

The Making of an Exhibition

BY AMY GODINE

Every hardworking New York folklore scholar has surely tangled with material so dramatic, so rich with possibility, it seems to beg for a really great exhibition—but how to pull it off? How to put on a memorable show without professional curatorial experience, with no standing in the hothouse world of museums, with no legitimizing degree?

This is the story of a successful traveling exhibition, *Dreaming of Timbuctoo*, that went from a gleam in a social activist's eye to a three-year tour of New York State and a four-column notice in the *New York Times* with nary a hardcore credentialed museum maven involved. I was part of this exhibition, and to my mind the story of its conception and production is as interesting as it is instructive. Are there lessons here that *Voices* readers can put to use? I'm no folklorist but so what—when it comes to getting a toehold in the rarefied world of exhibition production, we're all interlopers.

It started with a novel, a magazine article, and one keen reader. The novel was Russell Banks's enthralling saga of the abolitionist John Brown, *Cloudsplitter*; and the magazine piece from *Orion* was titled, "They Called It Timbuctoo," by the Afri-

can American Boston scholar Katherine Butler Jones. When social activist Martha Swan first encountered Banks's novel and Jones's moving account of her effort to locate her family's roots in the Adirondack wilderness, she was astonished. She was working for an environmental agency at the time, living in the tiny Adirondack hamlet of Westport on Lake Champlain, only a few years out of a career as a grassroots organizer in New York City and the South. She loved the Adirondacks, but she had never thought to link the wilderness with a lost saga of political reform and racial justice. This aspect of Adirondack history—enlivened not only by the family farm of the nation's most renowned abolitionist but by a vanished antebellum black farm colony—was a heritage, she felt, aching to be honored. Working out of her spartan apartment, Martha Swan founded a community education project called *John Brown Lives!* and then set about dreaming up projects worthy of that galvanizing name.

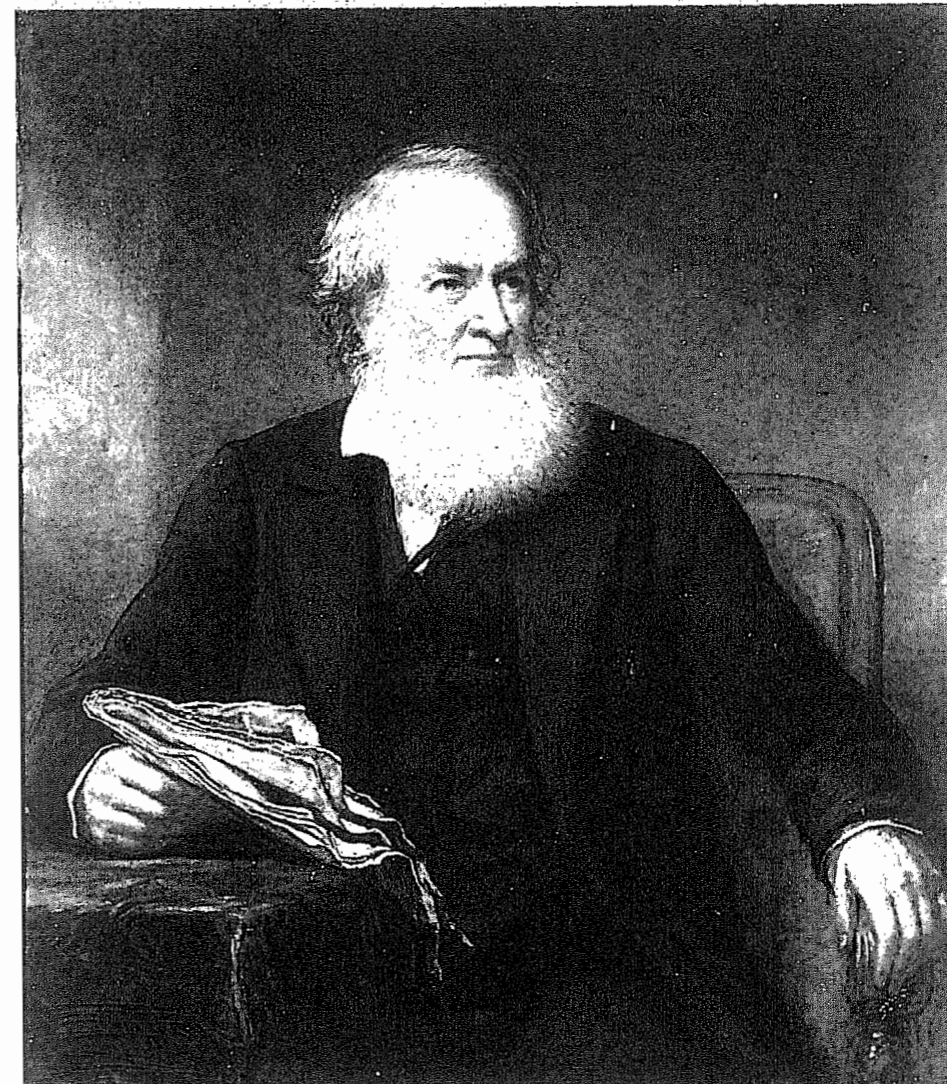
The first task was collaborative. With a New York City-based human rights group, the New Abolitionists, *John Brown Lives!* resurrected a long-defunct, near-forgotten, hundred-year-old Adirondack

