

The Underground Railroad:  
Grinnell's Part in History

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unknown

The year was 1859. Within two months after Iowa College had established itself at Grinnell, there occurred one of the most exciting and historic events in the town's history—a weekend visit by John Brown.<sup>1</sup>

The new town of Grinnell embodied its founder's interest in abolition, and while J.B. Grinnell frequently condemned the lawlessness of Iowa, he was a conscientious breaker of the Fugitive Slave Law. Grinnell, a wool trader, used his huge wool barn as a station. He and his fellow sheep raisers and station managers corresponded through ciphered messages in which "fleeces of wool" referred to the fleeing slaves they were transporting as part of the Underground Railroad. Great was the excitement among his workmen whenever word came for "one of the boys" to hurry fugitives on to the next station approximately 35 miles away. The trip was usually made by wagon at night, the driver sometimes having at his side a "double-faced bulldog" that kept curious persons from investigating the quality of the freight. It is thought that some 1,000 slaves passed through Grinnell in the pre Civil War years.

So well known became the town's and Grinnell's activities that a reward was offered by Missouri slave owners for J.B. Grinnell "dead or alive." A letter in the *Des Moines Journal* charged that the town had gained a "widespread reputation of being the most notorious rendezvous for stolen and fugitive Negroes west of the Mississippi." The same letter claimed that \$37,000 worth of stolen "property" from Missouri had passed through J.B. Grinnell's hands. In self-defense, Grinnell always claimed that he was "no party to enticing slaves away, only charged with the crime of giving shelter to the fleeing and helping them to Canada.

John Brown was a religious fanatic who killed people in the process. He left Kansas determined to strike in the East, picked up arms and ammunition that had been stockpiled for him at Tabor, invaded Missouri with two bands of raiders, killed a slave owner, stole horses, and captured some slaves. He began his journey across Iowa armed with swords, six shooters and Sharp's rifles. Despite a large reward for their capture the raiders traveled in the open, boldly entering Des Moines and visited a newspaper editor, then headed for Grinnell. Brown was warned as he passed through Iowa that pro-slavery agents would be waiting in Grinnell. Those agents would be working for Samuel Workman, a Democrat, that President Buchanan appointed postmaster at Iowa City and U.S. marshal for the district. Workman was also a personal friend of J.B. Grinnell.

Shortly before noon on February 20, 1859, Brown's party came in sight of Grinnell. Brown, unsure of what pro-slavery forces were nearby, left his band in a grove near the town and went to the home of J.B. Grinnell.

Brown rang the doorbell and introduced himself to Grinnell, not by name, but only as a friend of Mrs. Grinnell's father. Grinnell promptly invited the unexpected guest to tea. After a short talk, Brown suddenly admitted, "I am not here on a social visit. I am the awful Brown—Capt. John Brown of Kansas." Grinnell showed Brown the copy of the *New York Tribune* that he had just been reading about his raids and warned him that the authorities were after him.

"My company is just back here in the grove, and I am only a scout," Brown replied. "Don't put yourself and family in jeopardy. I came for advice. I was in the wool business and am still, they say derisively, I hear you are openly. We are 16 persons with horses, and man and beast must be fed and stop with friends if we can and not spies. Then, it is Saturday and we want rest. I make it a rule not to travel on Sunday if it can be avoided and to save expenses we can cook our own food, and we need a rendezvous to stack our arms. What do you advise?"

Grinnell opened the door to his parlor and said, "This is at your service, and you can occupy the stalls in the barn that are vacant. Grinnell also advised Brown that there was no need to wait to bring the party into town in darkness, "for you have too much of an outfit for concealment."

By that time, as a Grinnell woman recalled, "a rumor ran through the settlement that John Brown, better known throughout the West as Ossawatimé Brown, had arrived in Grinnell with a small band of fugitives from Missouri on his way to Canada." When Brown's company filed into Grinnell, the town was out in good numbers to see the outfit. There were canvas covered wagons with the contraband (weapons and escaped slaves included men, women, children, one of them a baby) followed by horsemen, sentinels in strict military order.

