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## Article Title: Fact and Folklore in the Story of “John Brown’s Cave” and the Underground Railroad in Nebraska

Full Citation: James E Potter, “Fact and Folklore in the Story of ‘John Brown’s Cave’ and the Underground Railroad in Nebraska, *Nebraska History* 83 (2002): 73-88.

URL of article: [http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH2002J\\_Browns\\_Cave.pdf](http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH2002J_Browns_Cave.pdf)

Date: 11/24/2010

Article Summary: This article examines available evidence in order to determine the extent to which John Brown’s Cave and the adjacent Mayhew log cabin in Nebraska City may or may not have contributed to the escape of fugitive slaves. It has been alleged that through Brown’s direct involvement, the “cave” was an important Underground Railroad station, sheltering scores if not hundreds of black fugitives who were making their way out of bondage. The article debunks the story of the cave, concluding that it is an example of folklore that demonstrates how generations of Nebraskans have come to regard the crusade against slavery as a meaningful part of their past.

### Cataloging Information:

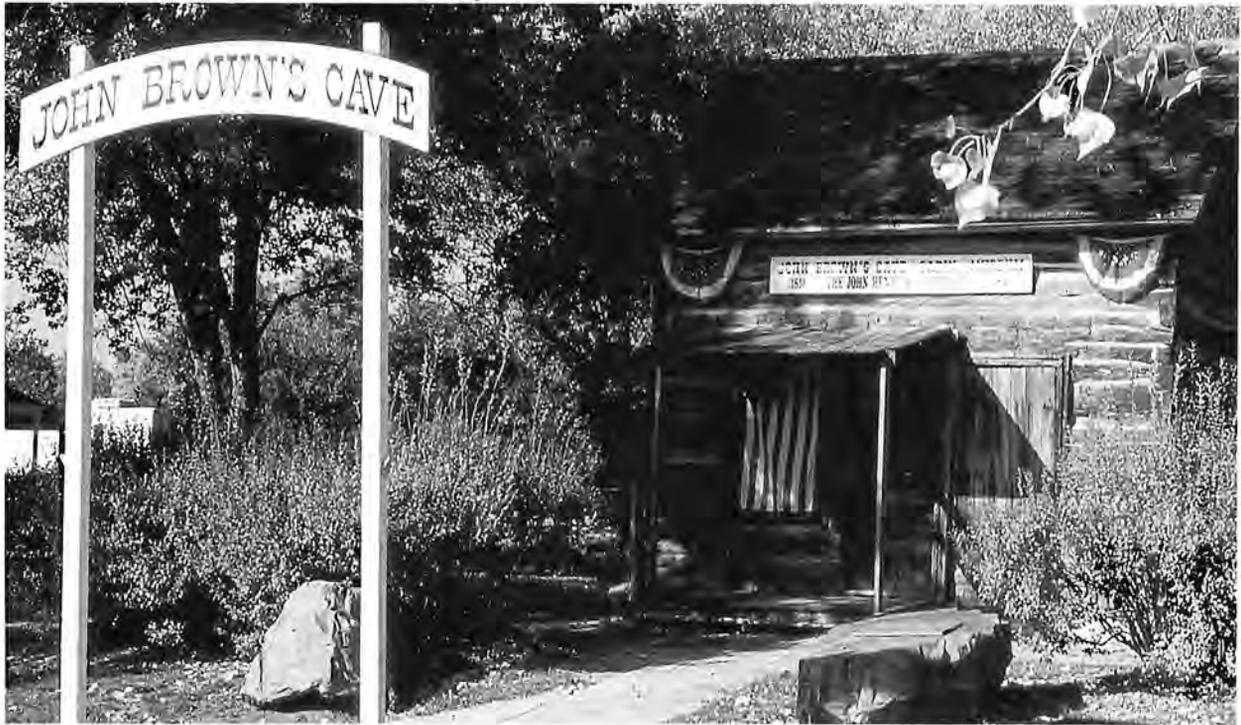
Names: John Brown, Barbara Mayhew, John Henry Kagi, Carol Kammen, Larry Gara, John Blue, William P Birchfield, Allen B Mayhew, A H Reid, Henry H Bartling, Mr Haskins, Edward Bartling, Carsten N Karstens, Calvin Chapman, Ned C Abbott, Mrs Henry Cleve, Charles Bickel, Fred Roberts, John Henry Kagy, John Boulware, Louise Pound, Abraham Kagey, Barbara Kagey Mayhew, Lena Linhoff, Edward Mayhew, Henry H Mayhew, Charles Mayhew, John Wayland, Jim Lane, Stephen F Nuckolls, George Gill, Dr Whitenger, Alexander Majors, Jacob Dawson, Stephen W “Squire” Kennedy, A R Keim, W W Cox, Alice (Lockwood) Minick, David Lockwood, Napoleon [slave], John Rastall, J W Cassell, R E Hawley, Lemuel B Irwin, Daniel Cady Cole, Ben T Skeen, John H Kearnes, James Redpath, Richard Brownlee, James Goodrich, Lewis Atherton, Wilbur H Siebert

Place Names: Nebraska City, Nebraska; Harper’s Ferry, Virginia; Johnson County, Iowa; Otoe County, Nebraska; Civil Bend, Iowa; Nebraska Territory; Missouri; Nemaha County, Nebraska; Brownville, Nebraska; Tabor, Iowa; Nemaha City, Nebraska; On River Road, Martin Stowell, Mount Vernon; Northern Kansas Trail; Richardson County, Nebraska; Topeka, Kansas; Holt County, Kansas; Atchison County, Kansas; Missouri River; Bates County, Missouri; Vernon County, Missouri

Keywords: *Bleeding Kansas*; Underground Railroad; National Landmark; *History News*; *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad*; *Nebraska City Times*; *Chicago Times*; *Nebraska City News*; The Vegetable Society; *Omaha Bee*; broom maker; *Black Den*; School for the Blind; *Omaha World-Herald*; Nebraska Department of Public Works; *Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State*; Federal Writers Project; Nebraska State Historical Society; *Nebraska History*; *Old Log Cabin Home*; *John Henry Kagy and The Old Log Cabin Home*; *The Nebraska Advertiser*; Pony Express; *Wyoming Telescope*; *Falls City Broad Axe*; *History of Nebraska*; *American Reformer*; *One Family Travels West*; *The Underground Railroad, From Slavery to Freedom*; Mayhew Cabin; John Brown’s Cave

Photographs / Images: John Brown’s Cave tourist attraction; Nebraska City in 1865; Dr John Blue; John Brown; Henry H Bartlin; Ned C Abbott; Alexander Majors, co-founder of the Pony Express; Alice Minick; Daniel Cady Cole family

# FACT AND FOLKLORE IN THE STORY OF



## "John Brown's Cave" AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN NEBRASKA

*By James E. Potter*

Few, if any, sites associated with Nebraska history have become more encrusted with legend and lore than "John Brown's Cave" and the adjacent Mayhew log cabin in Nebraska City, which together have been operated as a tourist attraction for more than sixty years. Less than a decade after the Civil War, accounts gained currency that the "cave" and cabin had been a major depot on the Underground Railroad, the secret prewar network by which slaves escaped to freedom.

Other essential elements of the story held that the "railroad's" Nebraska route was laid out by none other than John Brown of "Bleeding Kansas" fame, who was hanged in 1859 for fomenting a

slave insurrection with his abortive raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia. It has been alleged that through Brown's direct involvement, and with the assistance of numerous "conductors" at "stations" throughout southeastern Nebraska, of which John Brown's Cave was the most important, scores if not hundreds of black fugitives made their way out of bondage. The fact that Barbara Mayhew, sister of one of Brown's close associates, John Henry Kagi, lived in the cabin with her husband and children in the late 1850s, and Kagi visited his sister there, helped solidify the site's presumed connection to John Brown and the Underground Railroad.

Since the 1870s these basic presumptions have been passed down through oral and written accounts and they survive virtually intact today. They have

assumed the status of undisputed history. Recent tourism guides, newspaper articles, and even a state historical marker all attest to the story's remarkable vitality. The announcement of a National Park Service theme study of Underground Railroad resources in the United States to determine their eligibility for National Landmark or National Register status prompted a new look at the history and folklore associated with John Brown's Cave and the Underground Railroad in Nebraska.<sup>1</sup>

Above: Operated as a tourist attraction for more than sixty years, "John Brown's Cave" and the adjacent Mayhew cabin in Nebraska City have played a central role in the history and folklore of Nebraska's association with the Underground Railroad, the secret pre-Civil War network by which slaves escaped to freedom. Photo by Don Cunningham

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"Nebraska City. The landing and City as Seen from the Iowa Side of the Missouri River, in 1865."  
Lithograph by A. E. Matthews. NSHS-RG22911-13

In order to evaluate the various claims, several issues bear further analysis. First, what was the origin of the claims that the Mayhew cabin and associated "cave" was a depot on the Underground Railroad, how credible are they, and what, if any, was John Brown's connection to the site? Second, what level of Underground Railroad activity in Nebraska can be documented, and what realistic estimates can be derived for the number of slaves who actually escaped via this route located on the western periphery of slaveholding territory? Third, although the Mayhew cabin is said to be the oldest or second oldest building in Nebraska still at or near its original site, what evidence is available regarding the cabin's probable construction date? Finally, what is the importance of the stories and beliefs associated with the site and with the Underground Railroad, regardless of whether they can be substantiated, and what do they tell us

about how we think about the past?

