

# Daring death for an idea

# J.B. Grinnell and the Underground Railroad

By Nicole Etcheson  
Herald Register Intern

"No man in America more fully embodies the whole juice and spirit of rampant abolitionism in its present sense, than does J.B. Grinnell," the Iowa City Press wrote in 1862.

J.B. Grinnell earned that reputation for his long career in preaching against slavery, his aid to escaping slaves, and not least of all in the eyes of his fellow Iowans, the hospitality which he gave to John Brown on that radical abolitionist's trek through Iowa in 1859.

In that year, Iowa was a divided state. Although legally a free-soil state nearly all its public officials were pro-slavery Democrats, most of them appointed by President James Buchanan. Those men reported violations of the Fugitive Slave Law, searched railroad cars for escaping slaves, and harassed settlers moving west on the Iowa trail to Kansas and Nebraska. Slaves were even owned and worked in the southern counties. At the beginning of the Civil War, Governor Samuel Kirkwood confessed in a letter to the secretary of the treasury, "The southern half of our state is strongly pro-slavery."

Despite the Fugitive Slave Law, which made it illegal to aid escaping slaves, southern slave owners protested that "Negroes escaped to Canada as easily as if they traveled on a railway which ran beneath the ground."

"A hamlet on the prairie," as J.B. Grinnell described the town he founded, Grinnell was a stop on that "Underground Railroad."

### Entered Near Tabor

Slaves escaping from Missouri entered Iowa in the southwest corner of the state near Tabor and passed through Lewis, Des Moines, Grinnell, Iowa City, West Liberty, Tipton, De Witt, and Low Moor, crossing the Mississippi at Clinton on their way to one of the Great Lakes ports where they were ferried to Canada and freedom.

All along the "railroad" Iowans with strong abolitionist beliefs, usually New Englanders, helped the fleeing slaves by hiding them in houses, attics, and barns and passing the fugitives on, under cover of night, to the next station on the route. But those men were out

In 1851, after graduating from the Theological Seminary in Auburn, N.Y., Grinnell went to Washington, D.C., as pastor of the Trinity Church. Grinnell was said to have preached the first anti-slavery sermon heard in Washington at the First Congregational Church. In deed his "forthright" preaching against slavery aroused such opposition that he was forced to leave the town. He returned to New York, where he married Julia A. Chapin, the daughter of an abolitionist minister, on Feb. 2, 1852.

Grinnell continued preaching. When his voice failed him as a result of too much outdoor speaking, he consulted Horace Greeley who gave him the famous advice, "Go West, young man, go West. There is health in the country and room away from our crowds of idlers and imbeciles."

Grinnell took Greeley's advice and began his work of founding "somewhere in this new western country a religious, moral and educational community."

The new town of Grinnell embodied its founder's interest in abolition, and while J.B. Grinnell frequently condemned the lawlessness of Iowa, he was a conscientious breaker of the Fugitive Slave Law.

Grinnell, a wool trader, used his huge wool barn as a station. He and his fellow sheep raisers and station managers corresponded through cipher messages in which "fleeces of wool" referred to the fleeing slaves they were transporting.

### "Notorious Rendezvous"

So well known became the town's and Grinnell's activities that a reward was offered by Missouri slave-owners for J.B. Grinnell "dead or alive." A letter in the Des Moines Journal charged that the town had gained a "widespread reputation of being the most notorious rendezvous for stolen and fugitive Negroes west of the Mississippi." The same letter claimed that \$37,000 worth of stolen "property" from Missouri had passed through J.B. Grinnell's hands.

In self defense, Grinnell always claimed that he was "no party to enticing slaves away, only charged with the crime of giving shelter to the fleeing and helping them to Canada."

J.B. Grinnell's actions, however it

unusually cool reception.

Brown was warned as he passed through Iowa that pro-slavery agents would be waiting in Grinnell. Those agents would be working for Samuel Workman, a Democrat, the Buchanan-appointed postmaster at Iowa City and U.S. marshal for the district.

Shortly before noon on Feb. 20, 1859, Brown's party came in sight of Grinnell. Brown, unsure of what pro-slavery forces were nearby, left his band in a grove near the town and went to the home of J.B. Grinnell.

Brown rang the doorbell and introduced himself to Grinnell, not by name, but only as a friend of Mrs. Grinnell's. Grinnell promptly invited the unexpected guest to tea.

