

"John Brown's Last Visit to Tabor" in *The Annals of Iowa*, 1898

John Brown's Last Visit to Tabor
By Prof. J.E. Todd

In reading recently Hon. I.B. Richman's interesting historical sketch entitled "John Brown among the Quakers," I came across a passage in which he refers to John Brown's latest visit to Tabor, Iowa. He says: "The story of Brown's raid into Missouri, after his return to Kansas in 1858, is well known. Suffice it to say, that on this raid he took from their owners a dozen slaves with whom, aided by Kagi and Stephens, amid great peril he made good his escape into Nebraska, and thence to Tabor, Iowa. Here, contrary to his expectation and contrary to the whole former attitude of the people, he was not welcomed, but, at a public meeting called for the purpose, severely reprimanded as a disturber of the peace and safety of the village."

The writer, having been a resident of Tabor at that time and present at the public meeting referred to, would offer the following correction which it seems to him ought to be made. The history of this visit is as follows: He is guided not only by his memory, but by the statements of his father, Rev. John Todd, in his "Reminiscences" which he printed a few years since, and which have been in that way submitted to the criticism of many who were familiar with the occurrences of that time.

I first quote from these reminiscences: "Captain Brown with his company of eleven slaves arrived safely in Tabor with their escort in February, 1859. They came the latter part of the week and remained several days. A school-house was placed at their disposal during their stay. On the Sabbath following I was handed a paper to be read from the pulpit, saying – John Brown respectfully requested the church of Tabor to offer public thanksgiving to God on behalf of himself and his rescued captives, in particular for his gracious preservation of their lives and health and his signal deliverance of all out of the hand of the wicked heretofore. 'Oh, give thanks unto the Lord for He is good, for His mercy endureth forever.'" My father being called away by an appointment before the end of the Sabbath, was unable to be present at the public meeting which was appointed for the next day. The interest was so great in the community that at the time appointed the house was filled.

John Brown arrived promptly on time and had just begun to tell his story when a stranger came in, and John Brown quietly remarked that he was informed that one had just entered whom he would rather should not hear what he had to say; and he would, therefore, respectfully request him to withdraw. This man was a Dr. Brown of St. Joseph, Missouri, as I understand, a specialist who was treating some cases in town. He had heard the notice given upon the Sabbath and had arranged his work so as to be present. It was understood that he was a slave-holder, or at least a strong pro-slavery man; and therefore a knowledge by him of John Brown's movements might have been prejudicial to the interests of the latter.

Scarcely had John Brown made the request before one of the leading citizens of the place, who was unaccustomed to such stern measures, sprang to his feet and said that he hoped that nothing would be said there which all might not hear. John Brown very quietly remarked that if that man remained, he had nothing more to say, and soon after withdrew from the meeting. It was reported later that soon after he met some of his men and said they had better look to their arms, for they were not among friends yet. The withdrawal from the meeting. It was reported later that soon after he met some of his men and said they had better look to their arms, for they were not among friends yet. The withdrawal of John Brown did not break up the meeting. Very few withdrew. His men, several of whom were known by citizens of the place, remained; and several hours were spent in the discussion of the slavery question and what should be done for the slaves. In this Dr. Brown, from St. Joseph, took an active part. He had at his tongue's end "Cursed by Canaan" and other passages from scripture used by the slave-holders to justify their position.

On the other hand, brown's men were equally ready with quotations from scripture as well as in arguments, and the occasion was a most interesting one. Incidentally, the main features of the story of John Brown's raid into Missouri and the rescue of the slaves at the cost of the life of one of the masters was brought out. I do not remember that any formal action

was taken by the meeting, but the sentiments expressed by the prominent citizens of Tabor, both at the meeting and elsewhere, were simply in harmony with the position that they had always taken. As abolitionists they had frequently been charged with kidnapping negroes and helping them on to the Canadian border. This was explained by some of their enemies to be in order to obtain a premium, which they supposed Queen Victoria offered for every slave.

This ignorant suspicion had always been met by a denial of any attempt to take slaves from their masters, that they were law abiding citizens and would seek to overthrow slavery only by legal and legitimate means. They did not approve the action of John Brown in taking slaves from their masters by force or in an illegal and disorderly way. But instead of its being contrary to the whole former attitude of the people. I think any candid judge would say that it was the only consistent and honorable position for them to take under the circumstances.

John Brown was welcomed and treated kindly in every way as his stay of nearly a week at that place abundantly testified. The position taken by the citizens of Tabor at that time, was, I think, not different from that taken by the great majority of anti-slavery citizens of the United States throughout the land. There is little doubt that John Brown was much disappointed that the citizens of Tabor did not fully commend his step, but I do not know that he had any good reason for being disappointed.

We have referred to this stay at Tabor as his last visit, but his absolutely last appearance, which was only for a few hours, was about the first of September, 1859, less than two months before his capture at Harper's Ferry. He came to the residence of Mr. Jonas Jones on the Sabbath, where he stopped. When taking leave on the same day, he said in an impressive way, "Goodbye, Mr. Jones. I do not say where I am going, but you will hear from me. There has been enough said about leaving Kansas. I intend to make a bloody spot at another point, and carry the war into Africa." The outbreak at Harper's Ferry leaves no explanation necessary.

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