

Revision to the John Brown Photo Chronology

by Jean Libby

Image 11

11. John Brown in Akron [2] June 1857 ¹

Photographer: attributed to Benjamin Battels (1823-1896) Copy by the Philadelphia Photographic Company, undated carte-de-visite albumen print. Western Maryland Room, WMR 1703, life view

**Washington County [Maryland] Free Library (WMR)
Donated by Jean Libby in 2003**

The last photograph of John Brown without his beard was probably taken in early June, 1857. Brown was heading West, through Hudson (where he wrote to Mary on May 27th)² and Akron to visit his sons John Jr., Jason, and Owen. Although he was continuing fundraising for Kansas freestate settlement defense, his plans were becoming larger. He decided to grow a beard, whether for disguise as popularly believed or to mask the ravages that guerrilla warfare in Kansas had drawn on his face and the evidence of Bell's Palsy, about which little was known. His tired expression may be seen in his May 27 letter, when he told Mary that "I am much confused in mind, and cannot remember what I wish to write."³ By June 25 1857 Brown was in Wisconsin in the company of Gerrit Smith of New York, seeking funds for weapons and support.

Akron photographer Benjamin Battels opened his studio in the winter of 1856, which is later than Image 4, the portrait made in Akron in August, 1855 locally attributed to him. Battels advertised that he had the same facilities for reproduction and enhancement as could be found in New York City.⁴ The same portrait sitting in a painted photograph at the Akron Public Library is attributed to Benjamin Battels. It was used as the signature portrait in Akron's events of the 150th anniversary of John Brown's raid, identified as taken in January, 1858.⁵

In January 1858, John Brown was organizing the Antislavery Convention in Chatham, Canada West. He indeed stopped in Akron on his way from his base in Iowa to the home of Frederick Douglass in Rochester, where he wrote the Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the Oppressed People of the United States. This was the time and location that Brown recruited Shields Green to his army of liberation.⁶

John Brown had a full beard at the Chatham Convention in May 1858. Although he had the genetic trait of rapid and full hair growth, the earlier visit to Akron in May and June, 1857, is more likely.

Another painted version of this photograph is located in Chatham, Canada West, the settlement of former fugitive slaves and free blacks where Brown held the Antislavery Convention of May, 1858.⁷ It is likely this was brought by Brown himself to his supporters in Chatham in May, 1858. The full beard which would immortalize him in the final original photograph was taken by M. M. Lawrence in New York in May 1858 (Image 15). <http://www.alliesforfreedom.org/files/insertImage15.pdf>

Endnotes

¹ The author has changed the date of this sitting from January, 1858, to June, 1857, in the John Brown Photo Chronology exhibition. A question from John Craig, author and compiler of *The Daguerreian Registry* and evidence in “Portraits of John Brown” in the *Springfield Republican* August 11, 1898 received after publication of the catalog initiated this change.

² “I do not expect to leave these parts under four or five days...” To Mary and children in North Elba, May 27, 1857. In Richard D. Webb, *The Life and Letters of Captain John Brown...* London, Smith, Elder & Co., 1861:421.

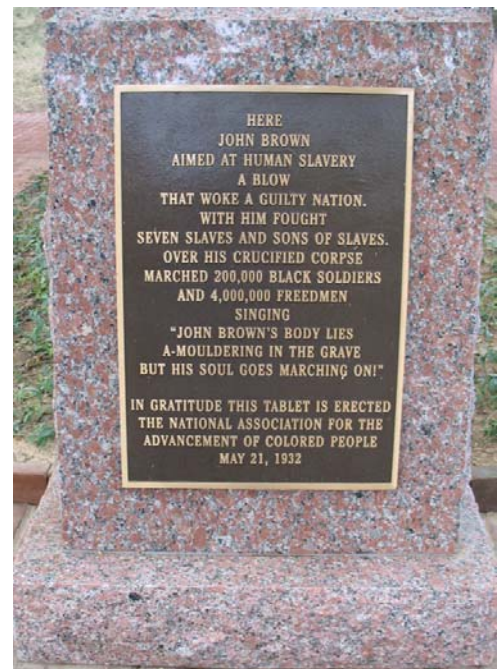
³ *Ibid.*,421.

⁴ Virginia Gunn, “Commercial Photographers in Akron, Ohio 1850 – 1900.” (1989, University of Akron)

⁵ *John Brown in Akron: A 150th anniversary Commemoration. Akron History Trails 2009.* Akron Publishing Company: Summit County Historical Society, 2009.

⁶ Shields Green was a former fugitive living at the home of Douglass. When he accompanied Douglass to Pennsylvania in the summer of 1859, he responded to Frederick Douglass’s refusal to participate in the raid with the famous words: “I believe I’ll go with the Old Man.” Green survived the raid and was hanged on December 16, 1859.

⁷ Gwendolyn Robinson and John W. Robinson, *Seek the Truth, A Story of Chatham’s Black Community.* 1989:22. Mrs. Robinson is seen here in the center (white t-shirt) at the NAACP 100th anniversary commemoration in honor of W.E.B. Du Bois in August, 2006. Photos by Jean Libby.



reinstalled plaque at Harpers Ferry NHP

Errata and addition to *John Brown Photo Chronology*, pages 46-47,

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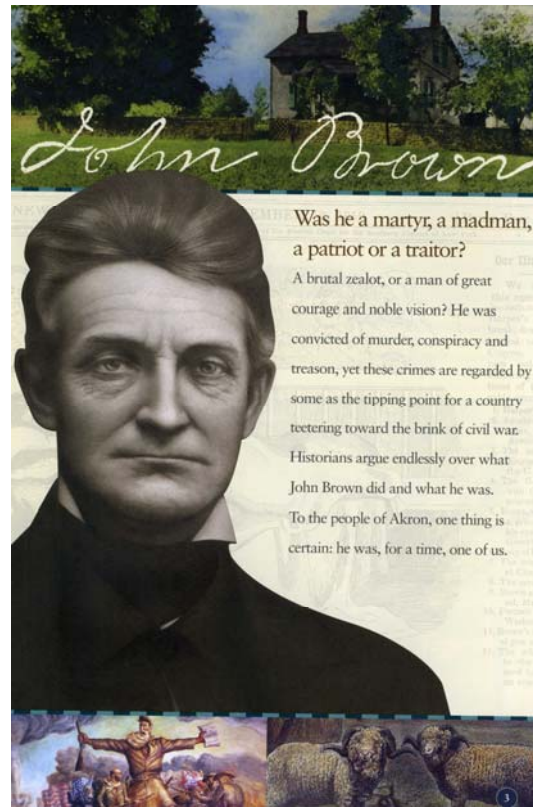
Jean Libby, author and curator

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The original carte de visite



... painted photograph identified as "John Brown, 1858" in *Akron History Trails 2009*. Lianne Neff Heppner, Judy James, and Dave Lieberth, editors.