

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 2: "Flight to Freedom"

Letter from Participant in John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry (1859)

Among the Harpers Ferry raiders captured and sentenced to death was John Copeland, a 25-year-old free black born in North Carolina. Before joining Brown, Copeland and other Oberlin, Ohio abolitionists helped fugitive slave, John Price, escape to Canada. Price was being held under the Fugitive Slave Law and was to be returned to slavery. Copeland wrote this letter to his brother six days before he was executed on December 16, 1859. On the way to the gallows, he was reported to have said "If I am dying for freedom, I could not die for a better cause—I had rather die than be a slave."

Dear Brother:

...It was a sense of the wrongs that we have suffered that prompted the noble but unfortunate John Brown and his associates to give freedom to a small number, at least, of those who are now held by cruel and unjust laws, and by no less cruel and unjust men. To this freedom they were entitled by every known principle of justice and humanity, and for the enjoyment of it God created them. And, now, dear brother, could I die in a more noble cause? Could I, brother, die in a manner and for a cause which could induce true and honest men more to honor me, and the angels more readily to receive me to their happy home of everlasting joy above...? And were it not that I know that the hearts of those to whom I am attached by the nearest and most enduring ties of blood relationship—yea by the closest and strongest ties that god has instituted—will be filled with sorrow, I would almost as [soon] die now as at any time, for I feel that I am now prepared to meet my maker....

John A. Copeland

Source: Quoted in Richard J. Hinton, *John Brown and His Men* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1894)