

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MONUMENT TO JOHN BROWN AT THE AKRON ZOO

John Brown was perhaps the nation's most infamous abolitionist. Believing that violence was the only way to abolish slavery, he organized a raid on the military arsenal at Harper's Ferry in a failed attempt to incite a slave revolt. Found guilty of treason in 1859, he is widely credited with sparking the U.S. Civil War. He worked and lived in Akron for a short time, where he was a shepherd and business associate of Colonel Simon Perkins, the son of Akron's founding father. Read more at: <https://www.summithistory.org/abolitionist-john-brown>

German immigrants placed the monument. The monument dates to 1910, a full 50 years after John Brown's execution. Akron's German-American Alliance, an organization of German immigrants then headed by Louis Seybold, erected the pillar to memorialize John Brown, whom they saw as a symbol of liberty. The growing prohibition movement and laws weakening German language instruction in schools alarmed organized German immigrantsⁱ who wished for the freedom to express their culture as they sought to make their way in a new country. Explaining the decision to erect the monument, Louis Seybold explained, "Nothing has been done to preserve the memory of John Brown and we, the Germans, felt it was our duty to take some step, and this is the outcome."ⁱⁱ The Alliance built the central pillar using a discarded column from Summit County's first courthouse and dedicated the monument during a statewide convention of German societies. The *Akron Beacon Journal* reported 8,000 people attended that first dedication.ⁱⁱⁱ

Akron's Black settlers amplified the monument. Between 1910 and 1930, Akron experienced its first wave in the Great Migration of Black southerners moving north. Akron's earliest Black settlers formed a social club called the Negro 25 Year Club, and their first big action was to add bench seating, a fountain, and a statue of John Brown at the monument site.^{iv} Emmer Martin Lancaster chaired the monument improvement effort and, in 1938, the club presented the additions to the public. We have no statements from Lancaster or other club members explaining a motive for the addition; however, the inscription on the statue references appreciation of Brown's sacrifice for slaves' freedom.

Mr. Lancaster (1898-1984) was a luminary for civil rights. The first Black graduate of the Municipal University of Akron, he was also the first Black lawyer admitted to Akron's bar, served as a past president of the Akron chapter of the NAACP, and was active in the Democratic party at a time when segregation severely limited opportunities for Black people living in Akron. His political connections resulted in his appointment to serve as the third Advisor on Negro Affairs in the U.S. Department of Commerce under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.^v He worked there until President Eisenhower disbanded the office in 1953 but established a framework for Black business development through government contracting- a novel thought at the time. He stayed in the District of Columbia until he retired back to Akron in 1974.

Once again in Akron, Lancaster resumed his civic engagement, including with the Negro 25 Year Club. He noticed the deplorable condition of the John Brown Monument and urged Akron City Council to restore it in time for Akron's 150th anniversary.^{vi} The City of Akron agreed, and the Negro 25 Year Club organized a re-dedication

ceremony that took place on September 2, 1975. The 2025 re-dedication ceremony honors the tradition established by the Negro 25 Year Club, while asserting a future for this monument.

ⁱ "Want Liberal Legislation." (1910, Aug 22). *Akron Beacon Journal* p. 2.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Ohio Germans Enthuse Over John Brown." (1910, Aug 22). *Akron Beacon Journal* p.1

^{iv} "Dedicate Tribute to John Brown Sept. 4." (1938, Aug 22). *Akron Beacon Journal* p. 22.

^v Harriman, H.H. (1939, Dec 19). "Request Donahey, Name Lancaster." *Akron Beacon Journal* p. 39.

^{vi} "John Brown Memorial Services Provides Celebration." (1975, Aug 2-9). *The Reporter* p. 12.