tradition, John Brown Day at the John Brown Farm in North Elba, near present-day Lake Placid. Through the first half of the twentieth century, black and white families gathered at this state historic site on the anniversary of John Brown's birth for a day of commemorative speeches about the man who in 1859 tried to capture a federal arsenal in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, and to incite a multiracial revolt against slavery. John Brown Day languished in the 1960s, when black and white activists began to pursue discrete, not always sympathetic political agendas, but by the 1990s some forward-thinking souls, including Martha, decided it was high time for a revival. Several hundred people showed up for John Brown Day in 1999, and attendance held firm in the years that followed.

The second project was more amorphous. More ambitious, too. Swan was familiar with the cultural institutions of the region—the Adirondack Museum, the Adirondack Center Museum, various town museums, art centers, shoestring historical societies. Why had none of these venerable outfits ever taken up the saga of John Brown and the story of Timbuctoo, the black settlement that drew

*"He was not great, as Clay and Webster and Calhoun were great—he was not even so profound a champion of his cause as Charles Sumner, but he united the aristocratic bearing of the gentleman with the simplicity of the servant of the bondsman, giving to him as a brother, in such equal proportions that he earned for himself a title better than that of gentleman, better than that of philanthropist—
—that of a man."*

New York Herald, Dec. 29, 1874.



Panel from *Dreaming of Timbuctoo* exhibit: Gerrit Smith. Courtesy of Madison County Historical Society. Oneida, New York

Brown to the Adirondacks in the first place? What if she tried to work this rich material into an exhibition—would anybody bite?

The story was extraordinary. In 1846 the voters of New York State yet again denied free black New York males the right to vote unless they could meet a prohibitive \$250 property requirement, which effectively barred them from the franchise. Gerrit Smith, a land speculator, passionate abolitionist and good friend to many black reformers, knew well the devastating impact of the antisuffrage vote on the black political elite. Giving black New Yorkers land enough to parlay into a vote was his answer to the 1846 referendum—a way of saying, OK, if land is what you need to vote, well, here it is. Let's get started.

And so commenced the quiet, steady parceling out of one-fifth of a more than half-million-acre land fortune—a hundred and twenty thousand acres in forty-to sixty-acre lots—to three thousand African American residents of New York State. Most of the grantees, as they were called, were city dwellers, but in the end black men from almost every county in the state were represented in Smith's 122-page inventory of grantees. Smith's only requirements were that the grantees be black, poor, landless, sober, and between the ages of twenty-one and sixty. A heartfelt agrarian, Smith hoped fervently that his "scheme of justice and benevolence," as he called it, would enable New York African Americans to make a break from city slums, rum shops, immigrant mobs, and job discrimination for a safer, more spiritually sustaining and self-sufficient life on small farms of their own. If it helped them get a leg up on the vote, so much the better. I should add that Gerrit Smith was very *happy* to lose this land, some of which he'd tried and failed to unload before. Smith's taxes were ruinous, his financial distress immense—and giving away unsalable land was as sensible an act as any.