Carol Kammen reviewed the difficulty of researching the local history of the Underground Railroad in the spring 1999 *History News*. "Because it was conceived in secrecy and conducted in silence," said Kammen, "it has few records to tell its story." Those that do survive have been expanded upon with folklore and fiction. "Yet, precisely because reliable information is scarce, the local historian needs to be even more vigilant regarding the subject." Kammen adds, "About no other local topic, except possibly the weather, are there more legends, more hearsay, or more dubious claims; about no other topic is there more to question." Larry Gara expressed similar cautions in his 1961 book, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad*.<sup>2</sup>

The earliest known published source alleging that the Mayhew cabin and cave was a station on the Underground Railroad appeared in the *Nebraska City*

*News*, November 14, 1874. The article's author was Dr. John Blue, city physician, former editor of the *Nebraska City Times*, and sometime correspondent for the *Chicago Times*. Blue, who came to Nebraska City after the Civil War, visited the site with William P. Birchfield, first sheriff of Otoe County, and wrote his article for the Chicago newspaper. It was then reprinted locally.<sup>3</sup>

Blue's account provided many essential elements of the story of John Brown's Cave, which have been repeated in most subsequent retellings: The cave was on property owned by Allen B. Mayhew, reportedly one of John Brown's men (Mayhew was, in fact, John Henry Kagi's brother-in-law; Kagi was one of Brown's associates in antislavery warfare in Kansas and was killed in the 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry); the cave was dug in the fall of 1856, and though it was supposed to be merely a root house or potato cellar, its true use as a

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slave hideout was discovered only after the Civil War; the cave entrance was in a dense thicket in a ravine west of the Mayhew cabin, and a tunnel burrowed directly under Mayhew's house, where there was a secret trapdoor in the floor; ten feet inside the ravine entrance to the cave were two "cross wings," where guards were stationed and where a few resolute men could have "held the position against a battalion;" the abolitionists who used the cave to hide runaway slaves disguised their true purpose by calling themselves "The Vegetarian Society"; slaves would come to the cave at night and members of the society would then transport them across the Missouri River to Iowa; three or four times John Brown personally accompanied the slave-running expeditions. The article termed the site "John Brown's Cave," and the appellation has survived unchanged.

The inspiration for Blue's article is unknown. Earlier that year, in June 1874, prominent abolitionists from across the country gathered in Chicago for a reunion. Blue was not recorded as having attended, nor would he likely have been welcome, because he evidently owned slaves while he lived at Brunswick, Missouri, before the war. He probably heard about the gathering, and may have read some of the many published recollections of stirring events connected with "Bleeding Kansas" and the Underground Railroad that appeared in the Chicago papers. The publicity afforded the reunion could have been Blue's motivation to write his *Chicago Times* article.<sup>4</sup>

A. H. Reid, the editor of the *Nebraska City News* in 1874, in a postscript to Blue's article, noted that a German family who lived in the former Mayhew cabin was then using the cave for a calf stable. A shed originally sitting atop one of the cross wings, and from which a ladder extended down into the back of the cave, had already been torn down. Reid further embellished Blue's account, noting, "On this obscure spot occurred some of the exciting seed-incidents which grew at



Dr. John Blue, Nebraska City physician and former editor of the *Nebraska City Times* wrote the earliest published account alleging that the cave and cabin were a station on the Underground Railroad. Blue's account in the *Nebraska City News* in 1874 introduced many of the essential elements of the story, which have been repeated in most subsequent retellings. A. C. Edmonds, *Pen Sketches of Nebraskans* (Lincoln: R. & J. Wilbur, 1871), plate VI

last into the gigantic war of the rebellion, which revolutionized the entire political, commercial, social, and industrial policy of the nation." In a remarkable bit of prescience, Reid predicted that someone would buy the cave someday, "fence it in, advertise it well, charge 25 cents admission, and make quite a spec. out of it."<sup>5</sup>

Reid repeated some of the now standard lore about John Brown's cave in his 1883 history of Johnson County, Iowa. In a footnote, he claimed to have visited the cave twice in 1874. He again described the cross wings, and recalled that the shed over the manhole into the cave had been disguised as a smokehouse. He made no mention of a tunnel from the Mayhew cabin into the cave.<sup>6</sup>



John Brown came to national attention in 1855 when he led a raid against pro-slavery forces that had attacked the free-soil town of Lawrence, Kansas. In 1859 he led a raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Many of his men were killed, including John Kagi, brother of Barbara Mayhew, who lived in the Nebraska City Mayhew cabin. Brown was hanged on December 2, 1859. F. B. Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891) frontispiece.

The next known published version of the story of John Brown's cave was a non-bylined article headlined "The Vegetable Society" in the March 3, 1890, edition of the *Omaha Bee*, reprinted March 20 by the *Nebraska City News*. This article took further license, though many elements of Blue's 1874 account remained intact. According to the *Bee*, "The Vegetable Society" had dug the cave. The hidden entrance and the deadly cross wings were both described, as was the long tunnel leading to Mayhew's house. The cave's defensive status had improved; two men could hold it against an army. According to the *Bee*, slaves were hidden in the cave only during the day. At night, they slept in Mayhew's house. (It must have been

crowded. Mayhew and his wife had four children; the house was 12 x 16 ft., with a loft.) The article concluded with a complaint that the unnamed current owner of the Mayhew cabin had “desecrated” the cave by converting it to horse stables and pig pens.<sup>7</sup>

The *Bee* article proved too much for Edward M. Mayhew, Allen Mayhew’s son, who had lived in the cabin with his family from about age six (1855) until he was eleven or twelve (1861 or 1862). Writing from his home in Kansas, the forty-year-old Mayhew provided a very different version of the cave’s history. Mayhew contradicted the *Bee*’s description of the cave’s size and its distance from the cabin. He stated that there was no passageway or tunnel connecting the cave with the house. The main entrance to the cave was a large door in plain sight, with a secondary entrance having a ladder leading down into the back of the cave. The cave, according to Mayhew, was dug for storing potatoes and later was enlarged as a wine cellar. “There never was a negro in said cave while Mayhew owned it, neither was John Brown ever in the cave or on the place.” Mayhew recalled that his uncle, John Henry Kagi, once brought fourteen blacks to the house for breakfast; after eating they continued north on foot. “There were negroes in the house; John Kagy [sic] was there and was killed at Harper’s Ferry; Mayhew lived there and had a cave or wine cellar, and that is all there is in this great mystery.”<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary sources tend to support Edward Mayhew’s statements about how the cave was used. The *Nebraska City News* of July 14, 1860, remarked that Allen Mayhew and a Mr. Haskins living in the west part of town were shipping large quantities of brooms of their own manufacture to St. Louis and elsewhere. In February 1861 the paper again mentioned Mayhew’s broom “manufactory.” On July 13, 1861, an article reported that Allen Mayhew had twenty-five gallons of native wine for sale. The editor had sampled the wine, made two years earlier, and pronounced it superior

to the “drugged stuff sold here as imported wines.” The article said that Mayhew was planning to make a considerable quantity of wine that fall.<sup>9</sup> These references suggest that Mayhew, like most settlers in the days before refrigeration, had a practical need for



Henry H. Bartling owned the property in 1901. Although by then the cave had collapsed, he decided to re-excavate it and open it to the public. Bartling died three years later, and there is no record indicating that his plans were ever carried out. NSHS-RG2411-304

storage such as a cave or wine cellar would provide, and had been making wine since 1859. The quantities of broom corn required to operate a “manufactory” would also require storage, and it is unlikely that sufficient room was available in Mayhew’s tiny cabin.

Unlike John Blue’s article, Edward Mayhew’s statement did not become part of the lore surrounding John Brown’s Cave. In fact, no more was heard of it until thirty-five years later when Mayhew again had an opportunity to tell his version of what did and did not take place there; in the meantime, other variations of the basic cave story surfaced.

By 1901 interest in the cave remained

high, and Henry H. Bartling, owner of the property and one of Nebraska City’s prominent businessmen, decided to open the cave to the public. By this time, the cave had collapsed; only some depressions remained. Bartling and his sons probed down twelve feet and struck timbers near the suspected entrance. Although the newspaper indicated that further digging was to be done, there was no subsequent reference to Bartling having succeeded in re-excavating the cave. Bartling died three years later and the property passed to his son, Edward.<sup>10</sup>

This setback did not quell the sprouting of new John Brown’s Cave stories. The *Nebraska City News* of December 31, 1909, published the reminiscences of seventy-six-year-old Carsten N. Karstens, a German immigrant who had arrived in Nebraska City as a youth of twenty-three in August 1857. With Karstens’s account, however, recollections of John Brown’s Cave began to shift from mere descriptions of having visited the cave or hearing about its alleged use, to claims of having actually participated in transporting slaves to or from the site. Karstens said he learned of “John Brown’s Gang” soon after arriving in Nebraska City. He claimed to have helped guide runaway slaves from what he termed the “three-story” cave across the Missouri River to Civil Bend, Iowa. En route, “there were three or four stations” at Wyoming, a small town on the Missouri River north of Nebraska City. Karstens recalled the work as being very dangerous; “We were armed to the teeth with revolvers, shotguns, and bowie knives.”<sup>11</sup>

Calvin Chapman provided a subsequent account in a similar vein in 1925. In a sworn affidavit, the eighty-one-year-old Chapman told of driving wagonloads of slaves from the “Black Den” (John Brown’s Cave) beginning in the fall of 1859, soon after his arrival in Nebraska City. The sixteen-year-old Chapman made no fewer than ten trips from the cave, across the river to Iowa, carrying from four to ten slaves each time. All the slaves were men. He got his instructions from his brother, Tom, didn’t know who

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was in charge of the operation, and never knew the Mayhews. He never saw the fugitives arrive, or talked to the parties that brought them in.<sup>12</sup>

At least Chapman did not claim that John Brown personally delivered the slaves to the cave. Brown had gone east in February 1859 and had been arrested after his October 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry, so he was nowhere near Nebraska City when Chapman was supposed to have been transporting slaves.

