

# John Brown's 1859 Harpers Ferry Raid

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**Was “the time for compromise gone?”**

**Was this the blow that “began the war that ended slavery?”**

## Overview

John Brown was a driven man, an abolitionist who was relentless in his opposition to slavery. Ultimately, he justified violence as a means to realize what he considered the most noble of goals – the destruction of slavery.

Like his Calvinist father before him, Brown considered slavery a moral blight. But unlike many other white abolitionists, Brown mixed easily with African Americans, prompting Frederick Douglass, the most famous 19th century black abolitionist, to write that:

Though a white gentleman, he is in sympathy a black man and as deeply interested in our cause as though his own soul had been pierced by the iron of slavery.

In 1849, John Brown settled his family in the black community of North Elba in the New York Adirondacks.

Six years later, Brown moved to the new territory of Kansas, which soon became a major pre-Civil War battleground.

A year earlier, the Kansas Nebraska Act of 1854 undid the Missouri Compromise, which in 1820 had prohibited slavery north of the latitude of 36/30 (the southern border of Missouri). Even though the two territories lay north of the Missouri Compromise line, the Kansas-Nebraska Act allowed both jurisdictions to vote on whether they would enter the union as slave or free states. Upon passage of the act, organized groups of slaveholders and abolitionists, including the Browns, poured into the new Kansas territory. An undeclared guerilla war erupted which became known as “Bloody Kansas.” Both sides perpetrated acts of intimidation, murder and arson, which soon escalated out of control.

On May 24, 1856, Brown led a party of militant abolitionists who slaughtered five pro-slavery settlers in Pottawatomie Creek. Brown claimed that he did not participate in the actual killings, but unapologetically approved them as justified payback for a pro-slavery assault on Lawrence, Kansas. For this act and for his defense of the “free soil” town of Osawatomie, Kansas, Brown became nationally renowned to abolitionists and infamous to slaveholders. Soon after, a New York stage play, “Osawatomie Brown” heralded his feats.

Subsequently, Brown, with funding from prominent abolitionists, raised a small paramilitary force. In January 1858, raiders under Brown's leadership liberated twelve slaves in Missouri, delivering them to freedom in Canada.

On the night of October 16, 1859, Brown, now 59 years old, staged his final and most daring raid, an assault on the federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), which housed an arsenal of more than 100,000 rifles and muskets. Calling his raiding force, the “Provisional Army,” Brown's group of 22 men included three of Brown's sons, a fugitive slave and four free blacks. Brown's goal was to seize the arsenal, distribute the guns and muskets, mobilize anti-slavery forces, incite slave insurrections and organize raids against slaveholders across the South.

Brown and his men initially took control of the armory, but within 36 hours, U.S. Marines under the leadership of future Confederate generals, Robert E. Lee and J.E.B. Stuart, stormed the facility, killed several of Brown's band and captured Brown and the remaining raiders.

Brown was taken to nearby Charles Town, Virginia (now West Virginia) where he was charged on three counts: treason, murder and conspiracy to lead a slave rebellion. After a seven-day trial and forty-five minutes of deliberation, a jury found him guilty on all counts. The court sentenced Brown to death.



Illustration from Harper's Weekly, November 12, 1859

On December 2, 1859, Brown wrote:

I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had, as I now think, vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done."

Later, that day, Brown was hung. By March 1860, six of his compatriots, having been tried and found guilty, followed Brown to the gallows.

In life and even death, John Brown's image loomed large, particularly in the nineteen months between the October 1859 Harpers Ferry raid and the outbreak of Civil War at Fort Sumter in April 1861. The debate about the immediate and long-term meaning of the Harpers Ferry raid and Brown's legacy was loud, messy and intemperate. On the day of Brown's execution, church bells tolled in several northern cities and many abolitionists hailed Brown as a martyr (although some questioned his violent means). In the North, partisans (and newspaper editorialists) of the Democratic and Republican\* parties railed at one another, each accusing the other of promoting a culture of violence. Across the South, newspaper editorials vilified Brown, his raiders and his supporters, but disagreed about the consequences of Harpers Ferry raid for the future of the South and slavery. The language used to characterize Brown in newspapers – North and South, Democrat and Republican, abolitionist and pro-slavery –was rarely neutral or even-tempered. Depending upon the viewpoint, editorials used the partisan vocabulary of "saint," "crusader," "martyr," "madman," "devil," "lunatic," and "murderer."

Decades later, Brown continued to evoke deep passion. Almost 22 years after the event, Frederick Douglass memorialized John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry, proclaiming:

If John Brown did not end the war that ended slavery, he did at least begin the war that ended slavery.... Until this blow was struck, the prospect for freedom was dim, shadowy and uncertain. The irrepressible conflict was one of words, votes and compromises.