To identify his three thousand grantees, Smith asked ten or so prominent black reformers to pitch his giveaway from their pulpits and at suffrage conventions, in newspapers, and at neighborhood rallies. For a few years they went to bat for Smith, signing on grantees as fast as they could find them, not for pay (there was none) and not for glory, but for their shared conviction that getting black families out of racist cities and onto the land was the best way to get ahead and claim a portion of the American dream.

Long story short: the settlement effort failed. Some families moved north. A few even stuck around and tried to make a go of Adirondack life. But fifty families out of three thousand grantees isn't much of a showing. Regional historians routinely blamed the settlement's failure on the grantees (they were clueless, lazy, uneducable; they couldn't hack the rigors of the Adirondack winters; their land was lousy; they were city folk at heart), or on Smith's own craziness in thinking this could ever work. But mostly, regional historians didn't deal with the settlement at all. Their interest was John Brown.

Martha Swan approached me because I had previously written about lost pockets of Adirondack social history and had curated local exhibitions on ethnic enclaves in the region. So I knew about Timbuctoo. Or thought I did. Taking my cue from local history sources, I had assumed it was pretty much a nonstory, another cautionary fable about an Adirondack speculator's ambition gone risibly awry. And then there was the John Brown angle, which seemed to me had been done to death. But Martha suspected there was more, and she was right. I'd never thought about the critical role of Gerrit Smith's ten black apostles, for example—surely the most intellectually prominent, politically sophisticated group of land agents ever to attempt to settle homesteaders in northern New York. I'd never considered the suffrage angle: land for votes. I'd never seen the story framed in a wider political context. The idea that this Adirondack

The presence of black settlers in the Adirondack frontier provoked a wide range of responses among local white farmers and townspeople.

The early presence in the Champlain Valley of Quaker pioneers and New England Yankees had set the stage for a regional political culture that was uncommonly sympathetic to the antislavery cause. At the same time, some white settlers feared an influx of black homesteaders might upset the political balance of the community:



"Arguing the Point." A. F. Tait. Drawn on stone by Louis Maurer. Courtesy of the Adirondack Museum, Blue Mountain Lake, NY.

"At one period in the progress of the [Timbuctoo] settlement, it seemed probable that the colored freeholders would obtain the political preponderance of the town, where the anomalous spectacle might have been exhibited, of an African supervisor occupying a seat in the county legislature."

Walden S. Watson, of General Van and Agricultural Society, of the County of Lewis, takes on the Appointment of the N.Y.S. Agricultural Society, 1853.

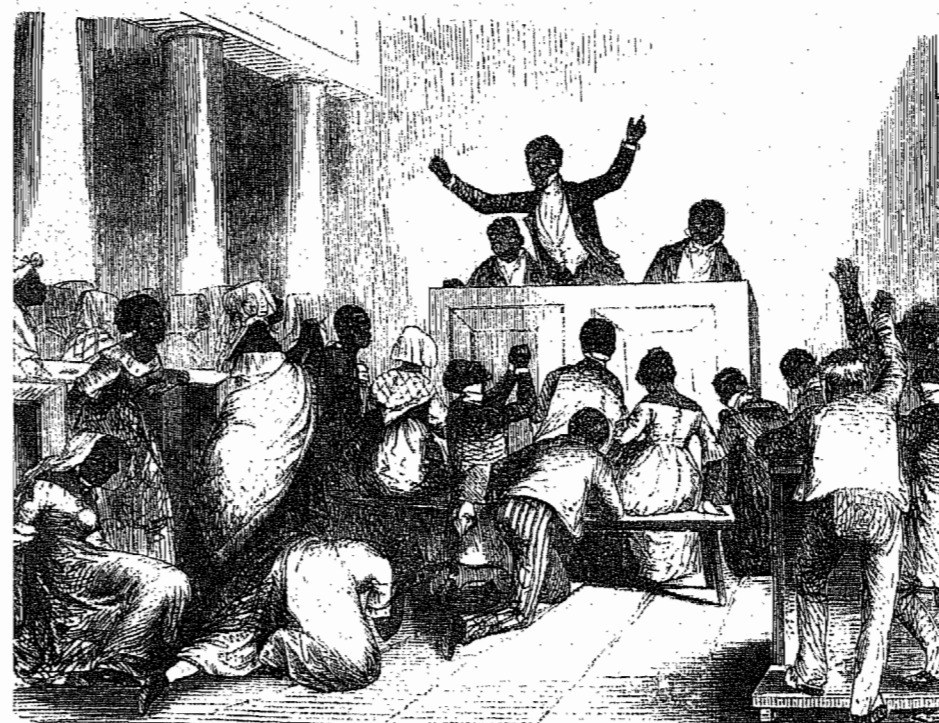
"Our white countrymen do not know us. They are strangers to our characters, ignorant of our capacity, oblivious to our history and progress, and are misinformed as to the principles and ideas that control and guide us, as a people."

