Mary Brown in 1882, the same year she appeared at a Topeka reception held in memory of her late husband. Photograph courtesy of the John Brown/Boyd B. Stutler Collection, West Virginia State Archives, Charleston.
“The noble wife of the late champion of freedom”: Mary Brown’s 1882 Visit to Topeka and John Brown’s Enduring Legacy

by Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz

In mid-November 1882 a crowd gathered expectantly in a statehouse reception hall in Topeka to greet a guest whom Kansas State Historical Society Secretary Franklin G. Adams, on behalf of himself, the Society, and the “people of Kansas,” had cordially invited to visit the state. Society members had worked for weeks to put together a night of festivities equal to the importance of the occasion. Community members crowded eagerly into the room, hoping to catch a glimpse of the woman whose surname had long been spoken in Kansas. They gathered to honor Mary Brown, the widow of John Brown of Bleeding Kansas and Harpers Ferry fame. Relics related to Brown and 1850s Kansas adorned the walls, bands performed, and famous Kansans rose to address the crowd and celebrate Mary Brown as “the noble wife of the late champion of freedom.”

More than twenty years after the events at Pottawatomie Creek and Brown’s raid in Virginia, why did so many turn out to see John Brown’s widow? What stories were told that night in Topeka: in what way was Mary noble, and how did her late husband champion freedom? Why were they celebrated at this particular historical moment? In short, what was the significance of the gathering that night, and how did it help shape John Brown’s enduring legacy?

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By the time Mary Brown stepped onto the stage in Topeka, she had already appeared before other interested crowds in Chicago and Boston. In 1882, newspapers across the country proclaimed “John Brown’s widow was to travel East,” and they continued to report about her journey, beginning with her departure in late August through her arrival in Kansas. Everywhere her presence was used to support particular narratives about John Brown, the Civil War, and the meaning of the antebellum antislavery fight. Kansans were not of one mind about John Brown or his violent deeds, and his widow arrived in Topeka in the midst of a long tug-of-war over how he should be remembered. Her appearance that night is noteworthy both because it commemorated a life of extraordinary experiences and because of the larger cultural shifts occurring throughout 1880s America at the time of her visit. Less than thirty years after Kansas bled, Mary Brown’s husband hanged, and the Civil War ended, the nation had abandoned Reconstruction and shifted toward Jim Crow repression of African Americans, a movement that historian Paul Shackle has termed “the national rejection of abolitionist ideals.”2 Mary Brown’s journey and appearance in Topeka offer a window into a critical period in the contest over how John Brown, as well as the antislavery movement and Civil War, should be remembered. Pro-Brown contingents, led by Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS) Secretary Adams, advocated for the abolitionist’s nobility and importance to Kansas, though they neglected to highlight his violent means and radical outlook on race. Others looked to avoid controversy at the occasion, using Mary Brown’s presence to patch over old Civil War wounds. In Topeka as elsewhere, she stood as a symbol of her husband, the Civil War, and their long-lasting legacies.3

Long before her late husband’s arrival in Kansas Territory in 1855, Mary Brown’s life had been intricately bound up with his war against slavery. She married John Brown in 1833 when she was but a teenager and he a widower with five young children. She would go on to bear thirteen children of her own. Some Brown biographers chronicle how she and some of Brown’s oldest sons swore an oath to fight slavery as early as the late 1830s.4 By the time the Kansas–Nebraska Act instigated agitation in Kansas, she had labored at the Brown home for decades, enduring poverty and isolation while her husband roamed far and wide chasing the wool business and fighting slavery. In 1856, with John Brown and all but one son in Kansas, her stepson Frederick proclaimed that Mary had been left “alone to paddle your canoe.”5 The following year abolitionist and Brown backer Franklin Sanborn noted that Mary and Brown’s daughters were “hardworking, self-denying, devoted women, fully sensible of the greatness of the struggle in which Capt. Brown is engaged, and willing to bear their part in it.”6


5. Frederick Brown to “dear brother and all,” September 12, 1855, Ella Thompson Towne scrapbook, Brown Family Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Her husband also acknowledged what he called her “widowed” state. John Brown to wife and children, November 23, 1855, in The Life and Letters of John Brown, Liberator of Kansas, and Martyr of Virginia, ed. Franklin Sanborn (Boston, Mass.: Roberts Brothers, 1885), 205.

