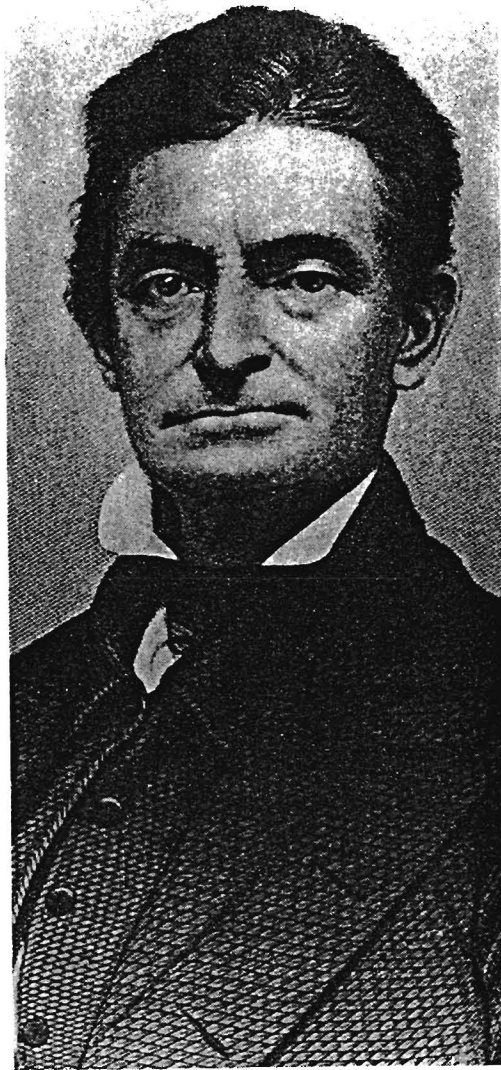


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JOHN BROWN

AND THE MASONIC ORDER

by BOYD B. STUTLER



John Brown

The Civil War had been fought out and peace had returned to the land when a group of churchmen and reformers led by the Rev. Charles G. Finney of Oberlin, who had long served as president of Oberlin College, turned to make war on secret societies and the Masonic order in particular. The crusade mildly agitated a part of the country for some years, but lacking as it did the frenzy, hysteria, and political potency of the anti-Masonic movement of the 1820's and 1830's it eventually fell of its own weight.¹

The persistent crusaders in the Finney camp were fond of referring to recusant Masons as proof that the principles of the order were repugnant to thinking Christian men—that they renounced the order once its secrets and

its binding oaths had been made known to them. John Brown, the firebrand of Kansas and the raider at Harpers Ferry, was among those mentioned whose religious principles impelled them to leave the order and to become bitter enemies of all secret societies. But proof of John Brown's affiliation was lacking—those who knew the circumstances were not talking. In the face of strong denials of such membership by Masons who knew as little about the truth of the matter as did the anti-Masonic advocates, his name was dropped. The dispute, however, was not settled.

Was John Brown a Mason? Some argued that he was; others claimed that he was not. Members of the family remained silent. It took a long time for the record to become clear.

The long dispute as to whether John Brown was a regularly initiated Mason and a member of a lodge operating under proper authority was definitely settled only a few years ago when the records of the old, disbanded Hudson Lodge No. 68 were uncovered in the archives of the Grand Lodge of Ohio. There it was found that Brown's membership was fully established, with dates of initiation and, further, his election to an office in the lodge.² His record as an opponent of secret societies—with Masonry as his chief target—had been no secret, though he had nothing to say about the subject in his later years. Behind the brief notes in the old lodge record is a story that has never been fully told.

It was not until 1881, when Mrs. Brown in a newspaper interview casually mentioned that her husband had once been a Mason, that the argument was renewed.³ Again there was quick denial by Masons who were zealous to protect the good name of their order against aspersions of association with a character as controversial as John Brown. Apparently, save for the surviving members of the family, there were none to defend John Brown—the friends who had known him as a Mason some fifty years earlier had either passed from these worldly scenes, or did not want to add fuel to the flames of controversy, or perhaps withheld their knowledge of his membership and his later renunciation of Freemasonry as a lodge secret. Brown himself had little or nothing to say about his Masonic record and, if one of his associates is to be believed, even wanted to conceal his anti-Masonic activities from his associates in the later days of his life.⁴ Thus the incidents surrounding his renunciation and activity as an anti-Mason have been generally blurred by inaccurate and misleading statements made by members of his family, and by anti-Masons who wanted to use his change of attitude for propaganda purposes.

