

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

John Brown's Raid

By **Evan Carton**, University of Texas at Austin

John Brown is the most controversial and, arguably, the most historically consequential private citizen of the United States who ever lived. The evidence for his controversy is the polarized debate about his character and importance that has raged for more than one hundred and fifty years and attracted many of the country's leading writers, artists, and scholars. One measure of his consequence is that that debate, until very recently, has fallen out along starkly racial lines. Whether or not Brown was, as Herman Melville called him, "the meteor" of the War Between the States, he surely has been a lightning rod of the war between the races that still awaits full settlement in truth and reconciliation.¹

The John Brown of Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and critic Robert Penn Warren was an unprincipled low-life disposed "to meanness, to chicanery, to bitter, querulous intolerance, to dishonesty, to vindictiveness and ruthless brutality." The painter John Steuart Curry, whose widely reproduced mural of Brown adorns the Kansas State Capitol, considered his subject "a bloodthirsty, god-fearing maniac." Prominent white historians echoed these early twentieth-century characterizations throughout the latter decades of the century: Alan Nevins pronounced Brown "ignorant, narrow-minded, fanatically prejudiced"; Bruce Catton declared him "a brutal murderer if ever there was one"; Eugene Genovese labeled him "fanatical, millenarian, and possibly mad"; and Charles Joyner dismissed him as "an incompetent revolutionary" whose "whole life was a pitiful failure."²

¹ Herman Melville, "The Portent" in *Battle Pieces and Aspects of War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1866), 1.

² Robert Penn Warren, *John Brown* (New York: Payson & Clarke, 1929), 350; John Steuart Curry to Reverend A. Christensen, Jan. 12, 1940, JSC Papers in R. Blakeslee Gilpin, *John Brown Still Lives!* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 154; Albert Fried, *John Brown's Journey* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1978), 8-9 (Nevins and Catton); Stephen B. Oates, *Our Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and the Civil War Era* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 40-1; Charles Joyner, "Guilty of Holiest Crime," in *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid*, Paul Finkelman, ed. (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1995), 299.

By contrast, Frederick Douglass, Brown's associate and friend for more than a decade, described the 1859 raid on the U. S. armory at Harpers Ferry (which he himself had declined to join) as a "sublimely disinterested effort to emancipate the slaves of Maryland and Virginia" led by a "humane" and "dignified" man "moved by the highest principles of philanthropy"--a man whom Douglass also regarded as the only white person he had ever met who was free of racial prejudice. Sociologist, historian, and NAACP co-founder W. E. B. Du Bois affirmed that it was Brown's "incarnate spirit of justice" that enabled him "to sacrifice money, reputation, and life itself on the altar of right"; of all white Americans, he added, Brown "has perhaps come nearest to touching the real souls of black folk." African American minister and anti-slavery activist Henry Highland Garnet insisted on the twentieth anniversary of Brown's hanging that "without him there would have been no civil war, and without civil war there would have been no emancipation." Nearly a century later, Malcolm X paid similar tribute to Brown's moral and practical heroism and offered an unsubtle but generally apt explanation of the abolitionist's denigration and dismissal by received white opinion: "You know what John Brown did? He went to war. He was a white man who went to war against white people to help free slaves. . . . And any white man who is ready and willing to shed blood for your freedom--in the sight of other whites, he's nuts."³

John Brown was a complicated, driven, and flawed man, but he was neither mad, nor bloodthirsty, nor millenarian, nor ineffective. African American assessments of his character and significance have been discounted as biased and self-serving in mainstream American history and civic memory, but, on the whole, they have been far more accurate than have the depictions of Brown by representatives of the country's literary, political, and historical establishment. These representatives have sometimes, as in the case of Warren, been outright sympathizers with the antebellum South's lost cause. More often, as in the case of Civil War historians generally, they have been invested in a project of sectional reconciliation that has demanded that the war be viewed as a national tragedy precipitated by structural socio-economic conditions and by the divergent yet equally reasonable claims, motives, interests, and the shared miscalculations, of North and South alike. This view cannot condone or dignify the actions of a deliberate provocateur and committed revolutionary like John Brown. Neither can it easily assimilate the following truths—truths that most blacks have held to be self-evident: that the sectional conflict that

³ Frederick Douglass, "Letter to the *Rochester Democrat*, October 31, 1859" and "Captain Brown Not Insane" *Douglas' Monthly*, November, 1859, collected in Zoe Trodd and John Stauffer, eds., *Meteor of War: The John Brown Story* (Maplecrest, NY: Brandywine Press, 2004), 202, 204; W. E. B. DuBois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. DuBois* (New York: International, 1968) 251, and *John Brown* (Philadelphia: G. W. Jacobs, 1909), preface; Henry Highland Garnet, "Lincoln and John Brown: Coupled by Colored Men as Martyrs in Freedom's Battle," 1879; quoted in Gilpin, *John Brown*, 60; Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970, 1985), 81-2.

led to war was about slavery; that, in 1859, neither moral suasion, nor political compromise, nor enlightened self-interest, nor natural demise, nor God's providence was about to end slavery any time soon; that, as Brown understood, and stated in the note he passed to his prison guard on the morning of his execution, only bloodshed could purge the nation of slavery; and that slavery itself, not the Civil War that ended it, entailed the greatest carnage and the greatest tragedy in American history.

