

[Epilogue] Document-Based Activity

John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry

On October 16th, 1859, the radical abolitionist John Brown led 21 followers—including free African Americans/Blacks and formerly enslaved African Americans --in a raid on the Federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Brown's intention was to spark an uprising by enslaved African Americans, who he planned to arm with weapons captured from the arsenal and lead in a campaign of liberation across the South. As it happened, Brown's group was detected before they had seized the arsenal, and were forced to retreat into an adjacent engine house. Local militias and armed citizenry kept them surrounded until a federally dispatched unit of United States Marines—commanded by Brevet Colonel Robert E. Lee—arrived on the 18th to storm the engine house, capturing Brown and seven of his surviving followers.

Brown was tried for murder, conspiracy to incite slave rebellion, and treason against the state of Virginia. He was convicted and sentenced to death. The day of his execution, he wrote for himself the following epitaph:

I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with Blood.

Indeed, although John Brown's dramatic raid failed to spark a larger slave rebellion, it convinced Americans on both sides of the slavery debate that the time for compromise and negotiation had past. The raid on Harper's Ferry has since come to be regarded by many as the first skirmish of a civil war which, within a year, would finally erupt between North and South.

The following passages are excerpted from newspaper editorials published shortly after the Harper's Ferry raid. Having your students read them and discuss the prompted questions will help give them an understanding of how John Brown's raid was perceived at the time, and why it was such a critical turning point.

1. The Riot at Harper's Ferry

Nashville, Tennessee, *Union and American*, October 21, 1859

. . . Later accounts seem conclusive that [the raid] was a concerted attempt at insurrection, aided by leading Northern Abolitionists. The papers of Brown, the leader, are said to have fallen into the hands of Gov. Wise, and to include among them letters from Gerrit Smith, Fred Douglass and others. We shall hear more in a few days, when, no doubt, the whole plot will be disclosed.

In the mean time, the facts already before us show that Abolitionism is working out its legitimate results, in encouraging fanatics to riot and revolution. The "harmless republicanism" out of which there is serious talk even here of making a national party, to defeat the Democracy, fosters and sustains, and is formidable only from the zeal of, the class within its ranks who incited this insurrection. Of the capacity of the South to defend and protect herself, we have no doubt. But when called on to do this, as at Harper's Ferry, she must know who are her friends and who are her enemies. She can have no political association with men who are only watching a safe opportunity to cut the throats of her citizens. It will not do for Northern Republicans to attribute this outbreak to the fanaticism of a few zealots. The Republican party of the North is responsible for it. . . .

Discussion Questions:

Why does the *Union and American* blame "Northern Abolitionists" for Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry?

Why does the *Union and American* believe abolitionists are such a threat?

2. "Where the Responsibility Belongs"

Chicago, Illinois, *Press and Tribune*, October 20, 1859

The attempt of the *Chicago Times* to place the responsibility of the Harper's Ferry affair upon the Republican party, is a resort to the rogue's trick of crying "stop thief, stop thief," for the purpose of diverting attention from the really guilty party. . . . The opposition to slavery is based upon moral and economic considerations, and the only action it proposes or that it would countenance, with respect to the institution, is to confine it to its present limits, leaving the problem of "what will they do with it?" to the solution of the people of the slaveholding States.

The Democratic party, however, proposes to increase the chances for insurrection, bloodshed and all the horrors of servile war, by extending the area of slavery indefinitely and by re-opening the African slave trade. . . .

As respects the attempt of an insane old man and his handful of confederates to excite a negro insurrection in Virginia and Maryland, it is easy to determine where the responsibility really belongs. That act is but a part of the legitimate fruit of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. In another part of this paper, in a sketch of the life of the leader of the attempted insurrection, will be found a statement of some of the wrongs heaped upon old Brown by the minions of that power at whose command and for whose benefit the compromise was broken down -- wrongs which entered his soul and made him what he is - - a monomaniac who believes himself to be a God-appointed agent to set the enslaved free. Upon the heads of those who repealed that compromise and who sanctioned the lawless violence and bloodshed which grew out of it on the plains of Kansas, rests the blood of those who fell at Harper's Ferry.

Discussion Questions:

How does the *Press and Tribune* describe the ambitions of the Republican party?

How does it describe the intentions of Democrats?

Who does it hold responsible for Harper's Ferry?