[African American] New York State Suffrage Committee, ca. 1860.

Panel from *Dreaming of Timbuctoo* exhibit: Arguing the Point. A. F. Tait. Drawn on stone by Louis Maurer. Courtesy of The Adirondack Museum, Blue Mountain Lake, New York

At church pulpits in Troy, Utica, Manhattan, Syracuse and Brooklyn, Gerrit Smith's agents preached the gospel of the "Smith Lands."

They advertised the grants in handbills and promoted them at temperance meetings and in black newspapers.



"We held a fine meeting on Wednesday night and delivered 60 deeds to a fine set of men. You certainly deprive yourself of a most interesting sight, in declining to see a gathering of the Grantees. Tall, stalwart, hard-fisted, they embody a Hope of the Race. We hold another meeting to night at Brooklyn, and on Monday in Westchester."

James McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith. Letter. New York City. Dec. 17, 1846

Panel from *Dreaming of Timbuctoo* exhibit: Black convention goes, around 1840. Engraving courtesy of William Loren Katz

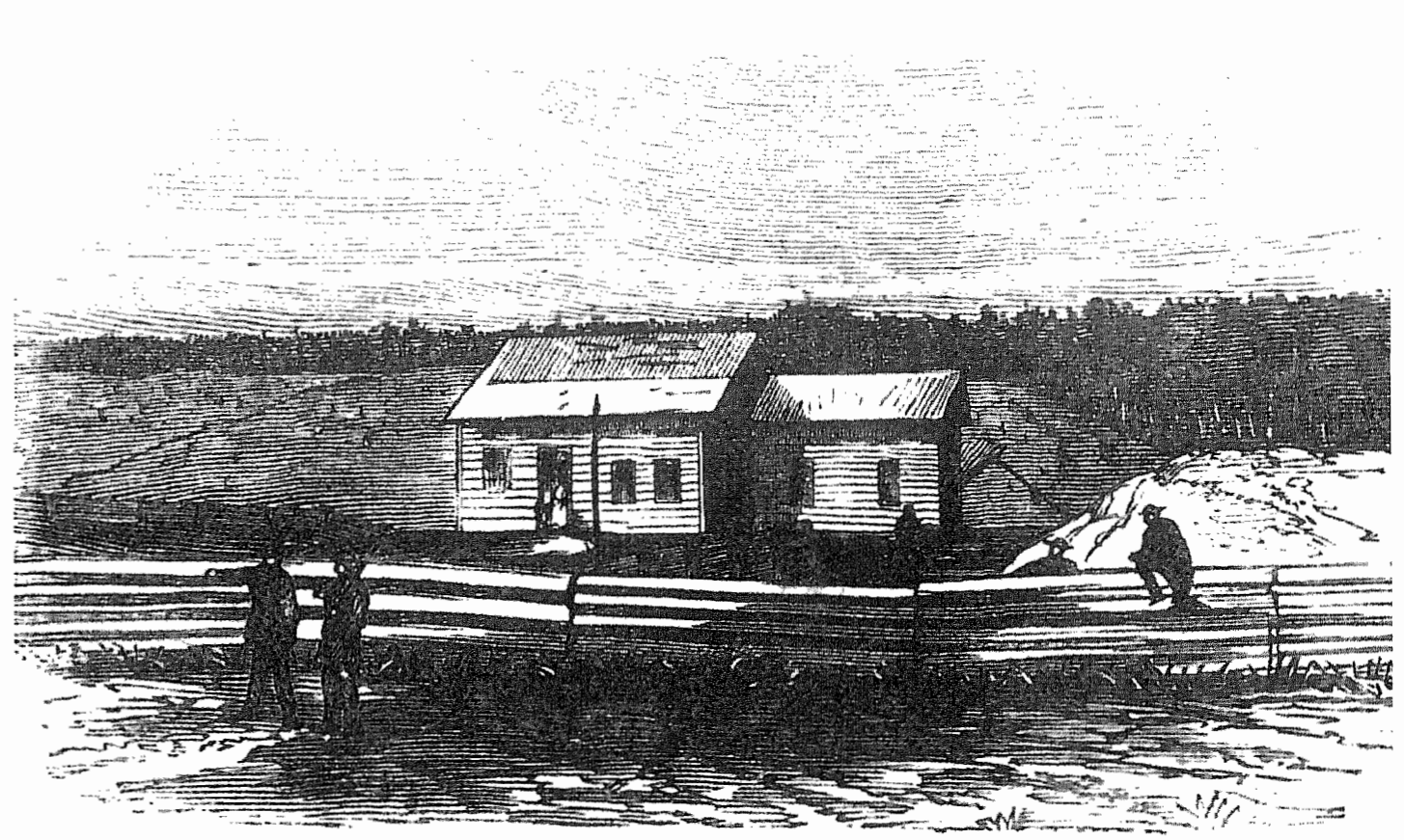
land giveaway project was hitched up to civil rights drew me in.

