The Dauphin Thompson Carbine and Brown’s Raid at Harpers Ferry

Michael J. Konowal

This is a story about inscriptions on a gun and the manuscripts which helped validate the inscriptions and establish the gun’s provenance as a weapon used by Dauphin Thompson, one of John Brown’s men, during the raid at Harpers Ferry. The manuscripts and gun’s inscriptions also provide evidence to support a rumored close relationship between Dauphin Thompson and John Brown’s daughter Annie.

In June 1859, John Brown was at home in North Elba, New York spending what would be his final days with his family. Father, as he was known to his family, was a strict, God-fearing Calvinist, who had made it his life’s mission to free those in bondage. Between 1855 and 1857 Brown, along with several of his sons and his son-in-law Henry Thompson, led anti-slavery free-state militia in the Kansas Territory against pro-slavery militia from Missouri—often referred to as Border Ruffians. The guerilla warfare between the groups over whether Kansas would enter the Union as a free or slave state led to the territory becoming known as Bleeding Kansas. Brown’s efforts in Kansas had been supported by Northeast assistance committees formed
to provide moral and financial aid to free-state emigrants. Such aid often made it to Kansas in the form of guns. In 1855, Brooklyn minister Henry Beecher declared that the rifle was a greater moral agency than the Bible in the struggle against slavery. And so rifles sent to Kansas to support the cause were sometimes shipped in crates marked “Bibles”, and became known as “Beecher’s Bibles”.¹

By 1857, with the struggles in Kansas subsiding, Brown began planning in earnest for his ultimate mission, a raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia) and the forcible freedom of slaves. Beecher’s Bibles would be a necessary instrument to achieve his goals. In early 1857 Brown set his sights on acquiring 200 Sharps carbines² stored in Tabor, Iowa that had been shipped by the Massachusetts Kansas Aid Committee to Kansas, but never made it there. After initially being turned down, Brown managed to secure the carbines in exchange for a promise to sell the guns and use the money to support settlers in the Kansas Territory. Instead, Brown shipped the guns to his son in Ohio, where they awaited their ultimate fate as instruments in Brown’s plan.³

Back at home in North Elba, the family was now fully aware of Father’s plan. But not everyone was supportive. They knew this would likely be a one-way mission, and likely the end of their family. Salmon Brown’s wife Abby begged her husband not to go. Ruth Brown refused to let her husband Henry go. But three of Brown’s other sons—Watson, Owen and Oliver—were in. Watson would have to wait to join the men, however. His wife Isabel was full term, and he needed to stay in North Elba until the birth of his son. Isabel was the sister of Ruth’s husband Henry Thompson. The Browns and the Thomsons had long been neighbors in the Adirondack backcountry. Intermarriage of the families was a natural progression. Henry and Ruth. Isabel and Watson. And possibly a new family tie—Dauphin and Annie.

Dauphin Thompson was Henry and Isabel’s younger brother. Only twenty-one in 1859, Dauphin was known as a simple, blond-haired, blue-eyed country boy, but intelligent—a boy who knew right from wrong; and who always protected those who could not stand up for themselves.⁴ Dauphin had grown up with the Brown children. He had heard Father speak on the evils of slavery and was fully engaged in the cause. He was also, appar-
ently, fully engaged in further binding the Thompson/Brown families. Annie Brown was fifteen at the time; a loyal daughter in her Father’s mission, and a girl who would someday make her own contributions toward equality. But in the summer of 1859, in the shadow of impending doom, Dauphin and Annie were simply looking forward to a future together.

In early July 1859, Brown began to gather loyal men at a small rented farmhouse in Western Maryland, known as the Kennedy Farm, just across the Potomac River from Harpers Ferry and the federal arsenal there. Worried that a large gathering of men at the farmhouse might raise suspicion, Brown sent for his wife to join him. But Brown’s wife Mary was busy with the children, the youngest Ellen only 5. So Mary sent her oldest daughter Annie instead, along with Oliver’s wife Martha. Annie and Martha joined the men at the farmhouse, spending the summer as cooks, housekeepers and lookouts, and hiding the men from prying neighbors. When Watson’s wife Isabel had her baby, Watson also reluctantly left North Elba to join Father. Accompanied by Dauphin and his brother William Thompson, the men made their way to the Kennedy farmhouse in early August. Whether Dauphin fully understood the magnitude of what the men were about to do, or merely wanted to be closer to Annie, may never be known. But one thing we now know for sure, Dauphin carried his affections for Annie with him to Maryland, and eventually to the grave.