After a short talk, Brown suddenly admitted, "I am not here on a social visit. I am the awful Brown — Capt. John Brown of Kansas."

Grinnell showed Brown the copy of the New York Tribune that he had just been reading and warned the Kansas that the authorities were after him.

### "Come for Advice"

"My company is just back here in the grove, and I am only a scout," Brown replied. "Don't put yourself and family in jeopardy. I came for advice. I was in the wool business, and am still, they say derisively, and I hear you are openly. We are 16 persons, with horses, and man and beast must be fed, and stop with friends if we can, and not spies. Then, it is Saturday and we want rest. I make it a rule not to travel on Sunday if it can be avoided, and to save expenses we can cook our own food, and we need a rendezvous to stack our arms. What do you advise?"

Grinnell opened the door to his parlor and said, "This is at your service, and you can occupy the stalls in the barn that are vacant."

Grinnell also advised Brown that there was no need to wait to bring the party into town, "for you have too much of an outfit for concealment."

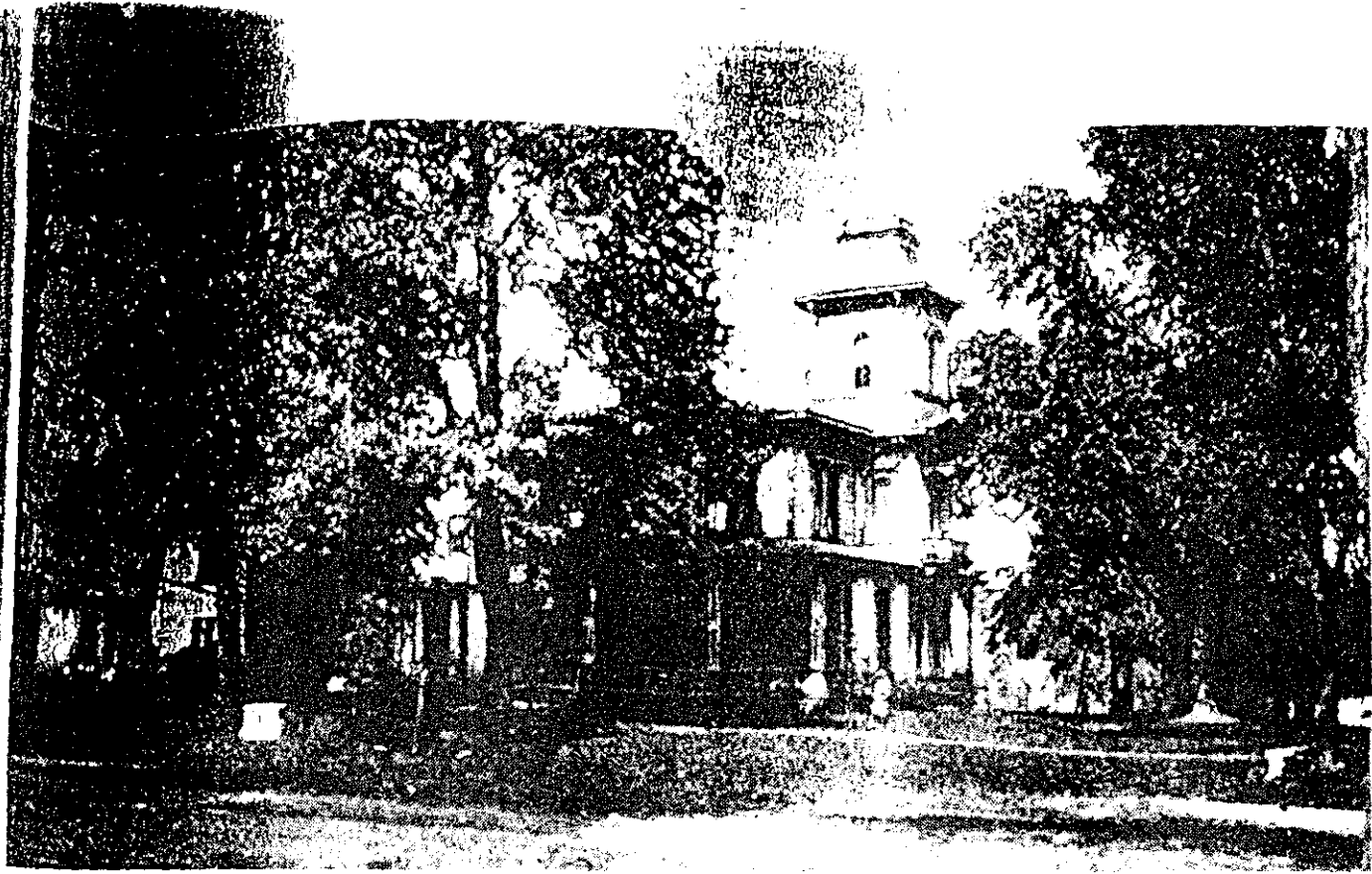
By that time, as a Grinnell woman recalled, "a rumor ran through the settlement that John Brown, better known throughout the West as Ossawatimie Brown, had arrived in Grinnell with a small band of fugitives from Missouri on his way to Canada."