Chapman's statement and several other 1925 recollections of John Brown's Cave had been collected by Ned C. Abbott, superintendent of the School for the Blind at Nebraska City, a member of the governing board of the Nebraska State Historical Society, and a man deeply interested in history. Abbott's project was an attempt to place the history of John Brown's Cave before the public, complete with evidence that he believed confirmed the cave as a major station on the Underground Railroad. The result was his article published in 1929 in the *Omaha World-Herald*.

Perhaps because Abbott was already convinced that stories of the cave being a station on the Underground Railroad were true, he could not evaluate his sources objectively. Admitting that after the passage of so much time, testimony from still-living persons was suspect because "so many dreams have mingled with their recollections, so many fancies have woven themselves into the pattern of fact, so many visions have crowded in among the memories," Abbott proceeded to disregard his own warning. He found Calvin Chapman's 1925 statement credible, but discounted Edward Mayhew's 1925 letter to Abbott in which Mayhew reiterated what he had said about the cave in 1890, again stating that the cave had been enlarged in 1861 as a wine cellar. This was exactly the period when Allen Mayhew was making brooms and wine, but Abbott probably was not aware of the contemporary evidence.

Edward Mayhew's recollection was suspect, according to Abbott, because he was "a mere boy" when he lived in



**Ned C. Abbott gathered many accounts of John Brown's Cave, hoping to confirm that it was a major Underground Railroad station. He was a member of the governing board of the Nebraska State Historical Society, and his 1929 article in the *Omaha World-Herald* lent credibility to the stories circulating about the house and cave, even though he gave considerable weight to accounts that tended to confirm his point of view and discounted contrary evidence. NSHS-RG2411-10**

the cabin. Chapman, though barely sixteen when he supposedly transported slaves from John Brown's Cave and an old man when he told about it, was among those whose memories Abbott termed "material that seems to have genuine merit." Although he failed to cite any sources, Abbott stated, "evidence is plentiful that [John] Brown himself often drove a large lumber wagon, or in winter, a bobsled, his precious freight of human chattels lying flat on the floor. . . . The fiery zealot was seen by many on

these occasions." Finally, his article mentioned that other unnamed old-timers had told him of "a barn down on Otoe street. . . where they hid the runaways," and of "runaway colored folk up in a cave in Bone's Pasture."<sup>13</sup>

Abbott's article was not the only one to relate stories of caves, hideouts, and tunnels in Nebraska City. A few weeks earlier the magazine section of the September 1, 1929, issue of the Sunday *World-Herald* had published a story about another secret tunnel in Nebraska City. The newspaper got the story from Charles Bickel's daughter, Mrs. Henry Cleve, who had heard it from her father twenty-two years before in October 1907 as he lay on his deathbed. Bickel had made his daughter swear not to divulge the story for at least twenty years.

Bickel, a stonemason who came to Nebraska City in 1865, according to the *World-Herald* article, had been hired by an unnamed but prominent man, under an oath of secrecy, to brick up a tunnel originating in a chamber beneath the basement of the man's house. According to Bickel's employer, this tunnel led from the house and terminated four blocks away in a shack near the Missouri River. Parts of the tunnel were thirty-five feet beneath the surface. Slaves were brought across the river to Nebraska City, and hurried through the tunnel to the house. From there, they were taken to John Brown's Cave. At least this is the story Mrs. Cleve recalled hearing from her father as he lay dying. Mrs. Cleve refused to give the name of the Nebraska City man in whose house the secret tunnel had supposedly originated, nor was there any speculation about how a thirty-five-foot-deep tunnel could have been excavated for four blocks without anyone knowing of it. There was no explanation why escaping slaves would have been brought across the river *from* Iowa, when Iowa was the usual destination for slaves purportedly traveling on the Nebraska route of the Underground Railroad.<sup>14</sup>

Shortly after the Cleve and Abbott articles were published, the *Nebraska*

*City News* issued a special diamond anniversary edition that included many stories about the city's past. Among them was one about John Brown's Cave that told of local men visiting the site several months earlier to see whether the cave might be reopened. All they could find were the wooded ravine and a depression believed to be the cave's western end. The depression was "similar to others in dozens of other ravines along South Table Creek." The project

stand, and pop-bottle repository."<sup>16</sup>

These announcements elicited yet another recollection of the cabin and cave in the Underground Railroad days. Fred Roberts, pictured in the newspaper standing beside the cabin, noted that he had been born in the cabin seventy-four years earlier on October 18, 1864. Although the Roberts family moved from the house when Fred was five, he remembered playing in the cave with its cross wings, "which made defense

on the Mayhew and Kagey families, and reviewed John Brown's exploits in Kansas, Nebraska, and elsewhere leading up to his October 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry. No footnotes were provided, but a careful reading of Bartling's publication indicates much of the information about the cave and its alleged role in the Underground Railroad was drawn from the Blue article and subsequent recollections or newspaper articles.

Bartling also added some totally new material. For example, he alleged a conversation between Allen Mayhew and John Brown in which Brown said, "We want to put slaves in your house and to transport them." Mayhew supposedly admitted to being a "slave sympathizer," but refused the use of his house because his neighbors would find out. Like earlier writers on the subject, Bartling attributed the escape of hundreds of slaves from Missouri to the activities of John Brown and his followers. He stated, "Nearly always the first trip in the morning of John Boulware's ferry [across the Missouri River] carried a load of slaves."<sup>19</sup> Even if a "load" consisted of only two slaves and the ferry ran daily for only six months of the year, more than 1,000 fugitives would have thus been transported from Nebraska City in just three years, a number that would strain the credulity of even the most fervent believers in an active Nebraska branch of the Underground Railroad.

The opening of John Brown's Cave to visitation and the publication of Bartling's booklet seemed to ordain the site's significance as a station on the Underground Railroad. *Nebraska History*, the quarterly of the state historical society, published an article that closely paraphrased the Bartling pamphlet, with an equal lack of documentation. The 1939 Federal Writers Project's *Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State* mentioned the cave with an interesting variation: If danger threatened, the slaves escaped through the tunnel to Table Creek and "took refuge in its waters."<sup>20</sup> The placement of a Nebraska State Historical

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***The cave development is a 'natural'. It is there and all it needs is a suitable setting—parking lot, Sunday lecturer, hot-dog stand, and pop-bottle repository.***

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*Nebraska City News*, August 1, 1937

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was abandoned because the men determined it would take several months and hundreds of dollars to open the cave. The paper then reprinted John Blue's 1874 article, once again placing the "genesis" version of the cave story before the public.<sup>15</sup>

There the matter rested until the Nebraska Department of Public Works in 1937 selected a new route for Nebraska Highway 2 that promised to cut across the Bartling property and threatened the Mayhew cabin. This proved a blessing in disguise for Edward Bartling and others in Nebraska City who had long lamented the site's inaccessibility and lack of development. In July Bartling announced that he had begun moving the Mayhew cabin some fifty feet to the north of its original location to make room for the highway. He also told of his plans to restore the cabin and beautify the grounds, and said he intended to "venture into other business enterprises on the grounds nearby and may call the place 'John Brown's Town.'" The newspaper concurred: "The cave development is a 'natural.' It is there and all it needs is a suitable setting—parking lot, Sunday lecturer, hot-dog

easy in case of attack." A trapdoor led from the cabin into the cave.<sup>17</sup>

By February 1938 the work of restoring the cabin and cave was nearing completion. Although the cabin had been moved, the cave conformed to the early descriptions, complete with a tunnel from cave to cabin, three chambers in which the slaves had been secreted, and an outlet in the nearby creek bank. Because the cave was slated for public visitation, Bartling had made its chambers large enough so visitors could walk through them upright and walled them with brick and limestone. He admitted that the tunnel to the cabin was new, but that the chambers and tunnel to the creek bank were "in precisely their original places." He did not divulge how he had managed to determine the cave's exact location when visitors to the site in 1929 had found only a depression similar to dozens of other depressions nearby.<sup>18</sup>

While Bartling was preparing the cave and cabin for public visitation, he was also writing a booklet giving the history of the site. It was published in May 1938, and entitled *John Henry Kagey and the Old Log Cabin Home*. The pamphlet included biographical information

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Marker in front of the cabin in the 1970s offered additional reassurance that the cave was an authentic Underground Railroad station. Save for only minor embellishments and an occasional challenge, the story of John Brown's Cave and the Mayhew Cabin as it exists today had become firmly established.<sup>21</sup>

Nebraska scholar and folklorist Louise Pound mounted the major challenge to the John Brown's Cave story after 1938. Her 1948 *Nebraska History* article entitled, "Nebraska Cave Lore," included a section on the cave. Pound examined many of the same accounts cited above, as well as several John Brown biographies, and concluded that Brown never lived in the cabin and probably never visited it. She also cited Edward Mayhew's 1925 letter as credible evidence that the cave had not been used to hide fugitive slaves before the Mayhews left there "about 1860." According to Pound, Bartling's *Old Log Cabin Home* suffered from "many omissions and he is vague concerning essentials," another way of saying Bartling did not document many of his assertions. While Pound left open the question of the "historicity" of the John Brown Cabin and Cave, she concluded, "considerable folklore has sprung up about them."<sup>22</sup> Like Edward Mayhew's statements from 1890 and 1925, Pound's assessment failed to gain a foothold among the sources on which the modern-day story of John Brown's Cave was based.