Brown was born in Torrington, Connecticut on May 9, 1800, five months after George Washington's death, and just as itinerant book vendor Mason Locke (Parson) Weems was beginning to peddle his hagiographic *Life of Washington*. The Browns shared the patriotic pride in the nation's revolutionary heroes and founding principles that Weems' bestseller tapped and promoted. In fact, they could claim a familial Revolutionary legacy and sacrifice in the figure of Captain John Brown, the abolitionist's grandfather and namesake, who had commanded a regiment in Washington's army until his death of dysentery during the war. The family also professed and devoutly practiced the Reformed Christianity of its earliest American ancestor, the 17th century Puritan Peter Brown. One key to Brown's career as an uncompromising and increasingly militant proponent of immediate abolition lies in the fact that, by the time of his birth, influential Reformed theologians had come to believe that ending slavery was an urgent religious imperative--"a duty," as Jonathan Edwards Jr. put it, "which we owe to mankind, to ourselves, and to God too."⁴

A distinguished minister in his own right, Edwards Jr. also carried on the name of his famous father, the preeminent New England Calvinist and leader of the powerful religious revival of the 1730s-40s, the Great Awakening. In 1791, the younger Edwards delivered a sermon entitled "The Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade and of the Slavery of the Africans" that took as its text the most famous verse in Christian scripture, *Matthew 7:12*: "Therefore all things whatsoever that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the law and the prophets." Upon this teaching of Jesus, Edwards built to the following crescendo of questions: "Should we be willing, that the Africans or any other nation should purchase us, our wives and children, transport us into Africa and there sell us into perpetual and absolute slavery? Should we be willing, that they by large bribes and offers of a gainful traffic, should entice our neighbors to kidnap and sell us to them, and that they should hold in perpetual and cruel bondage, not only ourselves, but our posterity through all generations? Yet why is it not as right for them to treat us in this manner, as it is for us to treat them in the same manner?" Printed as a pamphlet, Edwards's sermon circulated throughout New England's Reformed congregations. In one of these, it was read by a devout young man named Owen Brown, who instantly embraced active opposition to slavery as a religious obligation.

⁴ Mason L. Weems, *The Life of Gen. Washington By Rev. Mason L. Weems 1809* (Philadelphia: Matthew Carey, 1809); Jonathan Edwards, *The Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade and of the Slavery of the Africans: Preached Before the Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Freedom, and for the Relief of Persons Unlawfully Holden in Bondage, at Their Annual Meeting in New-Haven, Sept. 15, 1791, 2nd ed.* (Boston: Wills & Lilly, 1822), 4.

John Brown idolized his father Owen and followed his example in many facets of his life. Both father and son were master tanners; both also raised livestock, speculated in land, and held civic office—Owen as justice of the peace in Hudson, the town in Ohio's Western Reserve that he helped settle, and John as postmaster of Richmond in western Pennsylvania, a frontier township, as Hudson had been when his father moved his family there twenty years earlier, to which John Brown relocated with his young wife and children in 1825. Both Owen and John Brown became patriarchs of large, devoted families, both sought to inculcate Calvinism and abolitionism in their children, both assisted slaves escaping to the north. Yet both also recognized a fundamental conflict between their religious and political principles and an emerging American model of masculine identity and achievement to which they were by no means immune: the figure of the entrepreneur, the man on the make, the votary of material self-interest, the economic competitor and winner.

Brown married at twenty and managed a tannery owned by his father until 1825, when he moved with his wife Dianthe and their three sons to Crawford County, Pennsylvania, eighty miles northeast of Hudson, and helped establish a new township there. As Richmond's tanner, surveyor, and first federally appointed postmaster, he quickly became a civic and business leader in the community, but abruptly pulled up stakes a decade later and returned to Ohio. As would be the case with each of the many subsequent re-locations and reorientations of his life, Brown's reasons for moving were complex. Though he remained a respected figure in Richmond, Brown alienated some of his white neighbors by his aggressive advocacy of Native American and African American rights. In 1832, affronted that fellow worshippers at his local church had made the area's few black families feel unwelcome there, he organized a new, pointedly interracial Congregational Society that met in his tannery's attic. That same year, Dianthe died in childbirth, leaving Brown a thirty-two year old widower with five young children. Thereafter, life in Richmond was shadowed by her loss, even though Brown was married again eleven months later to Mary Ann Day, the teenage housekeeper he had hired after Dianthe's death. Missing his relatives in Ohio, and wanting his children to know them better, Brown accepted a partnership offer in a new tannery in Franklin, a town on the Cuyahoga River less than ten miles from Hudson that developers expected to boom upon the completion of the Pennsylvania-Ohio Canal.

If economic opportunity occasioned Brown's move back to the Western Reserve, an underlying dissatisfaction with a life devoted to economic pursuits contributed to his restlessness as well. Brown read and in some degree approved Ben Franklin's gospel of industriousness, but he could not shake the suspicion that, in keeping his nose to the grindstone, he was turning his back on a higher calling. That calling was abolition, which had become a national movement with William Lloyd Garrison's establishment of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. One year later, Brown produced the first written record of his own desire to "do something in a practical way for my poor fellowmen who are in bondage" in a letter to his brother urging that they start a school for young black boys, who, he proposed, might also lodge, board, and be "[brought up] as we do our own" at his home in Richmond. Though the means of this never-realized scheme were

peaceful, its ends were militant: “If the young blacks of our country could once become enlightened, it would most assuredly operate on slavery like firing powder confined in rock, and all slaveholders know it well.” Militant, too, was the Brown family’s response in 1836, the first year of its residence in Franklin, when local blacks were seated apart in the back of the Franklin Congregational Church for a service led by a celebrated revivalist. In the middle of the sermon, the Browns rose en masse, walked to the rear of the packed meeting house, escorted a black family of their acquaintance back to their pew near the front, and resettled themselves on this family’s vacated bench. This was not the sort of action likely to enhance the fortunes of a businessman in a new community.⁵