When John Brown stretched forth his arm the sky was cleared. The time for compromises was gone – the armed hosts of freedom stood face to face over the chasm of a broken Union – and the clash of arms was at hand. The South staked all upon getting possession of the Federal Government, and failing to do that, drew the sword of rebellion and thus made her own, and not Brown's, the lost cause of the century.

Is Douglass right about the legacy of Brown's raid? Was "the time for compromise gone?" Was this the blow that "began the war that ended slavery?"

In the activity that follows, you will consider these and other questions. Taking a leap in space and time, you will debate the moral and political implications of Brown's raid in the voice of historical characters, circa 1859-1860.

For additional overviews and perspectives:

- Re-evaluating John Brown's Raid ([http://www.wvculture.org/history/journal\\_wvh/wvh34-1.html](http://www.wvculture.org/history/journal_wvh/wvh34-1.html)), by Karen Whitman (from *West Virginia History*)
- John Brown, 1800-1859 ([http://www.territorialkansasonline.org/~imlskto/cgi-bin/index.php?SCREEN=bio\\_sketches/brown\\_john](http://www.territorialkansasonline.org/~imlskto/cgi-bin/index.php?SCREEN=bio_sketches/brown_john), Territorial Kansas Online at the University of Kansas)
- John Brown's Holy War (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/filmmore/description.html>, The American Experience/PBS)
- John Brown's Raid (<http://www.civilwarhome.com/johnbrown.htm>, Shotgun's Home of the American Civil War, a site constructed by an amateur Civil War and Confederate history buff)

\*Republican politicians, including Abraham Lincoln, made a point of publicly distancing themselves from Brown's Harper's Ferry Raid and tactics. In his famous Cooper Union speech on February 27, 1860, Lincoln asserted:

*You charge that we stir up insurrections among your slaves. We deny it: and what is your proof? Harper's Ferry! John Brown!! John Brown was no Republican; and you have failed to implicate a single Republican in his Harper's Ferry enterprise.*

But no matter how much Republicans protested any link with Brown, it did not stop Democratic Party invective and claims that the Republican Party was responsible for Harper's Ferry.

## Objectives

1. Learn about the events in the 1850s leading to disunion and war, in particular John Brown's Harpers Ferry raid and its aftermath.
2. Promote historical empathy and understanding for the key actors in these historical events.
3. Interrogate primary source documents and build historical understanding of Brown's raid and its role in the events leading to war.

## Activity

**Preparation.** Read the chapter in your course textbook about the rapid-fire events of the 1850s that escalated sectional tensions and led to war. Pay particular attention to the Compromise of 1850, the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, the founding of the Republican Party in 1854, "Bleeding Kansas" and the caning of Senator Charles Sumner in 1856, the Dred Scott decision in 1857 and Lincoln's election in 1860.

### Step One

The class will divide into groups with at least three (but preferably six or more) students. Each group briefly meets, assigning roles from the following list to members. Groups should make sure that each role on the list is assigned to at least one member of the group.

**Role One:** Someone who sees Brown's raid in a positive light. Define your position by taking one of the following identities or a combination of some of these identities:

- An abolitionist – black or white -- who saw John Brown as a martyr who used necessary means (violence) to realize a justified end (destroying slavery).
- A woman reformer and abolitionist who abhors violence as a means but defends Brown's courage and moral example.
- A northern Republican newspaper editor who believes that the Democratic party and its southern allies promoted the expansion of slavery by creating an environment of lawlessness and violence which in the process pushed opponents of slavery like Brown to desperate acts like the Harpers Ferry Raid.

**Role Two:** Someone who sees Brown's raid in a negative light. Define your position by taking one of the following identities or a combination of some of these identities:

- A southern Democratic party editor who believes that northern reaction to the Harper's Ferry raid leaves the South no choice but to secede from the union if it is to preserve the institution of slavery.
- A Democratic party newspaper editor (either South or North) who sees John Brown's raid as the logical outgrowth of inflammatory Republican party positions and rhetoric.
- A Democratic party newspaper editor (either South or North) who sees the Harpers Ferry Raid's failure to realize its goal of exciting a slave insurrection as proof that slaves are happy with their lot and do not seek freedom.

**Role Three:** A newspaper editor who, in order to preserve the union, sees the need to isolate what he sees as extremists on both sides – zealots for and against slavery.

## Step Two

Analyze and take notes on the following texts and images using a worksheet (last page of the PDF). As you do, consider the following questions as they apply to each primary source. What is the point of view and intent of the author or artist? How can you tell? Who is the intended audience? In the text documents, how would you characterize the language -- hot or cool/ objective or subjective? What evidence (words, sentences) would you use to make this judgment about the use of language? How would you characterize the argument -- is it logical given the basic assumptions of the author? How are the images constructed to create a mood or to make a point?