Willing or not, Mary endured much privation and hardship as her husband adopted the violent means that made him famous, first against Border Ruffians in Kansas Territory and then in his failed attempt to incite slave insurrection at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. In the aftermath of the uprising she made a slow pilgrimage to his side in the Charles Town Jail, seeing him for a final time the night before his execution.7

Just as Americans had wanted to see and read about John Brown in the days after his raid, in the decades after his death many in America were curious to see his family. Even as Mary arrived in Charles Town to see her condemned husband, artists sketched her for an eager public and writers published lengthy stories about her.8 The same curiosity motivated the Topeka crowd that gathered in the fall of 1882. In the more than two decades that had passed since John Brown’s execution, his kin—especially his widow—retained the celebrity they had gained in the six weeks between their patriarch’s raid and his execution. Countless periodicals published articles about their whereabouts and remembrances, and communities gathered money and built homes for the Brown women because of their connection to the man whom one newspaper dubbed the “frightener of the great state of Virginia.”9 Mary’s continuing celebrity, as well as that of the Brown children, was molded by the fierce fascination and intense feelings Americans had about the Civil War and its legacy. The Brown kin—like Jefferson Davis’s wife Varina and daughter Winnie, the latter of whom was dubbed “the daughter of the Confederacy”—were special objects of memory. Famous as well as infamous for her surname, Mary Brown became, as Joan Cashin has written of Davis’s widow Varina, a “living link to the great conflict.”10 In addition, the Browns, like the Davises, were not just living links, but also weapons in the battle over what the Civil War had been about and what it meant in the American present.

The Browns did not always welcome this public contest and their accompanying notoriety. In the years after Harpers Ferry, Mary and all of Brown’s children fled the East for new lives in Ohio, Wisconsin, California, or Oregon. Hoping to make a new life for her family in

7. For much more information on this trip (and John Brown’s refusal to see her at first), see Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz, “The Tie That Bound Us”: The Brown Women and Radical Antislavery (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, forthcoming 2013).


10. Joan Cashin, First Lady of the Confederacy: Varina Davis’s Civil War (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2006), 276. Brian Jordan has argued that Union veteran amputees became “living monuments,” and that their bodies themselves became “obvious sites for remembering the war.” Though Brown’s kin were quite different from Jordan’s wounded Union veterans, they were equally recognizable, especially for Brown supporters and those looking to uphold an emancipationist memory of the war. Brian Jordan, “Living Moments: Union Veteran Amputees and the Embodied Memory of the Civil War,” Civil War History (June 2011): 121, 122.
what she termed “a new country,” Mary, her son Salmon’s family, and her three youngest daughters joined a wagon train heading to California in 1864.11 But in the West as in the East, the Brown family’s celebrity continued, and they were implicated in the ongoing debates about Brown and the Civil War. In a letter written the year before Mary’s appearance in Topeka, her daughter Sarah, with whom Mary lived, noted the receipt of letters from “all over the country” as well as countless visitors. Not all of the attention was positive: the Browns left their first California residence in Red Bluff after harassment by a local Democratic newspaper that assaulted its Republican adversaries by tying them to “old John Brown, the horse thief and murderer.”12

Like her life before it, Mary’s 1882 cross-country journey offered multiple reminders of the divergence of opinion about “old John Brown.” In Chicago and Boston, she had been feted at receptions and other commemorative events. The Boston Daily Advertiser described one appearance as an abolitionist reunion of sorts, noting that “many of the old antislavery workers were invited” to a reception in Mary’s honor. Concluding a long speech to a Chicago crowd, the Illinois state attorney conflated her, the broad abolitionist movement, and the Union army. “Thanks to your own struggles, the valor of Northern soldiers, fighting on a thousand battlefields for a free nationality, and a guarding Providence,” he concluded, “the slave is free and panoplied with honoring and honored citizenship.”13

News of Mary’s journey also reached the South prior to her arrival in Topeka, and she came to Kansas well aware that not all responses to her presence were positive. After hearing about Chicago’s commemoration of Brown, the Macon Telegraph published a piece titled “A Georgia View of John Brown.” It argued that John Brown was “not a man of distinction” but instead “coveted notoriety” and was “a worse man than . . . even Grant,” offering a very different interpretation of Brown and the Civil War than had been given in Chicago. Brown’s raid had helped incite civil war, and Brown himself “was a thief, a murderer, and a miscegenationist.”14 Such critiques of Brown’s radical ideas about race were typically unstated, glossed over by characterizations of the man as a horse thief or murderer. The Telegraph’s vehemence reveals how, two decades past Harpers Ferry, Brown still inspired a fierce response. Mary likely wondered if the intensity with which Kansans were debating Brown and especially his role in the Pottawatomie murders would affect her reception, despite Franklin Adams’s reassurance that she would receive a “friendly welcome.”15

Mary’s appearance on Kansas soil came at an important moment in the Brown women’s lives, as she and Brown’s children wrestled with definitive revelations of John Brown’s participation in the Pottawatomie Creek murders. In the middle of the night in May 1856, five proslavery settlers were lured from their beds and killed in gruesome fashion by a group of broadsword-wielding men that included John Brown, Mary’s stepsons Owen and Frederick, her sons Salmon and Oliver, and her son-in-law Henry Thompson. In the days and weeks that followed, the attack and its perpetrators were much talked about in Kansas, where a Franklin County grand jury heard testimony about the matter, and the affair was also written about in eastern newspapers.16 The New York Herald detailed the grisly killings, naming Brown as the culprit, but Brown himself denied participation in the murders. In the most literal sense, he appears to have been correct: investigations showed that his sons and son-in-law did the killing as he watched, though there is some debate about his role in the shooting of one of the victims. Though Brown had been named in the Herald and in a congressional report investigating the Kansas violence, many of his admirers defended him as wrongly accused. This group included Franklin Adams and a handful of other Kansas compatriots, along with New England