In this, I was not alone. Everybody who eventually volunteered to help out with the project—with the research, the mapping, the design—was compelled by this angle, a view of the Adirondack region from a freshly politicized vantage, a perspective that yoked Adirondack history to the national scene. That's what kept me and a score of others engaged in doing a lot of work for much less than we knew our skills and labor to be worth, or in many cases, for nothing. That, and of course, the charismatic example of Martha's own steady zeal and her conviction that the issues of racial justice that drove Gerrit Smith and the black abolitionists 150 years ago were no less pressing today. Through Martha's eyes, the story assumed an urgency, a feeling of necessity, that overwhelmed its antiquarian appeal. And Martha, remember, was an organizer from way back. She knew how to make people feel good.

And we needed people, lots of them. We needed volunteer researchers to help us out all over—to comb census records in Madison County, to share findings on grantees from Queens, to check out candidates for the antislavery Liberty Party in Clinton County in 1845. This was a jigsaw with a thousand scattered pieces, some of them mired in the state archives or squirreled away in the Gerrit Smith Collection at Syracuse University or buried in *The Black Abolitionist Papers*. What was the demographic profile of the grantees? Why did thousands of grantees who signed their deeds never come north? What was happening in Brooklyn, or for that matter, up in the Adirondacks, that may have dissuaded them? Were they inept farmers? (No, not at all—but they were undercapitalized and inadequately outfitted from the first.) Did John Brown really serve as the "kind of father to them" he'd promised he'd be in a letter to Gerrit Smith? (Not by half: he mostly left his wife and children to manage his Adirondack farm while he pursued other agen-



From *Dreaming of Timbuctoo* exhibit: Black Farmers at North Elba, New York. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of The Adirondack Museum, Blue Mountain Lake, New York



From *Dreaming of Timbuctoo* exhibit: John Brown Farmstead. Courtesy of West Virginia State Archives, Boyd B. Stutler Collection

das in England, Kansas, Ohio, and Harper's Ferry.) Did the settlers really huddle in an African-like encampment with a tattered flag flapping from a tilted pole? (Sheer literary fancy: in fact, many of the settlers never stayed on their appointed lots, preferring to squat on better land nearby.) Did white racist storekeepers do them in? (Some did. Other white neighbors worked closely with their new neighbors to found a singing school, a library, a church.)

Among the volunteer researchers who labored on this project were a labor lawyer from Albany who was a long-time Gerrit Smith admirer, a Parks and Recreation worker with a passion for Adirondack social history, a site manager for the John Brown Farm, a graduate student with a keen eye for the minutiae of the census, a self-taught scholar of the vernacular architecture of Saranac Lake, an African American historic sites photographer, a retired Radcliffe College librarian, and numberless local and lay historians who contributed information about

grantees from counties as remote as Erie and Ontario. We journeyed, sometimes as a group, more often solo, to the state library, county archives, Syracuse, Peterboro, the New York Historical Society in Manhattan. We made tracks. And inevitably, of course, as the findings piled up, as the circle of our story widened to include not just the brief abortive tale of Timbuctoo but the savage political context that engendered it, our vision of the exhibition grew accordingly.

