

## Chronology of the Boardinghouse

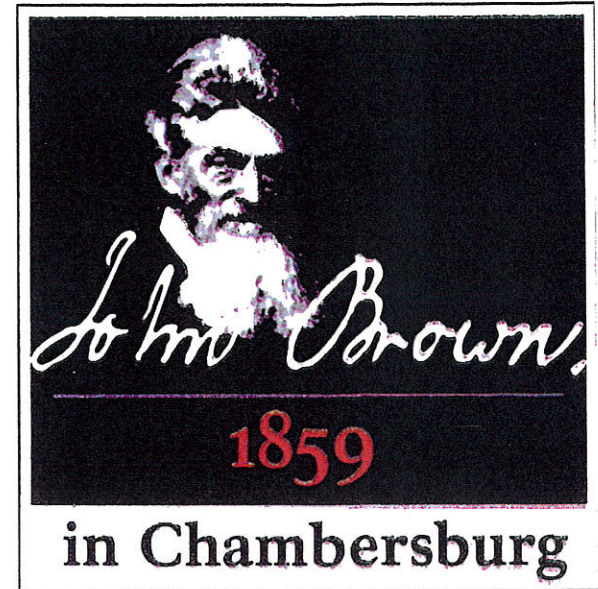
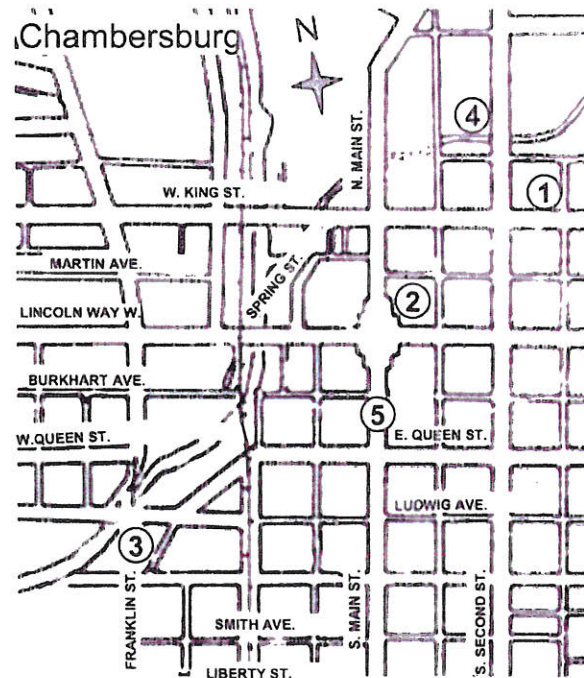
- In 1849, Abram Ritner bought the property for \$500.00. Abram, a son of the abolitionist Governor, Joseph Ritner, was thought to be part of the Underground Railroad during this period.
- Abram died in 1851, leaving his widow, Mary, with five children.
- In 1852, Mary Ritner expanded the house to accommodate boarders.
- In the spring of 1859, Isaac Smith (Brown) and John Henri (Kagi) arrived.
- Brown was in and out of the house during the summer months. Kagi stayed for longer periods checking mail and receiving shipments of arms.
- Other members of the Provisional Army also boarded that summer: Tidd, Hazelett, the Coppocs, Anderson, Merriam; and four Brown sons: John Jr., Owen, Oliver, and Watson.
- Brown left Chambersburg October 9<sup>th</sup> for Harpers Ferry; Kagi left on the 10<sup>th</sup>.
- The raid failed. All who escaped Harpers Ferry returned to Mary Ritner's boardinghouse looking for help.
- The house survived the burning of Chambersburg, July 30, 1864.
- Mary Ritner sold the property in 1865 and moved to New England.
- In 1973, the Franklin County Redevelopment Authority sold the property to the Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission.
- In 2002, PHMC turned the property over to Franklin County Historical Society-Kittochtinny through the generosity of Dr. Wilbur R. McElroy and Family.

Hours: May through October  
Tuesday through Saturday 10 am – 4 pm  
Winter months – call for tours.

Admission: Adults \$4, Children \$3

Franklin County Historical Society –  
Kittochtinny  
175 East King Street  
Chambersburg, PA 17201  
717-264-1667  
franklinhistorical.org  
history@pa.net

- ① John Brown House
- ② Post Office
- ③ Quarry
- ④ Train Station
- ⑤ Road to Harpers Ferry



**Freedom Fighter**  
  
**or**  
  
**Fanatic?**



## The John Brown House

Largely unnoticed on a side street in the quiet town of Chambersburg is a small house that played a critical role in the history of our nation. However, in 1859 it was a boardinghouse owned by a widow, Mary Ritner, whose late husband had been sympathetic to the abolitionist cause and who, it was said, had been a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad. That may have been what drew John Brown and several of his accomplices to stay at the house when he was looking for a secure site from which to plan his raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry.

### Uncertain Ground for Abolitionists

Chambersburg, which lies only eleven miles north of the Mason-Dixon line, was uncertain ground for those with abolitionist sentiments. In the summer of 1859, there appeared in the streets an old gentleman sporting a white beard and driving a canvas-covered wagon. He was known to the townspeople only as Isaac Smith. John Brown (alias Isaac Smith), with his Secretary of War John Henri Kagi (alias John Henri), was able to travel about freely, moving stocks of weapons through Franklin County to the Kennedy Farmhouse Brown rented four miles north of Harpers Ferry.

### A Price on His Head

Brown, a militant abolitionist with a price on his head for the murders he committed in Kansas, had vowed to "consecrate his life to the destruction of slavery." The Ritner boardinghouse provided the link between the beginning of his war against slavery in Kansas and the end of it at Harpers Ferry.



The John Brown Interpretive Center/  
Mary Ritner Boardinghouse  
225 E. King St., Chambersburg, PA

### Secret Activities

What was happening behind this modest, almost shabby, exterior in the summer of 1859?

As Mary Ritner strove to make life comfortable for her family and her boarders, baking and cooking, tending to her garden, sewing, cleaning, and raising her children, Brown made this boardinghouse his base of operations. He directed traffic in and out of the house, discussed plans with members of his Provisional Army, and received mail at the post office and arms at the train station. No one in the community had the least notion of the secret activity that was transpiring.



at the time. Instead they were plotting the best route to capture the Arsenal and arm the slaves.

One day Mary Ritner's daughter and friend peeked through the keyhole and watched seven men looking at a map. They thought the men were making "bogus money," because counterfeiting was common

## John Brown – The Man

Franklin Keagy, another boarder that summer, wrote about the softer side of John Brown. Ella Ritner, the youngest daughter of Mary, was returning home from an errand when she happened upon a black child who was lost. The child was frightened and crying loudly. So, Ella brought her home and asked her mother "Won't you keep it?" Brown, who was in the room, scooped up both children in his arms.

Emma, another daughter, also wrote about him, "John Brown was strong and vigorous. We children loved him. He was carrying guns and ammunition to Harpers Ferry instead of farming tools. My sister and I very often rode with him for a mile or two and walked back."



In the middle of August that year, Brown summoned **Frederick Douglass** to Chambersburg, where they met at a local quarry for two days. Douglass wrote, "Brown was always well armed and regarded strangers with

suspicion." Brown spoke of his plans, and asked Douglass for his help. But Douglass refused, calling it "sheer madness," "treason," saying slavery must be abolished in other ways.

*"Sometimes a man is worth more dead. Besides, God is with me in this."*

John Brown