Throughout July and August, Brown gathered additional soldiers and weapons. Under the assumed name of Isaac Smith, Brown directed his son John, Jr. to forward the stored carbines from Ohio down to Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. Under cover of night, Brown moved the weapons from Chambersburg fifty miles by wagon to the Kennedy Farmhouse. On Sunday, October 16, 1859, Brown gathered his twenty-one men (five blacks and sixteen whites) together. Although he was still expecting additional soldiers to gather for the cause, word that the local sheriff was planning a raid on their farm the next morning expedited Brown’s plan. “Men, get on your arms; we will proceed to the Ferry.” Leaving three men behind to guard the weapons, Brown and each of his remaining men armed themselves with sufficient weaponry and accoutrements and headed down the five-mile road toward Harpers Ferry. How many of the guns
Brown’s men actually took on the raid and how many they left at the farmhouse is uncertain. But we do know that each of his men, including Dauphin, was armed with a Sharps carbine.

The tactical failure of Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry quickly unfolded. Early success in taking the arsenal and armory, and gathering some prominent residents as hostages, was followed by miscalculations which led to Brown and his men being trapped by angry townspeople, state militia and eventually a battalion of U.S. Marines under the command of Army Col. Robert E. Lee. By the morning of October 18, 1859, seven of Brown’s men had been killed in battle (and a few had escaped). Four townspeople had also been killed and nine others wounded. As the sun rose over the Ferry, Brown, his dying son Watson, his young neighbor Dauphin, and a few of his other men were trapped with their hostages in a small fire engine house on the arsenal grounds. Brown requested safe passage across the Potomac where he would free his hostages and take his chances on the run. Lee refused. Lee’s deputy, J.E.B. Stuart, called for Brown’s surrender. Brown refused. Stuart gave the signal and the Marines moved in. Breaking down the front door to the engine house, the Marines poured into the breach led by Marine Major William W. Russell and Lt. Israel Greene. The first to enter was Private Luke Quinn, who was immediately killed by Brown’s forces. Shots were exchanged and in the ensuing brief battle another Marine was injured. Two of Brown’s men were bayoneted to death, including Dauphin. Brown was injured, and along with four of his men taken into custody where they would be convicted of murder, treason and conspiring with slaves to commit insurrection. All five, plus two of Brown’s men who had escaped but subsequently been captured, were sentenced to hang. On his way to the executioner, Brown handed a note to his jailer reflecting on what he had started: “I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with Blood. I had as I now think vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed, it might be done.” On December 2, 1859, Brown swung from the gallows. So ended the civil insurrection, but so began the march toward Civil War.

One hundred and fifty-two years after Brown was hung, one of the Sharps carbines used during Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry came up for auction. The carbine had been passed down
in the family of Marine Maj. William W. Russell and was inscribed on the brass patch box with the name of “Dauphin O Thompson, New York, 1859.” The auction house stated that Dauphin had “undoubtedly” inscribed the carbine himself, but provided no proof. The description also mentioned that carved into the wood stock was the name “Bessie Bell,” its “significance unknown.” Could this actually be Dauphin’s Sharps, one of the guns used at Harpers Ferry? Apparently the description, without further support, was insufficient to entice bidders, as it failed to receive the minimum bid. Wondering whether it was possible after 150 years to locate additional information which could enhance the gun’s provenance, I took to the library.

My first find was in Richard Hinton’s book John Brown and his Men. Hinton quoted a letter written by Dauphin just six weeks before the raid. The typed transcript made it clear that a handwritten letter from Dauphin existed. An internet search revealed the letter’s current location, and a phone call later I was in possession of an electronic copy. As the large file opened on my computer screen I waited anxiously for the signature line to appear. And then there it was: “Direct your letters to … Dauphin O Thompson.” To the naked eye, a virtually identical signature match to the inscription on the carbine (and later supported by a handwriting expert). To me this was the smoking gun. I immediately decided I would acquire the carbine if it was still available; it was.

The signature above is from the letter; the faint image of the inscription on the carbine is below.
GLC06471 Dauphin A. Thompson to his brother and sister, September 4, 1859. (Courtesy of The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.)
But the letter wasn’t done revealing its secrets. Overlooked in my haste to match the signature was another statement in the letter: “A brothers love to Bell.” Bell; could this be “Bessie Bell,” the person whose name was etched in the wood stock on the gun? Further research revealed that Dauphin had a sister, one year older, and her name was Isabel [Bell] Thompson Brown, the wife of Watson Brown. A letter from Isabel to Watson while the men were at the Kennedy farmhouse revealed the close relationship between Dauphin and Isabel: “tell Dauphin I was at Father’s this week and the place was so lonely without him there.” Bessie being a nickname for Isabel, I was sure I had now solved the mystery of “Bessie Bell.”

