

John Brown's Raid

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Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass called John Brown a “brave, heroic, and Christian man,” while Henry David Thoreau referred to him simply as “an angel of light.” In contrast, Virginian Edmund Ruffin described Brown as an “atrocious criminal.” Whether viewed as a hero or madman, martyr or terrorist, John Brown and his October 1859 attack on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, exacerbated the sectional tensions that had already increased tremendously in the decade following the Mexican War.

Born in Connecticut in 1800, Brown bounced unsuccessfully through numerous occupations. Through membership in the Congregationalist Church he developed a strong antislavery sentiment and became convinced that he could serve as God’s instrument in the destruction of the South’s “peculiar institution.” Brown catapulted to notoriety as the result of his activities in Kansas, where, in May, 1856, in retaliation for a raid on the anti-slavery town of Lawrence, Brown and a group of followers hacked to death five pro-slavery settlers on the banks of Pottawatomie Creek.

Within a year he envisioned an even bolder operation—the seizure of the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. Using weapons obtained there, Brown planned to launch raids to free slaves and perhaps start a general insurrection. He obtained financial assistance from a group of prominent abolitionists known as the “Secret Six,” and on the evening of October 16, 1859, Brown and his followers descended upon Harpers Ferry.

Little went right over the next two days. After crossing a railroad bridge into town, Brown took several hostages and gained control of the armory and nearby rifle factory. A free black baggage handler became, ironically, the first casualty when he was

mortally wounded after approaching one of the raiders. By morning, townspeople had begun to resist, followed by Virginia militia and, eventually, a detachment of U.S. Marines, sent from Washington and commanded by army officers Robert E. Lee and Jeb Stuart. On the morning of October 18 Lee ordered the marines to assault the building where Brown and his men had sought shelter. They killed two of the raiders and seriously wounded their leader with a saber blow to the head.

The survivors were charged with treason, conspiracy to commit insurrection, and murder. Brown's subsequent trial, conviction, and hanging captivated the nation. He rejected an insanity defense and, following his sentencing on November 2, remarked to the court: "I believe to have interfered as I have done in behalf of His despised poor, is no wrong, but right." On December 2, 1859, a large crowd gathered in a field near Charlestown to witness Brown's execution. While being led to the site, he handed his jailer a note explaining his actions. It included the prophetic statement: "I John Brown am now quite *certain* that the crimes of this *guilty, land: will* never be purged *away*; but with Blood."

In the aftermath of his execution, Brown's supporters praised the martyred abolitionist. Louisa May Alcott referred to him as "Saint John the Just," while Ralph Waldo Emerson noted that Brown's death "would make the gallows famous like the cross." Others felt differently. Virginia citizens passed a resolution that breathlessly warned of "assassins dispatched by secret conclaves of Northern abolitionists." More ominously editorials, including some in papers that had earlier preached moderation, now threatened secession. The Richmond *Whig* reported that, while many in the state may have previously thought of disunion as "a madman's dream," they now felt America's

“days are numbered, [and] its glory diminished.” In the wake of John Brown’s raid, southerners put themselves in a defensive posture from which they could not retreat. Within a year, a national election propelled Republican Abraham Lincoln into the White House, prompting seven states to leave the Union.