

The Brown Quarterly

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John Brown: Madman or Martyr?

by Marvin Stottelmire

No Kansan in history was better known or more controversial than the militant abolitionist John Brown.

Neither his contemporaries nor modern historians agree on what sort of man John Brown was. To the pro-slavery forces and some modern historians, he was a madman and a cowardly murderer. To the abolitionists of his time and other modern historians, he was a visionary who willingly gave his life in an attempt to end slavery.

Frederick Douglass said of him, "His zeal in the cause of my race was far greater than mine. I could live for the slave, but he could die for him." Although there is disagreement on what sort of person he was, no one disputes that he was completely committed to the end of slavery in the United States.

One cannot begin to understand John Brown without understanding his time. The Kansas John Brown found was in turmoil. It became the battleground between the pro-slavery and abolitionist forces. Pro-slavery forces were very strong in the United States Government. They had succeeded in 1850 in getting the Fugitive Slave Act through Congress. The Fugitive Slave Act made it a Federal Crime to harbor people escaping slavery even in the free states. The fine for harboring an escaped slave was \$1,000 and up to six months in jail. While \$1,000 seems like a lot of money even by today's standards, it was a tremendous amount of money at a time when a typical day's wages were \$1.50.

In 1854 Congress passed the Kansas and Nebraska Act. This act repealed a previous law, which had said

that slavery would not be permitted in new territories. The Kansas and Nebraska Act provided that the Kansas and Nebraska territories could be admitted as either free states or slave states, depending on a vote of the residents.

Abolitionist societies from the free states encouraged abolitionists to move to Kansas and settle so that they could vote for Kansas to be a free state. Five of John Brown's sons moved there to make homes for themselves. There was free land for the taking. The pro-slavery forces became concerned that Kansas would become a free state.

Men from all over the South, but particularly from Missouri, a slave state, went into the

Kansas Territory on every Election Day and voted "at the point of the Bowie Knife and Revolver." These gangs of armed men would go to polling places and vote even though they were not residents of the Kansas Territory. They would also intimidate free state men (women did not have the right to vote until 1920), and many would-be voters were beaten and some were killed.



This famous mural of John Brown by John Stewart Curry is located on the second floor of the state capitol of Kansas.

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John Brown =

When John Brown was executed for the crimes of murder, slave insurrection and treason against the state of Virginia on December 2, 1859, African Americans declared it "Martyr Day." In New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland and Detroit, African American owned businesses closed for the day. African American men walked down the streets of these cities wearing black armbands. Throughout the urban North, African American families and community leaders held vigils of prayer and fasting in their churches. Others convened in meeting halls and sent financial donations to the widow and family of John Brown.

Not only did John Brown sacrifice his life to bring down the nation's nefarious system of chattel slavery, but unlike most white abolitionists, he devoted a great deal of his adult life to fostering the practice of racial equality. During the 1830s, he and his family took up residence in a predominantly African American community where he earned a reputation for treating everyone as his peers. Moreover, he frequently demonstrated a strong intolerance for acts of racial discrimination, such as those he encountered when traveling with his African American colleagues. By the time he began to take up arms against the forces of chattel slavery in Kansas, John Brown had developed allies and friends among many African American leaders, of whom Frederick Douglass, his long-term friend, was the closest.

Consequently, the execution of John Brown evoked a massive public reaction of sorrow and praise from Black America. At a John Brown memorial program in Cleveland, Ohio, Charles Langston, an African American teacher and civil rights activist who would later move to Kansas and marry the widow of one of the participants in the Harper's Ferry raid, announced "I never thought that I should ever join in doing honor to or mourning any *American* white man." Indeed, never before had the death of a white person galvanized the national African American community as did John Brown's.

Hero and Martyr



by Deborah Dandridge

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brownvboard.org



(l to r): Tim Rues, curator of Constitution Hall in Leocompton, U.S. Senator Sam Brownback and Karl Gridley, historian, tour the site of "Battle of Blackjack," the first battle between Free and Slave states.

The Brown Foundation is pleased to publish this newsletter for classroom teachers through which we will share resources available from national parks and museums. Established to maintain the legacy of the *Brown* decision, our organization plays an exciting role as a park partner. In 1990 we were instrumental in developing *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site in Topeka, Kansas. We hope you enjoy the *Brown Quarterly* and we eagerly anticipate your comments.

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John Brown: Prelude to War

by Marsha Starkey, Education Specialist,
Harpers Ferry National Historical Park

John Brown. Was he a madman or martyr, murderer or saint? As we approach the bicentennial of Brown's birth on May 9, 2000, opposing opinions swirl around this controversial figure like the unsettling tornado depicted in John Steuart Curry's "The Tragic Prelude," a mural of Brown that graces the Kansas Statehouse.

