

## THE JOHN BROWN RAID

By 1859, the disagreements between the defenders and the opponents of slavery had grown more acute. State governments in the North had legislated to prevent the recovery of fugitive slaves. These states included Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin. Their actions were naturally denounced by many Southerners. Then, in 1859, in the case of [Ableman v. Booth](#), Chief Justice [Roger B. Taney](#) announced the decision that Federal law was supreme, and that this supremacy had to be maintained against state interference. While the echoes of this decision and the Dred Scott case were reverberating, and rumors of anti-slavery activity were coming out of Kansas, there arose the mystic figure of John Brown, the precursor of emancipation.

Brown was born in Connecticut in 1800 and had worked at tanning, raising sheep, and selling land. He had devoted much time to reading and meditating on the Bible while moving to Ohio, Pennsylvania (where he aided the Underground Railroad), Massachusetts and New York. In 1856, he moved to Osawatomie, Kansas, with his four sons and joined with the Free Soilers of the state. Proslavery families were attacked at [Pottawatomie](#) Creek and five men were slain.

Brown's complicity was not proved, but he and his followers were attacked. Brown's son Frederick was killed, and the village was burned. Shortly thereafter, Brown left Kansas and returned to the East, where he planned to establish a post for freedom within slave territory. He had formulated a plan to overthrow slavery, and his scheme was daring and quixotic. He planned to establish one post in the mountain areas of Virginia then extend his plans to Tennessee and North Carolina.

He would attract slaves to these spots of freedom, arm them and instruct them for defense. He had gained cooperation from several extreme antislavery leaders, among them [Gerrit](#) Smith, and had secured two thousand dollars, several hundred Sharps rifles, and bundles of pikes. It is evident that the means and personnel at his command were small in terms of the project and the opposition which he faced.

The headquarters for his project was established at Chatham, in Canada. On May 8, 1858, Brown called a convention to draft a constitution for his new republic, and he proposed to create a state by appropriating portions of land located in the South. His ultimate plan was to form a government in this new area and then to secede from the United States.

In July 1859, Brown took a few followers, including five Negroes, and settled in a farmhouse five miles from Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Later, on October 16, Brown and a band of twenty-one marched to Harpers Ferry, crossed the Potomac River, held the bridge, and then seized possession of the United States Arsenal. One of the Negroes was Osborne Perry Anderson of Fallowfield, Pennsylvania, a printer by trade. Anderson escaped, wrote *A Voice from Harpers Ferry* in 1861, and later served with distinction in the Civil War. Another

man in Brown's band was Lewis Sheridan Leary, a free black of Fayetteville, North Carolina, who was a saddle and harness maker. Shields Green, a sailor, was a fugitive slave from Charleston, South Carolina, and a protege of Frederick Douglass. The remaining two blacks were John Anthony Copeland, a North Carolinian who had studied in Oberlin, Ohio, and Dangerfield Newby, formerly a slave from Fauquier County, Virginia, who had been living in Oberlin.

On the evening of the attack, the first of Brown's little group to fall in battle was Dangerfield Newby, who was shot near the armory gate. Brown could have escaped with his band after daybreak to the mountains, but he remained to fight and was later caught in a trap, forcing him to withdraw his men into the engine house. By the time [Colonel Robert E. Lee](#) arrived with Federal troops, the telegraph had spread the news of the raid across the countryside. Brown left under cover of darkness, taking six of his followers with him, two of whom were wounded. But early next morning, Brown and his surviving followers were taken into custody.

The judge at first suggested that Brown should be examined for insanity, an idea which Brown met with scorn. He had suddenly realized that every hour's delay until the execution came would diminish the tide of Northern feeling against slavery. A brief trial followed, and on December 2, 1859, John Brown was hanged in the public square of Charlestown.