When Brown's company filed into Grinnell, "the town was out in good numbers to see the outfit."

To J.B. Grinnell's eyes Brown's men

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The home of J.B. Grinnell where John Brown and his men took refuge during their trek through Iowa in 1859.

From: The Grinnell Herald-Register, Monday,  
November 24, 1967, page 10

Photos courtesy of  
Grinnell College archives

which is kept back

Another man asked Brown if he thought it right to sell stolen horses.

"How can a piece of Missouri property be a thing 'steal'?" Brown asked in return. "They did not strip the plantation but took only what was due them, and rode away for their liberty just as any man or a coward would do, having a chance." Tomorrow being Sunday, read your Bibles about "hiding the out-cast," and Monday buy seven horses to help on a family of God's black children.

Again on Sunday night, Brown spoke to the townspeople. "Slavery is a crime and a traitor to his race and country will put a wall of fire around it. You have a college started and I hear your prayers and this spirit will save the country. Slavery can not endure a college of a prayer that goes above the roof.

After the Sunday night meeting, J.B. Grinnell found the stage driver waiting with a message from Workman warning Grinnell that armed men were coming to get Brown. "You can see that it will give you a bad name to have a band here, then all who are associates and there will be an arrest or blood." Workman wrote: "Get the old devil away to save trouble, for he will be

ingale in Cedar County, which he reached without incident.

Brown stayed in the quaker community of Springdale until March 1. Meanwhile, Grinnell went to Chicago, where, as a wool shaper, he loaded a railroad car from John V. Tracy, the superintendent. The car was to be transported at West Liberty, to take the fugitives to Chicago.

#### An Offer Refused

The kind of freight was not named. Grinnell recalled, "and the Democratic manager, while suspicious, was kept in ignorance. When too late the permission was withdrawn for the outfit had filled the car, and Brown was so fully aware of the value of caution that there was only a secret unloading in Chicago. It was in vain that I offered the coach money. Mr. Tracy saying, 'I would not accept it for \$10,000 since we might be held for the value of every one of the negroes.'"

Before the train reached Davenport, however, a passenger recognized Brown and discovered the slaves. Brown and his armed men persuaded the man to keep quiet. The conductor and English agent and sympathizer asked the other passengers.

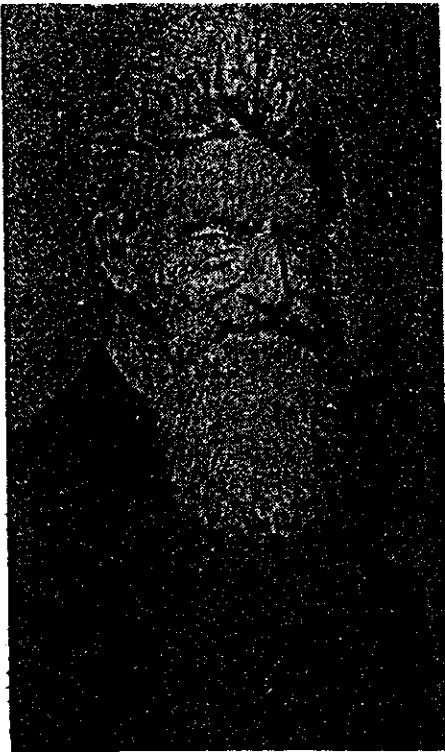
When the train stopped in Davenport, U.S. Marshal Laurel Summers boarded the train to arrest the fugitives, but they did not ex-

Iowa saw John Brown as a noble martyr and in many towns the flags flew at half mast. In Grinnell, Brown's death had immediate repercussions.

When captured, Brown had had such person letters from many prominent abolitionists including memoranda of letters written to Grinnell by Brown. Senator James M. Mason of Virginia, the author of the Fugitive Slave Law, had been named head of a committee to investigate Brown's papers. Mason was convinced there was a widespread political conspiracy to free the slaves.