John Brown, who is yet one of the most controversial characters in American history, was born at Torrington, Connecticut, on May 9, 1800, but in

1805 was taken by his parents to the then frontier town of Hudson, Ohio, where he was reared. The Western Reserve was then being settled largely by emigrants from New England, and Hudson was one of its newer towns—in all respects a New England village pulled up by its roots and transplanted in Ohio. Members of the Masonic fraternity who had been made master masons in lodges in their old home towns were among the settlers, but it was not until January 26, 1823, that Hudson Lodge No. 68 was constituted.⁵ The first worshipful master was Gideon Mills, Jr., who was an uncle of John Brown—it may have been the influence of this uncle, or it may have been his own curiosity to see what this secret order was all about that caused him to apply for membership. At any rate, his application was filed in late 1823, and after the usual course of investigation and waiting he was found worthy. The records of the old lodge disclose that he appeared and received the entered apprentice degree on January 13, 1824, and on February 10 received the fellow craft degree. After a lapse of three months he was raised to master mason on May 11.⁶ His attitude at that time must have been in all ways satisfactory to members of the craft, for he was elected junior deacon for the 1825-26 term—and he was holding that office, whether actively serving or not, when in May 1826 he hastily pulled up stakes and moved to Crawford County, Pennsylvania, relinquishing a prosperous tanning business in his old home town.

It has been claimed by a son that he was hounded out of his native town because of his renunciation of Freemasonry,⁷ but the facts so far as discovered seem to prove otherwise. Young John Brown, then twenty-six years old and with a rapidly increasing family, saw better opportunities in the newer settlements near Meadville, Pennsylvania, and, in addition, he had formed a partnership with a kinsman, Seth Thompson of Hartford, Trumbull County, Ohio, to go into tanning and cattle dealing on a very extensive scale. All evidence found strongly indicates that he did not break with the Masons until the anti-Masonic hysteria was fanned into a national frenzy. At that time he was comfortably settled on his farm at Randolph, twelve miles east of Meadville, Pennsylvania, with an adequate acreage cleared, his tannery constructed, and hides in the vats.

The anti-Masonic frenzy was touched off by the reported abduction and murder of William Morgan at Batavia, New York, in September 1826.⁸ Morgan, himself a member of the craft, had published a book, *Illustrations of Masonry*, which was designed to expose the order as subversive of American democracy—the work itself was poorly done and would probably have soon been forgotten had it not been for the violent methods resorted to by

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CINCINNATI:

PUBLISHED BY MATTHEW GARDINER.

.....
1850.

zealous members to suppress it. The office in which it was printed was burned, and Morgan, after his release from imprisonment for a small debt, was abducted and was presumed to have been killed. The incident was seized upon by reformers, church groups, opportunist politicians, and dissident Masons and was quickly fanned into a national issue based on principle, prejudice, and hysteria. Led by political herdsmen—such as Thurlow Weed in New York and Thaddeus Stevens in Pennsylvania—the Anti-Masonic political party was hastily formed and until 1836 offered a serious threat to the balance of political power in New England and the upper tier of northern states. As the first “third party” in American political history, the Anti-Masons offered William Wirt of Maryland as their candidate for president in 1832—he polled a heavy popular vote and won the seven electoral votes of Vermont. Pennsylvania and Vermont elected Anti-Masonic governors, and the party won many other state and local offices. It thrived in New York, where it once achieved a position as second in voting strength.⁹

The crusade precipitated a crisis in Masonic affairs. In New York, for instance, the membership dwindled from 20,000 in 1826 to 3,000 in 1836, and the number of lodges was reduced from 507 in 1826 to 48 active units in 1832.¹⁰

The prevailing sentiment in Crawford County, Pennsylvania, was anti-Masonic, and the political party under that name carried the county repeatedly. John Brown renounced his membership and roundly denounced the order—he was with the majority this time, something strange for him, and it seems likely that the threats of personal injury mentioned by members of his family were largely magnified in repetition. An active, working lodge was located in Meadville—Western Star Lodge No. 146, constituted on August 15, 1816—and certainly the order had some friends in that area. But the lodge was not strong enough to withstand the assaults of the opposition; it ceased its labors in 1828, but the charter was not actually vacated until 1837.¹¹