15. Franklin G. Adams to Mary Brown, October [31], 1882, John Brown Papers, KSHS.

16. Some of the grand jury’s testimony can be found at Kansas Territorial Online. For an account that describes seeing “Old Man Brown” in a wagon, see Amos Hall et al., “Testimony taken before the grand jury investigating the Pottawatomie murders,” folder 2, box 1, William I. R. Blackman Collection, Collection 278, State Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, available online at territorialkansasonline.org/~imlskto/cgi-bin/index.php?SCREEN=show_document&SCREEN_FROM=border&document_id=102379&FROM_PAGE=&topic_id=70.
backers such as Franklin Sanborn. In 1878 Adams wrote to Mary Stearns, widow of one of Brown’s chief financial backers prior to Harpers Ferry, denying knowledge of Brown’s participation and declaring that he “trust[ed] that the record which history shall back up in relation to it will not leave a stain of suspicion upon the memory of John Brown.”

As she was far from the Kansas battlefield in the mid-1850s and the men confessed little when they returned to her at the family’s home in North Elba, New York, what Mary Brown knew about the events at Pottawatomie and when she knew it is unclear. It seems likely that Brown himself admitted nothing of his involvement to her beyond an initial letter that described the sack of Lawrence and casually mentioned being “accused” of the crimes at Pottawatomie. As participants, Owen, Oliver, and Frederick knew the truth. Frederick died later that summer in a battle with proslavery forces at Osawatomie, along the banks of the Marais des Cygnes River. While Oliver may have confided something to his stepmother prior to his death at Harpers Ferry in 1859, her stepson Owen lived far from Mary and did not have much contact with her after she and some of the family moved west. Son Salmon, too, appears to have kept silent. Even Ruth—whose husband Henry was likely responsible for the deaths of two men at Pottawatomie—seems to have known little of what transpired. The historian Robert McGlone has argued convincingly that the Brown sons were long affected by Kansas. But Mary Brown was far from Kansas at the time, and John Brown was rarely home with her in the years that followed. When new evidence about the events at Pottawatomie emerged in the late 1870s, igniting renewed public debate about her husband’s cause and actions, Mary herself may have been reeling from revelations she was perhaps hearing for the first time, despite her family’s direct involvement.

But Mary had been long aware of a letter from Mahala Doyle, the widow and mother to three of John Brown’s victims at Pottawatomie. Mrs. Doyle had written to Brown upon hearing that he was awaiting execution at the Charles Town Jail in 1859. In her short letter Doyle defended her family against the frequently made charge that they were slaveholders and accused, in some detail, Brown and his men of shooting her husband and two sons “in cold blood.” Having just lost sons Oliver and Watson at Harpers Ferry and facing impending widowhood herself, Mary likely identified with Doyle’s emotions as she outlined the loss of a husband and two sons, aged twenty and twenty-three, and described herself as “a poor disconsolate widow with helpless children.” As Brown’s role at Pottawatomie was revealed in the late 1870s, did


her mind wander back to Doyle’s widow?19 Whatever her inner resolve, new revelations about Pottawatomie were on the minds of some of Brown’s staunchest defenders during Mary Brown’s three-month trek eastward—and they were clearly part of why Franklin Adams was so eager to host her in Kansas.

In 1879 James Townsley, who accompanied Brown’s raiding party (although it is not clear how willingly), publicly charged that Brown had orchestrated the killings of James, William, and Drury Doyle, William Sherman, and Allen Wilkinson, offering new and seemingly definitive evidence that Brown was responsible.20 Brown aficionados Sanborn and Adams renewed their fight to preserve the abolitionist’s reputation, arguing not just over Brown’s responsibility at Pottawatomie but also the circumstances that shaped life in pre–Civil War Kansas and whether they excused what some described as coldblooded murder. Upon hearing rumors of Townsley’s charges, Adams wrote to Charles Robinson, a leader of the Free State Party and first governor of the state of Kansas, to request that he provide information about the situation in Kansas Territory in the 1850s, “justifying and making necessary if you please the execution of the Doyles and the others.” He added pleadingly, “No one so well as you can give a true exhibition of affairs in Kansas and of the policy of murder and assassination which ruled the action of the proslavery party till the affair of which I am speaking checked that policy. You will render history a great service by making a statement now on this subject . . . will you not do it?”21

19. Mahala Doyle to John Brown, quoted in the New York Express, November 20, 1859, in Stauffer and Trodd, Meteor of War, 88. It was not only Mary who recalled Mrs. Doyle. David Utter, a Chicago minister who published an attack on Brown in the North American Review in 1883, advertised for Mrs. Doyle, and other pro- and anti-Brown factions sought her out. See H. L. Cargill to A. A. Lawrence, April 19, 1885, “Items removed from Amos Lawrence volume, pp. 150–158” folder, John Brown Collection, 1861–1918, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston (hereafter cited as “John Brown Collection, MHS”); Mahala Doyle to Amos Lawrence, May 26, 1885, John Brown Collection, MHS.