J.B. Grinnell was summoned by the Mason senatorial committee, and a writ of extradition was issued and made ready to give to Iowa Governor Kirkwood. Senator James W. Grimes of Iowa warned Grinnell in time to cross the border to Canada until things quieted. Friends advised Grinnell to flee to Canada or go into hiding. Instead, Grinnell went to Washington, bypassing the marshal with the extradition papers in Pittsburgh.

In Washington, the issue was delayed until Senator Grimes threatened to lay the matter before the entire Senate. Grinnell was not given a hearing. Mason retorted that Grinnell was too willing a witness and could go home, but since he had not been escorted by the marshal, there were no fees due and he had to pay his own fare.



John Brown

numbered simply because only one New Englander had settled in Iowa for every six southerners before 1850. Even some Iowans of New England background felt they had no right to break the law by helping escaping slaves.

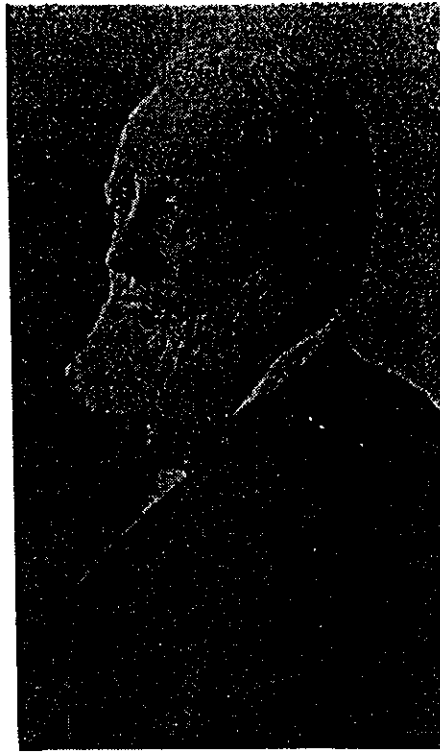
Only a few towns like Tabor, Springdale, and Grinnell were overwhelmingly abolitionist. The Quakers of Springdale and the Congregationalists of Grinnell took seriously the Mosaic law which commanded, "Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee; he shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose."

Josiah Bushnell Grinnell was particularly suited to follow that teaching. Born on Dec. 22, 1821, in New Haven, Vt., to Myron and Catherine Hastings Grinnell, J.B. Grinnell was raised in an atmosphere of "hard work, poverty and a sternly religious training," according to his biographer, Charles Payne.

**'Radical' School**

When Grinnell left the farm to get an education, he attended Oneida Institute "a hotbed of the radicalism of the day." Indeed, the school was so radical that the regents of the state of New York refused to let it confer degrees, and Grinnell completed the course of instruction without one.

This article was based on material from the following publications: Josiah Bushnell Grinnell, "Men and Events of Forty Years," D. Lothrop Company, 1891; Des Moines Register, 1927; Grinnell College Scarlet and Black, March 19, 1927; The Grinnell Herald-Register, Jan. 3, 1966 and Dec. 14, 1970; Curt Harnack in The Iowan, July 1956; Charles Payne, "Josiah Bushnell Grinnell," State Historical Society, 1938; and Stephen D. Oates, "To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown," Harper & Row 1970



J.B. Grinnell

legal, were mild contrasted with the violence practiced by John Brown, just as Iowa was peaceful and united compared with the torments of "Bleeding Kansas." Yet when Brown appeared unexpectedly on J.B. Grinnell's doorstep in the late winter of 1859, there was no question but that the Kansan was welcome.

On Saturday, Feb. 20, 1859, J.B. Grinnell was reading the New York Tribune. The story he read was about John Brown. On the night of Dec. 19, 1858, Brown and a band of men had encamped on the Kansas side of the Missouri line. Their scout brought in a black, Jim Daniels, who appeared to be selling brooms. Daniels confided to Brown that he, his wife, and children belonged to a Missouri slave-owner and were about to be sold at auction. Daniels was looking for help for himself and others he knew of in a similar plight.

On the following night, Brown and some of his men arrived at midnight at the house of Daniels' owner, Harvey Hicklan. Hicklan was held at gunpoint while the band looted the house and out buildings for provisions and freed five slaves. Brown and his men went to another home and liberated another five slaves.