Brown was many things, but first and foremost, he was an abolitionist who dedicated his life to ending slavery in the United States. Wanted for murders committed during the Bleeding Kansas slavery war, Brown was 59 years old when he led his "Provisional Army" of 21 men, 16 whites, five blacks, at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). His plan was to seize the guns from the United States Armory and Arsenal and execute raids throughout the slave-holding south, ultimately forcing an end to slavery.

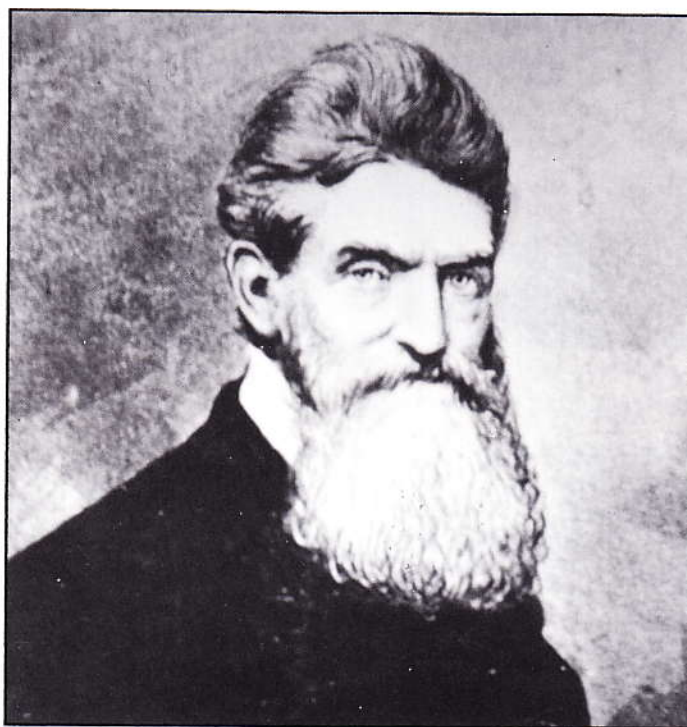
The night of October 16, Brown and 19 of his men crept into the town, took control of the armory, arsenal and U.S. Rifle Works and rounded up several hostages. The raid had begun. Throughout the day on the 17th, Brown and his men battled townspeople and local militia companies and were finally forced to take refuge in the armory's fire engine house, today known as John Brown's Fort. On the morning of October 18, Colonel Robert E. Lee, in immediate command of a detachment of U.S. Marines, ordered Lt. J.E.B. Stuart to the door of the engine house offering one last chance to surrender. Brown refused. Twelve Marines stormed the building, captured Brown and the remaining raiders and freed the hostages. Brown's raid ended 36 hours after it had begun.

Taken to the jail and courthouse in Charles Town, Virginia, (now West Virginia) Brown was charged with

murder, conspiracy to lead a slave rebellion and treason. During the subsequent trial, he was found guilty on all three charges and sentenced to be hanged. Brown was hung in Charles Town on December 2, 1859.

His raid had failed, but Brown had succeeded in focusing the nation's attention on the issue of slavery. In a note left with his jailer, Brown wrote,

"I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with blood...." The first shots of the American Civil War were fired sixteen months later.



Portrait of John Brown 1859
Courtesy of Harpers Ferry Historical Park

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park
Homepage can be accessed at <http://www.nps.gov/hafe/home>

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park is located at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers in the states of West Virginia, Virginia, and Maryland, 65 miles northwest of Washington, DC, and 20 miles southwest of Frederick, MD, via U.S. Route 340.

The Visitor Center is located on Cavalier Heights about one mile west of the Shenandoah River bridge just off U.S. Route 340. Hours are from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. The park entrance fee – good for

three days – is \$5 per vehicle or \$3 per person. Commercial Tour Fees are available on request (call 304-535-6299). Park Service shuttle buses transport visitors to the Lower Town Historic District.

The Lower Town Historic District sits on the point of land where the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers converge. It was here that George Washington convinced the Federal Government to build an Armory and Arsenal, and it was here that John Brown led his ill-fated raid of October 16, 17, and 18, 1859.

Several park exhibits and museums occupy restored 19th century buildings in the Lower Town today.

John Brown

Continued from page 1

The pro-slavery forces also suppressed the free state press. Newspaper offices were often their targets.

The result of this election fraud was what Free-Staters called the bogus constitution. Under this document only pro-slavery men could hold office or serve on juries.