A dams’s efforts to defend John Brown continued as Mary Brown’s scheduled visit approached. The month before her stop in Kansas, Adams participated in the founding of a group calling itself the John Brown Associates, members of which vowed to defend “one of the world’s bravest martyrs” and to collect facts and information related to his memory. The associates offered the following resolve: “we hurl back with scorn the assertion so often made that John Brown was insane in his efforts to free four millions of bondmen, even with but a handful of men; on the contrary we maintain that, with a faith unlimited in God, he correctly foresaw that a system born of the sword and sustained by the sword must perish by the sword.”22 The John Brown Associates were formed partly in response to the fierce debate over Brown’s memory in Kansas. Still, even Adams soon found himself shying away from any explicit defense of Brown’s violence.

Like many Americans, Kansans were not of one mind about John Brown; in fact, Kansas was and would continue to be the site of a particularly contentious fight about Brown’s legacy. The debate was fueled by the new revelations about Pottawatomie as well as by the broader question of whether Brown had been important or irrelevant to Kansas. Powerful players in Kansas’s territorial history and contemporary public life chose sides, with some free-state fighters such as Adams supporting a heroic vision of Brown while others vehemently disagreed, disputing the character and significance of “Osawatomie Brown.” Free-state fighter and editor of Lawrence’s Herald of Freedom George W. Brown described John Brown’s territorial violence as counterproductive. Two years prior to Mary’s visit, George Brown published Reminiscences of Old John Brown: Thrilling Incidents of Border Life in Kansas. In it he argued that the “real” heroes

22. Resolutions, John Brown Associates meeting, October 26, 1882, microfilm MSS 1246, John Brown Papers, KSHS. Adams was named as corresponding secretary of this organization. By the 1890s, Adams defended Pottawatomie as “a terrible blow struck against assassins who had, unchecked for months, carried on the work of butchery of defenceless [sic] settlers.” Franklin G. Adams to Richard Hinton, ca. 1894, box 1, James William Eldridge Papers, 1797–1902, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
of Kansas history were nonviolent free-state fighters, not those of the John Brown variety, and he condemned the “horrible murders on the Pottawatomie,” saying that they only incited further violence. He continued, “The eastern press, and the eulogists of John Brown, were not content to make him a model hero, in almost every direction, but they gave him credit for fighting bravery where battles were never fought . . . [and] credited him with making Kansas a Free State.” But, according to the newspaperman, the truth of the matter was that John Brown “retarded [the state’s] prosperity and threw obstacles in the way of its most zealous and effective workers.”

Former Governor Charles Robinson and his wife Sara, once supporters of the abolitionist, ultimately agreed with George Brown’s assessment of John Brown’s legacy and joined with other anti-Brown freestaters in arguing against those who painted Brown as a hero. Two questions dominated the debate in the 1880s and well into the twentieth century, writes historian Julie Courtwright: “was Brown a murderer or a patriot, and how did his actions affect Kansas?”

At the moment of Mary Brown’s visit in 1882, Franklin Adams saw an opportunity to use the KSHS collections and its institutional structure to advocate for Brown’s nobility and importance to Kansas history, as well as to quell seemingly endless discussion of Pottawatomie. Presenting Brown’s widow to Topeka would help Adams make his case. The historian Edgar Langsdorf noted that Adams had long admired Brown and “never tired of exalting his image.” After its start in 1875, Adams became very important to the Society’s aim of preserving and collecting materials on Kansas history.

23. George W. Brown, Reminiscences of Old Brown: Thrilling Incidents of Border Life in Kansas (Rockford, Ill.: Abraham E. Smith, 1880), 12, 55–56. 24. Courtwright, “A Goblin That Drives Her Insane,” 110. See also Peterson, John Brown, 61. The Topeka Commonwealth had received a series of historical letters from Robinson, attacking him both for his significance to the Kansas struggle and for his work, which he characterized as trying “to embroil the country in civil strife.” Pottawatomie and his work at the border “has always to be apologized for and explained, and is really the only blot upon the record of our struggle,” he added. Unidentified clipping, folder 23, box 2, microfilm MS 1246, John Brown Papers, KSHS.