In an interview given a reporter in 1895, a short time before his death, John Brown, Jr. (himself a Mason, 1859-95, and buried with Masonic honors), said: “Father denounced the murder of Morgan in the hottest kind of terms. . . . Father had occasion to go to Meadville. A mob bent on lynching him surrounded the hotel, but Landlord Smith enabled him to escape through a back entrance.”¹² Owen Brown, another son, said in 1886 that his father “was active in the anti-Masonic campaigns at that time, circulating Giddins’ *Anti-Masonic Almanac*, but so high was the excitement and so loud the threats that he kept a pistol and keen-edged knives in his house for self-protection.”¹³

Owen was interviewed by Henry L. Kellogg, an editor of the *Christian Cynosure*—one of the last religious papers devoted to anti-Masonry—and the story as it appeared in that publication was probably colored or slanted to meet the editorial policy. Another statement in that interview was that the senior Brown’s “detestation of lodge literature was shown by the fact that Owen once found the by-laws of the order in a swill barrel where his father had thrown them.” Owen was born late in 1824, and if it is presumed that Brown disposed of his lodge papers within two or three years after severing his membership, it seems hardly likely that a three- to five-year-old child would retain a clear memory of such a minor incident.

Still another explanation was given by a daughter, Sarah Brown, in 1908, when she was interviewed by Katherine Mayo, who was then doing field research work for Oswald Garrison Villard’s monumental biography of John Brown. Said she: “John Brown was deeply opposed to *all forms*, even in church. He did not like formal worship. It was the forms of the initiatory ceremonies of the Masons that struck him as silly and disgusted him. He was in sympathy with Morgan. He bought Morgan’s book—and it was in the North Elba house for years.”¹⁴ But Sarah, like Owen, had no first-hand knowledge—she was not born until 1846.

Henry Thompson, a son-in-law who was in the Kansas wars with Brown, was more forthright and just as inaccurate. “When Morgan’s pamphlet came out it made a great sensation among the Masons. I got it. Captain Brown saw it in my house, took his pencil and wrote across the back of it, ‘This story could not be better told.’ But he never uttered a word concerning it. . . . I was asked to join the Masons myself later, but always refused. Captain Brown’s verdict was good enough for me.”¹⁵

John Brown himself did not dwell on this incident in his life—in fact in later life he wanted to suppress knowledge of it.¹⁶ So far as found the only written statement about his anti-Masonic activities is in a letter to his father, which was written at Randolph on June 12, 1830:

You mention some difficulty in the church arising out of Masonry. I wish you would at some leisure moment give me a little history of it. I hope the church in regard to that subject will pursue a mild but persevering & firm course, not undertaking with any unmanageable point, but such as may undergo easy general & thorough investigation. I make no doubt that some of the Masonic brethren yet think their oaths binding as much as Herod the Tetrarch did his to the daughter of Herodias. I have aroused such a feeling toward me in Meadville by shewing Anderton’s statement as leads me for the present to avoid going about the streets at evening & alone. I have discovered that my movements are narrowly watched by some of the worthy brotherhood. This I ought to consider as right

according to the views of some distinguished professors of religion at Hudson who are of their own craft. Some of them have said to me that the courts of justice have no right to compel a mason to testify anything about masonry, of course they are above the laws of the land. Some of them I suppose intend pleading to the jurisdiction of the great Supreme, at least their actions say who is Lord over us.¹⁷

The reference to "Anderton's statement" in the letter is easily understood; it refers to a sworn statement made by Samuel C. Anderton of Boston, Massachusetts—a recusant Mason—that he had been chosen by lot one of three members in a lodge at Belfast, Ireland, to cut the throat of a brother member who had revealed some of the secrets of the order. This statement was widely published in the anti-Masonic press, including the *Crawford Messenger* at Meadville, which Brown probably read every week.¹⁸ But as the lodge at Hudson was disbanded in 1828, the reference to an investigation by the church two years later is a bit obscure.