By the middle 1830s, slavery had come to occupy a much more central place in both the American economy and the American imagination than it had at the beginning of the century. The Founding Fathers generally did not hold the self-evident truth “that all men are created equal” to apply to blacks, and would have dismissed as foolish or fanatical anyone who argued that it should. They did, however, believe that those who held absolute power over other human beings tended to be corrupted by that power. Accordingly, they hoped and expected that slavery would soon die out, that planters would find it preferable to employ white laborers rather than have to control ever increasing numbers of blacks, and that within a few decades the nation’s leaders would agree on a plan to send the slaves and their descendants back to Africa or to some Caribbean island or distant western territory. But the new technology and vast new supply of arable land provided by the invention of the cotton gin (1793) and the Louisiana Purchase (1803), respectively, made large-scale cotton production possible, hugely profitable, and, by the 1830s, central to both the southern agricultural and the northern industrial economy. Despite Congress’s 1808 ban on the further importation of slaves, the U. S. slave population more than tripled between the first national census in 1790 and 1835, when 2.2 million African Americans were held in bondage.

As slavery expanded, Southern efforts to secure it politically and defend it ideologically intensified. Slavery was not a necessary evil but a “positive good,” South Carolina Senator and former Vice-President John C. Calhoun pronounced in an 1837 speech on the Senate floor, as punitive practices designed to terrorize slaves into submission and legal penalties for anti-slavery expression were becoming the norm throughout the South. Though slavery’s escalating scope and brutality prompted a small minority of Northerners to embrace radical abolition, racism and anti-black laws also predominated in the North, particularly in states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Illinois, where many white residents feared that their communities would be inundated and their jobs taken by escaping or freed slaves from bordering slaveholding states. In November of 1837, a mob in Alton, Illinois, just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, assassinated newspaper editor Elijah Lovejoy, after Lovejoy had defied numerous previous warnings to cease publication of his abolitionist polemics. Lovejoy became the abolitionist movement’s first white martyr. At a commemorative prayer service for him,

⁵ John Brown letter to Frederick Brown, Nov. 21, 1834, in Zoe Trodd and John Stauffer, eds., *Meteor of War: The John Brown Story* (Maplecrest, NY: Brandywine Press, 2004), 42-3.

held in the chapel of Western Reserve College in Hudson, John Brown stood and pledged that he would henceforth devote his life to the anti-slavery cause.

Nearly a decade would pass before he could begin to make good on that promise. Brown had quarreled with the funder of the Franklin tannery, which was never built, and sought to replenish his depleted funds and support his wife and six children by speculating in land with borrowed capital. The financial panic of 1837 and the five-year depression that followed thwarted his development plans and reduced the value of his collateral against the debts he owed. Brown staved off bankruptcy until 1842, but finally could not prevent the court-ordered auction of everything he owned, aside from his family's clothing and Bibles, to make partial payment to his creditors. A timely offer of employment and lodging by Simon Perkins, an Akron capitalist and owner of one of the largest and finest flocks of Saxony sheep in Ohio, allowed the Browns to avert destitution. Brown and his sons would tend and cross-breed Perkins's flock and prepare their fleece for market in exchange for a cottage on Perkins's property and a share of the profits on the sale of the wool.

By 1845, Brown was one of the most successful breeders of sheep and respected authorities on the cleaning and grading of wool in the United States. He had exhibited his season's shearing at agricultural shows in Boston and New York City, winning gold medals in each, addressed wool growers' conventions on his methods, and been the subject of articles in agricultural journals. Brown's rapidly acquired expertise and reputation enabled him to persuade his fellow growers and his partner Simon Perkins to attempt to redress a structural economic inequality in their business. Producers of wool were typically at the mercy of traveling purchase agents for the big eastern mills who offered them a flat price per pound for their yields, with no additional compensation for the higher-grade fleeces on which the manufacturers would turn large profits. Brown's proposed remedy was collective bargaining: the growers could command fair prices by consigning all their wool to an agent of their own and empowering him to sort it, grade it, and sell it to manufacturers from a central depot at rates that were tied to quality.

In the spring of 1846, Perkins & Brown opened their warehouse and distribution center in Springfield, Massachusetts, "for receiving wool of growers and holders, and for grading and selling the same for cash at its real value." Brown managed the business for almost four years, moving an average of 130,000 pounds of wool annually. But, throughout his family's Springfield residence, Brown's efforts were divided between his responsibility to answer to the interests of his clients and what he would later call his charge "to answer the end of my being." For the first time, Brown was living in proximity to a sizable black community, and he made it his business to interact with this community and to earn its trust. Brown, along with the adult sons who joined him in the Springfield venture, hired blacks to work in the warehouse, patronized black businesses, worshipped at a black church, and attended abolitionist meetings and lectures organized

and led by blacks. After one such lecture, Brown's African American friends invited him to meet the celebrated speaker, Frederick Douglass.⁶