25. He had accepted the family’s donation and written to John Brown, Jr., for help in “connect[ing] all the links” about Brown’s life, and while Mary Brown was in Topeka, Adams enlisted her to weigh in on a debate about a portrait of John Brown done by Selden Woodman. From Topeka, Mary Brown wrote to the Century to affirm her sense that the portrait was “a very good likeness of him, and the more I see it, the more I like it.” Franklin G. Adams to John Brown, Jr., January 2, 1882, John Brown, Jr., Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus (hereafter cited as “John Brown, Jr., Papers”); and Mary Brown, November 15, 1882, “Open Letters,” Century 24 (July 1883): 477.


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Mary Brown’s 1882 Visit to Topeka

Mary’s continued celebrity after her husband’s execution was molded by the fierce fascination and intense feelings Americans had about the Civil War. The Brown kin—like the family of Confederate President Jefferson Davis—were special objects of memory, as their patriarchs’ legacies were used to wage the ongoing battle over the causes and implications of the war. In this 1865 cartoon, “John Brown Exhibiting his Hangman,” the ghost of John Brown taunts a caged Davis, outfitted in a dress and bonnet, as he swings from a gallows. Cartoon courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

and beyond. There was no better way to distance the John Brown of present memory from the John Brown of broadsword-wielding fame than by channeling his legacy through a peaceful, solemn widow, one who had been a thousand miles away from Pottawatomie that night in May 1856.

Mary was already acquainted with Adams through correspondence, and she and the entire Brown family knew him to be a man interested in upholding Brown’s reputation. Because of their trust in him, the Browns donated materials to the KSHS late in 1881. Though she “part[ed] with them with tears,” Mary was glad to send Brown papers, letters, and relics. Even before these acquisitions from the family, Adams noted to Mary Stearns in 1879 that “many” people continued to call on the KSHS to “express a special interest” in Brown, so much so that he had arranged for a “cheap little picture of Capt. John Brown” to give to them. New debate about Pottawatomie only increased the public’s fascination, and Adams was eager to use Mary’s visit to channel Brown commemoration in particular directions. Despite Adams’s careful orchestration of her visit, Mary Brown’s willingness to go to Kansas seems brave given the contentious ongoing debate about her husband. But the vociferousness of the argument was largely patched over during the course of her visit. The word “Pottawatomie” was never uttered, nor were radical claims concerning Kansas’s new African American population put forth. Instead, Mary Brown’s presence was used to recall and celebrate the abolitionist past and to claim an important place in it for Kansas. Her husband’s radical stance on race and embrace of violent means were muted in order

27. Adams had already been working with Mary Stearns in the fight to uphold Brown’s memory, and they shared a desire to place a statue of Brown in Washington, D.C. He assured Mary Stearns that the KSHS was “doing what it can to cultivate such sentiment” that Brown above all others deserved commemoration for his role in Kansas history. (He was also interested in using the collections to show what her “noble husband,” Brown backer George Stearns, had done for Kansas.) Franklin G. Adams to Mary Stearns, January 12, 1879, Stearns Papers. Mary Stearns provided him with materials over the years, and they carried on a long correspondence about Brown’s legacy. The Stearns Papers are full of such letters.

28. Adams had also extended charity to them a few years prior. Horatio Rust to Franklin G. Adams, December 3, 1880, folder 23, box 2, MS 1246, John Brown Papers, KSHS; see also Franklin G. Adams to John Brown, Jr., January 2, 1882, John Brown, Jr., Papers.

to convince more people that Mary and John Brown were Kansas folk heroes of a sort.30

On November 12, 1882, the Topeka Daily Capital reported Mary Brown’s arrival, describing her as the widow of “the man who struck the first blow for the abolition of slavery in America.” Under the headline “Osawatomie’s Widow,” the Daily Kansas State Journal implored Topeka residents to turn out and “show to her the love and regard with which Kansans cherish the memory of her husband.” Committees had been appointed to oversee everything about the night, from the reception itself to music to decorations. Outgoing Kansas Governor John P. St. John, recently defeated in his bid for an unprecedented third term, was tapped to preside over the event, and John Brown comrades August Bondi and Luke Parsons were specially invited to share their reminiscences. Given all of this, the Daily Kansas State Journal confidently proclaimed that “every preparation has been made to make this affair a success.” Its closing made Mary’s position there clear. “Gov. St. John will preside at the reception,” the paper reported, “while a reception committee of representative ladies of Topeka will take possession of Mrs. Brown, and see that all who desire will get a glimpse of the noble wife of the late champion of freedom.”32 As the reception itself unfolded, the paper’s phrase “take possession” seemed prescient. Mary Brown was never given an opportunity to offer her own interpretation of Brown, the war, or the present state of things in Kansas; instead, her presence was used to assert a particular narrative.

