

*From Chatham
to
Harper's Ferry*

Fred Landon

fadedpage.com

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: From Chatham to Harper's Ferry

Date of first publication: 1919

Author: Fred Landon (1880-1969)

Date first posted: Sep. 10, 2023

Date last updated: Sep. 10, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230916

This eBook was produced by: John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpcanada.net>

From Chatham to Harper's Ferry

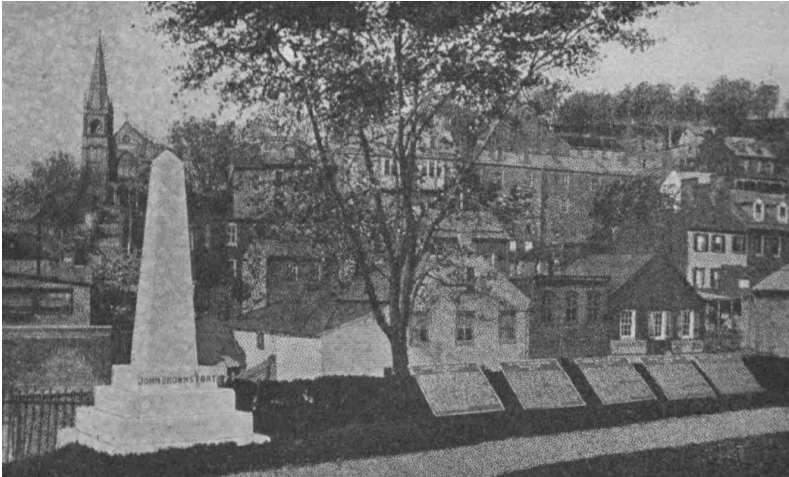
By FRED LANDON

Canadian Magazine, Volume LIII, #6, 1919

Sixty years ago this month John Brown and his men made their famous raid on Harper's Ferry. It was the most dramatic incident in the slavery struggle before the Civil War. Though the plan to free the slaves was doomed to failure from the start, there persists the feeling expressed by Gov. John A. Andrew at the time that "John Brown himself was right". Emerson and Thoreau in America and Victor Hugo in Europe vied in their tributes to his life, but time has paid the greatest tribute of all in the fact that "his soul goes marching on". The old song that northern boys of 1861 sang as they marched to battle was sung again half a century later by the youth of Britain, Canada and America once more going out in what seems to be the age-long struggle for liberty, democracy and righteousness. John Brown, Puritan, fanatic, call him what you will, lived with the one idea that slavery was a great evil, his duty was to strike at it whenever and wherever he could. To that end he gave his life, enlisted the ardent support of his own family and others and finally made the complete sacrifice upon the scaffold at Charleston. Yet Brown himself rose to more dignity of purpose and moral grandeur during the weeks in prison awaiting death than ever before in his life. Like Paul he had fought a good fight, finished his course, kept the faith, and was now ready to be offered.

