The Capture of John Doy

By 1859 the Underground Railroad was busy helping slaves escape through Kansas Territory. Proslavery Missourians, called “border ruffians,” continued to pursue them. A group of people in Lawrence realized it was too dangerous for formerly enslaved African Americans to remain in town. They decided to move some of them to Canada using the Underground Railroad. Dr. John Doy was one of the men who volunteered to undertake this task.

Doy was escorting 13 African Americans in two wagons to an Underground Railroad stop near Holton. A few miles into the journey they were ambushed and captured by some 20 Missouri ruffians. News spread quickly throughout the antislavery town of Lawrence.

Mary W. Brown, the daughter of minister John Stillman Brown, was about 14 years old at the time of Dr. Doy’s capture. Mary’s family had come to Lawrence in 1857 as part of the abolitionist movement. Mary’s brother William was attending school back East. She wrote a letter to share the news of Doy’s capture with her brother.

John Doy’s Sharps rifle shown in the sketch of Doy, has a silver plaque that says, “Successful Agent of the Irrepressible Conflict.” Sharps rifles were a symbol of the abolitionist movement. This gun is in the collections of the Kansas Historical Society.

This sketch of John Doy was made after his capture and release.
Lawrence. Jan. 30. 1859

Dear Brother Willie-

... There has been a great excitement in Lawrence this last week, about some fugitive slaves. I will tell you all about it. Last Tuesday - Monday evening I meant - ... fourteen slaves, who had escaped from Missouri, started from Lawrence for Canada. Dr. Doy and son, and a Mr. Clough went with them and were going as far as Iowa City. They had only got about ten miles from here, when, as they were going over a little rise of ground through the woods, a band of Missourians sprang out suddenly from the trees and took them all prisoners. As the [Black] people were in a closed covered wagon they had no chance to fight. These Border Ruffians took them to [Weston] in Missouri. There they took Clough and made him swear all kinds of oaths that he would not betray them and sent him back to Lawrence with the teams. They kept Doy and son as prisoners. And night before last a man came from [Weston] and he said, “The Border Ruffians have decided to punish Doy and son.” The people think they will hang them; if they do it will cause a disturbance here. I pity them and the slaves too, it is outrageous. There were only ten men who knew when these people were to start, and one of those ten must have told the Missourians all about their plans. Mr. Nute knows who is the traitor, so does Mr. Bolles. But they will not tell till Doy’s fate is decided for they are afraid if they do it will go harder with them. ... It is queer how the Missourians knew everything about it: as soon as any change was made they knew it instantly. There are many spies all around. Wade, the man who owns the claim joining us, is one of the worst kind. But enough of this I have said a great deal about it but every one is talking of it. It is a beautiful day, Father has gone to Bloomington to preach and Charlie and Edward have gone to hear Mr. Nute preach. ...

I think if you should come out to Kansas it would do you good Kansas air will strengthen you. ...

Your, Sister

Mary

This letter was written by Mary Brown to her brother Willie talking about John Doy’s capture.