Some have called the revolutionary war an "incomplete revolution," because it did not deal with the issue of slavery. For these scholars, it was the civil war that completed the American Revolution. It is indeed ironic that a country based on the principle that "all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among

which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," could have tolerated slavery. Certainly slaves were human and should have had the same rights as others. For them, the civil war was the war that completed the revolution. John Brown was a key player in this Second American Revolution. He was born May 9, 1800. His family were deeply religious and believed that slavery was a sin. While John Brown himself was an ardent abolitionist all of his life, active in both the underground railway and other abolitionist activities, he didn't become well known nationally until he moved to Kansas in 1855.

During the first 50 years of his life, he had worked as a tanner, a sheep farmer, a land speculator, and a wool broker. That he was not successful in these business ventures was not for want of hard work. He was extremely diligent and hardworking, but he was also stubborn, and refused to take advice from those who could have helped

him become successful.

John Brown's was married twice. His first wife, Dianthe, died after bearing him seven children. Shortly after her death, he married Mary, who bore him an additional 13 children. By all accounts John was a stern,

but loving father. He believed in corporal punishment and was not shy about using a switch to enforce his rules. At the same time he could be loving, and on more than one occasion stayed up all night comforting a sick child.

In 1854 five of Brown's sons, Owen, Fredrick, Salmon, Jason, and John Jr. moved to Kansas to settle and support the free state cause. At the time, John Brown was living in North Elba, New York, where he had established a farm with

the hopes of training escaped slaves in citizenship and farming methods. However when he heard of the troubles

in Kansas, the enactment of the "bogus laws" and his sons' ill health, he collected arms with his son Oliver and son-in-law Henry Thompson and moved to Kansas.

When he got there his sons were all sick, and

he began immediately clearing land for them and helping them build houses. However, violence against Free-Staters interfered with these efforts and Brown and his men were often called out to defend Lawrence from invasion. In May of 1856, a gang of men from Missouri, Georgia and Alabama stormed into Lawrence and destroyed two free-state newspapers and the Free State Hotel.



*Aerial view of Harper's Ferry circa 1887.
Courtesy of the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.*

Men from all over the South, but particularly from Missouri, a slave state, went into the Kansas Territory on every Election Day and voted "at the point of the Bowie Knife and Revolver."

Madman or Martyr?

They also killed two men, bringing to five the number of free state men who had been killed. On hearing of the planned attack, John Brown started out from near Osawatomie for Lawrence with a group of free state fighters to help defend the city. Before they could get there, however, they received word that they were too late, and that the city had not resisted.

Historians, as well as Brown's contemporaries, disagree about the details of what happened next, and why. Certain facts are not disputed. On the night of May 24, 1856, John Brown together with a small group of armed men, made up mostly of his sons and son-in-law, took five pro-slavery men from their houses and killed them in what is known as the Pottawatomie Massacre. Brown's defenders hold that the men killed had threatened the lives of every abolitionist on Pottawatomie Creek and had aided and abetted the raiders of Lawrence.

One contemporary wrote that Brown and his men saved the homes and lives of free-staters living in the community. Detractors, of course, saw it as a cowardly act of murder. John Brown himself had very little to say about it. He claimed to have killed no one, but acknowledged responsibility for the killings. In a letter written shortly after the massacre, Brown wrote, "We feel assured that He, who does not see as men see, will not lay the guilt of innocent blood to our charge . . ."

Brown left Kansas in late 1856 and spent most of 1857 and 1858 in the East raising money and plotting ways to end slavery. He returned to Kansas briefly in 1858 and

there carried out his famous raid into Missouri where he freed 11 enslaved people and conducted them to Canada.

In 1859 he plotted and trained for the raid on Harpers Ferry. On October 16, he set out with a force of 19 men, including himself, and captured Harpers Ferry.

Again historians disagree as to what "went wrong," but Brown and his men were delayed in their escape from Harpers Ferry and were captured by a group of Marines led by Robert E. Lee.

Brown was tried, and convicted of murder, treason, and conspiring with slaves to rebel. He was hanged on December 2, 1859. His hanging was widely seen as an act of martyrdom, and he himself said, "I can trust God with both the time and the manner of my death, believing as I now do that for me at this time to seal my testimony for God and humanity with my blood will do

vastly more toward advancing the cause I have earnestly endeavored to promote than all I have done in my life before." Both his supporters and detractors acknowledge that his death hastened the beginning of the Civil War and the end of slavery.

Although there is disagreement on what sort of person he was, no one disputes that he was completely committed to the end of slavery in the United States.



Drawing of the John Brown Raid, showing militia volunteers attacking Brown's men at the fire engine house near the Armory gate in 1859. Courtesy of the Harper's Ferry National Historic Site.