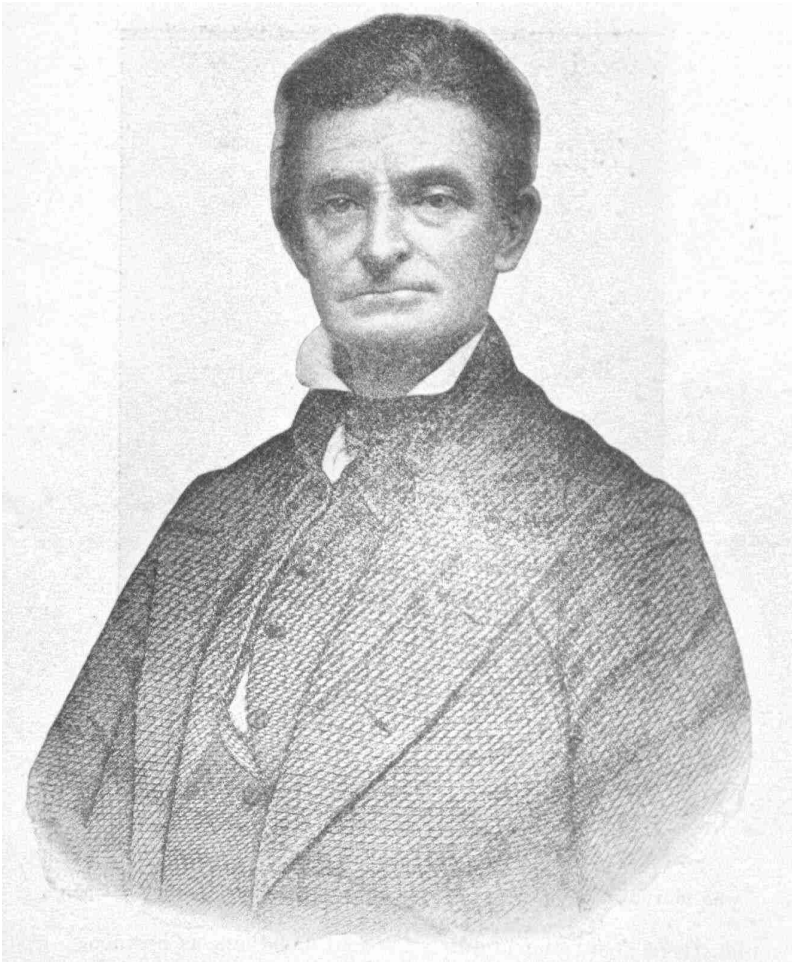
The Harper's Ferry Raid of October, 1859, has special interest for Canadians because it was in the little Western Ontario town of Chatham, in May, 1858, that the plans were laid which came to fruition in Virginia more than a year later. Brown had long meditated a bold stroke against slavery, convinced that the "milk and water principles" of the abolitionists, as he called their moral suasion ideas, would never accomplish the great end of freeing the negroes from their bonds. Direct action, a phrase that has significant meaning to-day, was Brown's idea of the way to rid the country of the evil, and in the early part of 1858 he laid before some New England friends a plan by which he felt that the power of slavery could be broken. Briefly, he proposed to gather about him a small band of trusty followers, occupy some remote fastness in the Virginia Mountains, and from there

make raids upon the slavery areas, seizing the slaves and adding them to his band. He was convinced that within a short time he would make slaveholding so precarious and unprofitable that he would have the South on its knees. He expected aid both from the free negroes in the northern states and from the refugees in Canada, who at that time numbered about 40,000. So confident was he of success that already there had matured in his mind a plan of provisional government for the forces he would command and for the territory he would occupy.



John Brown's Fort and Tablets, Harper's Ferry

The Eastern friends to whom he communicated his plan were astounded, and appear to have made effort to dissuade him from carrying it out, but Brown was determined to go ahead. Feeling that they must not desert him. A fund of \$1,000 was raised, and the understanding was that Brown would act as soon as possible in order to lessen the chances of the authorities hearing of it. Accordingly Brown proceeded to Canada, and to Chatham there came in the second week of May, at Brown's invitation, a company of forty-six men, of whom but twelve were white. For two days they deliberated over the plans, the full import of which probably few other than Brown himself really appreciated. The constitution for the provisional government was considered and adopted, officers were elected, and then the party scattered.



John Brown, whose soul “goes marching on”

Chatham had been chosen as the place of meeting because of the fact that it was one of the most important negro centres in Canada; indeed, a majority of the 40,000 or more negroes in Canada at the time were located within a radius of fifty miles. Among the refugees were many men of intelligence, education, and daring, some of them already experienced in slave raiding, and Brown was justified in expecting their active assistance. There were also secret organizations among the refugees which had as their object to assist fugitives and resist their masters. Help from these societies might be looked for and John Brown is quoted as stating at the Chatham convention that he expected all the free negroes in the Northern States to flock to his standard, that he expected the slaves in the South to do the same and that he wanted as many of the Canadian refugees to accompany him as

could do so. But this seems to be a misunderstanding of Brown's plans. Hinton, his biographer, is nearer the truth when he says that Brown never expected more aid from the negroes than would give his plan its first impetus. It was not mere numbers that he wanted, but rather quality. A few men thoroughly loyal to his plan could do more than a rabble of a thousand.