Douglass was struck by the intensity and authenticity of Brown's devotion to abolition: "though a white gentleman," he wrote of Brown in his newspaper, after their first meeting, "he is in sympathy a black man, and as deeply interested in our cause, as though his own soul had been pierced with the iron of slavery." The two men forged a close friendship that, over the years, would involve extended stays in one another's homes and many long discussions of the pros and cons of direct anti-slavery action. The earliest of these occurred in the fall of 1848, when Douglass joined the Brown family for dinner at their rented house in Springfield and afterwards talked long into the night about Brown's grand scheme to end slavery in America. The plan was to mobilize a small, committed, interracial militia, establish mountain bases in the Appalachians, and from these hidden strongholds stage a series of surprise freedom raids on plantations up and down Virginia, thus liberating slaves, making slave property insecure, driving slaveholding ever further south, and reducing the productivity and profitability of slavery until the entire system collapsed.⁷

Before he could put this plan in motion, Brown felt he needed to secure a permanent home for his family (which in 1848 included five living children by Mary Ann, with a sixth on the way, in addition to his five adult children by Dianthe) and to cultivate a wider set of relationships with bold black men who might be persuaded to join or recruit for such a radical enterprise. An opportunity to do both arose when Brown learned of millionaire abolitionist Gerrit Smith's project to sponsor a black farming community on 120,000 acres of land that he owned near Lake Placid in the Adirondacks. Traveling to call on the New York philanthropist, Brown asked to purchase an adjoining tract, arguing that—as a skilled surveyor, farmer, and livestock breeder, as well as a determined advocate of African American rights—he could help this new community meet the daunting environmental challenges, natural and social, that it was sure to face. Persuaded, Smith sold him 244 acres in North Elba, New York for one dollar an acre.

Brown now attempted to close Perkins & Brown's operation in Springfield on favorable terms. Believing that English manufacturers would pay higher prices than their American counterparts for top quality wool, Brown arranged to bring his entire inventory to London for sale. This gamble failed miserably, leaving the firm with heavy debts that would mire Brown in lawsuits for the next two years. A sense of personal obligation to Simon Perkins, who had covered the firm's losses, prompted Brown to return to Ohio and work for Perkins in his previous capacity for three more. Finally, in 1854, Brown prepared to occupy the North Elba tract and offer what assistance he could to the struggling black community there. But a new escalation of the national struggle over the

⁶ Perkins & Brown advertising circular cited in Franklin Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown* (Boston: Roberts Bros., 1885), 63; John Brown letter to wife and family, Sept. 4, 1855, Sanborn, *Life and Letters*, 199-200.

⁷ Frederick Douglass, "Editorial Correspondence," *The North Star* (Rochester, NY), February 11, 1848.

expansion of slavery intervened and altered Brown's plans, setting him on his path—via “Bleeding Kansas”—to Harpers Ferry.

On May 30, 1854, President Franklin Pierce signed into law a bill empowering the western territories of Kansas and Nebraska to elect representatives to draw up petitions for statehood. Superseding the Missouri Compromise, which for thirty-four years had prohibited the formation of new slave states north of 36° 30' latitude, the Kansas-Nebraska Act called for the popular determination of slavery's legal status by voting residents of these territories. Nebraska was not considered suitable for a slave-based economy, but Kansas, due west of the slaveholding state of Missouri, was. A mad and nationally publicized rush to populate the territory ensued, fueled by both cheap land prices and inflamed political passions. Kansas was the test case for slavery's containment in the South or expansion across the continent. Slaveholders and their congressional representatives were determined to have it; abolitionists were determined to keep it from them.

Brown's four adult sons by his first marriage—John Jr., Jason, Owen, and Frederick—along with their seventeen year-old half-brother Salmon decided to stake a Kansas claim and emigrate. This was their opportunity at once to strike out on their own and to contribute to the anti-slavery cause that they had been schooled to view as nothing less than the cause of Christ. “Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me” (*Matthew*: 25:45). “Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them” (*Hebrews*: 13:3). These, along with the Golden Rule, were the New Testament verses on which the Brown children had been raised from infancy, and, though most of them fell away from his pious faith, not a one failed to embrace his egalitarian racial politics.

The Brown boys settled in Kansas in the spring of 1855. They found a territory with a residential population that opposed slavery by a significant margin but with a recently elected legislature and newly drafted constitution that were radically pro-slavery. The reason for the disjunction was simple: in two consecutive territorial elections, on November 29, 1854 and March 30, 1855, respectively, several thousand Missouri vigilantes had descended on Kansas polling places, terrorized and dismissed dutiful election officials, commandeered and stuffed ballot boxes, and, at gunpoint or knife-point, dissuaded those suspected of free soil sentiments from voting. This campaign of voter fraud and intimidation was too blatant to be ignored by the federally appointed territorial governor Andrew Reeder, even though Reeder served a pro-slavery administration. “Kansas has been invaded by an organized army, armed to the teeth, who took possession of the ballot-boxes and made a legislature to suit themselves,” he reported. President Pierce dismissed him and refused to void the election results.⁸

In June, Brown received a month-old letter from John, Jr. in Kansas: “I tell you the truth,” his son had written, “when I say that while the interest of despotism has

⁸ Andrew Reeder 1855 Speech in Easton, PA in Richard O. Boyer, *The Legend of John Brown* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 503.

