

THE ABOLITIONIST & THE SCULPTOR

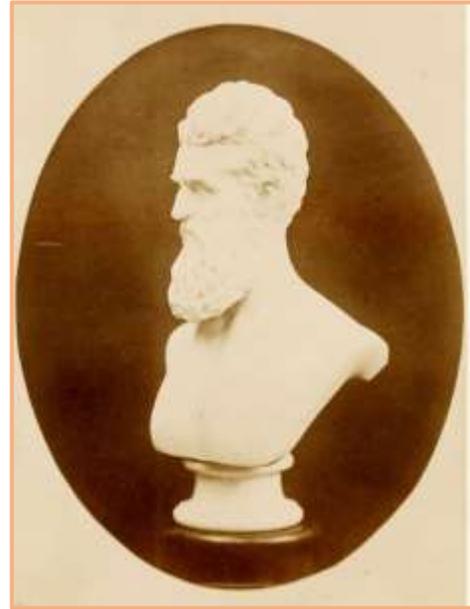
By Ellen Knight¹

In October 1859, while the abolitionist John Brown was held in jail awaiting execution, a Winchester man journeyed to Charlestown, Virginia, anxious for a last opportunity to see him. His trip was financed by the wife of one of the "Secret Six," a group who aided John Brown in Kansas and supported him financially until his death.

It was a perilous journey into a place where, the traveler himself reportedly said, "excitement was so intense and where every Northerner lay naturally under suspicion as an enemy." He undertook the risk because he had a vision of capturing a likeness of Brown in sculpture. The man was the artist Edward Augustus Brackett, and his goal was to get sketches and measurements to create a bust of the man viewed by many as a martyr to the cause of the abolition of slavery.

His bust of John Brown became an icon for the movement.

This icon might never have been completed, however, had the Virginians who tried to block Brackett's access to Brown been successful.



Bust of the Abolitionist John Brown by Winchester resident Edward A. Brackett, photographed by the Litchfield Studio in Arlington.

BRACKETT VISITS JOHN BROWN

Prior to creating a bust of the Abolitionist John Brown, Brackett already enjoyed some reputation as a sculptor. He won praise particularly for his life-sized story sculpture, *Shipwrecked Mother and Child*, inspired by the recent tragic death of Margaret Fuller.² He had a studio in Boston from 1841 to 1873. In 1843, he settled in Winchester where he remained until his death in 1908.

Brackett first conceived the idea of a bust of Brown in 1857 when he caught sight of the man in Boston and "had been attracted by the dignity of his mien."³ After the raid on Harper's Ferry and Brown's arrest in October, 1858, he was seized with a desire to do it.

"I could hardly sleep or eat, so absorbing was the desire that took possession of my mind." Not having the money for the trip to Virginia, he went in turn to Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, Wendell Phillips, and finally George Stearns, who said he was occupied with efforts to obtain funds for Brown's defense but would mention it to his wife. Mary Stearns' reply was \$120 in gold coins and her instructions that, if Brown did not consent, Brackett should say "that he has come at the

express wish and expense of Mrs. Stearns, and that she will be deeply disappointed if he returns without the measurements."⁴

"I got off as quickly as possible," Brackett said near the end of his life. "Reaching New York at night, next morning I set out again, and arrived in Harper's Ferry a little after dark. There I went to the hotel, an old-fashioned country tavern. I walked up to the register by the door, and signed myself, 'E. A. Brackett, Boston,' and at that time and place a man might quite as well have booked from Hell."⁵

As reported by American Anti-Slavery Society, "The *Tribune's* reporter wrote, 'Cannon are planted in front of the courthouse, the jail, and in positions commanding all the main streets. The approaches to Charlestown are also strongly guarded. At Harper's Ferry, there are companies of Virginia militia and United States troops. At Martinsburg, there are three or four hundred soldiers. Elsewhere it is the same.' The presence of strangers in Charlestown was thought so dangerous as to require a proclamation from the mayor, which accordingly was issued on the 12th of November, commanding all such as could not give a satisfactory account of themselves, to leave the town and county."⁶

The exact date of Brackett's arrival is unclear. Mary Stearns' gold was placed in his hand on Oct. 23. Brown's trial lasted from October 25 to November 2, 1859, when the verdict finding him guilty of treason was delivered. Brackett visited the jail while the trial of Brown's fellow defendant Shields Green was still proceeding. Shields was convicted on Nov. 10.