Related to the claims about the Mayhew cabin and cave as a major station for escaping slaves is the attribution of the cabin as Nebraska's oldest standing building, with a construction date of 1851 or 1852. This claim seems to have originated with Edward Bartling in the second edition of his *John Henry Kagi and The Old Log Cabin Home* (1940). In the 1938 edition, Bartling reported that Allen and Barbara Mayhew and their children came to Nebraska City in 1855, and the cabin was their home by 1857. The next year Abraham Kagey, the father of John Henry Kagi and Barbara

Kagey Mayhew, came to Nebraska and claimed land. While not entirely accurate, these dates are fairly close to the facts.<sup>23</sup>

In the 1940 edition, Allen and Barbara Mayhew arrived in Nebraska City in 1851 and six years passed before Mayhew filed his preemption claim. The claim that Abraham Kagey, "an experienced timber man," helped build the cabin, implies that he, too, must have come to Nebraska in 1851 or 1852. The cabin had thus become the oldest building then standing in Nebraska. The elder Kagey dug the cave. Also new was the statement by Mrs. Lena Linhoff that when she lived in the cabin in 1886 and 1887, the names of no less than fifteen slaves were still visible in the cellar on the door casing leading to the cave. (That statement had prompted Louise Pound to wonder how Linhoff knew the names were those of Negroes.)

Also new in the 1940 edition was an extended biographical sketch of John Henry Kagi that reproduced a Kagi letter from Nebraska City, which Bartling dated as 1853. This dating helped bolster his allegations that the Mayhews and John Henry Kagi were in Nebraska City much earlier than they really were. He misread the true date of 1855 on the Kagi letter, which is in the Kansas State Historical Society collections. That John Henry was in Nebraska City in 1855 is confirmed by his listing in the 1855 Otoe County census as a "Professor of Phonography." Bartling made other additions or changes in the 1940, 1943, and 1961 editions of *Old Log Cabin Home*, but they are not material here.<sup>24</sup>

Records that may not have been accessible to Bartling in 1938 or 1940 shed a different light on the probable construction date of the Mayhew cabin. The 1860 census of Nebraska Territory lists the Mayhew family and their four children. Edward, age ten, and Henry H., age eight, had both been born in Ohio, while Charles, age four, had been born in Nebraska. This data makes it impossible for the family to have been in Nebraska as early as 1851. That early date is implausible, regardless, because it

was illegal to settle in Nebraska Territory before its official organization on May 30, 1854.<sup>25</sup>

The Mayhews were in Nebraska City in 1854, according to the first territorial census, and Allen Mayhew is credited with being present when the townsite was laid out on July 10 of that year. He filed a preemption claim March 30, 1857. Under the Preemption Act, it was possible to have settled on a tract in advance of the filing, but it is hardly likely that he did so as early as 1851. These data square well with the supposition that the cabin may have been built as early as 1855. Edward Mayhew recalled living in the cabin from the time he was about six, and he had been born September 21, 1849.<sup>26</sup>

In 1961 John Wayland, a Kagey descendent, published *John Kagi and John Brown*. Wayland had access to documents that cleared up some of the previous misinformation about John Henry Kagi and Abraham Kagey in Nebraska. The elder Kagey had gone to California in 1852 and did not return east until the summer of 1856. He then moved to Nebraska City. If the Mayhew Cabin had not yet been built, then Abraham may have helped build it. He could also have dug the cave, which Edward Mayhew said was dug that fall.

Wayland had read one or more of Bartling's booklets and seemed confused about when Allen and Barbara Mayhew had gone to Nebraska. In one place he has them there in 1854, in another he credits Mayhew with building the cabin "in or about 1853," and finally, has the Mayhews coming to Nebraska "in 1852 or thereabouts," which Wayland says was the year of their marriage. Had he known of the family's 1860 census enumeration, listing Edward Mayhew as being ten years old, he would have realized that the marriage date was suspect unless Edward Mayhew had been born out of wedlock.<sup>27</sup> Of particular interest also is Wayland's discussion of the later lives of the Kagey and Mayhew families. After Allen Mayhew died during a trip to Utah in 1862, the cabin property was

sold. Edward Mayhew continued to live in Otoe County until sometime in the 1880s, as did his grandfather, Abraham Kagey. Barbara Mayhew remarried, and died in 1882.<sup>28</sup>

In order to determine the extent to which John Brown's Cave may or may not have contributed to the escape of fugitive slaves, it is necessary to examine and evaluate evidence of Underground Railroad activity in southeastern Nebraska Territory from 1855 to 1861. John Brown figures prominently in stories of the cave itself, as well as in recollections of the broader operations of the Underground Railroad, and those accounts must be correlated to what is known about his activities in Nebraska. Because the Underground Railroad was a secret and often illegal endeavor, primary sources for its operations are generally not available. For the period under study, however, contemporary newspaper articles and manuscript sources left by Brown and his associates, provide some means to assess the credibility of recollections, both regarding the number of escaping slaves Brown is alleged to have aided directly, and the broader estimates of how many fugitives may have been aided by the Nebraska line of the Underground Railroad.

Although John Brown spent many months in Kansas between his arrival in the fall of 1855 and his final departure in early 1859, most of his visits to Nebraska were brief as he passed through on his travels back and forth from Kansas and the East. The route through Nebraska Territory was also used by hundreds of "free soil" emigrants, as well as armed parties who supported the free state cause, on their way to or from Kansas. It allowed them to avoid crossing proslavery Missouri to reach their destination. Jim Lane, a prominent abolition leader and sometime Brown confidant, is credited with establishing the route, which was named for him.<sup>29</sup>

In all, John Brown spent a total of no more than thirty days in Nebraska, most of it traveling back and forth from the Nebraska City area to the Kansas bor-

der. His many biographers generally agree on the approximate dates he would have passed through Nebraska: August 3–10, 1856; October 5–9, 1856; November 2–4, 1857; November 18–22, 1857; June 23–26, 1858; and February 1–4, 1859.<sup>30</sup> The number of slaves Brown personally escorted north from Kansas was eleven or, perhaps, twelve. There is no dispute that eleven slaves taken during Brown's raid into Missouri from Kansas in December 1858 accompanied

offered a reward of \$200. The paper reported the women had been taken to "the little abolition hole" of Civil Bend, Iowa, across the river and about eight miles from Nebraska City, and then to Tabor, Iowa, but a party of seventy-five men sent in pursuit failed to find them.<sup>33</sup> Nuckolls later located one of the women in Chicago, but failed to recover her.

John Brown's departure from Kansas with the eleven slaves from the Missouri raid attracted the attention of both the

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***In all, John Brown spent a total of no more than thirty days in Nebraska, most of it traveling back and forth from the Nebraska City area to the Kansas border.... The number of slaves Brown personally escorted north from Kansas was eleven or, perhaps, twelve.***

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him north through Nebraska in early February 1859 on his final departure for the East. His attack on Harper's Ferry took place that October.<sup>31</sup>

Between 1857 and 1860 there are several contemporary references to slave escapes through or from Nebraska. The first involved three black men, supposedly escaped slaves from Platte County, Missouri, and Atchison County, Kansas, who were discovered by citizens (perhaps including slave hunters) near Brownville, Nemaha County, in September 1857. In the ensuing shootout, one white man was killed, one black man was wounded and captured, and the other two blacks escaped. The captured black was indicted for murder, but there is no information that he was tried. He may have been returned to his owner. At least one of the other black men involved in the Brownville incident, along with ten other supposed fugitive slaves, was captured several weeks later in Iowa.<sup>32</sup>

In the fall of 1858 two slave women owned by Stephen F. Nuckolls of Nebraska City escaped. The *Nebraska City News*, a Democratic paper, attributed their loss to enticement by "some vile, white-livered abolitionist." Nuckolls

Brownville and Nebraska City papers. The *Nebraska Advertiser* in its February 10, 1859, edition reported Brown's passage through Nemaha City "at midnight, on Saturday night last [February 6], with thirteen negroes." Although Brown had indeed passed through the area, it had been a few days earlier. Even contemporary accounts contain inaccuracies that plague Underground Railroad research. The *Nebraska City News* of February 12 also mentioned that the party passed through the city last Friday evening [February 5] and devoted a column of invective against Brown, "his precious gang," and the "rankest Black Republicans," presumably anyone who supported abolition.

Edward Mayhew in 1890 stated that his uncle, John Henry Kagi, once brought fourteen slaves to the Mayhew cabin for breakfast. It is possible that this was the Brown party of February 1859 and Mayhew was off about the numbers. Kagi did visit the Mayhews about this time, because his February 7 letter from Tabor, Iowa, reported that he had been alone at his sister's house a few days earlier when the deputy U.S. marshal for southern Nebraska and a small posse

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tried to arrest him. "While he was securing a larger posse, I escaped."<sup>34</sup> Edward Mayhew recalled that officers from Missouri had tried to arrest Kagi at the time he brought the fourteen blacks to the cabin, but the fugitive slaves (if that is what they were) were evidently gone when the posse arrived, because Kagi was alone. Mayhew was clear that John Brown never visited the cabin, and recalled that the fourteen slaves Kagi brought were on foot, not in wagons as were those in the Brown party.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, it is possible that Kagi brought Brown's Missouri fugitives to the cabin for a quick breakfast while his leader was elsewhere.

George Gill a member of Brown's group and a friend of Kagi's, told of staying overnight at Mayhew's house during the February journey out of Kansas. He had fallen behind the main party, was further delayed when intercepted by members of a posse, and did not arrive in Nebraska City until late in the evening. "I stopped over night with Kagi's brother-in-law, Mr. Mayhew, but had some difficulty finding him, having had to inquire some."<sup>36</sup> Evidently Kagi was no longer at the house, and Gill mentions no other members of Brown's party as having been there. If the Mayhew cabin had been regularly used as a stopping place for fugitive slaves, it seems surprising that Gill, one of Brown's close associates, did not know where to locate it.