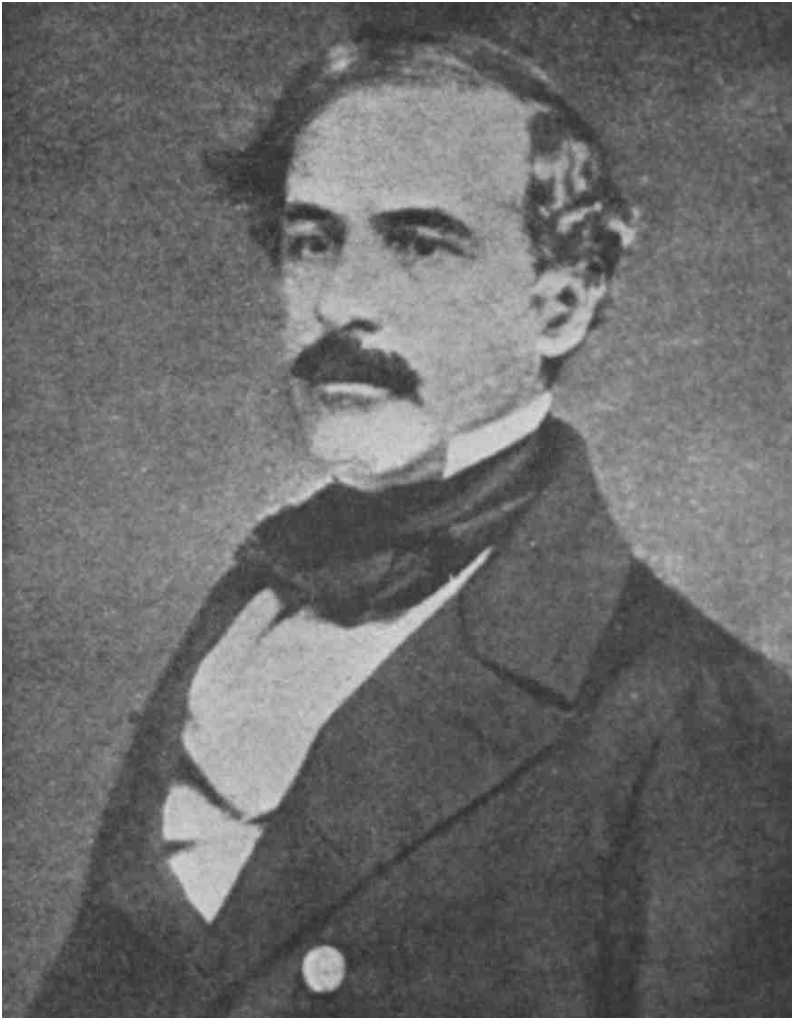


Dr. Alexander Milton Ross, a distinguished Canadian, who moved in sympathy with John Brown in his anti-slavery campaign

Had it been possible to strike the blow immediately after the Chatham meeting there might have been a different story to tell. Frank B. Sanborn, one of the New England friends, says he understood from Brown that he would strike about the middle of May, 1858. But a treacherous follower revealed the plans to Senator Henry Wilson, the eastern supporters were

panic-stricken and the whole scheme had to be postponed. Brown was penniless and dependent upon his New England helpers and so had to submit. He went west to Kansas that summer and it was more than a year before he would carry out his plan. With dramatic suddenness there came on Monday morning, October 17th, 1859, the startling news that a body of armed men, some of them Negroes, had seized the government arsenal at Harper's Ferry, taken possession of the town, cut telegraph wires, stopped trains, killed several people and was holding others as hostages. Wild reports spread through the south and east that slave insurrection had broken out and that the country round about Harper's Ferry was menaced. Later in the day it became known that it was old "Ossawatimie" Brown, of Kansas fame, who was at the head of the outbreak. He was reported to be holding out, with a few of his followers, in an old fire-engine house which was surrounded by militia and United States troops under command of Col. Robert E. Lee. Finally came word that the outbreak had been suppressed, that Brown was wounded and a prisoner and that most of his followers were dead or captured. The South began to breathe easier.