Photograph of Abolitionist John Brown owned by the sculptor Edward Brackett

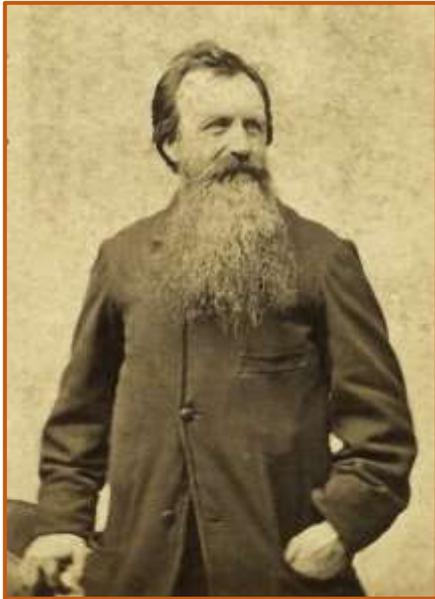
On the day after his arrival at Harper's Ferry, Brackett went to Charlestown, Virginia, taking letters of introduction to Senator James Murray Mason, who led the Senate committee that investigated the raid on Harper's Ferry, and to Andrew Hunter, the prosecuting attorney. "Both received me after the manner of Southern country gentlemen, with all civility. They often walked with me in public, in the days that followed, thereby, no doubt, contributing much to the general forbearance with which I was treated in that community."

Though courteous, Mason and Hunter put him off repeatedly, leading him to conclude that they intended to defeat his purpose by procrastination. Eventually one of them "handed me a letter, written by a Democratic office-holder in my town of Winchester which read, in effect: 'Look out for Brackett. He is an Abolitionist and a spy.'"

Although Brown was allowed visitors, Virginians deemed Brackett "if not himself a dangerous man, – to be about a dangerous business.... Anyhow, the Virginian authorities and people appear to have thought so, and Mr. Brackett, after

much solicitation, was denied access to Brown. The jailor told him, as we learn from the *Tribune's* reporter, 'that his mission in town was well known, and that there was an immense opposition to it, some hundreds of people having called on him and insisted, with all the arguments they could bring, that no such thing should be permitted. Under these circumstances, the jailor did not feel willing to open his doors,' for the desired purpose."⁷

BRACKETT USES SUBTERFUGE



Brackett in 1863

However, Brackett found a way to his goal, aided by one of the defense attorneys, Hiram Griswold. "At last, in despair of effecting my mission through diplomacy, I began to think of means more dark." The jailer, Captain Avis, stood in his way. "The assistant jailer, however, presented a different front. According to a story told me later, this man had known Brown in Kansas; but whatever the cause, he was willing to connive in my scheme to the extent of his power. Nevertheless he was greatly perturbed by the fear of discovery, and made me promise never to tell the tale, should anything be effected through his agency, during his lifetime.

"Finally the opportunity arrived. The trial of Shields Green, one of Brown's negro raiders, came on, and Captain Avis was obliged to conduct the prisoners from the jail to the courthouse. In anticipation of this movement, I had prepared a conventional drawing of a head. Taking the drawing and my measuring instruments and accompanied by Mr. Griswold I went to Brown's cell. Mr. Griswold entered and explained to Brown my purpose.

"Through the open door I saw the object of my pilgrimage quietly reading, but heavily loaded with chains. He was sitting in a chair with both hands chained, and his feet chained to the floor. Only those who saw him in that miserable prison can have any adequate conception of the moral grandeur of his presence! Everybody and everything was dwarfed in comparison. He looked up from his book when addressed by his counsel, and listened attentively to the request conveyed for me. Impressive as the scene was, I could not restrain a smile, when his reply repeated the very words of Mrs. Stearns. 'Nonsense, all nonsense! better give the money to the poor.'"

At first Brown could not be persuaded. Then Brackett followed Mrs. Stearns' instructions and asked Griswold to tell Brown that Brackett was there by her wish and at her expense and would be deeply disappointed if he returned without the measurements for a bust.

"I watched his face eagerly while Mr. Griswold repeated to him these words, and to which clung all my hopes. As he listened, I could see signs of interest mingled with surprise in his face; then a grave thoughtfulness. Presently his hands dropped at his side, and he seemed lost in thought.

Then, lifting his head and straightening himself up, he said with emotion, 'Anything Mr. or Mrs. Stearns desires: take the measurements.'"