Mr. Grinnell described his visitor: He stood very erect for a man nearing sixty years, wore a long, full beard, almost white, with hair parted and standing up, broad chin, and compressed lips. He had an expression of weariness and anxiety but his clear, light grey, deep set eyes gleamed out with

<sup>1</sup> Grinnell College in the Nineteenth Century " Joseph Frazier Wall p. 116-119

determination and will of his steadfast spirit.<sup>2</sup> There were no spurs on his boots and he was dressed in a plain, well worn suit, wide rimmed hat, and half-concealed pistol as it was against the law to carry concealed weapons.

The party settled into the town with some slaves concealed in Grinnell's wool barn, guests in a back room at the Reed Hotel (evidently located at the northeast corner of First Avenue and Broad Street)<sup>3</sup>, and horses were kept at Mrs. Reed's Hotel. Grinnell's parlor became a military arsenal with the stacking of rifles, shotguns, carbines, revolvers, flasks, strings of bullets and swords with blankets spread for sentinels. This room in Grinnell's House was later known as the "Liberty Room" and the room where Mr. Brown slept was called the "John Brown room."<sup>4</sup>

Townpeople suggested an evening reception for the guests in the large audience room used for a church. It was a large meeting of several hundred persons, many from the surrounding groves, brought by curiosity. Captain Brown spoke defending his seizure of slaves in MO on the ground they were about to be sold in the far south and his strategy was to keep slave holders away from Kansas. On Sunday night he spoke again at the church. A collection was taken up and Brown was so deeply moved by the Grinnell reception that the day after his arrival at Springdale he sent a note to friends in Tabor about his Grinnell visit saying: (1) Whole party & teams kept for two days free of cost; (2) Sundry articles of clothing given to captives; (3) Bread, meat, cakes, pies, etc. prepared for our journey; (4) Full houses for two nights in succession at which meetings Brown and Kagi (a member of the raider party) spoke and were loudly cheered; and fully endorsed. Three Congregational clergymen attended the meeting on Sabbath evening which had been announced from the pulpit. All of them justified our course and urged contributions in our behalf and there was no dissenting speaker present at either meeting. Mr. Grinnell spoke at length & has since labored to procure us a free and safe conveyance to Chicago. (5) Contributions in cash amounted to \$26.50. Last but not least public thanksgiving to all-mighty God was offered up by Mr. Grinnell on the behalf of the whole company for his great mercy and protecting care, with prayers for a continuance of those blessings. Respectfully your friend, John Brown. PS. Our reception among the Quaker friends here has been most cordial. Yours truly, JB.<sup>5</sup>

Upon returning from church on Sunday evening, there was a message from the US Marshal that Brown would be arrested immediately. His answer was "I will wait here 1 day longer for his accommodation. We can shoot 60 times in as many seconds." The marshal did not appear.<sup>6</sup>

Brown found time during his visit to linger in Grinnell's wool-barn where the two spoke of both forms of the "wool-trade": the raising of sheep and the sheparding of fugitive slaves to safety in Canada. He also visited the Bliss Store located on Broad Street between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenues.

Monday came and sickness, as well as Brown's stubbornness, kept the party from moving on. Although Brown stayed the extra day the marshal did not appear.

Tuesday they loaded the wagons. It looked like John Brown would travel openly on horseback but the wagons were closely covered and only have the driver visible. Eliza, a young girl at Grinnell told of watching him leave and said she'd never forget his appearance. Grinnell described his last glimpse of Brown seated beside the driver of a wagon, holding a mulatto child, raising his hat in the midst of the cheers of the crowd, with a God bless you, then joined in by the equestrian troupe that led and flanked his revered charges. They headed east to the Quaker settlement of Springdale in Cedar County where they stayed a few days.