3. "The Harper's Ferry Riot"

Nashville, Tennessee, *Republican Banner and Nashville Whig*, October 24, 1859

. . . It can no longer be doubted that the object of the conspirators was the liberation of the slaves in Virginia and Maryland. It is gratifying to record that the energy of President Buchanan and Governor Wise, the activity of the soldiery and the zeal of the citizens have crushed out the conspiracy before it could attain the huge dimensions of a revolution. But though the movement resulted so disastrously to the insurgents and met with so little sympathy from the negro population, for whose benefit it was designed, it will

nevertheless prove a valuable lesson to the people of the South, if they give it that calm reflection and careful consideration that it deserves.

This attempt to excite an insurrection among the slaves is one of the natural results of the agitation of the slavery question, originated and so persistently kept up by designing politicians, both of the North and the South for partisan purposes. It can be traced to no other cause, and unless the people of both sections rise in the majesty of their strength and put an end at once to this mischievous agitation, the page that records the bloody events of the last two days, will be but a preface to the history of a civil war in which the same scenes will be re-enacted on a larger scale, and end in the dissolution of our glorious Union.

Discussion Questions:

Based upon this editorial, would you describe the *Republican Banner and Nashville Whig* as a pro- or anti-slavery newspaper? Why?

Who does it regard as being at the core of the slavery problem?

4. "The Reign of Terror"

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, *Gazette* [Republican] November 30, 1859

Free speech is now denied at the South. Every man who opens his mouth to utter a word of sympathy for old Brown, or dares to advance a single sentiment favorable to liberty, is at once arrested and committed to prison. Men have been thus imprisoned for saying that they voted for Fremont in 1856; that old Brown was right; that slavery was wrong; . . .

It would be useless to undertake the enumeration of these cases. The Southern papers are full of them. Every Northern man now in the South is an object of suspicion; many have already been driven off; others have received notice to quit; and the rest are to be harassed with prosecutions for using "seditious language" in giving vent to their natural feelings, doubtless under strong provocation. It is a complete reign of terror. Every man is liable to be an object of suspicion; and he who expects to retain his foothold upon that soil must put

a padlock upon his lips, lest some incautious word slip out and thereby endanger "the institution. . . ."

There is another view of this subject which it behooves the South to take note of -- every man who is thus suspected, driven off or punished for his free speech will become, in the North, a proselyter for free sentiments. They will become, in 1860, the most efficient laborers in the cause of Republicanism. The South had better be careful, or it may send home too many of them.

Discussion Questions:

What is the main point of this editorial?

What does the *Gazette* feel will be the ultimate result of this?

5. "What Shall the South Do?"

Wilmington, North Carolina, *Daily Herald* [Opposition] December 5, 1859

. . . Old Brown has been hanged. What will be the result of this enforcement of the law? Will the effect be salutary upon the minds of the Northern people? Have we any reason to suppose that it will cause them, for one moment only, to pause and reflect upon the course they have persistently followed towards the South and her institutions?

It is useless to disguise the fact, that the entire North and Northwest are hopelessly abolitionized. We want no better evidence than that presented to us by their course in this Harper's affair. With the exception of a few papers (among them we are proud to notice that sterling Whig journal, the *New York Express*,) that have had the manliness to denounce the act as it deserved, the great majority have either sympathised with the offenders, or maintained an ominous silence.

Let us look calmly at the case: A sovereign State, in the peaceful enjoyment of the rights guarantied by the Constitution, has been invaded by an armed force, not foreign

mercenaries, but citizens of the same Confederacy, and her people shot down in the public highways. The question is a natural one -- Why is this thing done? Why is murder and rapine committed? -- And who are the perpetrators? -- The answer is found in the fact, that the State whose territory has thus been invaded, is a Southern State in which the institution of slavery exists according to the law and the gospel; and the actors in the terrible drama were but carrying out the precepts and teachings of our *Northern brethren*. The "irrepressible conflict" between the North and the South then, has already commenced; to this complexion it must come at last.

Discussion Questions:

How does the *Daily Herald* portray Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry?

What does the raid signal to them?

General Discussion Questions*

1. Was John Brown's use of violence warranted?
2. Why do you think abolitionists disagreed about the use of violence?
3. Do you think slave owners would have ended slavery without a fight?
4. Some commentators view the Harper's Ferry raid as the first battle of the Civil War, while others view it as a terrorist act. How do you view it and why?
5. How did the raid escalate tensions between the North and South and between the newly formed Republican Party and the Democratic Party?
6. How were John Brown's actions similar to, and different from, the acts of resistance committed by Lucy and the other characters in "Flight to Freedom"?