I did not expect to face this crossroads. Martha and I were figuring on a small-scale, bare-bones exhibition with foam-board labels backed with Velcro, smallish images, something that would suit the basement in the barn at the John Brown Farm—a rather dank, low, unprepossessing room without windows. But the story got bigger and deeper—and better. It deserved more. It snagged the interest of exhibition designer Stephen Horne of Kevan Moss Designs, who agreed to work on it for less than his usual fee, not for any love of losing money but because he

was himself an Adirondacker with an interest in Gerrit Smith and the dream of Timbuctoo spoke to his own heart. With Stephen on board and a few crucial grants rolling in, was it time to rethink the whole concept? What if we delayed the opening, expanded the narrative and visuals, and shot for a venue as professional and ambitious as our own expectations?

Which in the Adirondacks could only mean the Adirondack Museum at Blue Mountain Lake.

The benefits of an Adirondack Museum opening were immense. A regional institution would lend our shoestring production a cachet and credibility that could catapult it into a dozen venues that might not otherwise consider it. Not to speak of the exposure! Ninety thousand people visit the fourteen-building museum annually. But would the Adirondack Museum give *John Brown Lives!* the time of day? The museum has its own stable of gifted curators and an exhibition schedule planned years in advance. Why would they go for a show they'd neither curated

nor originated, a script over which they'd have no say, a story with much more political content, more text, and fewer artifacts than their audience might expect?

On the other hand, we weren't exactly, as they say, *from nothing*. Jackie Day, then the director, knew and admired Martha's work with *John Brown Lives!* Stephen's exhibition skills were well regarded. And I'd been in and out of the museum on various consulting, lecture, or research projects for years. More importantly, this exhibition had something the museum needed: most people assume that the Adirondacks is white folks' country, with no part in the largely urban black experience. This exhibition explored the region in a new way: as an idealized landscape of equal rights and black self-sufficiency, a place with meaning and value for black Americans no less than white. In hosting *Dreaming of Timbuctoo*, the Adirondack Museum gained an opportunity to expand its audience and, perhaps, its agenda. African Americans might come to recognize a connection to the region and its cultur-

al institutions as they hadn't felt since the early decades of John Brown Day. And if this was as big a deal for the museum as the museum's approbation was for us, we figured they would jump.

We figured right. *Dreaming of Timbuctoo* would be launched at the Adirondack Museum with the full support of its staff and all the fanfare of one of its own homemade productions.

Then came the bad news. For every sentence in the exhibition narrative, I needed to come up with a compelling image. Stephen warned me gently that this was an exhibition, not a book. So start looking. And this was when the going got seriously tough. The story, really, was all text, a brilliant paper trail of letters, handbills, lists and ledgers, reams of vivid quotes from radical abolitionists, lush agrarian rhetoric in the black press, resolutions at black conventions, letters from John and Mary Brown, progress reports in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (yes, Douglass too was a Gerrit Smith grantee), survey maps, long lists of grantees—but no color, no art,

no *stuff*. Of the perhaps two hundred grantees who actually visited northern New York after getting deeds for land from Gerrit Smith, we had but three faces—three sad-faced old men some decades past their homesteading prime—and one solitary photograph of a group of unsmiling black men and women in wide-brimmed hats posing in a field in North Elba, occasion unidentified, participants unnamed. As for other material evidence: nothing. No traces in the woods of makeshift cabins. No portraits (who among them could afford a portrait?). But that's how it goes when your subject is a vanished underclass that lacked the means to immortalize itself on canvas or to build enduring structures.

That left me scrambling for generics—never a first option, but we really had no other choice. Happily, the Adirondack Museum had in its own collection splendid paintings, photographs, and etchings that could help me illustrate a raft of points: images of the Adirondack frontier in the mid-1850s, early homesteads,

"I used to be compelled to clear up ten acres of land a year in the South, and do other work, and get thumped in the bargain. But when I reach my little farm, with my liberty axe I expect to clear up fifteen acres annually. I have received so much abuse from white men that once I thought all were my enemies. I was mistaken. God bless Mr. Gerrit Smith, and all the Smiths. (Long and continued cheering.)"