Mr. Grinnell and W.P. Clark of Iowa City arranged for the use of a freight car for \$50. Two weeks later when the passenger train from the west came in, the freight car, with Brown and the Negroes locked inside on a bed of straw, was coupled onto the rear of the passenger train and two of the escort entered a coach. When the train stopped in Davenport, U.S. Marshal Laurel Sumners boarded it with a posse, but they did not examine the freight car or catch Brown. An Underground Railroad agent in Davenport, anxiously watching the train from a window of the old Burtis Hotel was greatly relieved to hear the train crossing the bridge to Chicago, where the fugitives landed safely next morning. They were met in Chicago by the famous detective Allen Pinkerton who made arrangements to send the slaves on to Detroit and to Canada.<sup>7</sup> This treatment for the fugitives was not the usual way for gaining freedom in Canada.

<sup>2</sup> 1880 Poweshiek County History, p. 623.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin and Susan Reed came to Grinnell in 1856; Ben died 5-5-1857, age 39, Hazelwood records. Susan died 2-14-1889, age 70, according to WPA records.

<sup>4</sup> "Grinnell, A Century of Progress," p. 68 and Ben Jeffrey's Research Paper.

<sup>5</sup> "Reminiscences of Forty Years," by Josiah Busnell (sp) Grinnell, p. 210-219.

<sup>6</sup> 1911 Poweshiek County History, p. 222

<sup>7</sup> "The Making of Iowa" by Henry and Edwin Sablin p. 260

John Brown spent time in Springdale after the Grinnell visit preparing his party for Harper's Ferry. He had found Iowa to be his one sanctuary, a secure base to which he could retreat to rest, recruit new followers, and make plans for future operations. He was known to visit Iowa at least four times staying with abolitionist friends at Tabor, Des Moines, Grinnell, and Springdale which for two years was considered to be his Iowa headquarters.<sup>8</sup>

Grinnell recalled overhearing a conversation between Brown and one of his men in which Brown said, "The article must be drafted over," followed by a long reading and discussion. Grinnell was later convinced that Brown's plan following the Harper's Ferry attack was written in the Grinnell home, although Grinnell himself claimed to be ignorant of the Harper's Ferry plot.

When captured, Brown had on his person letters from many abolitionists including notes and letters written to Grinnell by Brown. Brown was executed December 2, 1859. A widespread political conspiracy was suspected and J. B. Grinnell was summoned to Washington for an inquiry but his friends advised him to cross the border to Canada until things quieted but Grinnell went to Washington. He never regretted his association with Brown, whom he described as a "martyr-hero" and "one who lived to elevate the race and dared to die for an idea." The anti-abolitionist press also remembered Brown and his fateful visit to Iowa, and they labeled Grinnell, "John Brown Grinnell."<sup>9</sup>

Professor Joe Wall mentioned a legend that Mr. Brown remembered J.B. Grinnell in a more material way. It is said that Brown at the time of his execution in Virginia requested his friends to send one of the pikes (steel knife, eight inches long, to be attached to a pole six feet long) used in the attack on the arsenal to his friend in Iowa and that as long as J.B. Grinnell lived this pike was carried at the head of the academic Commencement procession at Iowa College. If there is indeed truth in this story, then the pike has long since disappeared, but the legend has remained.<sup>10</sup>

### Other Grinnellians and the Underground Railroad

Thomas Brande related this story. "One Sabbath evening, a slave and his wife who had escaped from Topeka, Kansas, were present and desired help to escape to Canada. A fine young couple they seemed, of more than ordinary intelligence, 20 and 22 years of age, he having been a body servant to a lawyer in Topeka and she a house servant in a first-class family. I married a couple that evening in the school-house,<sup>11</sup> after which Mr. Grinnell introduced the fugitives and read the slave act with its severe penalties, which made us all liable as criminals in aiding slaves to escape from their masters. The next morning I found them in the wagon which was to take me to Iowa City and bring thence a load of lumber for my brother. Professor Parker went on ahead on business of his own, but sent us word where to take the fugitives on our arrival."<sup>12</sup>