secured to its cause hundreds and thousands of the meanest and most desperate of men, armed to the teeth with Revolvers, Bowie Knives, Rifles, & Cannon—while they are not only thoroughly organized, but under pay from Slaveholders—the friends of freedom are not one fourth of them half armed, and as to Military Organization among them it nowhere exists in this territory.” The Missourians, John Jr. continued, plan “to drive out from the Territory every Anti-slavery man they can find in it” and to do it “*now* while they can nip their opponents in the bud.” The Brown brothers, John Jr. concluded, were determined to resist, but they needed to be sent high-quality weapons from the East. “We need them more than we do bread.” Within days, Brown had raised funds from antislavery associates to purchase Colt revolvers and Sharps rifles, and, accompanied by another son, Oliver, and his son-in-law Henry Thompson, was on his way west.⁹

John Brown arrived in Kansas Territory in October 1855, an obscure tradesman (except, briefly, among northeastern wool growers) and an intermittent anti-slavery activist, more ambitious than accomplished in the cause. He left one year later, a national legend. Following his father’s lead, Brown had conducted escaping slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad for many years. He had befriended black abolitionist leaders, attended lectures and conventions, and, most radically, helped Springfield’s black community organize a mutual defense league to forcibly resist any marshal or bounty-hunter who, under the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, tried to capture and return a Springfield resident to slavery. But the Kansas conflict presented a field of anti-slavery action on a different scale and of a different character. Though it pitted whites against whites, Brown viewed the battle for Kansas as an expression of slavery’s essence: a campaign of violence and terror by which the rich and powerful withheld freedom and dignity from the poor and weak. Both the Bible and America’s colonial and revolutionary lore, of course, were rife with precedents of the righteous retribution and mythic triumph of the weak against tyranny.

What actually happened in Kansas, though a watershed in the history of American slavery and in the life of John Brown, was more prosaic and equivocal. Anti-slavery settlers, centered in and around the Free State enclave of Lawrence, refused to acknowledge the authority of what they called the “bogus” Kansas legislature and proceeded to elect a government of their own. Federal authorities deemed this rogue government treasonous but hesitated to move against it directly because the Free State cause in Kansas had a significant base of support in Congress and in the northern press. A tense stand-off held throughout the fall and bitter winter of 1855, punctuated by small-scale acts of vandalism and violence by pro-slavery partisans who, in many cases, as John Brown Jr. had reported, were not themselves settlers but hired, non-resident muscle. Several anti-slavery men were killed in disputes that may have been personal but that Free Staters regarded as political assassinations. The Douglas County sheriff, a pro-slavery Missourian who had participated in the hijacking of the March election, made no effort to apprehend the killers.

⁹ John Brown, Jr. to John Brown, May 20-24, 1855 in Boyer, *Legend*, 524-5.

Braving sub-zero temperatures in crude, unfinished shelters, the Browns battled flu and frostbite and organized small Free State militia companies to repel the vigilante attacks that they expected to resume in the spring. They wondered, however, whether enough of their anti-slavery neighbors would fight to force a genuine non-partisan intervention by the U. S. government, a disarming of all combatants, and honest Kansas elections. Most of these settlers had come to Kansas seeking personal opportunity, not to risk their property and their lives for some abstract principle. This, in fact, was what the mercenary army that gathered on a hill overlooking Lawrence in May, under banners proclaiming “Southern Rights” and “The Supremacy of the White Race,” was counting on: it was an article of popular faith that the New Englanders whom northeastern Emigrant Aid Societies had enticed to re-settle in Kansas were big on high-minded talk but had no stomach for a brawl.

On the morning of May 21, 1856, under the pretext of serving arrest warrants to prominent Lawrence citizens who had violated the territory’s draconian statutes prohibiting anti-slavery activity and expression, an eight hundred-man posse descended on the town. Recruited and financed not only by pro-slavery interests in neighboring Missouri but by wealthy slaveholders across the southern states, this irregular militia included Alabama Indian fighters, Georgia state militia men, Florida slave patrol officers, and Kentucky adventurers.

By evening, they had ransacked the offices of the two anti-slavery newspapers and destroyed their printing presses, burned the Free State hotel, the hub and symbol of abolitionism in Kansas, vandalized shops and homes, and humiliated the town’s residents, who put up no resistance. Some of the town’s leaders had fled at the southerners’ approach to avoid capture. When Lawrence was sacked, the Browns and their allies were en route from their homes fifty miles away to defend it. On May 22 they learned they were too late. On May 23 they received word that, as pro-slavery vigilantes were laying siege to Lawrence, the most outspoken Congressional champion of the Free State cause, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, had been ambushed and nearly beaten to death at his desk on the Senate floor by South Carolina congressman Preston Brooks. Years later, Jason Brown recalled his father saying to the men gathered around their campfire on Ottawa Creek: “Something *is going to be done now*. We must show by actual work that there are two sides to this thing, and that they cannot go on with impunity.”¹⁰

The actual work that Brown resolved to perform was a shocking act of political terrorism (or counter-terrorism): at midnight of the next day, he and the five men who agreed on the measure’s necessity dragged five local pro-slavery agitators from their beds, marched them out to the woods, and brutally executed them with broadswords. The Pottawatomie massacre was the first episode in Brown’s career as an abolitionist combatant and the only one in which his intention was to take human life. Its victims were not random, but its objectives were impersonal: to create a balance of terror in the

¹⁰ Recollection of Jason Brown in Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown*, rpt. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965, (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1910), 151.

territory and thus erode the confidence and security of proslavery forces; to escalate and polarize the conflict, thus forcing anti-slavery men to take up arms in self-defense; and to raise the political price of the federal government's tacit acceptance of pro-slavery violence as the basis of Kansas territorial law. Jason and John Jr. refused any part in the assassinations, which were carried out by sons Owen, Oliver, and Salmon, son-in-law Henry Thompson, and one non-family member, Theodore Weiner. Several members of the killing team suffered emotionally during or after their action, but in later years none ever repudiated it.