### A speech by William Henry Seward:

#### ON THE IRREPRESSIBLE CONFLICT

Delivered at Rochester, NY, October 25, 1858

....The Democratic party, or, to speak more accurately, the party which wears that attractive name-is in possession of the federal government. The Republicans propose to dislodge that party, and dismiss it from its high trust.

The main subject, then, is whether the Democratic party deserves to retain the confidence of the American people. In attempting to prove it unworthy, I think that I am not actuated by prejudices against that party, or by prepossessions in favor of its adversary; for I have learned, by some experience, that virtue and patriotism, vice and selfishness, are found in all parties, and that they differ less in their motives than in the policies they pursue.

Our country is a theatre, which exhibits, in full operation, two radically different political systems; the one resting on the basis of servile or slave labor, the other on voluntary labor of freemen. The laborers who are enslaved are all negroes, or persons more or less purely of African derivation. But this is only accidental. The principle of the system is, that labor in every society, by whomsoever performed, is necessarily unintellectual, grovelling [sic] and base; and that the laborer, equally for his own good and for the welfare of the State, ought to be enslaved. The white laboring man, whether native or foreigner, is not enslaved, only because he cannot, as yet, be reduced to bondage.

The slave system is one of constant danger, distrust, suspicion, and watchfulness. It debases those whose toil alone can produce wealth and resources for defence [sic], to the lowest degree of which human nature is capable, to guard against mutiny and insurrection, and thus wastes energies which otherwise might be employed in national development and aggrandizement. The free-labor system educates all alike, and by opening all the fields of industrial employment and all the departments of authority, to the unchecked and equal rivalry of all classes of men, at once secures universal contentment, and brings into the highest possible activity all the physical, moral, and social energies of the whole state. In states where the slave system prevails, the masters, directly or indirectly, secure all political power, and constitute a ruling aristocracy. In states where the free-labor system prevails, universal suffrage necessarily obtains, and the state inevitably becomes, sooner or later, a republic or democracy.

Hitherto, the two systems have existed in different States, but side by side within the American Union. This has happened because the Union is a confederation of States. But in another aspect the United States constitute only one nation. Increase of population, which is filling the States out to their very borders, together with a new and extended network of railroads and other avenues, and an internal commerce which daily becomes more intimate, is rapidly bringing the States into a higher and more perfect social unity or consolidation. Thus, these antagonistic systems are continually coming into closer contact, and collision results.

Shall I tell you what this collision means? They who think that it is accidental, unnecessary, the work of interested or fanatical agitators, and therefor [sic] ephemeral, mistake the case altogether. It is an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces, and it means that the United States must and will, sooner or later, become either entirely a slaveholding nation, or entirely a free-labor nation. Either the cotton and rice fields of South Carolina and the sugar plantations of Louisiana will ultimately be tilled by free labor, and Charleston and New Orleans become marts of legitimate merchandise alone, or else the rye-fields and wheat-fields of Massachusetts and New York must again be surrendered by their farmers to slave culture and to the production of slaves, and Boston and New York becomes once

more markets for trade in the bodies and souls of men. It is the failure to apprehend this great truth that induces so many unsuccessful attempts at final compromises between the slave and free States, and it is the existence of this great fact that renders all such pretended compromises, when made, vain and ephemeral. Startling as this saying may appear to you, fellow-citizens, it is by no means an original or even a modern one. Our forefathers knew it to be true, and unanimously acted upon it when they framed the constitution of the United States. They regarded the existence of the servile system in so many of the States with sorrow and shame, which they openly confessed, and they looked upon the collision between them, which was then just revealing itself, and which we are now accustomed to deplore, with favor and hope. They knew that one or the other system must exclusively prevail....

Newspaper editorials from the Secession Era Editorials Project/ John Brown's Raid (<http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/jbmenu.htm>). The political party affiliation of the newspaper, when either Republican or Democratic, is noted in brackets.

- Albany, New York *Evening Journal* [Republican], (20 October 1859, <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/nyajjb59a20a.htm>)
- Springfield, Illinois *State Register* [Democratic], (20 October 1859, <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/ilsrjb59a20a.htm>)
- Chicago, Illinois *Press and Tribune* [Republican], (20 October 1859, <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/ilcpjb59a20a.htm>)
- Nashville, Tennessee *Union and American* [Democratic], (21 October 1859, <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/tnnujb59a21a.htm>)
- Nashville, Tennessee *Republican Banner and Nashville Whig*, (24 October 1859, <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/tnnbjb59a24a.htm>)
- Nashville, Tennessee *Republican Banner and Nashville Whig*, (25 October 1859, <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/tnrbjb59a25a.htm>)
- Wilmington, North Carolina *Daily Herald*, (26 October 1859, <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/ncwhjb59a26a.htm>)
- Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania *Gazette* [Republican], (3 December 1859, <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/papgjb59c03a.htm>)
- Raleigh, North Carolina *Register*, (3 December 1859, <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/ncrrjb59c03a.htm>)
- Cincinnati, Ohio *Enquirer* [Democratic], (4 December 59, <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/ohcejb59c04a.htm>)
- Wilmington, North Carolina *Daily Herald*, (5 December 1859, <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/ncwhjb59c05a.htm>)

## Statements and letters by abolitionists:

Lydia Maria Child correspondence with Virginia Governor Henry Wise and John Brown in the aftermath of the Harpers Ferry raid.