U S I N G T H E I N T E R N E T

Is the Internet available at your school or public library?

Here are some sites that may help you find information on the Internet:

- www.jefferson.village.virginia.edu/brown/douglass
- www.JohnBrown.org/reference
- www.genforum.familytreemaker.com/brown
- www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground
- www.nps.gov/hafe/home
- www.mcps.k12.md.us/curriculum/socialstd/FT
- www.stottlemire.com
- www.yahooligans.com/around_the_world/countries/united_states/history/slavery

Information including the above sites can be found on the Internet by using a multi-search engine (try dogpile.com) and typing in *John Brown, abolitionist*. If you find a site you are interested in, be sure to click on "Add Bookmark," so you can return easily to the same site.



BOOK NOOK

A Picture Book of Frederick Douglass

by David Adler
Illustrated by Samuel Byrd

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery on a farm in Maryland in 1818. Although it was illegal for slaves to learn to read, Frederick asked poor white boys to teach him while he ran errands.

He escaped to freedom in 1838. He worked for the abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*, before starting a paper of his own. Douglass gave speeches about the horrors of slavery and offered his house as a stop on the Underground Railroad. He wrote three books, including *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 1881.

Douglass was a friend of Abraham Lincoln and was invited to the White House after Lincoln's inauguration. A leader in the struggle to end slavery and secure civil rights, his greatest hope was to see blacks and whites living together in peace, but his hope was never fulfilled during his lifetime.

John Brown Sites & Organizations:

John Brown Memorial Association
5301 Pine Street
Philadelphia, PA 19143

John Brown Heritage Association
291 Park Avenue
Meadville, PA 16335

Osawatimie Historical Society
P.O. Box 134
Osawatimie, KS 66064

John Brown Farm
State Historic Site
Lake Placid, NY 12946

A Picture Book of Harriet Tubman

by David A. Adler
Illustrated by Samuel Byrd

Harriet Tubman was born into slavery on a Maryland plantation in 1820. A rebellious child, she did not always do as she was told. She hated being a slave and escaped to the north on the Underground Railroad in 1849.

During the next ten years, she used the money she earned at odd jobs to return to the south and lead 300 slaves to freedom. She was called "General Tubman" for her strength and bravery. Harriet went on to work as a nurse and spy for the northern army in the Civil War. She fought for women's right to vote and also helped to open a home for poor and elderly black people.

Harriet was admired and loved by the many people who knew her. She was a conductor on the railway to freedom, a "Moses" to her people.

Topekan Re-creates John Brown

Topeka actor and amateur historian Marvin Stottlemire has created a theatrical presentation of John Brown's life. Based on Brown's own words, it presents the controversial figure as he himself wanted to be seen.

"Rather than take issue with what sort of person John Brown was," Stottlemire said, "I present him as he wanted to be seen. He was a prolific writer and, except for a few transition sentences, the whole presentation is in his own words."

Stottlemire's presentation has been enthusiastically received by both historical societies and schools and is available in elementary, middle and high school versions. For further information contact Marvin Stottlemire at (785) 232-6765.

Teachers Talk

How often we teach only about the most well-known figures in history. Using books, the internet and other media center resources, we can help students dig deeper to find new role models with fascinating stories. Thousands of people devoted their lives to ending slavery. Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and William Lloyd Garrison were not the only leaders. Others made contributions to the crusade.

Maria Stewart (1803-1879)

Maria Stewart, a free-born African American woman fired by political and religious zeal, began lecturing and writing pamphlets in 1831. She lectured on abolition, equal rights, colonization, educational opportunities, and racial pride and unity.

One of the most radical writers of her time, she advocated black self-determination and independence from whites. Her career as a public speaker was cut short due to strong opposition to women lecturing in public, even from members of the black community. Stewart launched a distinguished career as an educator in New York and eventually opened two schools for free African American children in Washington, D.C.

Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880)

Lydia Maria Child was a Massachusetts-born white woman who was an anti-slavery writer and activist. She published essays, articles, letters and novels, and edited *The Anti-Slavery Standard* and a children's magazine. She advocated racial and gender equality, as well as the abolition of slavery. Child promoted the purchase of items produced by free labor instead of by slave labor. She also edited Harriet Jacobs' narrative,

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.

Child promoted interracial marriage as a solution to racial inequality and advocated on behalf of Native Americans. During Reconstruction she worked for equality, suffrage, women's rights and land reform for freed people.

Mary Ann Shadd Cary (1823-1893)

Mary Ann Shadd was born to free African American parents who were active abolitionists. She began teaching at the age of 16, but when the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 passed, she joined the wave of blacks moving to Canada.