As John Brown was leaving Kansas in 1859, he wrote a treatise that has come to be known as "John Brown's Parallels." On the back of the document he jotted a list of names and places along his escape route. The Nebraska localities were "Nemaha City," "On River Road, Martin Stowell, Mount Vernon [Peru]," "Dr. Whitenger and Sibley, Nebraska City" and "Mr. Vincent, Ira Reed, Mr. Garner."<sup>37</sup> While some have attributed these as "stations" on the Underground Railroad, they may have been merely the names of people and places where Brown knew he might get aid. Significantly, Mayhew at Nebraska City was

not listed, even though Mayhew's brother-in-law was one of Brown's closest confidants.

The contemporary accounts of slave escapes in Nebraska before and after 1859 attest that a flight to freedom did not depend upon the personal intervention of John Brown. In addition to the episodes mentioned above, three women and two boys owned by overland freighting and Pony Express magnate Alexander Majors disappeared from his home in Nebraska City in June 1860. Once again the newspaper unleashed its invective upon abolitionists, "the worst possible enemy a good negro can have." The editor noted, however, that the servants had fled on their own, and were "supposed to have taken the Underground Railroad to Canada." He doubted "whether. . .the fugitives have bettered their condition. . .and they may encounter difficulties not expected by them or contemplated by their advisers, if any such there were."<sup>38</sup>

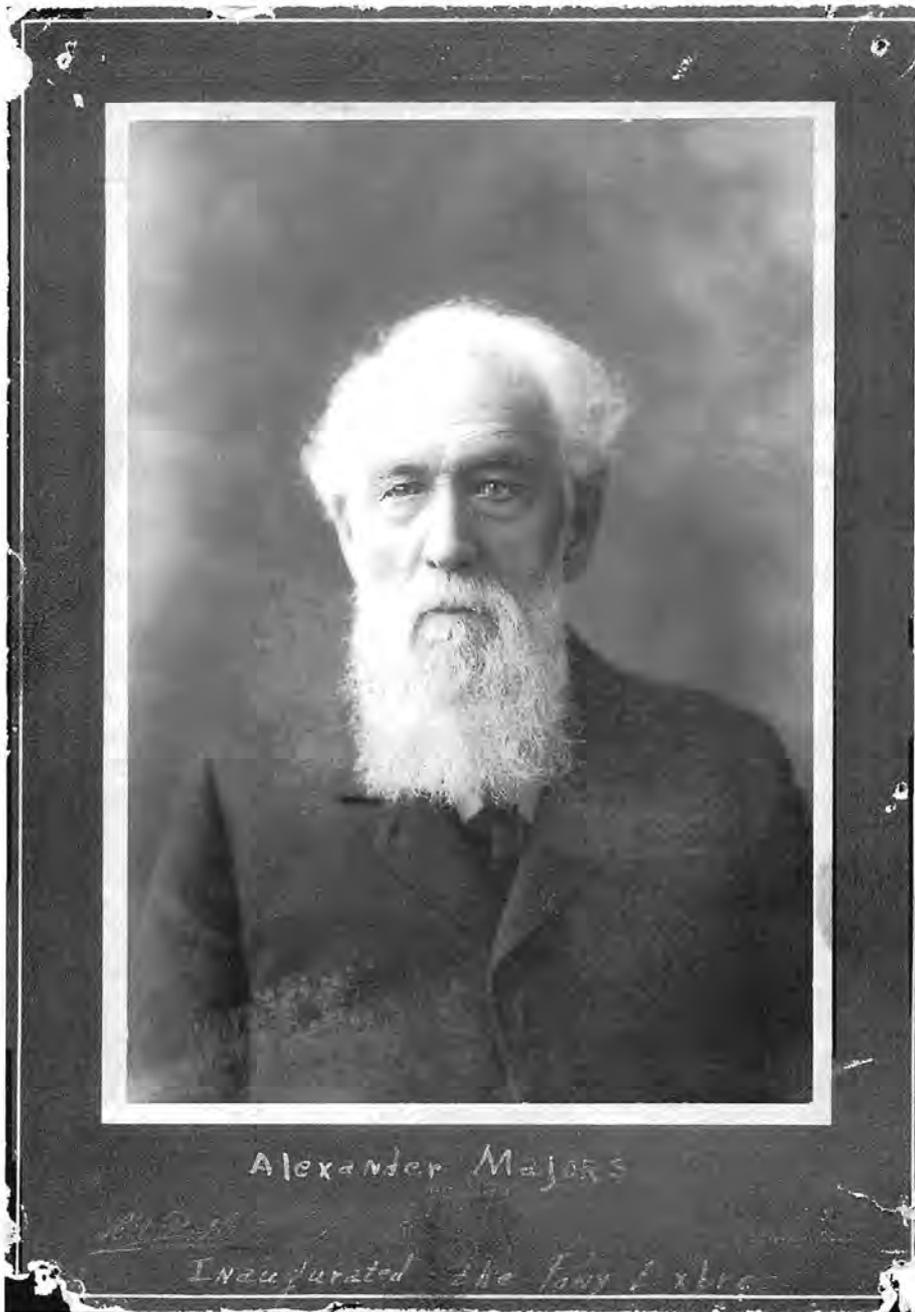
In August 1860 the Nebraska City paper heard of a group of nineteen blacks passing through on the "under ground railroad" to their "depot at Wyoming." The Democratic editor of the *Nebraska City News* charged that the Wyoming depot was in the home of Jacob Dawson, the former editor of the *Wyoming Telescope* and the "most liberal [Republican] we have known for a long while."<sup>39</sup> At about the same time, the *Falls City Broad Axe* reported that a cargo of fugitive slaves, "numbering half a dozen or more" and accompanied by some thirty or forty heavily armed white men, had passed through Salem in Richardson County. Although the number of escapees is different, it is possible that this was the same group supposed to have been seen at Nebraska City and Wyoming.<sup>40</sup>

If the fourteen slaves mentioned by Edward Mayhew were not the same group brought out by Brown in February 1859, adding them to the numbers provided by contemporary accounts of escaping slaves between 1857 and 1860 brings the total to approximately sixty-five. Of these, the eleven with Brown in

February 1859, the eleven or twelve captured in Iowa some weeks after the Brownville incident, and the seven who fled from Nuckolls and Majors (about thirty, altogether) are reasonably well documented. Large groups of fugitive slaves would have been hard to conceal and that is probably one reason the press noticed them. It is clear from the Brownville episode, and suggested by the Nuckolls and Majors escapes, that some blacks boarded the Underground Railroad on their own. It is likely that others also escaped via Nebraska during this period, perhaps one or two at a time, whose passage may not have been noticed. The probability that most slave escapes were of the latter variety makes it hard to credit accounts that have slaves passing over the Nebraska line of the Underground Railroad by the hundreds. Only a few of the post-Civil War recollections of Underground Railroad activity in Nebraska seem to be based on documented slave escapes; most offer nothing upon which to assess their validity but the author's claims.

We have already noted John Blue's statement (1874) that John Brown personally accompanied slave-running expeditions three or four times. A. T. Andreas in his *History of Nebraska* (1882) mentioned the Underground Railroad in several of the county history sections. For example, John Brown made "frequent visits" to his supporters in Nemaha County. Only two were actually mentioned: one was when Brown was alleged to have brought fourteen slaves to the Underground Railroad station at Peru; the other was his well known trip out of Kansas in February 1859, when his cargo of eleven slaves were fed at the home of Stephen W. "Squire" Kennedy near Nemaha City. Because Brown made only the one trip with a group of slaves, perhaps Andreas has somehow divided the single trip into two separate occasions. (Or perhaps the fourteen were the ones Kagi brought to breakfast at the Mayhew cabin?)<sup>41</sup>

Brown also spent "a large amount of time in Richardson County." "To record



Alexander Majors, a wealthy freighter and co-founder of the Pony Express, was one of several Nebraska slaveholders from whom slaves escaped without the intervention of John Brown. Three women and two boys disappeared from his home in Nebraska City in June 1860, and were thought, according to the *Nebraska City News* to have "taken the Underground Railroad to Canada." NSHS-RG2411-3392

a title of the exploits of John Brown and his friends on the Northern Kansas trail, through Brown County [Kansas]

to Richardson County, Neb. and thence northward would require a book of considerable size." Andreas, or the

unnamed contributor of the Richardson County history, went on to say, however, that the history of these times "has already drifted out of the brains of its witnesses," perhaps an unintended acknowledgment that John Brown's exploits in Nebraska were already passing into myth and legend.<sup>42</sup>

Other late nineteenth-century recollections embellished upon the developing lore of the Underground Railroad. One was that of A. R. Keim, focusing on Richardson County, published by the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1887. Keim stated that Brown brought a fugitive slave north to Falls City in the fall of 1855. At this time, Brown also "made the preliminary survey of the famous Underground Railroad." John Brown made his headquarters at a hotel during his frequent visits to Falls City, which Keim reckons at "four or five visits, . . . each time bringing slaves." Brown would usually be found in town, "in close conversation with his friends." Keim credits Brown with two or three raids into Missouri. In describing Brown's final exodus from Kansas with the captured slaves, Keim has the Brown party camping in the Falls City area for two or three days, spending the night in two different residences. At one of them, Brown discussed his pending Harper's Ferry raid with his host.<sup>43</sup>

Keim's claims are easily disposed of. John Brown had barely reached Kansas in the fall of 1855 and he did not travel there via Nebraska. The only documented trip through the Falls City area in which Brown conducted slaves was the one in February 1859, and he did not linger there for two or three days. The party crossed the Nebraska line on February 1, and reached Tabor, Iowa, across the river from Nebraska City, on February 5. Nor is it likely that Brown would have discussed his treasonous plans to attack Harper's Ferry with anyone but his closest confidants.