Now I had proof that Dauphin had inscribed his name on the gun, and carved his sister’s name into the wood stock. This evidence, combined with the family provenance from Maj. Russell, was enough to convince me that this was indeed the gun carried by Dauphin and taken during the Marines’ capture of Brown. But with any investigation, answers always bring more questions. For instance, the majority of materials written on the raid credit Lt. Greene with attacking Brown and in essence stopping the raid. But what was Maj. Russell doing after he entered the engine house, and how is it that he would have ended up with Dauphin’s carbine?

Additional internet research turned up a New York Times article written on the day of the raid: “A number of shots had been fired on both sides, when someone in the house cried for quarters. Instantly [Maj.] Russell commanded the Marines to cease firing; but seeing another volley about [to be] shot, he snatched a Sharp’s rifle from one of the insurgents (emphasis added), and turning to his own men declared he would shoot the first man who fired another gun. This ended the desperate struggle which had continued ...with rifles muzzle to muzzle.” While not often mentioned, this article was contemporary in time with the raid and quoted in many of the largest newspapers of the time. This answered, in my mind, how Maj. Russell likely ended up with Dauphin’s gun.

That left only one nagging question, but to me it was the most important question in confirming provenance and establishing the gun’s historical significance. If Annie and Dauphin were romantically involved, why was there no reference to Annie on
the gun? Surely if he carved his sister’s name into the gun, the elementary laws of romance would dictate that Dauphin carve his love’s name as well. Could the gun give up more secrets? Late one night the nagging gave way to closer examination of the gun’s surfaces. I had scanned it before, but had I really looked closely enough to find all she may have to offer? After all, the grain of the wood and patina had made the “Bessie Bell” carving hard to see. I began to pore over the wood surfaces. As I was about to give up, I noticed what looked like a carved line extending out from under the sling bar. The sling bar is a metal rail that runs 10 inches lengthwise along the carbine and allows for securing the carbine in a saddle. Grabbing a flashlight and magnifying glass and turning the gun for the best light reflection, it slowly came into view: “ANNIE”! There it was! Dauphin had carved his love’s name into a hidden, obscured area of the gun. All was right with the world. And the gun now told the full story: A young man in love, who carried his love with him on his quest to build a future where all men were free. But for Dauphin and Annie there would be no future. Dauphin had sacrificed his life, and their happiness, to set others free—standing up one final time for those who could not protect themselves.

Close-up of Annie’s name etched in wood stock.
Courtesy of David Rios.
Michael J. (Mick) Konowal, Esq. is a Senior Attorney with Microsoft Corporation and a manuscript and artifact collector. He holds a B.S. in Marketing from St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a J. D. from Widener University School of Law in Wilmington, Delaware and a Certificate in Museum Studies from the University of Washington in Seattle, Washington.

The author wishes to thank historian Jean Libby, editor of www.alliesforfreedom.org, for her contributions in accurately portraying the events related to John Brown’s life, and Kurt Langkow, Esq. for his assistance in researching the Thompson family history.


2. A carbine is a shorter barreled rifle designed for use by mounted cavalry.


6. Ibid.


8. When Dauphin was killed in the engine house, he apparently had a lock of Annie’s hair in his pocket. A story in the *New York Times*, Oct. 19, 1859, listed Albert Hazlett as being among the 4 raiders killed at the engine house and credited him with possessing a lock of a woman’s hair.
The dead raider was actually Dauphin Thompson (Hazlett had already escaped and was later captured near Chambersburg, PA), which leads to the conclusion that the lock was likely Annie’s.


11. In all ten of Brown’s men died at the Ferry; seven, including Brown, were hung; and five successfully escaped.


13. Model 1853 Sharps Carbine, Serial No. 16100. Sworn Affidavit, July 19, 2011, from previous owner who obtained the carbine from Major Russell’s descendants and consigned it for sale.


16. “All reliable indications are that the writer of the brass etching... and the writer of the letter ... are one in the same.” Report of Handwriting Expert Marcel B. Matley, San Francisco, CA, dated March 27, 2012.