**Slave-owner Shot**

Meanwhile, another party of Brown's men had gone to the home of a slave-owner named David Cruise. Cruise, when he appeared to be reaching for a weapon, was shot and killed by one of Brown's men.

The slaying of Cruise, more than the theft of the slaves, aroused the countryside against Brown. The governor of Missouri offered a \$3,000 reward for Brown, and President Buchanan offered \$250.

The story of Cruise's murder and descriptions of the slaves spread over Iowa. Even anti-slavery communities such as Tabor were shocked by the killing of Cruise and gave Brown and

numbers to see the outfit. To J.B. Grinnell's eyes Brown were particularly martial. "Comparing as good a display as possible were glistening with spurs, and was a clink of swords and in sight Sharp's six-shooters. . . . The canvas-covered wagons followed by horsemen. . . . Sentinels were by strict military precaution," wrote later.

**Pistol Not Concealed**

Compared to his men, Brown dressed inconspicuously, in Grinnell's opinion. "There were no spurs, boots, and he was only clad in a well-worn suit, with nothing to border warfare save a wide-rimmed and half-concealed pistol." Brown held the pistol openly to avoid breaking the law against carrying concealed weapons.

The party settled into the town where black men were hidden in the back room of Reid's Hotel. Grinnell's parlor became "a military arsenal by the stacking of rifle shotguns, carbines, revolvers, flasks, strings of bullets and spread blankets for sentinels, and caution, were to take a bed which could spring to their weapons at first alarm."

One townsman objected that town will be burned — it had been threatened, and every man should come home to defend his property. So about and the United States might could easily make an arrest."

This "nervous, good man," Grinnell described him, expressed worries of many of the townspeople assembled that evening in the parlour room used as the church. Brown spoke in defending his side of the Kansas border war.

"Bleeding Kansas" was of serious concern to Grinnell citizens, but many of them had friends or relatives settled there. But Brown's audience made up of men to whom the raid, the murder of Cruise, and theft of slaves were almost as forgivable crimes as slavery if men wanted J.B. Grinnell to be and not to bring reprisals from slavery factions onto the town.

**Brown's Defense**

Brown defended the violence in Kansas by telling the Grinnellians to save a great state from slavery. Those that went there to forge became murderers and deserters. "I am not a man of blood, but I send me on an errand I don't want my enemies to choose the battleground, and if I ordered men was because they had planned. There is no law on the border will be — the hirelings, backed Buchanan, cannot face lead."

A collection was taken to help fugitives, but when Brown announced that he would put up for sale the surplus horses, a Grinnell friend asked, "What title can you give?"

"The best," Brown answered, "I swear that they were taken from land they had cleared."

Workman wrote. "Get the old devil away to save trouble, for he will be taken dead or alive."

#### Valuable Friendship

Not only did J.B. Grinnell realize the danger, but Workman was a personal friend and a promoter for the Rock Island Railroad, soon to enter the town, so the Democrat's continued friendship was valuable. Nevertheless, Grinnell gave the message to Brown.

Brown's reply was to tell Grinnell: "Give my compliments to the slave catcher with a notice that I shall wait here only one day to give him a reception, then pass directly east. My mission is fearful, but we can fire 100 times without loading, and even the black women are a dead shot. Never fear, I have been a minuteman for years amidst the singing of bullets, and my company will never be taken."

Monday came and sickness, as well as Brown's stubbornness, kept the party from moving on. Although Brown stayed the extra day, there was no sale of horses and Workman did not appear. J.B. Grinnell believed Workman became less brave the closer Brown got to Iowa City. Workman's timidity was not unusual for pro-slavery officials in anti-slavery states who hesitated to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law because of widespread resentment of it.

Brown found time during his visit to linger in Grinnell's wool-barn where the two spoke of both forms of the "wool-trade": the raising of sheep and the sheparding of fugitive slaves to safety in Canada.

"I am under the law of fate which I cannot read," Brown told Grinnell. "I like a quiet home and children, but there is no rest for me. . . . Yes — wife, boys and all are full of fear, but they don't know my mission — it is direct from God Almighty, and I am discharging it."

#### 'A Kind of Insanity'

Grinnell later revealed in his autobiography that this statement "gave me the first indication of a kind of insanity," and he urged Brown to "take rest or your losses and severe sacrifice of your boys will drive you to madness."

"No," Brown answered. "The battle is raging, and I must fight, much as I like a home and [to] play with children."