W. W. Cox in his 1893 reminiscences, also published by the state historical society, was considerably less specific than Keim about Underground Railroad

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activity. Cox claimed to have visited the "great cave" at Mayhew's place in 1860. The cave "was undoubtedly a hiding and resting place for fugitives." When it came to details, however, Cox was content to claim that John Brown rested and fed "scores and scores" of fugitive slaves at Nebraska City.<sup>44</sup>

Alice Minick was the next person to explain the workings of the Underground Railroad in her paper read at the state historical society's 1896 annual meeting. Minick attributed the "Nebraska line" as being "directly under the management and leadership of John Brown" who "often passed over the route, personally accompanying the fugitives." While she admitted there was no way of correctly estimating the number of slaves that were assisted over the Nebraska line, "it is safe to say that there were several hundred." As a child, Minick, then Alice Lockwood, lived with her parents near Nemaha City in Nemaha County. Yet much of her recollection has to do with Underground Railroad activity in the Falls City area. Minick names many Richardson County residents who were active "station" operators. Minick also related a childhood experience in which she saw slaves being hidden in a cave on the farm of Houston Russell, just north of Nemaha City. She had gone to the cave with Russell's daughter to get vegetables for a meal. According to Minick, her father David Lockwood kept a station just west of Nemaha City; there was also a vacant house in town where large numbers of slaves were housed. She remembered awakening one morning to find her mother cooking breakfast for three fugitives.<sup>45</sup>

Minick tells of one slave, Napoleon by name, who had left his family behind in Missouri. Her father warned Napoleon against returning to slave territory to rescue his family. Nevertheless, some months later Napoleon did return to the house of his wife's owner, seeking to spirit his family away in the middle of the night. While he waited breathlessly for his wife to come out, "there came the sharp crack of a pistol—a flash—and



In reminiscences read at the historical society's annual meeting in 1896, Alice Minick reported on Underground Railroad activity in Richardson County from her childhood. Although most of the stories cannot be verified, her account of John Brown's presence near Nemaha City with a group of escaping slaves in 1859 is corroborated by other evidence of Brown's presence on that occasion.

a bullet had pierced Napoleon's heart."<sup>46</sup> One wonders how the teenage Minick learned these details of Napoleon's fate.

The final episode in Minick's account is her narrative of John Brown's February 1859 appearance in Nemaha County with thirteen [eleven] fugitives. Although Minick claims to have been present ("I can now see that group as they

surrounded the wagons preparatory to starting") she attributes the description of the trip to George Gill, a member of Brown's party at the time, whose account had been published in the *American Reformer*. Interestingly, in her 1936 family history, *One Family Travels West*, Minick omitted any claim of having seen John Brown in 1859, though the other Underground Railroad episodes she related in 1896 were included. Whether or not Minick was actually present on that day in 1859, at least there is corroborating evidence that Brown passed near Nemaha City with slaves at that time.<sup>47</sup>

John Rastall of Chicago, after reading the Minick article, offered his own brief account of his role in assisting a fugitive slave to escape north from Topeka, Kansas, to Nebraska City in 1856. Once across the Missouri River, Rastall and his friends turned over the black man to a Congregational minister at Oskaloosa, Iowa, who was an agent of the Underground Railroad. Rastall was inclined to think, "this was the first passenger on the U.G.R.R. through Nebraska from Kansas."<sup>48</sup>

J. W. Cassell in 1917 recalled an aborted John Brown visit to his father's house south of Nebraska City in the summer of 1857. A man came wanting dinner for seventeen men. The unnamed visitor said that the party included seventeen blacks, plus John Brown and himself. Before the meal could be prepared, however, John Brown said, "No, we can't make any new friends now," and Cassell's family could not induce him to stop. Concluded Cassell, "It was a common occurrence to see negroes moving up and down the road."<sup>49</sup> Whether or not escaping slaves passed the Cassell farm at this time, we can discount John Brown's presence. He was in the East during most of 1857, passing through Nebraska twice in November. On neither of those trips was Brown accompanied by slaves.

We have already mentioned the recollections of Carsten N. Karstens (1909), Calvin Chapman (1925), and

Edward Mayhew (1925). As part of the data-gathering for his 1929 article, N. C. Abbott also recorded a statement by R. E. Hawley of Nebraska City, who related a story he heard from his uncle, Lemuel B. Irwin. Irwin told Hawley of being accosted one evening in the winter of 1857 or 1858 by a gray-bearded stranger driving a covered wagon. The man asked directions to the ice road across the Missouri River. Irwin, then a boy of ten, agreed to show the way, and the man thanked him by giving him a coin, which in the darkness Irwin took to be a quarter, but which turned out to be a ten-dollar gold piece. A short time later five men arrived, inquiring the whereabouts of the man and his wagon. The men told Irwin that the man they were after had been inciting slaves to run away from Missouri and "Hangin' would be none too good for old John Brown."<sup>50</sup> Unless Irwin was mistaken on the date of this event, he could not have seen Brown, who was not in Nebraska City during the winter of 1857 or 1858. It is possible that Irwin's date should really be 1859, and the recollection refers to Brown's February 1859 journey with eleven slaves. Yet Brown had crossed the Missouri from Nebraska City to Iowa and back several times, sometimes in the winter. Why would he need a guide? And why would Brown, often in desperate need of money to finance his operations, give Irwin a ten-dollar gold piece merely for providing directions?

Daniel Cady Cole of Peru was another person who claimed to have met John Brown, telling the same story in at least three accounts. Cole was teaching school near Nemaha City in 1859, and boarding with Squire Kennedy. He recalled that one morning in late January when he came down for breakfast, there was a covered wagon in Kennedy's yard. Kennedy invited Cole over and introduced him to John Brown. Although the wagon cover was fastened tightly, Kennedy told Cole that Brown had seventeen slaves inside. Brown's party had arrived soon after midnight, Mrs. Kennedy had fed them, and they were



Daniel Cady Cole of Peru, Nebraska, (seated, left) also claimed to have met John Brown near Nemaha City in 1859. Although some details of his account are inconsistent with other reports, it stands up well to scrutiny, and may have an underlying basis in fact. NSHS-RG3557

preparing to leave when Cole saw them.<sup>51</sup>

Cole was slightly off on the date and confused about the number of slaves involved, but other parts of his account stand up well to scrutiny. Brown and his entourage did pass through Nemaha City and Nebraska City in February 1859 and Cole did teach school there at the time. While there is no documentation confirming that Brown stopped at Kennedy's house, it would have been possible for him to have done so, and the visit is one of the few stories appearing in several of the recollective accounts that may have an underlying basis in fact.<sup>52</sup>

Another person who claimed to have seen Brown at Squire Kennedy's place was Ben T. Skeen of Auburn, so stated in a 1931 newspaper article. Skeen's father had settled near Nemaha City in the spring of 1858. Although eighty-year-old Ben also garbled the date, claiming

to have seen John Brown in January 1858, his story includes many of the essentials that Cole and others have related about the February 1859 trip. According to Skeen, his father refused to shelter and feed Brown's eleven fugitives and directed the party to Squire Kennedy's. The next morning Skeen and his brothers and sisters were on their way to the Fairview school, where Daniel Cole was teacher, when they saw the covered wagons in the Kennedy yard. Perhaps to bolster his credibility, Skeen noted, "Young as I was at the time, he [Brown] made a vivid impression upon me."<sup>53</sup> It's impossible to determine whether Skeen's story had been influenced by reading other recollections such as Cole's, but his inconsistencies could well be due to an old man's faulty memory of events from decades in the past.

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While there may be some truth to Skeen's account, the article's author, John H. Kearnes, seized the opportunity to float some new stories about Nemaha County's contribution to the thrilling days of the Underground Railroad. He stated that Brown "rushed many a cargo of fugitive slaves through Nemaha County" in the months of December, January, and February of 1856, 1857, and 1858. What's more, in two years' time, Brown had succeeded in reducing the slave populations of Holt and Atchison counties in Missouri (just across the river from Nemaha County) from five hundred to fifty. In this scenario the slaves were ferried west across the Missouri River to freedom in Nebraska. None of these statements has a basis in fact. Not only was John Brown nowhere near Nebraska during the months mentioned, it appears Kearnes borrowed and garbled James Redpath's estimate that after Brown's 1858 raid into Missouri, the slave population of Bates and Vernon counties (far south of the two Kearnes mentioned and adjacent to Kansas) was reduced from five hundred to "not over fifty."<sup>54</sup> Even Redpath's figures are unlikely. Modern-day scholars have estimated that the number of slaves escaping from bondage during the late antebellum years ranged from one thousand to fifteen hundred annually in the nation as a whole.<sup>55</sup> Because Nebraska and Kansas were on the margin of slaveholding territory, it would be hard to credit more than a handful of escapees in any given year over what was, at best, an indirect route to freedom.

The one factual thread that seems to stand out from the claims of mass slave escapes on the Nebraska branch of the Underground Railroad has to do with John Brown's February 1859 trek out of Kansas. Not only is this episode mentioned in contemporary sources, but in several recollections that, although fuzzy on exact dates and numbers, seem to describe the same incident. Even less credible tales, such as the Hawley/Irwin report of a John Brown sighting in Nebraska City in the winter

of 1857 or 1858 might actually refer to the 1859 journey. There is no evidence, however, that John Brown himself was involved in conducting mass slave escapes. Not only are his movements fairly well documented, his biographers make it clear that he had little interest in "this piecemeal method of weakening slavery," when a bold attack might spark a mass slave uprising.<sup>56</sup> Brown had gone west in the first place to help secure Kansas for the free state cause, and not primarily to set up and promote slave escapes on the Underground Railroad.

