

## Underground Railroad Signals

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ISSN 0003-4827

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### Recommended Citation

Williams, Ora. "Underground Railroad Signals." *The Annals of Iowa* 27 (1946), 297-303.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.6467>

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## UNDERGROUND RAILROAD SIGNALS

By ORA WILLIAMS

Ever hear your grandfather, or some of his contemporaries, tell about the stop and go signs by which traffic jams were obviated on the historic "Underground Railroad" system that radiated from the realms of abolitionism? These unbonded lines were operated quite extensively while this fantastic idea of abolitionism was a dangerous social and political topic. The signals wouldn't be recognized now, but once they were as well established as the tactics of muster days or the calls to the old swimming hole.

There was a station right where now stands Iowa's beautiful historical building, within shouting distance of the state capitol. Every year this treasure house of history is visited by thousands of people, especially young folks eager for information, and as they admire the windows, the floors, the paintings, or pore over cases of genuine historic interest, few realize that old John Brown came this way often. They hardly ask a question when they see an oil painting of the old crusader, done in Iowa by an Iowa artist.

Capitol hill was crude and unattractive when the locating commissioners drove a stake where they said the permanent state capitol should have its corner stone. The approach was steep and high for the long walk from the site of the old dragoon barracks, and walking was the only way. The place was covered with trees, and harsh shrubbery cumbered the foot paths. This is all gone, but elms and oaks are of long life and like familiarity. There were deep gashes at the west, and a long slope eastward to the Indian agency and the swamp beyond.

The stage road floundered over what had once been the bed of the Des Moines river, now near the State Fair grounds, and followed along what was called Keokuk street right over the hill and down to the ferry near the

forks. The drivers had passed Grinnell's place, paused at Mitchell's tavern and forded Four Mile creek. Along the way there were lindens, much beloved of the bees, and plum and cherry trees of springtime fragrance.

Keokuk street became Sycamore and finally grew to the stature of East Grand avenue. It was just a dirt road, always muddy if not dusty, and there were deep ruts even a hundred years ago. It was on this thoroughfare that Harrison Lyon located his little home and later built the big one which had to be moved to make way for the State historical building. Pretty close to where East Twelfth street runs there was a cross road from Alex Scott's farms on the "bottoms" leading off toward Elk Rapids and Boonesboro. Right at this junction, the cherries and locusts caught the eye of Isaac Brandt and he established his famous "Cherry Place." Lyon had joined with Scott and others in donating to get the state house planted on the hill. All around there were dense woods that afforded easy hiding for the underground railroad freight.

#### CAPITOL LOCATED ON EAST HILL

The precise location of the capitol had been fixed in 1856 to the chagrin of the "leading business men" of the city at the Raccoon forks, who were sure that the only suitable place was on the hill west of the Des Moines river. But Lee township had already learned the game of politics quite well. Equally so it was a long time before the entrenched political and business interests of the old Black Hawk purchase became reconciled to locating the state house west of the Red Rock line. Not until the corner stone was laid were the grumblings and plottings laid aside.

The master of Cherry Place was impressed with the beauty of capitol hill when he first tramped along the old stage road; but he went farther, even so far as Lawrence, Kansas, and he bought lots near where the Pacific railroad was to start from Council Bluffs. In

fact, he walked back to Des Moines, because as he told the writer long afterwards, he had invested his every cent in land. It was at Lawrence, however, that he made the acquaintance of John Brown, though he had imbibed abolitionism when he was a shoemaker in Ohio and brought it with him to his store in Des Moines. Mr. Brandt's last public service was as postmaster of the capital city.

Des Moines was well out on the frontier. There were "before the war" no railroads, that is, real roads with oak ties. Newspapers got their "telegraph news" relayed from Council Bluffs by stage via Lewis and Dalmanutha. A wireless device would have been branded as a device of satan. Not even a covered bridge across the Des Moines river. The channel had to be cleared for the whistle of a steamboat.

The Isaac Brandt home at Cherry Place was modest, and the plain board fence surrounded a grove of fruit trees. There was a hand-made gate which Mr. Brandt kept standing long after he had built his more stately mansion. One day leaning over this gate he told the writer something of the operations of the underground and his recollection of the chief promoter.

#### JOHN BROWN AT BRANDT'S GATE

"The last time I saw John Brown was at this gate," said Mr. Brandt. "As we leaned over it, he took my hand and held it a long time, then spoke a few words of kindness and courage and went on. This was in 1859, in the early part of the year, only a short time before he went on to Harper's Ferry. I had met him on other occasions. It was a winter day, but I was out in the yard when I saw a covered wagon drawn along the rough road with a man walking at the side whom I recognized at once. He halted at my place and I called him to the gate. I saw that he had a load in his wagon and gave him the signal for safety and he understood. I asked him how many, and he held up four fingers of his hand. It was early in the day and he went on east-

ward with his "fodder" as we would have said. But in the few words exchanged he showed his passionate earnestness in the cause to which he had dedicated his life. Not far away there were places where he might have hid away for a night or a day those whom he was helping. But it was better to go on to places not so conspicuous.

"How did Brown know I could be trusted? Well, even if he had not met me before he knew it when I said 'hello', much as we now do at the telephone. That was a pretty well established underground railroad signal for all's well. In response, he lifted his right hand to his ear and grasped the rim firmly between thumb and finger. That meant he understood. If he had held up his hand with palm extended outward it would have been different. I do not know how these signs or signals originated, but they had become well understood. Without them the operation of the system of running slaves into free territory would not have been possible. Not only was the traffic illegal but in every community, even in Iowa and Ohio, there were many who opposed. Brown knew by the signals that I was a friend. I went to the wagon and peeked under the hay and cornstalks and saw four negroes keeping very quiet as they journeyed to they knew not where.