Three days after the Capital and Journal reported on preparations, the reception was held. On November 15, 1882, Mary Brown entered a hall in the statehouse that was described by one newspaper as “appropriately decorated for the occasion by the committee of arrangements, with whom the work of preparations had evidently been a labor of love.”33 The hall was decorated with a portrait of

John Brown surrounded by battle flags of Kansas, two of his sabers, and relics that included one of Brown’s pikes, a piece of wood from his gallows, and a piece of rock from near his grave in North Elba, New York. The latter pair of objects had special meaning to Brown’s widow, as they came from her donations to the KSHS.34 Speakers that night included Governor St. John, KSHS President T. Dwight Thatcher, Senator Preston Plumb, and August Bondi. Franklin Adams also spoke, holding the “unbroken attention of the audience for some time” as he discussed the relics on display and offered his own reminiscences of Brown’s work in the free-state fight. Songs by a Topeka male quartet and an African American cornet band, performances of the “Star Spangled Banner” and “John Brown’s Body” by the local chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic, and a laudatory poem completed the night.35 The audience—a large gathering composed of both whites and African Americans—heard in the evening’s speeches a carefully orchestrated set of presentations designed to celebrate Kansas history and progress alongside Brown’s noble role in that history. Mary Brown’s presence was used to stake a claim to both.

34. Details on decorations and general events of the night taken from “A Warm Welcome,” Topeka Daily Capital, November 16, 1882; “Mrs. Brown’s Reception,” Daily Kansas State Journal, November 16, 1882; and “The Reception,” unidentified newspaper clipping, November 16, 1882. Additional items donated by the Browns included a host of letters from the Bleeding Kansas era, a photograph, and a lock of Brown’s hair. For a full list of Mary’s donated items, see Kansas State Historical Society, Third and Fourth Biennial Reports, 1883–1885 (Topeka: George W. Martin, Kansas Publishing House, 1886), 38–42, 53, 59.

Governor St. John opened the night by introducing Mary as “the widow of the man who did more than any other to render the name of Kansas immortal.” The *Daily Kansas State Journal* reported the cheers that followed this introduction. In his speech, Thatcher worked to make sure the audience knew that Kansas had been integral to Brown’s history and that, in turn, the man had shaped the state. Looking to Mary, he described Kansas as the “scene of one of her husband’s greatest struggles” and reminded them of the Browns’ loss of their son Frederick at Osawatomie and of Mary’s endurance of “great privations” so that her husband could continue his fight. Free-state fighter and Union veteran Senator Preston Plumb, too, asserted the importance of Kansas and Brown to the abolitionist cause. “The history of the struggle for freedom could never be written except it should include the history of Kansas,” he stated, “and the history of Kansas could not be written, except it included that of John Brown who gave to Kansas and the world that heritage of freedom of which we are so proud and for which the world is so grateful.” Kansas’s present “wondrous prosperity,” he concluded, had grown from its free-state struggle.

St. John also highlighted how Brown had been assessed in the decades after his work in Kansas. “When the husband of her to whom we gladly extend our heartiest greeting to-night,” he stated, “fearlessly gave his life as a sacrifice for principle he was branded as a ‘fanatic,’ and shunned by moral cowards: politicians were afraid he would ruin the party. The country was full of such characters as Peter and Judas.” But times had changed, he asserted optimistically. Using John Brown to celebrate present-day progress and liberality, St. John told the gathered crowd that he appreciated the honor of presiding at the meeting. “Twenty years ago,” he noted, “there were but few, if any, places in the west where a meeting like this could, or at least would have been held; and very rarely was a man found then who would have cared to have presided over its deliberations.”

In celebrating Kansas liberality, St. John overlooked a significant and ongoing social issue of which many in the crowd were aware. In the late 1870s and early 1880s, more than fifteen thousand African Americans, the Exodusters, had migrated to Kansas from the South. White Kansans’ response to these immigrants had been markedly mixed. As the number of African Americans increased throughout the state and particularly in Topeka, prejudice against them grew and was more openly expressed. That intolerance existed in Kansas was not particularly surprising, given that some free-state fighters in the 1850s had been less than enlightened on issues of race and had wanted to block not just slavery but African Americans from the state. After the arrival of the Exodusters, the historian Robert Athearn noted, “some Kansans, who earlier had talked in lofty terms about helping to solve a great national problem, were on the verge of panic.” This panic may have cost St. John in his bid for a third term. His defeat by George W. Glick, who would become Kansas’s first Democratic governor, can certainly be

traced to St. John’s pro-temperance position and the entrance of a third-party candidate into the race, although his welcoming stance towards the Exodusters probably also worked against him.40

Though she was doubtless unaware of the intricacies of Kansas politics, Mary Brown knew of the influx of Exodusters into Kansas. Her eldest stepson John, Jr., had written letters in support of African American migration to the state, and he frequently discussed their plight in his correspondence.41 Mary may have been struck by the similarities between anti-Exoduster prejudice in Kansas and the intolerance shown to her former neighbors at North Elba, the African American settlement in upstate New York where she and Brown’s family lived in the 1850s. But despite the fact that St. John must have been thinking about his lost political capital and trying to discern reasons for his electoral loss, no one at the Topeka reception mentioned the Exoduster controversy. The reception for Mary Brown was a celebration of the roles John Brown and Kansas played in the end of slavery in the 1850s and 1860s, not a demonstration of support for African American civil rights in the 1880s. St. John closed by introducing Mary as “the widow of the man who had done more to make Kansas a free state than all men living or dead.”42 Notably, it was the freedom of Kansas, not that of slaves or Kansas’s new African American residents, that he celebrated. Glorifying John Brown, he placed questions about race and emancipation firmly in the past, not the present—and the past was long over.