Regarding Underground Railroad activity as it affected slavery on the western border of Missouri, which would have been the source for most slaves escaping through Nebraska, Missouri historians Richard Brownlee, James Goodrich, and Lewis Atherton concluded the Underground Railroad was "never organized to the point where it was effective." Although some Missouri county histories remarked about slave owners moving their slaves to the interior to keep them from being stolen, "the county histories are just not that credible." The scholars, who had mined Missouri newspapers and manuscripts for many years, "do not remember seeing any information that would provide a substantial generalization on this issue."<sup>57</sup>

If only some of the extravagant claims of Underground Railroad activity in Nebraska were true, it seems strange that Wilbur H. Siebert in his 1898 book, *The Underground Railroad, From Slavery to Freedom*, listed no operatives from Nebraska. An appendix records approximately 3,000 names of men and women from twenty states who allegedly had some connection with such activity. Thirty-four names are from Fremont County, Iowa, across the river from Nebraska City. Either Siebert passed over some Nebraskans, or he found nothing on which to base the inclusion of Nebraska "conductors."<sup>58</sup>

So what are we to make of the mass of source material that has accumulated in the past 140 years or so relating to the Mayhew cabin and cave, John Brown in

Nebraska, and the operations of the Underground Railroad? Some might argue that we should not expect to find much, if any, documentation of the operations of this secret network and should, therefore, rely upon the recollections of those who claimed first-hand knowledge of its activities. The absence of documentation does not prove that the Mayhew cabin and cave was not a station or that Underground Railroad activity did not occur in Nebraska. Nevertheless, the historical record provides some contemporary evidence by which to evaluate the credibility of later claims.

If the site was indeed a major station on the Underground Railroad, and if that site and others were instrumental in the escape of hundreds of slaves, and if such activities were known to as many persons as those who later claimed some involvement with them, how did these activities escape notice by the anti-abolition press, particularly the *Nebraska City News*? On the several occasions when local slaves made good their escape, and on the single instance when John Brown actually conducted slaves through Nebraska City, the paper's editor was quick to implicate the "white-livered abolitionists." It seems unlikely that Allen Mayhew, John Henry Kagi, and John Brown could have operated a slave depot on the scale that later accounts would have us believe without raising some suspicion from the editor or others among the community's sizeable proslavery element. Nor is it reasonable to think escaping slaves could have used the same trails and hiding places repeatedly without detection. The authorities would have been extra vigilant after having once nearly arrested Kagi, a John Brown associate, at the Mayhew cabin. The newspaper that had roundly damned the "white-livered abolitionists" is unlikely to have praised Allen Mayhew as a thrifty broom maker and purveyor of homemade wine if rumors had connected him with illicit traffic in fugitive slaves.

There are small facts that likely

sparked much of the folklore that has sprung up about the Mayhew cabin and cave. John Kagi was Allen Mayhew's brother-in-law, Kagi briefly lived in, and later visited the cabin, and Kagi was killed during John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry. It may have seemed logical for later writers to presume a direct connection between the Mayhew place, John Brown, and the Underground Railroad. Kagi's father, Abraham Kagey, also lived in Otoe County. It is possible that Mayhew and the elder Kagey were sympathetic to the abolition cause. Edward Mayhew said that black persons were once fed in the house and there is some hint that they had been brought there by John Henry Kagi. But he also said that Allen Mayhew told Kagi not to bring any more blacks to the cabin because it would make trouble for him. In other words, sympathetic or not, Mayhew was not willing to take significant risks to support the escape of slaves.

Another small fact lies at the bottom of the numerous stories of John Brown sightings and mass slave escapes: Brown's journey out of Kansas with eleven slaves in February 1859. Many of the accounts of seeing or meeting Brown connect to this incident, some more authentically than others. This was also the single event involving Brown and slaves in Nebraska that was noted in contemporary sources. Many of the other accounts of Brown in Nebraska, with or without slaves, fall apart when compared with his known whereabouts between 1856 and 1859.

Larry Gara in his book, *The Liberty Line*, attributed many of the postwar accounts of Underground Railroad activity to sons, daughters, and even more distant relatives of abolitionists who "doted on the achievements, heroism, and loyalty of their forebears." He added, "Local pride in northern communities also contributed to the growth of the legend."<sup>59</sup> Gara's assessment is particularly interesting when the Mayhew and Kagey families are considered. Whether or not Allen Mayhew participated in Underground Railroad activity,

his brother-in-law, John Kagi, did follow Brown from Kansas to Harper's Ferry, where he lost his life in the service of Brown's cause. Kagi's role alone would have allowed the Mayhews and Kageys to claim a place in the spotlight. Yet Kagi's father and his two sisters lived in Otoe County for several years after the war, and there is no evidence they ever commented publicly regarding their famous son and brother. Edward Mayhew, far from trying to capitalize on his uncle's reputation, made determined

would minimize the current emphasis on John Brown and give more prominence to what Edward Mayhew had to say. It would include his statement that blacks were once fed breakfast in the cabin, and that his uncle, John Henry Kagi, one of Brown's close associates, spent some time there. It would explain why early settlers would have needed a root cellar, and reveal that slaves' flight to freedom did not depend upon a network of caves and tunnels or the intervention of an organized abolition

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*The story of John Brown's Cave can serve both history and heritage.*

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efforts to disconnect his family from the tales of its alleged role in the operations of the Underground Railroad. The community, however, had adopted the Mayhew cabin/John Brown's Cave/Underground Railroad story as its own, and Edward Mayhew might as well have spared himself the effort.

Should Edward Mayhew's statement, "There were negroes in the house; John Kagi was there and was killed at Harpers' Ferry; Mayhew lived there and had a cave or wine cellar, and that is all there is in this great mystery," be accepted as the last word? While Mayhew is the most credible source about the history of John Brown's Cave, there is more to the story.

Historians work to dispel myths that have crept into the writing of history and search for the facts to the extent that sources and reasoned judgment will allow. But they must also reckon the importance of folklore, which, if it cannot be told as history, nevertheless forms an important part of our heritage.

The story of John Brown's Cave is really two stories, and both are worth telling. The first is simply a more realistic explanation of the probable role the site may have played during the Underground Railroad years within the context of available evidence about the level of such activity in Nebraska. The story

conspiracy. It would include background on slavery in Nebraska Territory before the Civil War, indicate that some Nebraskans owned slaves, and tell how some of those slaves made their escape. This part of the story would acknowledge that there is credible evidence of activity that links Nebraska in a minor way to what has become known as the Underground Railroad.

The second part of the story would review how myths about the site have evolved and were derived largely from uncritical acceptance of undocumented oral and written accounts, often provided by aged narrators. It would explain how the Underground Railroad legend exemplifies the pursuit of a noble cause, often at significant personal risk, how it has continued to resonate over time within the context of contemporary social and political issues, and how it has inspired individuals and communities to devise ways to connect with it.

The story of John Brown's Cave can serve both history and heritage. History will benefit from a more realistic reinterpretation of the site and the folklore that has grown up about it. The folklore can help demonstrate and explain how generations of Nebraskans have come to regard the crusade against slavery as a meaningful part of their past.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Among many other sources, the 1999 *Southeast Nebraska Visitors Guide* (Louisville, Nebr.: Snowdog Productions) includes an article headlined, "Nebraska City was Once Link in Underground Railroad"; U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Underground Railroad Resources in the United States, Theme Study* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Carol Kammen, "The Underground Railroad and Local History," *History News* 54 (Spring 1999): 3-4; Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1961), esp. chap. 8, "Reminiscence and Romance."

<sup>3</sup> *Nebraska City News*, Nov. 14, 1874. Blue's obituary in the *Nebraska City News*, Mar. 13, 1875, noted that he had contributed many articles to the *Chicago Times*. A biography of Blue appears in Raymond E. Dale, "Otoe County Pioneers," typescript, 1961-65, Nebraska State Historical Society, 252-53, and in A. C. Edmunds, *Pen Sketches of Nebraskans* (Lincoln: R. & J. Wilbur, 1871). Dale's exhaustive study consulted newspapers, census and county records, cemetery records, and secondary sources to glean biographical data on residents of Otoe County, Nebraska, from 1854 to 1870.

<sup>4</sup> The reunion was covered in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, beginning June 9, 1874; it closed June 12. Only one person from Nebraska, L. W. Platt of near Columbus, was listed as attending. Platt had lived in Fremont County, Iowa, before the Civil War and is listed as a conductor in Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad, From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Macmillan, 1898), Appendix E. Six Iowans attended the reunion. See *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 9, 1874.

Blue, a native of New York state, had lived in Brunswick, Missouri, before the Civil War, where he was a Democrat and a slaveowner. Blue, however, remained a Union man when the war broke out. When threatened by more radical Unionists, he left in 1864 for Brazil, where he remained for several years. Edmunds, *Pen Sketches*, 168-72.

<sup>5</sup> *Nebraska City News*, Nov. 14, 1874.

<sup>6</sup> A. H. Reid, *History of Johnson County, Iowa, 1836-1882* (Iowa City, 1883), 467n.

<sup>7</sup> *Omaha Bee*, Mar. 3, 1890.

<sup>8</sup> Edward F. Mayhew letter in *Nebraska City News*, Apr. 4, 1890. Allen B. Mayhew's biography in Dale, "Otoe County Pioneers," 1751, gives Edward Mayhew's birthdate as Sept. 21, 1849, based on probate records of Allen Mayhew's estate. The spelling is given variously as Kagi, Kagey, or Kagey. John Wayland, *John Kagi and John Brown* (Strasburg, Va.: Shenandoah Publishing House, 1961) uses Kagi for John and Kagey for other members of the family. This article follows the latter convention except for titles and quotes

<sup>9</sup> *Nebraska City News*, July 14, 1860; Feb. 2, July 13, 1861.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 3, 1901; Jan. 7, 1905.