It is only in the light of what took place after the collapse of the Harper's Ferry enterprise that Brown can be properly understood. His attack upon Harper's Ferry was an attack upon the State of Virginia, upon the United States government and upon the whole economic system of the South. Any man of judgment could foresee that it would fail. But what might seem folly to others was not folly to Brown, not more so than Joshua's plan to take a fortified city by the blowing of trumpets. Emerson saw pure idealism in Brown's act, an idealism that would sacrifice everything for the business in hand and take the consequences without fear or murmur. Brown had broken laws but he believed that his purpose was greater than any law, and his own death, he realized, would do more to arouse the American conscience on the slavery issue than even the success of his plan would have accomplished.



Colonel Robert E. Lee, who commanded the troops that captured John Brown

And so he died on the scaffold on a bright December morning, looking out over the smiling country within whose bounds existed the abominations which he had sought to destroy. Europe, as well as America, was moved by his death. Victor Hugo, from France, wrote: "In killing Brown the Southern States have committed a crime which will take its place among the calamities of history. . . . As to John Brown, he was an apostle and a hero. The gibbet has only increased his glory and made him a martyr".



The Court House in which John Brown was tried and sentenced

In Canada the raid on Harper's Ferry made a profound impression. Despite the secrecy surrounding the Chatham convention there were quite a number of Canadians belonging to the anti-slavery group who knew what had taken place there and knew, too, that Brown was meditating a bold stroke. The raid was reported in detail in the Canadian newspapers and commented upon from day to day. *The Globe* of November 4th, 1859, pointed out that Brown's execution would but serve to make him remembered as "a brave man who perilled property, family, life itself, for an alien race". His death, *The Globe* held, would make the raid valueless as political capital for the slaveholders and the South might expect other

Browns. References in *The Globe* to the Chatham convention indicate that its editor, George Brown, was well informed with regard to the proceedings there and knew the relation of the convention to the events at Harper's Ferry. In a later issue of *The Globe*, Brown, with discernment, declared that if the tension between North and South continued civil war would be inevitable and "no force that the South can raise can hold the slaves if the North will that they be free". On the day of Brown's execution *The Globe* said that "his death will aid in awakening the North to that earnest spirit which alone can bring the South to understand its true position" and that it was "a rare sight to witness the ascent of this fine spirit out of the money-hunting, cotton-worshipping American world". The prediction was added that if a Republican president were elected in the approaching contest nothing short of a dissolution of the union would satisfy the demand of the South.

The special interest taken by *The Globe* in American affairs and its sane comment on the developments in the slavery struggle were the result of George Brown's intimate acquaintance with the issues in the United States acquired during his residence there before coming to Canada. The feeling of the Canadian people on the death of John Brown was shown by memorial meetings held in several cities. In Toronto a large gathering assembled in St. Lawrence Hall at which the chief speaker was Rev. Thomas Kinnaird, who had himself attended the Chatham convention. He told of a conversation with John Brown in which the latter had declared his determination to do something definite for the liberation of the slaves, and, if necessary, perish in the attempt. The collection that was taken up at this meeting was forwarded to Mrs. Brown at North Elba, N.Y. At Montreal a similar meeting was held in Bonaventure Hall, attended by more than a thousand people who expressed their views by strong resolutions. Among those who occupied places on the platform of this meeting were some of the most prominent men of Montreal. Similar meetings were held in Chatham, Windsor and at other points in the western peninsula of Ontario where the negroes were numerous.

The slaveholders of the South were by no means blind to the fact that the abolition movement had friends and supporters in Canada; that there was, in fact, an abolition group there actively at work for their undoing. It is possible that they knew of the Chatham convention. In his message to the Virginia legislature after the Harper's Ferry raid, Gov. Wise made reference to Canada as a seat of abolitionist activity. "One most irritating feature of this predatory war," he said, "is that it has its seat in the British provinces which furnish asylums for our fugitives and send them and their hired outlaws upon us from depots and rendezvous in the bordering states."

