

Daguerreotype of John Brown in the news

by Jean Libby

The first daguerreotype photograph of John Brown the militant abolitionist recently resurfaced among descendants in Ohio who placed it for auction for medical expenses. It sold at auction for \$97,750, purchased by the Hall Foundation for the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. Public viewing began in March 2008. <http://www.nelson-atkins.org/images/PDF/press/2008%2003%2003%20John%20Brown%20Media%20Advisory.pdf> The image auctioned on December 7, 2007, was originally owned by Annie Brown Adams, the daughter of John Brown who spent the summer of 1859 at a Maryland farmhouse while her father gathered weapons and men to raid the government arsenal at Harpers Ferry.

This compares with the auction price of \$115,000 in 1996 when the second daguerreotype, which shows Brown with his hand upraised taking an oath on an abolitionist banner, was found mislabeled in Pennsylvania. Both were photographed by Augustus Washington, an African American daguerreotypist in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1846 or 1847. The second daguerreotype (photographed within in a short period of time, but not on the same day), was purchased by the National Portrait Gallery with funds donated from descendants of Free-State militia who fought alongside John Brown in Kansas in 1856.

http://www.civilwar.si.edu/slavery_brown1.html

The writer of this article is the private historian who undertook gathering and digitizing the John Brown portraits from many archives and personal collections over a period of years. They were examined by N. Eileen Barrow of the FACES Laboratory (Forensics Anthropology and Computer Enhancement Services) at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge in June 2003. Dr. Barrow makes age-advanced models of missing children. Dr. Barrow performed the analysis of eighteen images of John Brown without fee to further academic inquiry. The eighteen images narrowed to thirteen different portraits because of art derivations in the original group.

At the time of the forensic study Eileen Barrow made the startling opinion that the two portraits which are now extant in public in original daguerreotype form were made very close in time, “days, or at most a week from each other.” The year was 1846 or 1847, soon after John Brown had moved to Springfield Massachusetts to expand the wool business of [Simon] Perkins & [John] Brown in Akron. According to biographer Louis A. DeCaro, (*‘Fire from the*

Midst of You; a Religious Life of John Brown, NYU Press 2002) Brown was much more interested in aiding the African American community in Springfield and organizing a militant defense organization against the Fugitive Slave Law called the “League of Gileadites” than he was as the junior marketing partner. This assistance was in obtaining property for free African Americans that would be registered in their own names. Property ownership had racial restrictions even in northern states until after the Civil War and even well into the 20th century.

Brown and his family lived in the working-class neighborhood among mechanics and workers at the nearby Springfield armory, which was nearly identical to the armory in Harpers Ferry that he would seize with 17 men and hold for 18 hours in October 1859. Frederick Douglass met John Brown in Springfield in 1848 and wrote in *The North Star* that “though a white gentleman, is in sympathy a black man, and is as deeply interested in our cause, as though his own soul had been pierced with the iron of slavery.” John Brown was in the company of Augustus Washington, the Hartford daguerreotypist, at the meeting with Douglass.

Augustus Washington was an African/Asian American. His mother was East Indian, his father a freed slave of African ancestry. Augustus was born in New Jersey in 1820. After the daguerreotype that is paired with this image was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery in 1996, the Smithsonian Institution mounted an exhibition of the Augustus Washington daguerreotypes that could be traced and published *A Durable Memento; Portraits by Augustus Washington African American Daguerreotypist* by Ann Shumard (2000). This created a resurgence of interest in daguerreotypes and in African American photographers. Deborah Willis of the Smithsonian Institution (and recipient of a MacArthur genius award) curated and wrote *Reflections in Black; a history of black photographers 1840 to the present*, published by W.W. Norton in 2000. Augustus Washington emigrated to the American Colonization Society colony of Liberia in 1853. He continued daguerreotype photography to earn a living, including many portraits of early leaders of the colony, freedmen and their families from America.

Bear in mind that in order to get a good daguerreotype portrait the subject had to remain motionless and unblinking for at least 30 seconds. John Brown was very much a “new technology” man in the pursuit of abolition. Witness his ordering of the fastest weapon available, the Sharps Rifle, in Kansas in 1856 and at Harpers Ferry in 1859. The Sharps’ gave his militia a four-to-one advantage over those with standard rifles. Therefore, the posed image of the second daguerreotype, with a furled banner and John Brown actually extending his left

hand in an oath so that it would appear to be his right hand in the mirror image, is done for the purpose of using his likeness for recruitment.

The forensic comparison of the two portraits, now both known and extant as the original daguerreotypes, showed that they were taken no more than “days apart,” but not in the same sitting. I believe that the newly auctioned image was first. It is a standard portrait—a very good one showing the rapport of the photographer and subject, “a favorite of the family” according to Annie Brown, who loaned it to Thomas Featherstonhaugh for reproduction in 1909. Annie Brown Adams lived until 1926, spending most of her adult life in northern California’s rugged coastal area and raising a family of eight children. The daguerreotype passed from her oldest daughter, Bertha. The image was given as a wedding present to her grandson in 1949; it was auctioned to provide funds for medical assistance to the family.

A direct descendant of John Brown, Annie Brown Adams, and Bertha Adams Cook will be in Kansas City for the May 3, 2008 premiere of the opera *John Brown* by Kirke Mechem. Alice Keesey Mecoy (fifth generation), who grew up in Palo Alto, California, is interviewed in the Arts Section of the Kansas City Star in the weekend edition of April 26. ([link here](#)) Mechem, known as “the dean of American choral music,” grew up in Kansas in the company of John Brown. His father, also Kirke Mechem, was the Secretary of the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka. His “John Brown, a Play in Three Acts” published in 1939 by Kansas State College, forms the base for the operatic framework of the musical son.

There was a third daguerreotype made by Augustus Washington that included John Brown and Thomas Thomas, an African American in Springfield who worked for the Perkins & Brown Wool Company and came in two hours early each day for his shift (5:30 a.m.) so that he and Brown could make abolition plans. That image, a print of which is in the Boyd Stutler Collection at the West Virginia State Archives, shows both men holding a banner that says “S.P.W.” (Subterranean Pass Way). That may be the banner that Brown is holding in the daguerreotype now at the National Portrait Gallery. The location of the third is still unknown, which was the status of the newly-auctioned first daguerreotype until it was brought forward by descendants of John Brown in Ohio in November 2007.

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Jean Libby is the author of “The John Brown daguerreotypes; a leader uses his likeness for remembrance and promotion” in The Daguerreian Annual 2002-2003 and “John Brown, Bearded Patriarch,” photo portrait essay in The Afterlife of John Brown

(Palgrave 2005). Jean edited a collection of essays and photographs *John Brown's Family in California; a journey by funeral train, covered wagon, through archives, to the Valley of Heart's Delight, including the years 1833-1926, and honoring descendants of the Woman Abolitionists of Santa Clara County, now known as Silicon Valley* (Allies for Freedom, 2006). Currently she is contributing editor of a documents publication by the Harpers Ferry Historical Association scheduled for the 150th anniversary of the John Brown raid on October 14 – 17 2009, and preparing a visual chronology of the photo portraits for the conference. She is a retired community college history instructor in Palo Alto, California.

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