Due to the underjailer's fears, Brackett had to be able to swear, if questioned, that he never entered the prisoner's cell. "So I stood on the threshold, sketch in hand, almost near enough to Brown to touch him, while Griswold, with my instruments and by my minute directions made each measurement. These I noted down in their several places on my sketch, photographing the subject on my brain the while."

BRACKETT SECRETLY AIDS NEW YORK TRIBUNE



Edward A. Brackett, pictured in an undated daguerreotype.

After making drawings and measurements for a bust of the condemned abolitionist John Brown, Brackett then returned home, surprising Horace Greeley in New York along the way. Greeley was the editor of the *Tribune*, employing the very reporter quoted by the Anti-Slavery Society, an acquaintance of Brackett's.

The day after his arrival in Virginia, "I drove over to Charlestown, the county seat, eight miles away, where John Brown lay in jail. To my infinite surprise the first face I saw was familiar. In the same instant our eyes met. The young fellow took a step toward me. 'For God's sake,' he whispered, 'don't call me by name — don't give me away!' It was [Edward H.] House of the New York *Tribune*. Under cover of bona-fide credentials from a Boston pro-slavery paper, House was supplying the *Tribune*, as opportunity offered, with those long, picturesque, and stingingly ironical letters so bitterly resented in the South.

"As yet he was personally unsuspected, but the hunt was keen, and, glad though he was to see a friend, House was on tenterhooks in this moment of recognition. So we made a feint of scraping acquaintance, for future use."

Before Brackett left Virginia, House came to see him. He was still unsuspected as the author of letters appearing in the *Tribune*, but the search was on. "As I was packing my bag to leave, House appeared at my chamber door with a grave request to be allowed to make my toilet. Producing his copy, written on dozens of sheets of thin foolscap, he wound it around and around my calves and thighs, finally gingerly helping me into my trousers. In that costume I reached New York, went at once to the *Tribune* office, and to Horace Greeley in person.

"When Mr. Greeley heard that I came from Charlestown he was, of course, much interested, and wished to settle down for a talk. 'With much pleasure,' said I, 'but I am pretty heavily clad. Will you excuse me if I undress a little in your office?' Scarcely concealing his surprise, Mr. Greeley

consented. I took off my trousers forthwith, and sheet by sheet disrobed myself of a whole week's correspondence. Greeley laughed aloud."

BRACKETT CREATES ICON FOR ABOLITIONISTS

Brackett was likely back in Winchester at the time of Brown's execution on Dec. 10, 1859. After it was completed, several copies were made. One of the first, a copy in bronze, was sent in 1860 to President Guillaume Fabre Nocolas Geffrard of Haiti, which had held a state funeral for Brown. Geffrard reportedly displayed it in the presidential palace.

Other copies stayed closer to home. On New Year's Day, 1863, the day the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, Mrs. George Luther Stearns, who financed the sculpture, sent a plaster cast to her friend Wendell Phillips. When Col. Robert Shaw led the 54th Massachusetts Infantry in a parade through Boston on May 28, 1863, William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of the anti-slavery newspaper *The Liberator*, was seen on the balcony of Phillips' Essex Street home with his hand upon the bust as the regiment marched by.

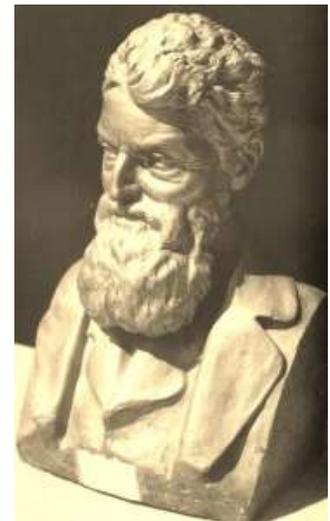
The plaster cast, Mrs. Stearns told Henry Bowditch who later inherited it, "was so unexpectedly satisfactory that I gave the happy sculptor an order for one in marble." Although the marble bust had been a fixture in their home in Medford and had been displayed at the Athenaeum in Boston prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, the Stearnses held an unveiling to commemorate the Proclamation and honor Brown on the evening of New Year's Day in 1863, following a great celebration in Boston.

About fifty people were invited. Ralph Waldo Emerson read his "Boston Hymn." Franklin Sanborn brought his sonnets on John Brown, read aloud by Phillips. Julia Ward Howe recited her "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Other guests included Garrison, Bronson Alcott, and the sculptor himself. Phillips was given the honor of unveiling the bust by removing the covering of blue cloth spangled with silver stars.