The wide suspicion that Brown had authored the Pottawatomie killings fueled his notoriety in Kansas, though, for obvious reasons, he did not claim responsibility for them. His national fame would rest on two paramilitary confrontations with much larger proslavery companies in the summer of 1856. In the Battle of Black Jack Springs in June, Brown and eight comrades succeeded in immobilizing and capturing a twenty-six-man militia unit dispatched from Missouri to arrest him. And at the end of August, Brown defended the Free State settlement of Osawatimie with a unit of thirty against a three hundred-man force led by Mexican War veteran, Captain John William Reid. Eventually, Brown's fighters were overpowered and fled across the river as Osawatimie was torched, but not before they exacted forty casualties while suffering only four themselves and made the heroic defense of freedom in Kansas a media cause célèbre.

Brown returned east early in 1857. He had not seen his wife and daughters in a year-and-a-half. One of his sons had been killed in Kansas, two others imprisoned, one emotionally broken by torture, and his son-in-law wounded in battle. All of these family sacrifices Brown leveraged in speaking and fundraising engagements before antislavery audiences in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania whom he urged to remain vigilant in the face of the still volatile Kansas situation. The vigilance he recommended entailed supplying him with guns and money to outfit a citizens' defense force in Kansas formidable enough to solidify and make permanent the gains of the Free State party. From the Massachusetts Kansas Committee and the National Kansas Committee, headquartered in Chicago, Brown received donations of funds and weapons. He duly returned to Kansas in the fall, but not to resume his operations there. Nearly four million African Americans were now enslaved, and by a 7-2 vote in the recent Dred Scott case the Supreme Court had ruled that the Constitution regarded not just slaves but all descendants of slaves, even those who were nominally free, "as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit." Brown's mission now in Kansas was to recruit for his campaign in Virginia. The time had passed, he felt, to resist slavery's incursion into places where it had yet to spread; it needed to be attacked where it lived.

Eight Kansas veterans and one escaped slave signed on and went to train at the home of a Brown admirer in the Quaker village of Springdale, Iowa. Brown traveled east again to visit his family and to spend two weeks as a secret visitor at Douglass's home in

Rochester, where he drafted the document that he meant to serve as the governing constitution of the egalitarian and interracial provisional state that he hoped to establish in the mountains. Liberated and escaping slaves, he believed, would flock to join this association and to serve in its defense once they saw that slavery was vulnerable to the concerted might and righteousness of black and white men willing to embrace its abolition as a matter of life and death. With the help of Douglass and other black activist friends, Brown arranged a series of meetings in the spring of 1858 with leaders of the radical fugitive slave communities in St. Catherines and Chatham, Ontario, Canada. Harriet Tubman was one such leader who promised to recruit for Brown's Virginia campaign, which he planned to launch as soon as he had sufficient funds and manpower. But the plan was betrayed to federal authorities by a disgruntled associate, Hugh Forbes, whom Brown had hired to train his troops in Iowa and then dismissed when Forbes proved irresponsible and mercenary. To discredit Forbes' allegation—scarcely credible on its face—that he intended a direct attack on slavery in the South, Brown returned once again to Kansas, grew a beard, assumed an alias, and waited.

Five of Brown's original eight Kansas volunteers remained committed to the Virginia project in 1859, when Brown reactivated it. Two Quaker brothers from Iowa, Barclay and Edwin Coppoc, shocked their family by joining the company, arguing that helping to end slavery better expressed the spirit of their religion than preserving its tradition of pacifism. Three new white recruits, one each from Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Massachusetts, found their way to Brown in the months preceding the Harpers Ferry raid, and five blacks rallied to his support: Lewis Leary and John Copeland, anti-slavery activists from Oberlin, Ohio; Shields Green, a fugitive slave who worked as an assistant to Douglass in Rochester; Dangerfield Newby, a freedman whose wife and children were enslaved in Virginia; and Osborne Anderson, the sole Canadian fugitive recruited in the spring of 1858 who answered Brown's renewed call a year later. Anderson, the only black Harpers Ferry raider who would escape death in Virginia by bullet or noose, later described the doomed community of comrades in arms as a family perhaps unlike any that had ever existed in America. "In John Brown's house, and in John Brown's presence, men from widely different parts of the continent met and united into one company, wherein no hateful prejudice dared intrude its ugly self—no ghost of a distinction found space to enter. . . . I thank God that I have been permitted to realize to its furthest, fullest extent, the moral, mental, physical, social harmony of an Anti-Slavery family."¹¹

Six Browns and Thompson in-laws completed the army of twenty-one that marched on the U. S. government arsenal at Harpers Ferry and on the institution of slavery on October 16, 1859. Brown's sons and son-in-law were the most proven and dedicated white anti-slavery militants in the country, and Brown urged them to make yet another personal sacrifice. But John Jr. and Jason had returned from Kansas too damaged for further combat. Salmon's wife insisted he'd done enough, and Henry Thompson now

¹¹ Osborne P. Anderson, *A Voice from Harper's Ferry: a narrative of events at Harper's Ferry, with Incidents Prior and Subsequent to its Capture by Captain Brown and His Men* (Boston, printed for the author, 1861), 23-4.

had three young children with Brown's daughter Ruth and would be the principal support for Brown's North Elba family if Brown never returned from Virginia. Henry's younger brothers, William and Dauphin Thompson, enlisted and died in his stead. Owen, Oliver, and Watson Brown, who had stayed behind to care for his mother and sisters and tend the farm during the Kansas years, went south with their father in July and took up residence in the Maryland farmhouse that Brown had rented as a staging area. Watson briefly delayed his departure to be present at the birth of his child—a boy, named Frederick after the brother shot in Kansas, whom he would never see again.

