

John Brown: The Man

John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry greatly alarmed southern slaveholders. A fiery fanatic who had hacked civilians to pieces in Kansas, Brown acted like a dignified martyr after his capture in Virginia. Here are some views of Brown.

Song: John Brown's Body

(to the tune of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic")

John Brown's body lies a-mould'ring in the ground,
John Brown's body lies a-mould'ring in the ground,
John Brown's body lies a-mould'ring in the ground,
But his soul goes marching on.

Chorus: Glory, glory, Hallelujah!
Glory, glory, Hallelujah!
Glory, glory, Hallelujah!
His soul goes marching on.

He's gone to be a soldier in the army of the Lord,
His soul goes marching on.—*Chorus*

John Brown died that the slave might be free,
But his soul goes marching on.—*Chorus*

They'll hang Jeff Davis on a sour apple tree,
As they go marching on.—*Chorus*

The stars of heaven are looking kindly down,
On the grave of old John Brown.—*Chorus*

Question: Is this an accurate view of John Brown? What kind of song about John Brown might a proslavery Southerner compose?

Directions: Read more about Brown and write a biographical sketch of this contradictory man. Or write two biographical sketches of Brown, one by an antislavery Northerner and another by a proslavery Southerner. Add copies of political cartoons and artistic depictions of Brown to your sketch.

Interviewed after his capture, Brown was asked, "Upon what principle do you justify your acts?"

Brown replied, "Upon the golden rule. I pity the poor in bondage that have none to help them; that is why I am here; not to gratify any personal animosity, revenge or vindictive spirit. It is my sympathy with the oppressed and the wronged, that are as good as you and as precious in the sight of God."

Question: Is this statement compatible with Brown's earlier statements and his actions in Kansas?



The Last Moments of John Brown,
by Thomas Hovenden, 1884



John Brown and Harpers Ferry

A popular American folksong begins, "John Brown's body lies a'mouldering in the grave." The subject of the song was born in Torrington, Connecticut, on May 9, 1800. John Brown's ancestors fought in the Revolutionary War. His father was a farmer and an abolitionist. His mother was mentally unstable, as were others in her family. Later in John Brown's life, people explained that his extreme attitudes and behavior were a result of the mental illness in his family.

When John Brown was four years old, his family moved to Hudson, Ohio. He learned to farm and to tan leather, as well as to survey land.

In 1820, he married Dianthe Lusk, a widow with whom he had seven children. She was mentally ill and died in 1832. Within a year, Brown married Mary Ann Day, by whom he eventually had thirteen more children. A famous portrait of John in middle age shows his intense glare set in a face with a rigid, no-nonsense expression. Brown was deeply religious and believed that God had called him to free the slaves by eliminating all the pro-slavery people he could find.

Brown moved his family to New Richmond, Pennsylvania, in 1825. He was a poor businessman, making bad investments in sheep raising, wool dealing, and racehorse breeding. By 1848, he was bankrupt, but he continued his anti-slavery activities.

Brown's hatred for pro-slavers grew. In 1856, he and four of his sons led a raid on pro-slavery settlers in Potawatomie, Kansas, killing five of the settlers and earning the nickname "Potawatomie Brown."

In 1858, Brown organized a rally in New England to fight the pro-slavery movement. Before the sparse audience, he outlined his plan to create a fortress in the Appalachian Mountains. From there he would lead raids to free slaves throughout plantations in the South. Most abolitionists recognized that Brown was a fanatic, but several agreed to support his anti-slavery efforts financially. What Brown did not tell the audience was that he had been collecting an arsenal of weapons for two years, and he planned to kill every pro-slaver he saw.

On October 16, 1859, Brown and seventeen followers raided and captured a federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Local law enforcement blocked all escape routes, and by October 17, federal troops led by Colonel Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant Jeb Stuart surrounded the arsenal with Brown and his followers trapped inside it. Brown refused to surrender, and in the ensuing battle, ten of his men were killed, including two of his sons.

John Brown was taken to prison and tried for treason. At the end of the five-day trial, Brown was found guilty. He was hanged in Virginia on December 2, 1859. His calm defense and dignity as he went to his death impressed many Northerners. The poet Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote of Brown that his death would "make the gallows as glorious as the cross."

