

1846. The Relationship between Gerrit Smith and John Brown

libwww.syr.edu/digital/exhibits/g/GerritSmith/harpers.htm

Gerrit Smith was born in Utica, New York in 1797 and lived in nearby Peterboro. A well known philanthropist and social reformer, he was a first cousin of the noted abolitionist and crusader for women's rights, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In 1835 Smith joined the American Anti-Slavery Society after witnessing its speakers being attacked by a wild mob in Utica. Five years later he played a leading role in the formation of the anti-slavery Liberty Party which was based in New York State. He was the Liberty Party candidate for president of the United States in 1848 and 1852. Smith was from a wealthy family and used his family's fortune to establish communities for formerly enslaved Africans, including one in North Elba, New York. He was a financial supporter of John Brown's campaign against the extension of slavery into Kansas and was implicated in the raid on Harpers Ferry. However, he denied knowledge of the attack or that his intent was to promote insurrection among Southern slaves. Gerrit Smith died on December 28, 1874.

Gerrit Smith enters the story of Harper's Ferry more than a decade before the raid, when he first made the acquaintance of John Brown. Their meeting led to a collaboration that included Smith's financial support for Brown's move to North Elba, NY, where he and his family established a farm with the intent of aiding black settlers who had moved to the Adirondack North Country after receiving grants of land from Smith. More than three thousand such gifts of land, averaging 40 acres apiece, had been made to poor black men. Smith sold Brown 244 acres of land (for \$1 per acre) on which he settled his family, the deed for which was transferred in November 1849.

When John Brown went to Kansas to fight (literally) against slavery interests, Smith raised money to support his military operations. When Brown proposed the creation of a permanent refuge in the mountains of Virginia, from which armed groups would help to run off slaves, gradually building an army of insurrectionists, Smith again supported him. When Brown raided the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, he had a check for \$100 in his pocket sent to him by Gerrit Smith.

In 1848, John Brown traveled to Peterboro to introduce himself to Gerrit Smith. Brown had heard of Smith's Adirondack land grants to poor black men, and proposed to relocate his family among the new settlers. His plan was to establish a farm where he could provide guidance and assistance to those who were attempting to establish communities in the area.

Smith accepted the proposal, and agreed to sell Brown a piece of property for \$1 per acre, which was paid off in November 1849. Brown actually spent little time at the farm, as his attentions were soon distracted by the conflict that had broken out in Kansas, between pro- and anti-slavery forces. He did make occasional visits, however, up to the time of his raid on Harper's Ferry.

After his execution, Brown's wife returned his body to the farm for burial. The tombstone of Brown's ancestor, also named Capt. John Brown was inscribed with his name, as well as those of his sons who died at Harper's Ferry. Little else was added to the grave site for many years later. In later years the graves of twelve of Brown's men were relocated to the site, a picket fence was erected, and still later the high iron fence that stands at present. The boulder was subsequently (around 1900) inscribed with Brown's name and the years of his birth and death. Plaques were added, memorializing Brown and his men, and the women of the Brown family, for their sacrifices in the cause of freedom.

Since 1895, the farm has been owned by New York State, and is maintained and staffed by the Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. It is a popular tourist stop on the edge of Lake Placid, and recently celebrated 100 years as a State Historic Site. The outdoor interpretive displays provide photographs and descriptions of the men who joined in the raid on Harper's Ferry. The fate of each man is also described. While the interpretation offered is blunt,

nothing at the site implies criticism of Brown or his motives. Many of the later improvements to the memorial, including a heroic statue of Brown walking with his arm around the shoulders of a young African-American boy, were financed by a John Brown Memorial Association, no longer in existence. The preservation of the house and barn is managed by the state, which has also restored the house to its condition circa 1859. Some of the original furnishings remain, and other period pieces have been added to provide visitors a reasonable sense of the accommodations at the time it was occupied by Brown's family.