There she established the *Provincial Freeman* in 1853, the first newspaper founded by a black woman in North America. Shadd wrote about the anti-slavery movement, denouncing racist white abolitionists.

In 1854 Shadd returned to the United States for a lecture tour. She applied to the National Negro Convention which did not accept women. Frederick Douglass argued she should be allowed to participate and she was admitted. Shadd married, attended Howard University law school, and in 1870 became the first black woman lawyer in the United States. She fought for women's rights until her death in 1893.

William Still (1821-1902)

William Still was born in New Jersey, the son of former slaves. In 1847 he married Letitia George and began working for the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery. He was soon assisting fugitive slaves on their flight north. When Philadelphia abolitionists organized a vigilance committee in response to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, they named Still as its chair. In addition to harboring countless fugitives, Still

also wrote a chronicle entitled *The Underground Railroad*. In it he countered the image of the helpless, dependent runaway by providing examples of courageous, self-reliant fugitives making their own way toward freedom.

In 1859 Still led an effort to end discrimination in Philadelphia railroad cars. Eight years later the campaign was successful. He also participated in organizations advancing black causes.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911)

Frances Ellen Watkins was the best-known and respected 19th century African American poet and novelist. She was also a powerful abolitionist and tireless community activist. Watkins was born into a free black family in Baltimore, but was orphaned and raised by relatives. In 1850 she became the first female faculty member of Union Seminary in Ohio.

In 1853 Watkins moved to Philadelphia to work as an abolitionist, working with the Underground Railroad. She then became an anti-slavery lecturer, in New England, Canada, Michigan and Ohio. In 1854 she published *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, which sold more than 10,000 copies.

Watkins was committed to non-violent political action. In 1860 she married Fenton Harper. After his death in 1864, she returned to the lecture circuit. During Reconstruction, she continued to work for social equality for African Americans and women. She was a founder of the American Woman Suffrage Association and the National Association of Colored Women.

Did You Know?

by Karl Gridley

Interesting Facts about John Brown in Lawrence and Douglas County: 1855-1859

John Brown arrived for the first time in Lawrence during the Wakarusa War on Dec. 7, 1855. That day, he and four of his sons, viewed the body of the Ohio abolitionist Thomas W. Barer, the first Free State martyr, as it lay in the Free State Hotel. Brown was made captain in the 5th Regiment, 1st Brigade of Kansas Volunteers. His company was the Liberty Guards.

- Following the Sack of Lawrence, May 21, 1856, Brown, four of his sons and two other associates retaliated on May 24, committing the Pottawatomie Massacre, killing with broadswords five Pro-slavery settlers near Lane in present-day Franklin County.

- Brown's forces fought in the first regular battle in Kansas between Free State and Pro-slavery forces at Black Jack, three miles east of present-day Baldwin. One of the trophies of battle Brown kept was Pate's Bowie knife, which Brown later showed a Connecticut blacksmith, asking if he could make "a thousand like it, to be fastened to poles six feet long." Thus originated the famous pikes of Harpers Ferry. Brown planned to use these as weapons in a massive slave uprising throughout the South.

- Following the Battle of Black Jack, Brown's camp was disbanded by federal troops under the command of

Col. Edwin V. Sumner. Another officer present was J.E.B. Stuart, who, in a twist of fate, would meet John Brown again during the storming of the engine house at Harpers Ferry, Oct. 18, 1859.

- Following the Battle of Osawatimie on Aug. 30, 1856, where Brown's son was killed, Brown returned to Lawrence. On Sept. 14, he was among the defenders during the Siege of Lawrence, as 2700 Border Ruffians threatened to invade the town. He gave a speech on tactics to a large gathering of armed Lawrence citizens as he stood on a dry goods box opposite the original Lawrence Post Office. A plaque commemorating the event can be seen at 636 Massachusetts.

- In 1857, after a lengthy absence from the territory, Brown returned to Kansas. In early November, he stayed at the Edmund B. Whitman farm, a few miles northwest of Lawrence, and began to gather recruits there and near Topeka for his Harpers Ferry Raid. Among them were John E. Cook, John H. Kagi and Aaron Stevens.

- In late January 1859, Brown passed through Lawrence for the last time, escorting to Canada along the Underground Railroad, twelve African Americans he had liberated from Missouri slaveholders.

The John Brown documentary entitled "John Brown's Holy War" is scheduled to air on PBS American Experience on Monday, Feb. 28, 2000.

For information on African, Hispanic, Asian, Native American history, see past issues of the Brown Quarterly on our website at:

brownvboard.org

E-Mail: brownfound@juno.com

Web: <http://brownvboard.org>