

JOHN BROWN: CONDUCTOR ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

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The story of Orrin and Jerusha Robinson and the Methodist Melee on Main Street made me wonder — if such staunch antislavery activists like the Robinsons lived in Willimantic, could the famous Underground Railroad have passed through the city? Did activists attempt to aid slaves who were escaping from bondage reach freedom in Canada or northern New England — itself an act of civil disobedience, for it was a violation of law — or did they limit themselves simply to attending abolitionist lectures? To find out, I turned to Horatio T. Strother's *The Underground Railroad in Connecticut*, a scholarly account published in 1962. Strother's chief source of information was the Siebert Collection, a trove of letters and other materials regarding the Underground Railroad that had been collected by Wilbur H. Siebert and stored at the Ohio State University Library. According to Strother (citing pages in the Siebert Collection) the Underground Railroad did indeed run through Willimantic, and the three local conductors were John Brown, John A. Conant, and J. A. Lewis.

The Underground Railroad wasn't a real railroad, of course. The term was a metaphor, and referred to a loosely organized (and illegal) system of escape routes (called "lines") and safe houses (called "stations") along which activists (called "conductors") spirited escaped slaves to freedom. The Underground Railroad had three main or "trunk" lines in Connecticut. The most important entered the state at New Haven (most of the escaped slaves arriving in Connecticut came by ship), proceeded overland to Middletown, headed north to Hartford and Farmington (which was the "Grand Central Station" of the Underground Railroad in Connecticut), and then went on to Massachusetts, Vermont, and finally Canada. A western trunk line came overland from New York City and followed the Housatonic valley north to Vermont, while an eastern trunk line began either at New London or Westerly, Rhode Island, and then proceeded north through Norwich, Hanover, Putnam, and Worcester, Massachusetts. All three trunks had numerous "branches," and the precise routes were changed constantly in order to confound the authorities. Willimantic was often a stop on the eastern route.

To find out more about John Brown, I turned to the Windham town clerk's office in Willimantic to check the land, birth, marriage, and death records. Not surprisingly, we found more than one John Brown, for it was a common name. (None of them, of course, was *the* John Brown, of Harper's Ferry fame, who was born in 1800 in Torrington, CT, but left the state when he was five years old.) Of the Willimantic John Browns, one (John Brown I) married in 1763 and fathered four children, among them a second John Brown (John Brown II), who was born in 1769. John Brown II married Olive Martin in 1796, when he was 33. It is

possible that he may also have had an earlier marriage: town records are often incomplete before 1840. According to town records, John Brown II and Olive had at least two children, Julia and Roswell — but according to Lloyd Baldwin, who knew him, John Brown II actually fathered seven sons and eight daughters, including John M. Brown (John Brown III), whose birth records we could not find, but who married Harriet Carey of Willimantic in 1846 and died in 1893. John Brown II outlived Olive and married yet again, in 1839, when he was 70, to his neighbor Nancy Fitch. He probably died in 1842, when he was 73, for it was that year that Nancy sold her interest in the estate of her “beloved husband, John Brown, late of [Willimantic]. Deceased.” Nancy herself died of consumption in 1847, at the age of 64. Her death certificate, which I found, listed her as white, a farmer, and a resident of Willimantic.

The land records showed that John Brown II was a prosperous farmer with extensive holdings of about 300 acres on the northwestern outskirts of Willimantic, spanning the Windham-Mansfield town line. Lloyd Baldwin described John Brown II and his farm in one of his 1895 newspaper articles. The farmhouse, in a semi-secluded location on the “northerly side of the highway” (now West Main Street), was “an old landmark.” Most of the land was wooded, and provided much of the oak timber used to build the houses and stores of early Willimantic. John Brown II was, Baldwin asserted, “a substantial farmer and respected citizen.” One of his sons, Elias, lived across the road and, in 1849, served in the state legislature. Was it old farmer John Brown II or his son John M. Brown III, who was the conductor on the Underground Railroad? Was it the father or the brother of the state legislator? I could not be certain. Perhaps it was both. But the location of the Brown farm, in a semi-secluded spot on the outskirts of town, with plenty of land and woods to conceal activities, seemed like an ideal spot for a station on the Underground Railroad.