Speaking again, on December 22nd, 1859, to a gathering of medical students who had left Philadelphia in protest, the governor said: "With God's help we will drive all the disunionists together back into Canada. Let the compact of fanaticism and intolerance be confined to British soil". *The New York Herald* quoted Wise as calling upon the President to notify the British Government that Canada should no longer be allowed, by affording an asylum to fugitive slaves, to foster disunion and dissension in the United States. The Virginia governor seems to have had the idea that the President might be bullied into provoking trouble with Great Britain. "The war shall be carried into Canada," he said in another of his outbursts.

A part of the Tory press in Canada took sides with the South, *The Leader* terming the attack on Harper's Ferry an "insane raid" and predicting that the South would sacrifice the union rather than submit to the North. The viewpoint of *The Leader* may be further illustrated by its statement that the election campaign of 1860 was dominated by a "small section of ultra-abolitionists who make anti-slavery the beginning, middle and end of their creed". As to Lincoln, he was characterized as "a mediocre man—a fourth-rate lawyer".

Canada's relation to John Brown's plans became known, of course, after the collapse of the Harper's Ferry raid. The seizure of his papers, the evidence given at the trial and before the Senatorial investigation, all confirmed the suspicion that there was extensive plotting against slavery going on in Canada. In the report submitted by the Senate committee the proceedings at Chatham were stated to have had as their object "to subvert the government of one or more of the states, and of course to that extent the Government of the United States". Questions were asked by members of the committee that indicated a belief that there was a distinctly Canadian end to the Harper's Ferry raid.

In the actual carrying out of the raid but small assistance came from Canada. Of the twenty-one men who marched out with Brown that October night only one could be described as a Canadian. This was Osborne Perry Anderson, a Negro born free in Pennsylvania who was working as a printer in Chatham when Brown came there, and who threw in his lot for the grand adventure. He is described by Hinton as having been "well educated, a man of natural dignity, modest, simple in character and manners". He wrote a pamphlet account of the raid, from which he escaped unhurt, and later served in the northern army during the Civil War. He died at Washington in 1871.

The question naturally arises, Why was the aid given to John Brown by the negroes of Canada so meagre? That Brown himself had counted on substantial help from the Canadian refugees is certain. John Edwin Cook, an associate, who made a confession after the raid, said that both men and money had been promised from Chatham and other parts of Canada. Yet, apart from Anderson, only one other Canadian seems to have had even an indirect part in the raid. The exception was Dr. Alexander M. Ross, of Toronto, who, by agreement with Brown, went to Richmond, Va., before the blow was struck and was there when the news came of its unhappy ending. Ross was evidently placed in Richmond to keep watch on the official attitude should the plan succeed and the abduction of slaves be thereby rendered possible.

It is known that there was some effort during the summer of 1858 to get the negroes in Canada enlisted, this work being in charge of John Brown, Jr., assisted by Rev. J. W. Loguen, a well-known negro abolitionist. Together they visited Hamilton, St. Catharines, Chatham, London, Buxton, Windsor and other places organizing branches of The League of Liberty among the refugees. But the letters of John Brown, Jr., show that there was not the same enthusiasm that had been manifested at Chatham in May. "Canada and the freed refugees therein proved a broken reed," says one writer, though there is some evidence that there were a few Canadians prepared to join in but who were late for the raid on Harper's Ferry. The real reason for the failure of the Canadian negroes to respond seems to be that there was too long delay after the plans were laid. The Chatham convention was held in May, 1858, while the Harper's Ferry raid did not take place until October of the next year. Warlike ardour had cooled off in the meantime, the magnetism of Brown had been withdrawn and new engagements had been entered into. Had Brown been able to move at once from Chatham there is little doubt but that he would have received substantial support from the refugees in Canada.

In a purely material sense the Harper's Ferry raid accomplished nothing; indeed, for the moment it seemed a setback to the abolition cause. After events, however, showed that it played a very important part in precipitating the conflict between slavery and freedom. John Brown made the North come face to face with the problem that Lincoln enunciated when he questioned if the nation could long endure half slave and half free. When the North elected Lincoln its purpose had been declared. Within a year and a half after John Brown died the Civil War had begun and the first regiments that went to the front sang as they marched,

“John Brown’s body lies mouldering in the grave,
But his soul goes marching on”.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover was created for this eBook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *From Chatham to Harper's Ferry* by Fred Landon]