"No, John Brown did not tell me any of the details of his plans that had long before been matured. But he let me know he had plans and that nothing could turn him aside. I learned that the party put up at the next station, the country tavern of Tom Mitchell, and remained until the following day."

More than one visit was paid to Iowa by John Brown. He had been in Kansas in 1855. He was at the Quaker settlement in Cedar county, Iowa, in 1856. He was at Tabor and again at Springdale in 1857. He knew the dangerous curves in the underground railroad and avoided them. When he journeyed on the way again to Kansas in 1856, taking with him a mounted cannon disguised as a plow, he broke into a meeting of friends in Sigourney,

and asked for one Jim Lane, who had promised to meet him. Brown at first gave a fictitious name, since he was uncertain as to the kind of men he found at the hotel, but he greeted Lane and gave his name. Soon he launched forth an eloquent speech about Kansas and a bitter denunciation of the slavery agents. A public meeting was arranged and the next day Brown and Lane, with others who knew the signals well, started off to Kansas. Federal officials with pro-slavery leanings watched all the "stations" of the railroad in Iowa as elsewhere.

It was in 1858 that Brown was once more in Iowa on his way into the slave country. But it was in February, 1859, that he started from Tabor eastward and made his last journey through Iowa. He knew several men in Des Moines and slept at Jordan's place just west of Des Moines in Polk county.

On a later occasion when John Brown's son paid a visit to the capital of Iowa, he was shown the gate at Cherry Place, and heard with some emotion the story told by Mr. Brandt. The son was given an official reception at the state house. The then late war had not yet become glorified in history as the "war between the states." The trail of the underground railroad was still fresh.

#### THE GATE KEEPER'S STORY

The story of how the gate keeper at Cherry Place got a job on the underground is much like that of many others. "I got my start in the cause of freedom when I was only nine years old," Mr. Brandt declared. "Two very fine men lived not far from my home and they were known everywhere for their kindness and love. A gossiping woman carried to my mother a tale about how these good neighbors were suspected of having actually aided some 'niggers' who were on their way to Canada, and she said with much indignation that the two men ought to be hanged. When the tale-bearer had gone I asked my mother why men like Beebe and Flattery deserved hanging. My mother lifted her spectacles to

her forehead, but did not explain. But I overheard her telling the two men of my question. One of the men said I was 'made of the right stuff,' and he asked me to do certain things which put me to a test as to my strength and will. Soon they had me doing a lot of things that perhaps only a big and strong boy could do without attracting attention. On more than one occasion I was called out of bed to engage in piloting a band of fugitives through the woods or to places far away from our town. Then I could get back to my room unseen. They had made me really an agent of the underground railroad. I learned the signs and signals and the negroes would have faith in me and obey me in everything.

"When I was ten years old I was apprenticed to a shoemaker. I was without money and I was not paid anything. I found that a neighbor's dog had been killed and secretly I found the carcass, removed the pelt and sold it for two 'levies' which was 25 cents. I made a moleskin purse and hoarded my money. I did not know how to get pleasure out of so much money and waited. One day a negro peered over the fence where I was and made known he was hungry. I lured the man behind the barn and promised I would try to get him some food. I asked for it of the mistress of the house where I lived as apprentice and she asked if the man was a runaway. I said no, and she said she would give food only if the negro would pay for it. I was in a great dilemma. Finally I brought out my purse and paid over my entire fortune, with only the satisfaction of seeing a poor fugitive eat heartily at my expense. From that day I was a confirmed abolitionist.

"From that small beginning in an Ohio community (Fairfield county) it is easy enough to understand how I came to be interested in the anti-slavery agitation all through the 50's. I was twenty-three years old when the shameful 'Missouri compromise' fastened the fugitive slave law on the country and undertook to make every officer of the law, in free states as in slave state, an agent of the slave owners. By that time we were

choosing sides, for or against, and it was hard to tell which was which. John Brown personally conducted his trains across Iowa, Illinois and Michigan. His cargoes were kept under cover in the cities and towns, but on the prairies they often got out and walked for miles in the free air. The 'stations' were always under suspicion and were watched. The best were far from the county seats and big towns. That is why the places of Grinnell, Mitchell and Jordan were favorites. The need for hailing signs and secret signals became more and more apparent as the nation drew near to the final showdown which was brought to a head by the John Brown crusade and final great mistake of attempting to start an insurrection."

Many were they who heard the story of the gate at Cherry Place as told by its builder as his hairs grew whiter and his heart very soft.

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### THE MILL AT ADEL

In the *Fort Des Moines, Iowa, Star*, a weekly newspaper published by Curtis Bates, Dec. 5, 1850, was printed a letter from someone at Adel, signed simply "Dallas," giving an account of a trip up the Raccoon river and describing the country. In this article appeared the following:

"Gentlemen of other states have visited this place and the natural mill race in the great bend of north fork of Coon river in particular. The mill race and property was purchased by Benjamin Coffin, Esq., of Fort Des Moines, who anticipates erecting a fine mill. This property includes the inlet and outlet of the race (80 acres), 40 acres above and 40 acres below; also two and three-fourths acres donated by the county off the town quarter. This natural race is a good two miles in length, with a fall of some eight to sixteen feet or more. There is a ferry boat to be established at the town of Adel, and one on the middle fork at New Ireland (Redfield) by Mr. (Thos.) Cavanagh."

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