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### LETTER TO GOV. WISE.

**Wayland, Mass., Oct. 26th, 1859**

Governor Wise: I have heard that you were a man of chivalrous sentiments, and I know you were opposed to the iniquitous attempt to force upon Kansas a Constitution abhorrent to the moral sense of her people. Relying upon these indications of honor and justice in your character, I venture to ask a favor of you. Enclosed is a letter to Capt. John Brown. Will you have the kindness, after reading it yourself, to transmit it to the prisoner?

I and all my large circle of abolition acquaintances were taken by surprise when news came of Capt. Brown's recent attempt; nor do I know of a single person who would have approved of it, had they been apprised of his intention. But I and thousands of others feel a natural impulse of sympathy for the brave and suffering man. Perhaps God, who sees the inmost of our souls, perceives some such sentiment in your heart also. He needs a mother or sister to dress his wounds, and speak soothingly to him. Will you allow me to perform that mission of humanity? If you will, may God bless you for the generous deed!

I have been for years an uncompromising Abolitionist, and I should scorn to deny it or apologize for it as much as John Brown himself would do. Believing in peace principles, I deeply regret the step that the old veteran has taken, while I honor his humanity towards those who became his prisoners. But because it is my habit to be as open as the daylight, I will also say, that if I believed our religion justified men in fighting for freedom, I should consider the enslaved every where as best entitled to that right. Such an avowal is a simple, frank expression of my sense of natural justice.

But I should despise myself utterly if any circumstances could tempt me to seek to advance these opinions in any way, directly or indirectly, after your permission to visit Virginia has been obtained on the plea of sisterly sympathy with a brave and suffering man. I give you my word of honor, which was never broken, that I would use such permission solely and singly for the purpose of nursing your prisoner, and for no other purpose whatsoever.

Yours, respectfully,  
..... L. MARIA CHILD.

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### REPLY OF GOV. WISE.

**..... Richmond, Va., Oct. 29th, 1859.**

Madam: Yours of the 26th was received by me yesterday, and at my earliest leisure I respectfully reply to it, that I will forward the letter for John Brown, a prisoner under our laws, arraigned at the bar of the Circuit Court for the country of Jefferson, at Charlestown, Va., for the crimes of murder, robbery and treason, which you ask me to transmit to him. I will comply with your request in the only way which seems to me proper, by enclosing it to the Commonwealth's attorney, with the request that he will ask the permission of the Court to hand it to the prisoner. Brown, the prisoner, is now in the hands of the judiciary, not of the executive, of this Commonwealth.

You ask me, further, to allow you to perform the mission "of mother or sister, to dress his wounds, and speak soothingly to him." By this, of course, you mean to be allowed to visit him in his cell, and to minister to him in the offices of humanity. Why should you not be so allowed, Madam? Virginia and Massachusetts are involved in no civil war, and the Constitution which unites them in one confederacy guarantees to you the privileges and immunities of a citizen of the United States in the State of Virginia. That Constitution I am sworn to support, and am, therefore, bound to protect your privileges and immunities as a citizen of Massachusetts coming into Virginia for any lawful and peaceful purpose.

Coming, as you propose, to minister to the captive in prison, you will be met, doubtless, by all our people, not only in a chivalrous, but in a Christian spirit. You have the right to visit Charlestown. Va., Madam; and your mission being merciful

and humane, will not only allowed, but respected if not welcomed. A few unenlightened and inconsiderate persons, fanatical in their modes of thought and action, to maintain justice and right, might molest you, or be disposed to do so; and this might suggest the imprudence of risking any experiment upon the peace of a society very much excited by the crimes with whose chief author you seem to sympathize so much. But still, I repeat, your motives and avowed purpose are lawful and peaceful, and I will, as far as I am concerned, do my duty in protecting your rights in our limits. Virginia and her authorities would be weak indeed--weak in point of folly, and weak in point of power--if her State faith and constitutional obligations cannot be redeemed in her own limits to the letter of morality as well as of law; and if her chivalry cannot courteously receive a lady's visit to a prison, every arm which guards Brown from rescue on the one hand, and from Lynch law on the other, will be ready to guard your person in Virginia.