From "John Brown's Survey Map," by "Gerrit Smith," *NYC*, New York Museum of Cultural History, October 25, 1848. *Working with Folk Materials*



"African American farmer with team of oxen in upstate New York." Photograph Courtesy of DeWitt Historical Association, Tompkins County

Panel from *Dreaming of Timbuctoo* exhibit: African American farmer with team of oxen in upstate New York. Courtesy of DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County, Ithaca, New York

backcountry roads, farmers talking politics, John Brown's farm in a hundred different moody lights. New York City museums and archival repositories supplied gripping illustrations of the problems—unemployment, racist mobs, bigotry, slave catchers, routine violations of civil rights—that gave rise to the idea for a black Adirondack farm colony in the first place. Local historical societies and libraries provided us with images of the story's prominent abolitionists, black and white. The Library of Congress, American Antiquarian Society, the Schomburg, the West Virginia State Archives—we borrowed from them all and were even able to display John Brown's surveyor's transit, the same one he likely used to help the black settlers determine the boundaries of their land.

I'm satisfied with the images I found, but the real visual coup was the overall design. Stephen had to find a way to put some flesh, or an illusion of flesh, on this bare-bones display of talking walls. His strategy was inspired. Instead of settling for stand-alone hinged panels, he worked with an Adirondack craftsman to devise a set of freestanding rough wood frames, easy to break down, secured with wooden pegs. The text panels—not paper or foam board but sailcloth-heavy two-sided grommet-studded banners—were laced in place between the frames with short lengths of rope. All the banners were digitally imprinted with a burlap pattern that lent the cloth the warm look of home-spun. The textured backdrop neatly contrasted with the digitally superimposed illustrations and text.

Among the research team's achievements was determining the exact location of each of the three thousand grants of land, even if this land was never visited or settled. The long, tedious work saw us through several late-night large pizzas. But we had to do it—we really wanted to get a feel for the physical range, the scope of Gerrit Smith's giveaway. What it came to on the map was a patchy rectangle of wilderness that ran roughly forty miles north

to south, maybe fifteen miles across. That's a lot of woods. Then Stephen Horne took our colored-in survey map and matched it to a topographic map of northern New York. He overlaid the topo with an outline of the disbursements and turned that map into a banner. This way you could see exactly where in New York State the parcels were—how far from Plattsburgh, Utica, Malone; which lots were on mountaintops, which under twenty feet of lake water. For me, this was the capstone of the exhibition, the image that drove home the immensity of Gerrit Smith's gesture as no amount of text could hope to do. People stood before it, mesmerized. So much land, such *mild* land! No wonder they didn't come!

Since the exhibition opened at Blue Mountain Lake, *Dreaming of Timbuctoo* has traveled to Paul Smith's College, SUNY-Plattsburgh, Utica College, the Brooklyn Public Library Main Branch, the Tang

Museum at Skidmore College, the Peterboro Historical Society, and the Adirondack History Museum in Elizabethtown. Stephen's structure is holding firm, and I can still read the panels without getting bored. From the *New York Times* to the *Plattsburgh Republican*, press and radio coverage has been extraordinarily generous. It's a story that makes people sit up and take heed.

As for the exhibition's movers and shakers, we're all on to other things. *John Brown Lives!* sponsors summer lecture and performance series geared toward issues of social and political justice, and such is Martha's reputation that small-town Adirondack audiences have thrilled to lectures from Eric Foner, James Loewen, and William Loren Katz. Stephen Horne and Kevan Moss continue to design award-worthy exhibitions. I'm doing the usual miscellany of freelance writing about Adirondack social history and working on

a book on the lost dream of Timbuctoo. I've often thought about the feverish work that went into the exhibit and why it seemed so compelling. I think it had to do with some spirit of necessity, a conviction shared by everyone who helped put it together that here was a story not merely interesting or résumé-enhancing or marvelously unexpected, but *needed*. A good feeling. It should be there for everything we do. ▼

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