Two Brown women—sixteen year-old Annie and Oliver's new bride Martha—joined the score of holed up raiders to create the public façade, and provide a few of the genuine comforts, of domesticity for the curious Yankee “family” that had leased the old Kennedy place. Most of the young men, and all of the blacks, lay out of sight on pallets in the attic during the long summer's daylight hours. In August, Douglass met with a disguised Brown in an abandoned quarry in Chambersburg, PA, and declined his friend's repeated appeals that he join in the action. Brown believed that, once the raid began, word of Douglass's participation could be spread quickly through underground slave networks of communication across the upper South, and that, given such a stamp of legitimacy and promise, slaves would desert their masters en masse and flock to the armory to take up the fight. Douglass believed that Harpers Ferry, nestled at the tip of the peninsula bounded by the converging Shenandoah and Potomac rivers, and accessible by two bridges that rifleman in the surrounding hills might easily close off to incoming or outgoing passage, was a “perfect steel trap.”¹²

As the summer passed, and it became evident that the raiders could count on no additional numbers or support before the commencement of their operation, a sizable faction of Brown's men concluded that Douglass was right and that their leader's plan was suicide. They urged Brown to return to the idea of a series of small slave-stealing raids from hideouts in the surrounding mountains, only culminating in a direct assault on the Harpers Ferry armory once they had attracted a force large enough to require the weapons stored there and to provide them with adequate cover. Brown refused to budge. Quietly running off slaves from Virginia plantations might make a local stir, but a public attack by black and white men in concert on a military facility of the U. S. government—the true power behind the institution of slavery—would be a revolutionary act as monumental and irrepressible as the first stirrings of revolt in 1776 or 1789. If the men had lost confidence in him, Brown offered to step down as their commander and follow the orders of the man they elected as his replacement. No one stepped forward, and no one left, though several wrote to loved ones that they expected to die in a cause that they nonetheless felt honor-bound to see to its conclusion.

After dark on Sunday evening, October 16, 1859, the company began its five and a half mile march along the Maryland Heights to the covered bridge over the Potomac that emptied into the town of Harpers Ferry. Telegraph wires under the bridge were cut,

¹² Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 759.

watchmen were surprised and arrested without resistance, the lock on the armory gate was broken, and the raiders fanned out inside the armory grounds to take control of its strategic buildings. Brown dispatched a delegation of raiders in a large wagon to visit the nearby farms of three prominent slaveholders (among them Colonel Lewis Washington, great-grandnephew of the first president), take their owners hostage, and bring them back, along with their house slaves, to the armory. By 4:00 a. m., this had been accomplished without violence. But things had begun to go wrong several hours earlier when Brown's sentries stopped the 1:25 a. m. train to Baltimore and two railroad employees ignored their command to stand and surrender. One of Brown's men fired as the railroad workers fled, and killed the Harpers Ferry baggage master, a black man, who became the raid's first casualty. A local doctor, observing the late-night activity and discerning its character, rode into the hills by a route that Brown had left unpatrolled and began to alert militia units in neighboring towns. And at dawn, Brown permitted the delayed B & O train to continue toward Baltimore, a decision that produced the conductor's telegraph to the railroad president and the railroad president's telegraph to the White House in quick succession.

By mid-morning on the October 17, the Associated Press office in Washington was disseminating across the country the shocking story that white abolitionists, supported by a "stampede of Negroes", had captured the Harpers Ferry armory and were in general revolt against the government. But the only stampede that Brown had yet provoked was the rush of outraged white Virginians to nearby rooftops, windows, and hills, from which they rained largely ineffectual but increasingly heavy gunfire into the armory grounds. Brown's men now began to urge that they should gather what weapons they could carry out and retreat to a rendezvous point they had prepared just across the Potomac. Brown hesitated. If he ordered his volunteers to evacuate now, what would they have to show for their efforts? Without a visible outpouring of slaves to arm, the raid's objectives would surely be trivialized as mere lawlessness and larceny. He and his men had signed on for risk, but Brown did not want it to be said that he had needlessly endangered the lives of his hostages. As the sniper fire intensified, he moved them into the fire engine house and instructed them to take cover away from the windows so as not to be killed by their own friends and neighbors.

Why Brown refused to order a retreat from the armory while retreat was possible and before casualties began to mount is a question that cannot be answered simply and will never be answered definitively. As the steel trap closed, he continued to hold out hope for reinforcement by slaves rising up to seize their freedom, but his very conception of the action upon which he was embarked—an action that had always combined elements of the military and the symbolic—also began to shift more decisively toward the symbolic, toward the victory of martyrdom rather than of might. It is likely, too, that the extraordinary physical and psychological effort that Brown had sustained over many years to arrive at this extraordinary place had begun, with his arrival, to take its delayed toll on his reserve of energy and initiative.