Perhaps in part due to these repeated attempts to bury the more contentious aspects of Brown’s legacy, most Topekans appeared ready to declare Mary’s trip a success. This assessment of her visit offered a preview of an emerging national consensus that played down discussions of race and civil rights in exchange for a sectional reconciliation built around agreement on Jim Crow. One Topeka newspaper declared Mary’s visit “one of the most memorable gatherings ever held in this city.” Thatcher declared that “John Brown’s gravity and devotion to duty were admirably reflected in his widow.”43 Even Adams, the most outspoken champion of Brown, was not interested in debating Exoduster politics or civil rights for one-time slaves. Two days after Mary Brown’s departure, he reported that she had lived up to Brown’s reputation, being “such a one as we might have expected to find as the relic of the rugged hero of Black Jack, Osawatomie, and Harper’s Ferry. . . . To many even of those who revere the memory of her husband, she must seem almost as one suddenly come down from those years of terrible struggle which her husband inaugurated, for the freedom of the slave.”44 Her tour stop in Kansas had served his purpose, he declared: it “has in no small measure increased the interest in John Brown and will help towards whatever may be contemplated to be done in his memory.”45

Mary Brown, too, seemed pleased, both with the proceedings and with her role in them as a silent figurehead. “I shall remember my visit to Kansas with a great deal of pleasure,” she wrote to Adams after her return, adding that “the kind friends” she met in Topeka


41. For a discussion of the 1879 letter, see Athearn, In Search of Canaan, 65–66. In the years prior to Mary’s trip, John, Jr., had frequently commented on the situation of African Americans in the South and had even addressed a few groups in Ohio about the matter. See, for example, John Brown, Jr., to Horatio N. Rust, April 30, 1879, RU 303, box 1, Horatio Nelson Rust Papers, Huntington Library; San Marino, California.

42. “The Reception,” unidentified newspaper clipping, November 16, 1882. Discussion of contemporary civil rights only arose once during Mary’s trip, and that was in Chicago. James Podd, a native of the West Indies and pastor of a Chicago Baptist church, saw Mary Brown’s presence as a way to celebrate her husband’s radical ideas about equality and as a means to argue for civil rights, not just to celebrate slavery’s demise. After describing Brown as the “savior of the Negro race,” he noted, “he was the true author of the civil rights bill, that magna charta of our liberties drafted by Sumner,” adding, “and let me say here, for the colored race, that we want this bill enforced.” “Osawatomie Brown—His Widow Warmly Welcomed,” Chicago Daily (Ill.) News, September 1, 1882.

43. “The Reception,” unidentified newspaper clipping, November 16, 1882; and Dwight Thatcher to Franklin Sanborn, March 30, 1885, in Sanborn, Life and Letters of John Brown, 249. A second reception was held at the Congregational church the following evening, where again all Topekans were invited to meet and “to look upon one who was the companion and counselor of the grand old hero of Osawatomie.” Lawrence (Kans.) Daily Journal, November 16, 1882. For outside reports, see New York Times, November 18, 1882; and Los Angeles (Calif.) Times, November 17, 1882. The historian David Blight compellingly argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century white northerners and southerners found reconciliation by forging a memory of the Civil War that highlighted soldier valor rather than the war’s causes such as slavery or emancipation. Blight, Race and Reunion.

44. Franklin G. Adams to Mary Stearns, November 18, 1882, Stearns Papers.

45. Ibid. One critic of Mary’s treatment during her Kansas visit was Elizabeth T. Spring, who wrote a piece for the Topeka Daily Capital complaining that Mary had not been properly credited for her own work for the cause and for Brown’s devotion to her. “She never failed, never faltered, never counseled any compromise with wrong for peace or comfort’s sake,” Spring wrote, “and that the strange, rugged old crusader loved her; in his angular and undemonstrative but no less sincere and exalting fashion, we may be quite sure.” Elizabeth T. Spring, “A Worthy Woman,” Topeka Daily Capital, November 19, 1882.
Mary Brown’s 1882 Visit to Topeka

would never be forgotten. As she had on every stop of her eastern tour, Mary Brown remained mute in Topeka. Her opinions and hopes can only be surmised, since few of her written records survive from the time. Her description of her “pleasur[able]” memories is telling.46