I could not permit an insult even to woman in her walk of charity among us, though it to be to one who whetted knives of butchery for our mothers, sisters, daughters and babes. We have no sympathy with your sentiments of sympathy with Brown, and are surprised that you were "taken by surprise when news came of Capt. Brown recent attempt." His attempt was a natural consequence of your sympathy, and the errors of that sympathy ought to make you doubt its virtue from the effect on his conduct. But it is not of this I should speak. When you arrive at Charlestown, if you go there, it will be for the Court and its officers, the Commonwealth's attorney, sheriff and jailer, to say whether you may see and wait. On the prisoner. But whether you are thus permitted or not, (and you will be, if my advice can prevail) you may rest assured that he will be humanely, lawfully and mercifully dealt by in prison and on trial.

Respectfully,  
 ..... HENRY A. WISE.

### **MRS. CHILD TO GOV. WISE.**

In your civil but very diplomatic reply to my letter, you inform me that I have a constitutional right to visit Virginia, for peaceful purposes, in common with every citizen of the United States. I was perfectly well aware that such was the theory of constitutional obligation in the Slave States; but I was also aware of what you omit to mention, viz.; that the Constitution has, in reality, been completely and systematically nullified, whenever it suited the convenience or the policy of the Slave Power. Your constitutional obligation, for which you profess so much respect, has never proved any protection to citizens of the Free States, who happened to have a black, brown, or yellow complexion; nor to any white citizen whom you even suspected of entertaining opinions opposite to your own, on a question of vast importance to the temporal welfare and moral example of our common country. This total disregard of constitutional obligation has been manifested not merely by the Lynch Law of mobs in the Slave States, but by the deliberate action of magistrates and legislators....

You accuse Captain John Brown of "whetting knives of butchery for the mothers, sisters, daughters and babes" of Virginia; and you inform me of the well-known fact that he is "arraigned for the crimes of murder, robbery and treason." I will not here stop to explain why I believe that old hero to be no criminal, but a martyr to righteous principles which he sought to advance by methods sanctioned by his own religious views, though not by mine. Allowing that Capt. Brown did attempt a scheme in which murder, robbery and treason were, to his own consciousness, involved, I do not see how Gov. Wise can consistently arraign him for crimes he has himself commended. You have threatened to trample on the Constitution, and break the Union, if a majority of the legal voters in these Confederate States dared to elect a President unfavorable to the extension of Slavery. Is not such a declaration proof of premeditated treason? In the Spring of 1842, you made a speech in Congress [advocating the conquest of Mexico for the purpose of expanding slavery], from which I copy the following:--

"...Slavery should pour itself abroad, without restraint, and find no limit but the Southern Ocean. The Camanches should no longer hold the richest mines of Mexico. Every golden image which had received the profanation of a false worship, should soon be melted down into good American eagles. I would cause as much gold to cross the Rio del Norte as the mules of Mexico could carry; aye, and I would make better use of it, too, than any lazy, bigoted priesthood under heaven."

...Was it not by robbery, even of churches, that you proposed to load the mules of Mexico with gold for the United States? Was it not by the murder of unoffending Mexicans that you expected to advance those schemes of avarice and ambition? What humanity had you for Mexican "mothers and babes," whom you proposed to make childless and fatherless? And for what purpose was this wholesale massacre to take place? Not to right the wrongs of any oppressed class; not to sustain any great principles of justice, or of freedom; but merely to enable "Slavery to pour itself forth without restraint."

Even if Captain Brown were as bad as you paint him, I should suppose he must naturally remind you of the words of Macbeth:

"We but teach  
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return  
To plague the inventor: This even-handed justice  
Commends the ingredients of our poisoned chalice  
To our own lips."

If Captain Brown intended, as you say, to commit treason, robbery and murder, I think I have shown that he could find ample authority for such proceedings in the public declarations of Gov. Wise. And if, as he himself declares, he merely intended to free the oppressed, where could he read a more forcible lesson than is furnished by the State Seal of Virginia?...

You may believe it or not, Gov. Wise, but it is certainly the truth that, because slaveholders so recklessly sowed the wind in Kansas, they reaped a whirlwind at Harper's Ferry.

The people of the North had a very strong attachment to the Union; but, by your desperate measures, you have weakened it beyond all power of restoration. They are not your enemies, as you suppose, but they cannot consent to be your tools for any ignoble task you may choose to propose. You must not judge of us by the crawling sinuosities of an Everett; or by our magnificent hound, whom you trained to hunt your poor cripples, and then sent him sneaking into a corner to die--not with shame for the base purposes to which his strength had been applied, but with vexation because you withheld from him the promised bone. Not by such as these must you judge the free, enlightened ycomany [sic] of New England. A majority of them would rejoice to have the Slave States fulfil their oft-repeated threat of withdrawal from the Union. It has ceased to be a bugbear, for we begin to despair of being able, by any other process, to give the world the example of a real republic. The moral sense of these States is outraged by being accomplices in sustaining an institution vicious in all its aspects; and it is now generally understood that we purchase our disgrace at great pecuniary expense. If you would only make the offer of a separation in serious earnest, you would here the hearty response of millions, "Go, gentlemen, and

'Stand not upon the order of your going,  
But go at once!'