Grinnell also recalled overhearing a conversation between Brown and one of his men in which Brown said, "The article must be drafted over," followed by a long reading and discussion. Grinnell was later convinced that a part of the Virginia constitution, Brown's plan for a new state in the territory he conquered in the Harper's Ferry attack, was written in the Grinnell home, although Grinnell himself claimed to be ignorant of the Harper's Ferry plot.

On Tuesday, Brown and his party headed east. The town turned out to see Brown off just as it had to welcome him. Grinnell described his last sight of Brown "starting with his company sitting beside a driver in the van, holding a mulatto child, raising his hat in the midst of the cheers of the crowd, with a God-bless you, joined in by the equestrian troupe, that led and flanked his covered wagons, bound for Spri-

When the train stopped in Davenport, U.S. Marshal Laurel Sumners boarded it with a posse, but they did not examine the freight car or catch Brown.

An Underground Railroad agent in Davenport, anxiously watching the train, reported: "From a window of the old Burtis Hotel I was greatly relieved to hear the train crossing the bridge to Chicago, where the Negroes landed safely next morning."

From Chicago, detective Allen Pinkerton arranged the blacks' transportation to Detroit where Brown saw the former slaves turned over to the Canadian authorities.

Brown was to remember his stay in Grinnell with gratitude. He wrote to friends in Tabor that his visit to Grinnell included the whole party and teams kept two days without cost and given food, clothing, lodging, and donations up to \$26.50.

Within months of his stay in Grinnell, Brown carried out his attack on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry. Brown, failing to arouse the support he expected would make his effort a success, was captured, tried, and then convicted of murder, slave insurrection, and treason against the state. The radical abolitionist was executed on Dec. 2, 1859.

but since he had not been escorted by the marshal, there were no fees due him and he had to pay his own fare home.

Grinnell never regretted his association with Brown, whom he described as a "martyr-hero" and "one who lived to elevate the race and dared to die for an idea."

The anti-abolitionist press also remembered Brown and his fateful visit to Iowa, and they labeled Grinnell, "John Brown Grinnell." The Ottumwa Mercury of Aug. 16, 1862, urged its readers to remember that John Brown "died a traitor to his country" and that J.B. Grinnell had been an adviser of Brown's.

The town of Grinnell also never forgot the abolitionist from Kansas. Stories of real underground tunnels which were used to smuggle slaves persisted, despite consistent denials of their truth. The room in J.B. Grinnell's home where Brown slept became known as the "John Brown Room" and the parlor where Brown's men slept and stacked their arms was called the "Liberty Room." An old college joke claimed that J.B. Grinnell "invented the Republican party and discovered John Brown."

## Was the Underground really underground?

Grinnell was well-known during the Civil War era as a station on the Underground Railroad. J.B. Grinnell, one of the foremost abolitionists in Iowa, used his wool-barn to hide fleeing slaves, but over the years stories grew of a tunnel near the Grinnell home and a system of tunnels in the city.

J.B. Grinnell admitted, "It is only the truth that Grinnell had been a station on the underground railway, but the departures had been in the night and the adventures not generally known. Certainly the event had found no local publicity, attended with cost if not personal peril." Grinnell never mentioned the existence of any tunnels.

J.B. Grinnell's daughter denied there was a tunnel. H.L. Triplett, a friend of J.B. Grinnell and later owner of the house, claimed that "J.B. Grinnell helped slaves to escape, but it was at night by lending them horses and shipping them in box cars."

Another famous legendary tunnel supposedly originated near the now-razed Monroe Hotel and ran south to the old Almy house on East St. One man claimed to have traveled 75 to 100 feet in the Almy House tunnel Mrs. Almy

was supposed to have said that the tunnel was only a cave which her sons used for growing chameleons. In another story, a Grinnell woman remembered playing in the "cave" as a girl and said it was really a cyclone cellar.

Although the Almy House was burned down some years ago for firemen's practice, Grant Gale, a frequent visitor to the Almy house, does not recall ever seeing a tunnel, and he doubts that the stories are true.

There was also a story that the "Spaulding tunnel" used by the company for power transmission might have originated as part of the Underground Railroad.

There are tunnels in the city which were used when city businessmen bought their heat from a central heating plant which piped steam underneath the city. Those tunnels are in no way connected with the Underground Railroad.

Rose Stoops of the Grinnell Historical Museum sums up the stories well when she says, "I really don't know of any authentic tunnels that were used for the Underground Railroad."