Mary Brown’s acceptance of a limited role in the ongoing formation of her husband’s legacy demonstrated a different approach than that taken by other famous widows of the Civil War era who were more vocal in shaping public memory of their spouses. Varina Davis completed and arranged for the publication of Jefferson Davis’s memoir after his death. In what she called her “sacred task,” she worked to defend his life and work for the Confederacy.47 Elizabeth Bacon Custer gave lectures, made appearances, and wrote letters to the editor in a self-conscious attempt to ensure that her husband George was idealized after his death at Little Bighorn. In 1885 she even wrote an autobiography, *Boots and Saddles*, which was thorough enough to classify her, in the estimation of Custer biographer Shirley Leckie, as one of her husband’s “major interpreters.”48 And, in a Kansas example, after Charles Robinson’s death in 1894, his widow Sara worked tirelessly to defend his legacy, and her own. In contrast, Mary did not use her 1882 trip as any kind of public stage from which to claim her own interpretation of John Brown. Nor did she ever publicly advocate for post–Civil War African American rights or assert Brown’s radical ideas like Frederick Douglass had in his 1881 speech at Storer College in Harpers Ferry, delivered just one year before her trip.49 Mary Brown did not envision a place for herself as a civil rights activist in the post–Civil War world. To have her husband vaguely honored and tied to the end of slavery was enough in light of the continued maligning of Brown’s name in certain quarters.

46. Mary Brown to Franklin G. Adams, December 11, 1882, folder 26, box 2, John Brown Papers, KSHS.
49. Frederick Douglass, “John Brown,” May 30, 1881, address at Storer College, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia (Dover, N.H.: Morning Star Job Printing House, 1881), available online at wvculture.org/history/jbexhibit/bbspr05-0032.html. For an excellent discussion of Sara Robinson’s role, see Courtwright, “Goblin That Drives Her Insane.”
Despite the declarations of success, Mary’s trip in no way ended debate in Kansas. There, as in the nation as a whole, agitation about Brown only intensified. Adams and the John Brown Associates continued to “spare no pains” in their attempts to commemorate “our worthy leader.” In future years Adams would bring other Brown kin to Kansas to help refute attacks on Brown’s legacy, including sons Jason and John, Jr., who made visits to Topeka.50 The opposing side was equally aggressive. Charles Robinson’s 1892 *The Kansas Conflict* highlighted “the disturbing element” that Brown had added to the territorial struggle. His success was such that Brown’s daughter Annie—who lived in an isolated region of northern California—declared that she had to keep her own children home from school when Brown and the Civil War were discussed because Charles Robinson had “colored the ideas and opinions of the people on the Pacific Coast about John Brown.”51

Like Annie, other Brown advocates and his surviving kin were dismayed by attacks in the 1880s and 1890s


and the broader cultural shift that dismissed Brown as a fanatic who instigated a needless war. As the tone of the Topeka reception held for Mary Brown in 1882 suggested, by that time only a few lone whites and African Americans continued to celebrate Brown’s radical agenda and his commitment to racial equality. But in spite of the whitewashing of Civil War memory, Brown remained a captivating figure. Article after article on Brown appeared in the 1890s. Some of the pieces were blatantly polemical; others conveyed simple fascination with the man and came close to removing him from the contested narrative of the Civil War altogether. By those who lauded him and even those who painted a more ambiguous picture, Brown was increasingly portrayed as a man of courage and importance as he had been in Topeka in 1882; his radical ideas on race were written out of his history, and he was recalled as someone who had acted, perhaps misguided, on principle.

By that time Brown’s widow could no longer be called upon for symbolic use. Late in 1883 Mary became ill with some kind of cancer, though one daughter suggested that the “terrible strain” of her 1882 tour contributed to the decline of her health. Mary Brown died on February 29, 1884, a month and a half before her sixty-eighth birthday. Newspapers throughout the country reported her passing. One obituary noted that her death “will recall to the memory of a great portion of the world some of the exciting scenes of over a quarter of a century ago.” Those who had gathered in the reception hall in Topeka to greet Brown’s widow would certainly have agreed with that assessment.

52. For a discussion of the attacks on Brown’s memory in the 1880s and 1890s, see Peterson, _John Brown, The Legend Revisited_, 60–80; and for an account of the broad change in memory between 1880 and 1915, see Blight, _Race and Reunion_.


54. Ruth Brown Thompson to Thomas Featherstonhaugh, postscript of October 7, 1896, to letter of October 6, 1896, folder 18, box 6, Orin G. Libby Papers, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota; and “Marching On: Death of the Widow of Old John Brown of Harper’s Ferry Fame,” _San Francisco_ (Calif.) _Call_, March 1, 1884, folder 12, box 2, series 3, Brown-Gee Collection, Hudson Library and Historical Society, Hudson, Ohio. Local Saratoga historian Damon Nalty declared the cause of Mary’s death as likely liver cancer; great-granddaughter Elizabeth Huxtable said it was a kidney ailment. Nalty, _Browns of Madronia_, 26–27; and Elizabeth Huxtable to Velma West Sykes, April 6, 1964, folder 3, box 1, Velma West Sykes Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.