Sanborn showed a copy of the bust to Harriet Tubman at his home. "The sight of it, which was new to her, threw her into a sort of ecstasy of sorrow and admiration."⁸

The bust was exhibited at the Athenaeum where all could see it. In addition, medallion copies crafted by Brackett's student, Edmonia Lewis were sold. Lewis, an artist of both African and Native American descent who arrived in Boston in 1863, got an introduction to Brackett from Garrison, and received the sculptor's permission to make and sell medallions of John Brown based on his bust.

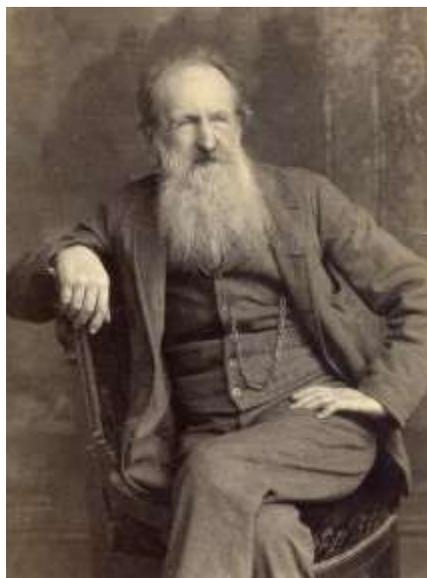
Much later Mrs. Stearns sent a plaster cast of the bust to the Kansas State Historical Society, which lent it to the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago.



Edmonia Lewis' bust of Brown, unveiled about a dozen years after the Brackett bust

THE BUST AS ART

Like John Brown himself, Brackett's statue evoked differing reactions. Many expressed great admiration for it. Charles Sumner reportedly exclaimed on seeing it, "There is nothing the sun shines upon so like Michael Angelo's 'Moses.'"⁹ The journalist James Redpath, who saw the bust in the Boston Athenaeum, commented that it might well be Moses but certainly was not John Brown.¹⁰



Brackett in old age

Brackett himself said, "It is a little poetized. A man who paints a picture of a great man and puts no greatness into it, saying that he sees none, errs both in perception and in art. In this case the idealization is elusive – not to be located in any one feature. But it exists, and purposely, the more truthfully to express the character of the subject. Yet John Brown was not himself a great man, but rather a forerunner of great things. He was a blind instrument, blindly cutting the way to the death of thousands and the birth of a new age."

Brackett also made busts of the Abolitionists Charles Sumner, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips.¹¹ Brackett himself donated plaster casts of the last two to the Winchester Public Library, which no longer has them nor any known record of what happened to them.

When Brackett died in 1908, a lengthy obituary appeared covering his work as an artist, his interest in wildlife and service as a state fish and game commissioner, his efforts at poetry, and his octagon house. While the Brown bust is listed among his creations, nary a word about his trip to Virginia and associations with Boston's leading Abolitionists is mentioned.¹² Apparently, that story had not been published in Winchester.

Fortunately, the story of Brackett's visit to Brown was printed in some other places (with some minor variation in the details) preserving this remarkable adventure.

¹This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Feb. 20, 21, 22, 2013. This article supersedes all previous articles.

² The sculpture is at the Worcester Art Museum.

³ *Topeka Daily Capital*, Nov. 14, 1889, quoted in Vincent Yardley Bowditch, *Life and Correspondence of Henry Ingersoll Bowditch*, Volume 2, 1902.

⁴ Quoted in Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, *The life and letters of John Brown: liberator of Kansas, and martyr of Virginia*, 1891.

⁵ Katherine Mayo, "John Brown's Raid Fifty Years Ago," *The Magazine of History with Notes and Queries*, Volume 10 (1909). A research assistant to Brown's biographer Oswald Garrison Villard, Mayo included a narrative Brackett gave about a year before his death in her article, which is the source for subsequent Brackett quotes not otherwise cited.

⁶ Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society for the year ending May 1, 1860.

⁷ Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

⁸ Sarah Hopkins Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 1869, p. 54.

⁹ Quoted in Sanborn.

¹⁰ Quoted by David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Right*, 2006.

¹¹ The bust of Phillips was completed in November 1862.

¹² By contrast, in 1902, the obituary in the *Winchester Star* for Rev. Joshua Young, who spent only his last two years in Winchester, recalled that he was a famous Abolitionist who was forced to leave his pastorate for preaching at Brown's funeral. While in Winchester, Young wrote an article about the funeral published in the *New England Magazine* of March 1904.