Johanna Harris Haines says their family operated a "station" on the underground. Her father James Harris settled on an 80 acre farm about a mile northwest of the "village."<sup>13</sup> Johanna described the location as a mile west of the north line of Grinnell.<sup>14</sup>

An internet listing of Poweshiek County Underground Railroad Operators shows John F. Bailey (possibly 4<sup>th</sup> and Main), Amos Bixby (possibly 1003 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue), Harvey Bliss, Elder T. Brande, Col. S. F. Cooper (436 East Street), Hon. J.B. Grinnell (3<sup>rd</sup> and Park), Homer Hamlin, Harris family (1 mile west), Prof L.F. Parker,<sup>15</sup> and Philo. Parks.<sup>16</sup> A home south of Searsboro was being used as a stop on the underground railroad according to the Searsboro Centennial Book.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Iowa: A Bicentennial History" by Joseph Frazier Wall, p. 97.

<sup>9</sup> "Josiah Bushnell Grinnell," by Charles E. Payne, 1938, p. 122.

<sup>10</sup> "Grinnell College in the Nineteenth Century: From Salvation to Service", Joseph Frazier Wall, p. 119

<sup>11</sup> Moses Abbot to Maria Longworthy, now Mrs. Pexton

<sup>12</sup> "Recollections of Grinnell," by Thomas Brande. Brand also tells of arriving in Grinnell May 20, 1858 and stayed at the Reed House.

<sup>13</sup> 1871 History by Nettie Sanford, p. 10

<sup>14</sup> "Grinnell, A Century of Progress", p. 58. I believe the northern most part of Grinnell was 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

<sup>15</sup> "Leonard Fletcher Parker," by Jacob Armstrong Swisher, 1927, p. 57. "In aiding slaves to pass safely through Iowa, Mr. Grinnell and Mr. Parker were co-workers with Brown."

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.ugrr.org/names/map-ia.htm>

<sup>17</sup> "The Searsboro Centennial Book" says present Robert Phillips home

### Was the Underground really underground?

Grinnell was well-known during the Civil War era as a station on the Underground Railroad. J.B. Grinnell, one of the foremost abolitionists in Iowa, used his wool-barn to hide fleeing slaves, but over the years stories grew of a tunnel near the Grinnell home and a system of tunnels in the city.

J. B. Grinnell admitted, "It is only the truth that Grinnell had been a station on the underground railway, but the departures had been in the night and the adventures not generally known. Certainly the event had found no local publicity, attended with cost if not personal peril." Grinnell never mentioned the existence of any tunnels.

J. B. Grinnell's daughter denied there was a tunnel. H. L. Triplett, a friend of J.B. Grinnell and later owner of the house, claimed that "J.B. Grinnell helped slaves to escape, but it was at night by lending them horses and shipping them in box cars.

Another famous legendary tunnel supposedly originated near the now-razed Monroe Hotel and ran south to the old Almy house in East St. One man claimed to have traveled 75 to 100 feet in the Almy House tunnel. Mrs. Almy was supposed to have said that the tunnel was only a cave which her sons used for growing chameleons. In another story, a Grinnell woman remembered playing in the "cave" as a girl and said it was really a cyclone cellar.

Although the Almy House was burned down some years ago for firemen's practice, Grant Gale, a frequent visitor to the Almy house, does not recall ever seeing a tunnel, and he doubts that the stories are true.

There was also a story that the "Spaulding tunnel" used by the company for power transmission might have originated as part of the Underground Railroad.

There are tunnels in the city which were used when city businessmen bought their heat from a central heating plant which piped steam underneath the city. Those tunnels are in no way connected with the Underground Railroad.

Many of the homes, Monroe Hotel, etc. where tunnels have been suggested were not even built at that period of time.

Rose Stoops of the Grinnell Historical Museum summed up the stories well when she said, "I really don't know of any authentic tunnels that were used for the Underground Railroad."