he eventually became a practicing attorney.

Grinnell's Home

"From Lynnville the Underground Railroad 'track' led to the home of J. B. Grinnell in the town bearing his name. Grinnell was more than the pre-eminent citizen of a small Iowa community; he was also one of the state's most influential men. Born in Vermont in 1821, and educated in New York, Grinnell claimed that the noted abolitionists of the 1830s and 1840s—Theodore Weld, Joseph Birney and Garritt Smith—became his early heroes. Coming to Iowa in 1853, he began his URR affiliation almost immediately. Like many of his fellow conductors, Grinnell personally knew John Brown and aided him in one of his more notorious exploits."

After the fleeing slaves left Grinnell, the route took them to Iowa City, to Springdale, Tipton, Dewitt,

Low Moor and Clinton, then across the Mississippi and out of the state.

Brown's Trip

John Brown, the militant abolitionist whom many considered a fanatic, died in 1859. And in that year of his life, he made one last trip into Iowa—a trip Grinnell had much to do with.

It is not clear whether Brown

stopped in Lynnville during February of 1859 when the final trip through Iowa took place. Connor writes that there "may have been" a stop, but there is no record of it. "There definitely was a stop at Grinnell, however," writes Connor, "and Brown's little band received a warm welcome from both

the town and its founder. While there the Kansas warrior was asked to speak at an open town meeting. The whole situation had an area of unreality, for by this time Brown's Missouri adventure had put a \$3,000 price on his head and a federal warrant had been issued for his arrest; yet here he was speaking openly at a town meeting and lodging with the town's leading citizen. Strangely, the speech was, for Brown, at least, rather defensive and pacific. Grinnell quoted him as saying that the lives he had taken were in 'self-defense,' and he maintained that he had 'never counseled violence, nor would he stir to insurrection which would involve the innocent and helpless.' "

Attempt at Capture

An Iowa City postmaster named Samuel Workman, it was learned, had set out to capture Brown and the 12 slaves accompanying him. When the word arrived in Grinnell, the community's founder went to work in an effort to secure a boxcar for Brown's attempted flight to Canada. But Grinnell was unable to do so. Grinnell's counterpart in Iowa City, William Penn Clarke, was able to secure the boxcar, however, and Brown was able to leave the state safely.

Writes Connor: "The whole affair of that February-March hejira across the state is curiously ambi-