Later, in 1847, when he wrote a series of parable-like articles for the *Ram's Horn*, a paper published by Negroes in New York City, he expressed dislike for secret societies in general in some words of advice to the colored people. The series was titled "Sambo's Mistakes." In looking back over his past life, "Sambo" discovers that "another of the few errors of my life is that I have joined the Free Masons[,] Odd Fellows[,] Sons of Temperance, & a score of other secret societies instead of seeking the company of intelligent[,] wise & good men from whom I might have learned much that would be interesting, instructive, & useful & have in that way squandered a great amount of most precious time & money."¹⁹

That is mild enough, but it strongly indicates that Brown retained his dislike and opposition to secret societies as he verged into middle age. Notwithstanding his attitude, two of his sons, John, Jr., and Salmon, were received into the order, while a third son, Owen, apparently adopted the views of his father. John, Jr., was raised in Jerusalem Lodge No. 19 at Hartford, Ohio, less than a month before the raid at Harpers Ferry. And the fact that some of Brown's men looked kindly on Masonry indicates that the militant leader became more interested in the anti-slavery crusade than in contesting with secret societies. Francis J. Meriam, one of the men who escaped from Harpers Ferry, was inducted into the order within a few months after the execution of his commander.

According to George B. Gill, who was one of Brown's men in Kansas, Brown became angry when he found that Owen had mentioned to Gill that his father had once been a Mason, but had renounced the order. "He was vexed when he found that Owen had told me of his troubles with the Masons,"

said Gill. "Owen should not have done that," said Brown. "Never tell it. Some of our friends back East are Masons. If they ever hear of it they might not like it—and might refuse further help. Never tell it."²⁰

Another sidelight of the Kansas campaign is a story, which is most probably apocryphal, that in the course of the Pottawatomie massacre on the night of May 24, 1856, when Brown with a small company called five pro-slavery men from their homes and hacked them down with short swords, Brown sent his son-in-law Henry Thompson and Theodore Wiener to kill Allen Wilkinson. It is said that Wilkinson was a Mason and that Brown remained at a distance from the scene of summary execution. The story is in part supported by the admission of Salmon Brown, who was with the party, that Thompson and Wiener did kill Wilkinson.²¹

As it was not generally known in Kansas that Brown had once been a Mason, it seems very probable that the Wilkinson story came about as an afterthought, as did many other tales relating to John Brown and his works in Kansas Territory.

More authentic is the fact that Brown did not hesitate to use the cloak of Freemasonry to conceal the purpose of his convention at Chatham, Canada, on May 8-10, 1858, when to account for the presence of so many strangers, white and Negro, in the small town he caused word to be spread that he was there to organize a lodge of colored Masons.²²

Less susceptible of proof—and less creditable if true—is the story widely circulated and just as widely believed that John Brown solicited (and received) aid from the lodge at Clarksburg, West Virginia, in early August 1859, under pretense of being a Mason in good standing. The story was told by John J. Davis, father of John W. Davis, the Democratic nominee for president in 1924, to whom the application was made.²³ Mr. Davis examined the stranger, whom he described as having a long, flowing beard, and the answers to his queries left no grounds for suspicion that the man was an impostor, but on the contrary gave Mr. Davis every reason to believe that he was a Mason in good standing. Mr. Davis then took the stranger to William P. Cooper and Charles Lewis, both prominent Clarksburg citizens, who were members of the committee appointed by the lodge to care for such matters. On the recommendation of Mr. Davis the stranger was given \$20 to help him on his way to Martinsburg.

After the raid at Harpers Ferry, Mr. Davis and the two committee members identified the brother they had befriended as John Brown, the identification being based on a picture published in *Leslie's Weekly*. And that is one of the strongest points that serve to cast serious doubt on the correctness of the identification.

The portrait in *Leslie's* was reproduced from a photograph made in Boston in May 1859, when Brown wore a long beard. But, just after the photograph was taken and before his arrival at Harpers Ferry, he visited his home at North Elba, New York, and while there had his hair and beard closely trimmed. The date of the supposed visit to Clarksburg is definitely fixed as the day on which a colored woman, Charlotte Harris, was on trial for aiding slaves to escape. This was August 1, 1859.²⁴ If Brown was there as an on-looker at the trial, as he is claimed to have been, his beard would have been a short, bristly stubble of not more than two or three inches in length.

It is not possible to pinpoint Brown's exact whereabouts on August 1, but on July 27 he was at Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, and was at that place again on August 2. He could have traveled by rail from Harpers Ferry to Clarksburg, but another witness who claimed to have observed him in the courtroom, says that he rode his horse in company with the stranger to Shinnston, some ten miles distant and away from the railroad line to Martinsburg, after the court proceedings had been concluded.²⁵

It seems very unlikely that the impostor, if he was an impostor, was John Brown. No doubt it was a case of mistaken identity such as occurred in a number of other instances where error could be easily established, though Mr. Davis, whose honesty, sincerity, and truthfulness cannot be questioned, believed to his dying day that he had been instrumental in rendering Masonic aid to the Harpers Ferry raider.