Yours, with all due respect,  
..... L. MARIA CHILD.

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### **MRS. CHILD TO JOHN BROWN. Wayland, Mass., Oct. 26th, 1859**

Dear Capt. Brown: Though personally unknown to you, you will recognize in my name an earnest friend of Kansas, when circumstances made that Territory the battle-ground between the antagonistic principles of slavery and freedom, which politicians so vainly strive to reconcile in the government of the United States.

Believing in peace principles, I cannot sympathize with the method you chose to advance the cause of freedom. But I honor your generous intentions--I admire your courage, moral and physical. I reverence you for the humanity which tempered your zeal. I sympathize with you in your cruel bereavement, your sufferings, and your wrongs. In brief, I love you and bless you.

Thousands of hearts are throbbing with sympathy as warm as mine. I think of you night and day, bleeding in prison,



surrounded by hostile faces, sustained only by trust in God and your own heart. I long to nurse you--to speak to you sisterly words of sympathy and consolation. I have asked permission of Governor Wise to do so. If the request is not granted, I cherish the hope that these few words may at least reach your hands, and afford you some little solace. May you be strengthened by the conviction that no honest man ever sheds blood for freedom in vain, however much he may be mistaken in his efforts. May God sustain you, and carry you through whatsoever may be in store for you!

Yours, with heartfelt respect, sympathy and affection,  
..... L. MARIA CHILD.

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## **REPLY OF JOHN BROWN.**

### **Mrs. L. Maria Child:**

My Dear Friend--Such you prove to be, though a stranger--your most kind letter has reached me, with the kind offer to come here and take care of me. Allow me to express my gratitude for your great sympathy, and at the same time to propose to you a different course, together with my reasons for wishing it. I should certainly be greatly pleased to become personally acquainted with one so gifted and so kind, but I cannot avoid seeing some objections to it, under present circumstances. First, I am in charge of a most humane gentleman, who, with his family, has rendered me every possible attention I have desired, or that could be of the least advantage; and I am so recovered of my wounds as no longer to require nursing. Then, again, it would subject you to great personal inconvenience and heavy expense, without doing me any good. Allow me to name to you another channel through which you may reach me with your sympathies much more effectually. I have at home a wife and three young daughters, the youngest but little over five years old, the oldest nearly sixteen. I have also two daughters-in-law, whose husbands have both fallen near me here. There is also another widow, Mrs. Thompson, whose husband fell here. Whether she is a mother or not, I cannot say. All these, my wife included, live at North Elba, Essex county, New York. I have a middle-aged son, who has been, in some degree, a cripple from his childhood, who would have as much as he could well do to earn a living. He was a most dreadful sufferer in Kansas, and lost all he had laid up. He has not enough to clothe himself for the winter comfortably. I have no living son, or son-in-law, who did not suffer terribly in Kansas.

Now, dear friend, would you not as soon contribute fifty cents now, and a like sum yearly, for the relief of those very poor and deeply afflicted persons, to enable them to supply themselves and their children with bread and very plain clothing, and to enable the children to receive a common English education? Will you also devote your own energies to induce others to join you in giving a like amount, or any other amount, to constitute a little fund for the purpose named?

I cannot see how your coming here can do me the least good; and I am quite certain you can do immense good where you are. I am quite cheerful under all my afflicting circumstances and prospects; having, as I humbly trust, "the peace of God which passeth all understanding" to rule in my heart. You may make such use of this as you see it fit. God Almighty bless and reward you a thousand fold!

Yours in sincerity and truth,  
..... JOHN BROWN.

## More Statements and letters by abolitionists:

- Frederick Douglass, "No Progress Without Struggle" (<http://www.blackpast.org/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-there-no-progress>) -- in an address on West India Emancipation, August 4, 1857, Douglass, the most famous African-American abolitionist in the 19th century, argues that change is impossible without struggle.
- Address by Sella Martin (<http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/address-by-j-sella-martin>), an African-American pastor and abolitionist in Boston on December 2, 1859, the day John Brown was hung. (From the [John Brown Archive/ Lost Museum](#))
- "Day of Mourning' Meeting in an African-American Church, December 2, 1859. (<http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/meeting-in-detroit>. From the John Brown Archive, Lost Museum, <http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/exhibit/brown>)
- Frederick Douglass at Harpers Ferry (<http://www.nps.gov/hafe/learn/historyculture/frederick-douglass-at-harpers-ferry.htm>) in a speech on May 30, 1881 commemorating John Brown's raid. (From the Harpers ferry National Historic Park, <http://www.nps.gov/hafe/index.htm>)