By afternoon, the raiders' fates were sealed. Brown's sentries had been driven off the bridges, Dangerfield Newby's throat pierced through by a six-inch iron spike fired from the musket of a Charlestown militiaman. William Thompson, venturing outside under the protection of an armory employee to try to negotiate a ceasefire, had been dragged away by a mob and executed. Three raiders, including Brown's sons Watson and Oliver, had been hit by snipers' bullets and lay dying of their wounds. Three others, who had broken cover and made a dash for the river, were gunned down. And two Harpers Ferry civilians had been killed by return fire from Brown's men within the armory compound. Throughout the day and night, no threats were made or retaliation taken against the hostages. Midnight saw the arrival of a marine company from Washington, D. C., on special assignment by the president, commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee. At first light on Tuesday October 18, Lee's second in command, Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart, delivered to the engine house a demand for the remaining raiders' unconditional surrender. Brown countered with a request to gather his dead and be granted safe passage out of town in exchange for the release of all the hostages. The request was denied, the federal troops stormed the engine house, at the cost of the lives of one marine and two additional raiders, and the insurrection was over. Three Virginia civilians and one federal soldier had died during the raid's thirty-six hour course. Ten of Brown's men had been killed; seven more, including Brown, would be executed by the state of Virginia in the coming months. No slaves had been freed.

Though he was beaten and stabbed during the engine house assault, Brown survived it and thereby afforded Virginia authorities the opportunity to deliver to him a political victory over slavery far more decisive than the military defeat he had suffered. On the very afternoon of his capture, Brown submitted to be interviewed while lying bleeding in one of the armory offices. Colonel Lee, Virginia Governor Henry Wise, Senator James Mason, several congressmen, and reporters from the *New York Herald* and the *Baltimore American* crowded around his cot, hoping to learn the extent of the Northern conspiracy that had planned and funded the raid. Who sent you here? Brown's interrogators demanded. "No man sent me here. It was my own prompting and that of my Maker, or that of the devil, whichever you choose to ascribe it to." How do you justify your actions? Brown was asked. In response, he three times cited the Golden Rule, and added: "I want you to understand that I respect the rights of the poorest and weakest of colored people, oppressed by the slave system, just as much as I do those of the most wealthy and powerful. That is the idea that has moved me, and that alone. We expect no reward, except the satisfaction of endeavoring to do for those in distress and greatly oppressed as we would be done by." And, when Virginia's governor reminded Brown that, as a religious man, he ought to consider the fate of his eternal soul and repent his sins before it was too late, Brown's reply soon graced the front pages of newspapers across the country and even around the world: "Governor, I have, from all appearances, not more than fifteen or twenty years the start of you in the journey to that eternity of which you so kindly warn me; and whether my tenure here shall be fifteen months, or fifteen days, or fifteen hours, I am equally prepared to go. There is an eternity behind, and an eternity before, and the little speck in the center, however long, is but comparatively a minute. The difference between your tenure and mine is trifling and I

want to therefore tell you to be prepared. I am prepared. You all have a heavy responsibility, and it behooves you to prepare more than it does me.”¹³

What he had accomplished in Kansas by meeting violence with escalated violence, Brown now achieved on a national scale by his combination of desperate, self-sacrificing action and soaring and defiant words: he reduced the margin for neutrality or moderation on the slavery question, pushing everyone on both sides of the issue toward the extremes. Governor Wise was advised to allow the federal government to prosecute Brown, so that his trial would not further inflame the sectional hatred that the raid and subsequent reports of Brown's sanctification in parts of the North had aroused. He insisted that Virginia try and sentence Brown. After the trial, Wise was petitioned to commute Brown's death sentence to life imprisonment so as to deny the abolitionists their martyr. Again, he refused. At his November 2 sentencing, Brown was asked if he wished to address the court. His unscripted remarks were reported nationwide: “I see a book kissed here which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament. That teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me further to remember them that are in bonds as bound with them. I endeavored to act up to that instruction. . . . Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights have been disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say, let it be done.” A month later, with black crepe draping hundreds of northern churches and town halls, Brown was hanged.¹⁴

Many of Brown's prominent contemporaries believed that the Harpers Ferry raid and its aftermath was a necessary link in the chain of events that included the sectional division of the Democratic Party at the 1860 convention, the election of Abraham Lincoln, the secession of the southern states, the protracted war, and the emancipation and enfranchisement of African Americans as a consequence of that war. While alternative courses of history are, obviously, impossible to chart, it is difficult to imagine that slavery would have ceased to exist in the United States anywhere nearly as quickly as it did absent John Brown. And, though slavery might have survived John Brown by more than a few years, history in fact bore out the prophecy of abolitionist orator Wendell Phillips, who stood at Brown's graveside before any of the other links in the chain had been forged, and pronounced: “He has abolished slavery in Virginia. . . . True, the slave is still there. So, when the tempest uproots a pine on your hills, it looks green for months--a year or two. Still, it is timber, not a tree. John Brown has loosened the roots of the slave system; it only breathes--it does not live--hereafter.”¹⁵

¹³ John Brown's Interview with Senator Mason, Governor Wise, and Others, October 18, 1859, Trodd, *Meteor*, 123-9.

¹⁴ John Brown's Address to the Virginia Court, Nov. 2, 1859, *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁵ Wendell Phillips speech, July 4, 1860, in Villard, *John Brown*, 562.