When John Brown came to the end of the road on the gallows at Charles Town, he could have no good claim on the tender sympathies of the brotherhood in America—it remained for the Freemasons of France to pay the final fraternal tribute. That tribute, it may be said, was not paid to him because of any pretense to Masonic membership, but in sympathy for the man who had dared to declare a one-man war on the institution of human slavery. It was at the solstitial winter feast in the lodge of St. Vincent-de-Paul in Paris on January 6, 1860, that M. Ulbach, orator, paid a glowing tribute to the memory of John Brown, and offered a toast to him and his work.²⁶

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¹ Charles C. Cole, Jr., "Finney's Fight Against the Masons," *Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, LIX (1950), 270-286.

² Ernest C. Miller, *John Brown: Pennsylvania Citizen* (Warren, Pa., 1952), 10.

³ *Kansas City Journal*, April 8, 1881.

⁴ Manuscript note by George B. Gill in the Richard J. Hinton Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

⁵ *Masonic Beacon* (Akron, Ohio), October 7, 1946.

⁶ Miller, *John Brown*, 10.

⁷ Henry L. Kellogg, "How John Brown Left the Lodge," in *Christian Cynosure* (Chicago), March 31, 1887. The article is based on an interview with Owen Brown.

⁸ A good short account of the anti-Masonic crusade is found in Alice F. Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment* (Minneapolis, 1944), 351-358.

⁹ Edward Conrad Smith, *Dictionary of American Politics* (New York, 1924), -15-16.

¹⁰ Milton W. Hamilton, "Anti-Masonic Movements," in James Truslow Adams, ed., *Dictionary of American History* (New York, 1940), I, 82.

¹¹ *One Hundredth Anniversary of Crawford Lodge No. 234, F&AM* (Meadville, Pa., 1948), 4-5.

¹² "His Soul Goes Marching On," in *Cleveland Press*, May 3, 1895, quoted in Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After* (Boston, 1910), 26.

¹³ Kellogg, "How John Brown Left the Lodge."

¹⁴ Interview by Katherine Mayo with Sarah Brown, September 16-20, 1908. Villard Papers, Columbia University Library.

¹⁵ Interview by Katherine Mayo with Henry Thompson, September 1, 1908. Villard Papers.

¹⁶ Interview by Katherine Mayo with George B. Gill, November 12, 1908. Villard Papers.

¹⁷ John Brown to Owen Brown, June 12, 1830. Original letter owned by Dr. Clarence S. Gee, Lockport, New York.

¹⁸ The *Crawford Messenger* of April 29 and May 20, 1830, reprinted the entire Anderton pamphlet, titled *Masonry the Same All Over the World: Another Masonic Murder*. Articles in subsequent numbers discussed the statement and branded Anderton as a fraud. Several articles in Volumes I (1830) and II (1831) of the *Boston Masonic Mirror* offer proof that Anderton was an impostor and that the incident described could not have occurred.

¹⁹ The quotation is taken from the original Brown manuscript as reprinted in the Appendix to Villard, *John Brown*, 659-660.

²⁰ Interview by Katherine Mayo with George B. Gill.

²¹ Salmon Brown to Frank B. Sanborn, November 17, 1911; Salmon Brown to William E. Connelley, May 28, November 16, 1913. These letters are in the author's own collection. See also Salmon Brown, "John Brown and Sons in Kansas Territory," in Louis Ruchames, *John Brown Reader* (London, 1959), 189-197, reprinted from *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXXI (1935), 142-150.

²² James Cleland Hamilton, "John Brown in Canada," *Canadian Magazine*, IV (1894), 119-140.

²³ C. D. Smith, "A Well-Kept Secret," in *Clarksburg Exponent-Telegram*, February 12, 1933, quoting John J. Davis at the dedication of the Masonic Temple at Clarksburg in 1915.

²⁴ Harrison County Circuit Court records, Clarksburg, West Virginia.

²⁵ Joseph H. Diss Debar, "Two Men, Old John Brown and Stonewall Jackson, of World-Wide Fame, by One Who Knew Them Both," in *Clarksburg Telegram*. Undated clipping, about 1894.

²⁶ *Le Monde Maconique* (Paris), January 1860, reprinted in translation in *Anti-Slavery Standard* (New York), October 6, 1860.