## Optional

If you want to explore more abolitionist voices, look at the following:

- Henry David Thoreau, A Plea for Captain John Brown ([http://www.transcendentalists.com/thoreau\\_plea\\_john\\_brown.htm](http://www.transcendentalists.com/thoreau_plea_john_brown.htm)), Read to the citizens of Concord, Mass., Sunday Evening, October 30, 1859. For background material on this address, go to PBS/The American Experience/John Brown's Holy War/Henry David Thoreau (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/peopleevents/pande04.html>)
- John Greenleaf Whittier, Brown of Ossawatimie -- a poem (<http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/brown-of-ossawatimie>. From the John Brown Archive/ Lost Museum, <http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/exhibit/brown>)

## Optional

You may also want to read the statements of two of the raiders:

- John Brown's Last Speech to The Court (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2943t.html>). From PBS/Africans in America, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2943t.html>)
- Last Words of John Copeland to His Family (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2942t.html>). From PBS/Africans in America, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html>)

## Images

- John Brown Meeting the Slave Mother and Her Child on the Steps of Charlestown Jail on His Way to Execution (<http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/john-brown-meeting-the-slave-mother-and-her>), a lithograph of a painting that helped to promote the myth that Brown had actually kissed a slave mother and her child en route to his execution. (From the John Brown Archive/ Lost Museum, <http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/exhibit/brown>)
- The Arraignment (<http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/the-arraignment>), an illustration intended to to be an objective news account from Harpers Weekly, November 12, 1859. (From the John Brown Archive/ Lost Museum, <http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/exhibit/brown>)
- John Brown Daguerreotype (1847, [http://www.civilwar.si.edu/slavery\\_brown1.html](http://www.civilwar.si.edu/slavery_brown1.html)), a recently discovered photograph taken by the African-American abolitionist Augustus Washington (from the Smithsonian Civil War Collection, <http://www.civilwar.si.edu/collections.html>)
- Portrait of John Brown (1856, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2954.html>), a photograph taken in Kansas in 1856, the same year that Brown led a party of militant abolitionists who slaughtered five pro-slavery settlers in Pottawatomie Creek. Compare this photograph to the 1847 daguerreotype. (From PBS/Africans in America, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html>)

- A Southern Planter Arming His Slaves To Resist Invasion (<http://www.harpweek.com/09Cartoon/BrowseByDateCartoon.asp?Month=November&Date=19>), a Harpers Weekly cartoon suggesting that John Brown's raid galvanized slaveholders and slaves in defense of the South (From HarpWeek Explore History, <http://www.harpweek.com/>)

### Music (optional)

- History of "John Brown's Body" (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/sfeature/song.html>), including an audio file and three version of the famous Civil War song (From John Brown's Holy War, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/filmmore/description.html>, The American Experience/PBS)

### Step Three

You will post to the BlackBoard discussion forum entitled "John Brown -- Interrogating the Primary Sources." For this step, you will post in your own voice as a student of history and NOT that of your character.

Select one of the primary sources (from the texts and images in step two) that you will use as background for shaping the role you chose in step one.

Begin your post identifying (1) the role you chose in step one and (2) the document you selected.

Next, write **at least** four or five sentences on any **one** of the following:

- Raise a question about something that you do not understand in/about the primary source you chose.
- Raise a question about an issue that you think needs further investigation in order for the class to deepen its understanding of (1) the particular primary source you chose and/or (2) the general response to Brown's raid.
- Make an observation about the source you chose that you think deepens your understanding of Brown's raid and its aftermath.
- Make and explain an observation about your source in response to any of the questions raised in the first paragraph of step two (above).

Finally, respond to the posts of anyone who chose the same role as you in step one.

### Step Four

Go to your group discussion board. Post to then forum entitled "Debating John Brown's Harpers Ferry Raid." In the historical character and voice of the role you chose in step one, assume it is December 3, 1859, the day after John Brown was sent to the gallows. Post -- in at least ten sentences, hopefully more -- your reactions to the raid, trial and execution. Tell us, in character, what these events mean (in 1859) for the future of the United States of America. As time permits, respond to as many posts as possible, particularly those with whom you sharply disagree.

### Step Five

The class will meet face-to-face to sum-up. Did the debate deepen your understanding of the key political and social actors on the eve of the Civil War? Did it deepen your understanding of the political and social dynamics on the eve of war? Based on your understanding, was sectional compromise possible in the wake of Brown's raid and execution? Or was this, as Frederick Douglass argued, the blow that "began the war that ended slavery?" Explain your answers to these questions.