The last note written by Brown, which was handed to his jailer on the morning of his execution, read:

*I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will be judged away but with blood. I had, do I now think, vainly flattered myself that without much bloodshed it might be done.*

Brown's fate was shared by the courageous John A. Copeland, a member of Brown's original band. Copeland is quoted by the *Baltimore Sun* as saying on his way to the gallows:

*If I am dying for freedom, I could not die for a better cause-I had rather die than be a slave.*

Reverence for John Brown among free Negroes in the North was widespread, because the general feeling was that Brown was chosen to lead the nation down the road to freedom.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a gifted black author and teacher, had written a letter to John Brown, while he was imprisoned at Harpers Ferry:

*. . . I thank you that you have been brave enough to reach out your hands to the crushed and blighted of my race. You have reached the bloody Bastille; and I hope that from your sad fate great good may arise to the cause of freedom. Already from your prison has come a shout of triumph against the giant sin of our country. The hemlock is distilled with victory when it is pressed to the lips of Socrates. The cross becomes a glorious ensign when Calvary's page-browed sufferer yields up his life on it; and if universal freedom is ever to be the dominant power of the land, your bodies may be only her first stepping-stones to dominion.*

Brown had also received a note on behalf of the black women of Brooklyn, New York:

*We consider you a model of true patriotism, and one whom our common country will yet regard as the greatest it has produced, because you have sacrificed all for its sake.*

A New Bedford, Massachusetts, meeting of free Negroes, December 16, 1859, resolved that:

*. . . the memory of John Brown shall be indelibly written upon the tablets of our hearts, and when tyrants cease to oppress the enslaved, we will teach our children to revere his name and transmit it to the latest posterity as being the greatest man of the 19th Century.*

John Brown was a hero of freedom. His devotion as an American to direct action was without precedent in the history of American slavery. Brown displayed dignity and courage at the time of his capture and at his execution. He stated in his last speech before the court that his purpose and design were to free the slaves. Brown insisted, "that was all I intended. I never did intend murder, or treason, or destruction of property, or incite slaves to rebellion as to make insurrection."

John Brown was not insane because he wanted to establish a center in the mountains to which slaves would come for freedom. Nor was he insane because his project became an adventure which did not achieve its goal of liberty for the slaves. The historian Edward Channing, in his *History of the United States*, dramatically draws a parallel between the brave Greeks at Thermopylae and the American patriots at Lexington. They were outnumbered and were without available materials, but they reached their goals through blood, tears and death. Similarly, John Brown was a man devoted and dedicated to the cause of freedom. Yet historians and writers have made him appear as a desperate, foolhardy leader of a small band with an erratic hope of obtaining his objective through the shedding of blood. His bravery and sense of martyrdom are demonstrated not only in the way he went to the gallows but in his last message before his death:

*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 are disregarded by the wicked, cruel and unjust enactments --I submit; so let it be done.*

The two black men from Oberlin also were executed. When Sheridan Leary went to the gallows he declared:

*I am ready to die! I only ask that when I have given my life to free others, my own wife and dear little daughter shall never know want.*

A monument was erected to their memory by the people of Oberlin as a testimony to their courage. More than two decades later, Frederick Douglass went to the shrine in Oberlin and delivered an address on "John Brown and West Virginia." He stated:

*I wish however to say, just here that there is no foundation whatever for the charge that I in any way urged or instigated John Brown to his dangerous work .... If John Brown did not end the War that ended slavery he did at least begin the War that ended slavery. If we look over the dates, places and men for which this honor is claimed, we shall find not Carolina but Virginia -not Fort Sumter, but Harpers Ferry and the arsenal-not Colonel Anderson, but J John Brown began the War that ended slavery and made this a free Republic.*

John Brown's invasion of Harpers Ferry produced emotional reactions throughout the nation. Southerners saw in it a sense of crisis, and the belief was widespread that the abolitionists were seeking to instigate insurrections in Southern areas. Vigilante committees and volunteer military companies were organized as a result of this excitement. Southerners had visions of black insurrections like the uprisings in Haiti. Many Northerners also were critical of the Brown raid, and the Republican platform of 1860 denounced it as a "lawless invasion," and as "among the gravest of crimes." However, the episode was of the stuff that heroes are made; and he was venerated by many in the North.



OSBORNE  
PERRY  
ANDERSON



DANGERFIELD  
NEWBY



JOHN  
ANTHONY  
COPELAND

Top left: John Brown.  
Bottom: Image of  
Harper's Ferry in 1862.  
The US armory is shown  
with John Brown's fort to  
the left. Courtesy  
National Parks Service.



LEWIS  
SHERIDAN  
LEARY



SHIELDS  
GREEN