<sup>11</sup> Karstens's biography in Dale, "Otoe County Pioneers," 1401, reports Karstens leaving for St. Mary's, Iowa, soon after arriving in Nebraska City in August 1857, returning to Nebraska City in April 1858. Dale also credits Karstens with knowing very little English.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin Chapman affidavit, Mar. 12, 1925, in "John Brown File," Ned C. Abbott Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society (hereafter NSHS).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* The article in which Abbott presents his findings appears in the Oct. 27, 1929 Omaha *Sunday World-Herald*. The 1925 letter from Edward Mayhew is in the "John Brown File," Abbott Papers, NSHS.

<sup>14</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Magazine Section, Sept. 1, 1929.

<sup>15</sup> *Nebraska City News*, Nov. 14, 1929.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, May 4, 11; July 4; Aug. 1, 1937.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, May 6, Nov. 12, 1937.

<sup>18</sup> *Peru Pointer*, Feb. 17, 1938.

<sup>19</sup> Edward D. Bartling, *John Henry Kagi and the Old Log Cabin Home* (Nebraska City: 1938). The 1938 and later editions of *Old Log Cabin Home* are on file at NSHS.

<sup>20</sup> Wayne Overturf, "John Brown's Cabin at Nebraska City," *Nebraska History* 21 (April-June 1940): 93-100; Federal Writers Project, *Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State* (1939, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 274.

<sup>21</sup> For the story as it is told today see, for example, the 1997 and 1999 Southeast Nebraska Visitors Guides, published by the Southeast Nebraska Travel Council, a story on the cave in *Grassroots Nebraska 2* (June 1999), and an article in the *Plattsmouth Journal*, Apr. 24, 1997.

<sup>22</sup> Louise Pound, "Nebraska Cave Lore," *Nebraska History* 29 (December 1948): 308-16.

<sup>23</sup> Bartling, *Old Log Cabin Home* (1938), 4-5.

<sup>24</sup> See note 19.

<sup>25</sup> 1860 population census of Nebraska Territory, Otoe County, 85, NSHS. Of course the military had an early presence in the region with the first Fort Kearny, 1846-47, and civilian John Boulware acted as caretaker of the government property there well before the organization of Nebraska Territory.

<sup>26</sup> Allen B. Mayhew biography in Dale, "Otoe County Pioneers," 1749-51. John Pearman, one of Otoe County's earliest residents, also mentioned Mayhew as among those who staked out the townsite in July 1854. See Pearman's address to the Old Settler's Reunion as reported in the *Nebraska City News*, Feb. 22, 1873. Pearman made no mention of anyone's involvement in the Underground Railroad. This was more than a year before John Blue

published his article linking Mayhew with the UGRR.

<sup>27</sup> Wayland, *John Kagi and John Brown*, 22, 25, 37, 46, 49,

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 18; Dale, Mayhew biography in "Otoe County Pioneers," 1749-51.

<sup>29</sup> See Glenn Noble, *John Brown and the Jim Lane Trail* (Broken Bow, Nebr.: 1977) for a popular account of this era.

<sup>30</sup> A chronology of Brown's travels from his departure for Kansas in 1855 until his death, December 2, 1859, appears as an appendix in Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After* (1910, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943). Other biographies, including one by Stephen Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 2d ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984) provide similar information, though not in tabular form. There are numerous biographical works on John Brown, the first published in 1860, which quote from letters, diaries, and other extant documents of Brown and his associates.

<sup>31</sup> Oates, *To Purge This Land*, 262, 264; James C. Malin, *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1942), 712. Malin also credits Brown with conducting one slave in 1856. Brown, in 1859, conducted eleven adult slaves out of Kansas, but one of the women apparently gave birth en route, adding a child to that total.

<sup>32</sup> *Nebraska Advertiser* (Brownville), Sept. 10, 17; Nov. 19, 26, 1857; *Nebraska City News*, Dec. 5, 1857.

<sup>33</sup> *Nebraska City News*, Nov. 27, Dec. 4, 1858.

<sup>34</sup> Wayland, *John Kagi and John Brown*, 82-83, citing original letter at the Kansas State Historical Society.

<sup>35</sup> Mayhew to Abbott, Apr. 24, 1925, "John Brown File," Abbott Papers, NSHS.

<sup>36</sup> Richard J. Hinton, *John Brown and His Men* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1894), 225.

<sup>37</sup> The "Parallels" are published in F. B. Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown* (Boston: Roberts Bros., 1891), 481-83. Daniel Whiting was a physician and druggist, and Samuel P. Sibley was a shoemaker. Both became active in the Republican Party in the early 1860s and Sibley, as a member of the territorial legislature, voted for an act to abolish slavery in Nebraska. Whiting's biography is in Dale, "Otoe County Pioneers," 2753-57; Sibley's is in the same source, 2330-33. While these men's Republican party affiliation suggests support for abolition, if they were Underground Railroad operatives they managed to avoid mention as such in any contemporary or recollective accounts. Interestingly, Whiting owned a farm on the west edge of Nebraska City, about a mile from the Mayhew property. See U.S. General Land Office Tract Books, Vol. 152, NSHS. Garner, Reed, and Vincent have not been further identified. They do not appear in "Otoe County Pioneers."

Martin Stowell, who had engaged in slave “rescues” and other abolition activity in his native Massachusetts, led one of the New England Emigrant Aid parties to Kansas in 1856, but soon moved to Nebraska. There he seems to have acted as an agent or solicitor for funds and commodities being sent from New England to aid Kansas settlers. Stowell correspondence from this period is in the Thomas Higginson and Thaddeus Hyatt papers at the Kansas State Historical Society (copies in author’s possession). Though various references link Stowell to the Underground Railroad they, like other such claims, are based on recollection or are otherwise not attributed. See, for example, A. T. Andreas, comp., *History of Nebraska* (Chicago: Western Historical Co., 1882), 2:1159.

<sup>38</sup> *Nebraska City News*, June 30, July 5, 1860.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 11, 1860. Jacob Dawson was editor of the *Wyoming Telescope* from 1856 to 1860 according to the newspaper inventory sheet, NSHS.

<sup>40</sup> *Omaha Nebraskian*, Aug. 18, 1860, quoting *Falls City Broad Axe*, n.d.

<sup>41</sup> Andreas, *History of Nebraska*, 2:1152, 1159.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1304. The Andreas description of Underground Railroad activity in Richardson County was repeated, virtually word for word and without attribution, by Lewis C. Edwards in his *History of Richardson County, Nebraska* (Indianapolis: B. F. Bowen & Co., 1917), 113–14, amply demonstrating the principal method by which the UGRR legends have been perpetuated.

<sup>43</sup> A. R. Keim, “John Brown in Richardson County,” *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, v. 2 (Lincoln: 1887), 109–13.

<sup>44</sup> W. W. Cox, “Reminiscences of Early Days in Nebraska,” *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, v. 5 (Lincoln: 1893), 73.

<sup>45</sup> Alice A. Minick, “Underground Railroad in Nebraska,” *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society* v. 2 (Lincoln: 1898), 70–79.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>47</sup> Alice A. Minick, *One Family Travels West* (Boston: The Meador Press, 1936). Minick was in her nineties when she wrote her book.

<sup>48</sup> John E. Rastall, “Underground Railroad in Nebraska,” *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, Second Series, v. 5 (Lincoln: 1902), 323.

<sup>49</sup> J. W. Cassell recollection in Minnie Prey Knotts, ed., *Nebraska Territorial Pioneers’ Association Reminiscences and Proceedings*, v. 1 (Lincoln: 1917), 42.

<sup>50</sup> Notes of a statement by R. E. Hawley to N. C. Abbott, Mar. 22, 1925, “John Brown file,” Abbott Papers, NSHS. Irwin was eleven years old in 1860, according to the territorial census as cited in Dale, “Otoe County Pioneers,” 1330.

<sup>51</sup> *Nemaha County Granger* (Auburn), Jan. 5, 1915; *Nemaha County Herald* (Auburn), Apr. 20, 1917; *Nebraska City News*, Aug. 5, 1928.

<sup>52</sup> The story appears in Andreas, *History of Nebraska*; J. H. Dundas, *Granger History of Nemaha County* (Auburn, 1902), 37; and in the Minnick recollection. Of course it is possible that, like other Underground Railroad tales, the later accounts have origins in the previous telling of this particular incident.

<sup>53</sup> John H. Kearnes, “Nebraskans Knew John Brown,” *Sunday State Journal* (Lincoln), Dec. 27, 1931.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*; James Redpath, *The Public Life of Captain John Brown* (Boston: 1860), 221.

<sup>55</sup> NPS *Theme Study*, 16, which draws from Gara, *Liberty Line*, 32, and Clement Eaton, *Growth of Southern Civilization* (New York: Harper, 1961), 73.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Villard, *John Brown*, 262, 308, 367.

<sup>57</sup> Priscilla A. Evans, State Historical Society of Missouri, to L. G. DeLay, NSHS, Apr. 16, 1976. An article by Benjamin G. Merkel, “The Underground Railroad and the Missouri Borders, 1840–1860,” *Missouri Historical Review* 37 (April 1943): 271–85, touches briefly on UGRR activity through Nebraska, but his sole source is Minick’s 1896 recollection.

<sup>58</sup> Siebert, *Underground Railroad*, Appendix E.

<sup>59</sup> Gara, *Liberty Line*, 178–79.