## Step Six

Write a four-page paper entitled "The Harpers Ferry Raid and the Road to Civil War." In the paper, you will assess the role of the raid and its aftermath as a cause-and-effect factor leading to war. You will be expected to:

- Situate the Harpers Ferry Raid in the context of the events leading to war.
- Explain the political, sectional and social dynamic that shaped the response to Brown's raid and moved events towards war. In particular, look at the Republican and Democratic parties, the media, and abolitionists and their pro-slavery counterparts.
- Consider whether compromise was possible or the war was (to use Seward's term) "irrepressible."
- Draw substantially on documents and primary sources from this activity as evidence for your conclusion.

## Resources

Secession Era Editorials Project/John Brown's Raid (<http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/jbmenu.htm>). Housed at Furman University, this archive has digitized newspaper editorials -- North and South, Democratic, Whig and Republican - - contending over four issues that divided American in the 1850s: The Kansas-Nebraska Act, the caning of Senator Charles Sumner, the Dred Scott Decision and John Brown's Raid at Harpers Ferry.

John Brown Archive/ Lost Museum (<http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/exhibit/brown>). The John Brown archive is part of the Lost Museum (<http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/>), a cyberspace recreation P. T. Barnum's American Museum, which burned down under mysterious circumstances in 1865. The museum, known as a site of popular entertainment and instruction, included exhibits celebrating Brown.

## Instructor's Annotations

In most history survey courses, the aim of instructors is two-fold:

1. Provide basic knowledge of the sweep of a historical era.
2. Teach students some of the most basic skills of the craft of historical investigation and the construction of historical meaning.

Before the advent of the World Wide Web, I was much more successful at realizing the former than latter. I suspect that many of my brethren in the historical profession experienced similar difficulties.

While I will readily confess that I did not exhibit much of a conquering spirit toward achieving the latter goal, I nonetheless like to think that there were objective reasons for my lack of success. First, like too many others at institutions of higher education, the library at my college is modest, insufficiently funded and houses sparse collections of archival materials. Second, while there are abundant primary source readers produced by university and general trade publishing houses, their scope understandably reflects the bias of the editor who chooses what to – and not to –include.

The Web on the other hand gives teachers and students easy and quick access to primary and multi-media sources curated by professionals. Since the advent of the Web in 1989 (or more accurately, the first graphic web browser in 1993), there has been a proliferation of academic, museum, library and government sites that have digitized and organized archival material in text, images and sound.

The Web makes it easier for instructors to choose and organize materials so that non-history majors, who are the majority of students in my survey courses, can learn the basics of how to interrogate primary source material and construct historical meaning without having to engage in a major archival research project. In the John Brown activity, I rather than the editor of a reader, selected the documents and structured them in ways that made access quick and relatively painless for students. While this might not exactly simulate the angst of a professional historian laboring in musty archives, it nonetheless gives students a sense of how history is constructed – and it does it in a survey course where the

constraints of class time and coverage are formidable.

In this exercise, students can examine a major digital collection of pre-Civil War newspaper – The Secession Era Editorials Project at Furman University, originally developed under the direction of Lloyd Benson. Through these and other primary source materials, students can make a leap in time and space to the rancorous debates over John Brown's 1859 raid on the arsenal at Harpers Ferry.

An electronic discussion board facilitates such a debate (see step four of the activity). While such a debate could be simulated face-to-face in class, I think it's more advantageous to do it asynchronously on a discussion board. First, it is more time efficient. In class, the debate must unfold serially – one student, then another and on and on. Online, students can post at the same time and then respond to one another. Second, participation is wider. In an electronic discussion, it is harder for students to hide in margins – or in the back of the classroom. Everyone must participate and some of the quieter students in class will find their voice online.

There is a rhythm and logic to the activity. First students examine the documents (step two). Then they make annotations and raise questions about primary sources on the discussion board (step three). Next they simulate a historical debate, circa 1859, about Brown's raid, hopefully in the process building historical empathy for their character (step four). Then, as a class, they debrief (step five). Finally, they construct historical meaning about this historical event in an individual essay (step six).

The suggested timing of the activity is as follows. Step one (choosing roles) can be done briefly in class. Steps two and three (reading and interrogating the documents) should be done as homework outside of class. Step four (the online debate,) if you have access to a lab, can be done in a single class period. If not, students could do the online debate as homework. Step five (the in-class debriefing) could conceivably be completed in the same class period as the online debate – or if necessary the next class. The timing for final step, the paper, is obviously up to the discretion of the instructor.

Step four, the online debate, is the heart of the exercise. If you must abbreviate the activity, the online annotation and questions (step three) could conceivably be scrapped, as could the final step, the essay (although I concede this with great reluctance).