

Handout A: John Brown

Background Essay and Timeline

Background Essay:

John Brown was born in 1800 in Connecticut, the son of a tanner. In 1804, his family moved to Ohio. Like most children of the time, from an early age Brown helped in the family business and had considerable responsibility. During the war of 1812, when driving cattle more than 100 miles from home to deliver the herd to the army, he witnessed the cruel abuse of a young slave of approximately John Brown's age. Much later, Brown wrote that this experience "led him to declare, or Swear Eternal war with Slavery . . . [as he observed] the wretched, hopeless condition, of Fatherless & Motherless slave children: for such children have neither Fathers or Mothers to protect, & provide for them."

He married Dianthe Lusk in 1820, and they had seven children. They farmed, raised cattle, and operated a profitable tannery in Pennsylvania. The year 1831 began a time of tragedy and struggle for the family. Their four-year-old son Frederick died, John Brown himself became ill, and his businesses began to decline. In 1832, Dianthe died shortly after the death of a newborn son.

In 1834, with five children under the age of 13, Brown married Mary Ann Day. Seriously in debt, Brown worked hard but failed at several different businesses. With Mary Ann, Brown had 13 more children. In 1837, after the murder of abolitionist editor Elijah Lovejoy in Illinois, Brown said, "I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery." He spent the next two decades developing his plan and cultivating support for an extensive guerilla effort he hoped would destroy slavery with a minimum loss of life.

In 1846, Brown moved his large family to Springfield, Massachusetts, the center of a strong antislavery movement, where he attended lectures by Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and other abolitionists. In 1849, he moved his family again, to a farm in the black farming community at North Elba, New York. In 1855, he left the farm, his wife, and his younger children in New York to join his adult sons in Kansas trying to block the proslavery settlers flooding into the territory.

In "Bleeding Kansas," Brown was incensed by the 1856 looting of the town of Lawrence by proslavery forces. He and his men retaliated on the night of May 26, 1856. Brown's men suddenly appeared and took from their homes five settlers who had threatened violence against free-state men at Pottawatomie Creek, promising not to harm them. However, after taking the men a short distance from their homes, Brown's men hacked the proslavery men to death with sabers. Violence escalated in the area, resulting in the deaths of more than 200 people.

Brown left the region but led another raid in Missouri in 1858, killing a slaveholder and freeing 11 enslaved people, eventually leading them to Canada. Then, in March 1859, Brown met with Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists in Detroit to enlist their support for his next plan, freeing enslaved persons in Virginia. Douglass declined to be involved in what he saw as a hopeless scheme, but Brown spent the next six months traveling through Ohio, New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts to solicit money for his goal: raising an army of escaped slaves who would hide in the Blue Ridge Mountains, recruit more runaway slaves in the dead of night, and help them escape to the North. They would use weapons from the federal armory at Harpers Ferry to fight for their own freedom.

Brown believed that, once he kicked off the plan, fugitive slaves would eagerly join in the conspiracy, and slaveholders would eventually realize that they could not protect their investment in enslaved persons.

Late on Sunday evening, October 16, 1859, John Brown led his army to the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). Hoping to provide weapons that would enable enslaved people to fight for their freedom in Virginia and beyond, the army consisted of five blacks and 16 whites, three of whom were Brown's sons. They captured the night watchman and seized the arsenal, an armory, and rifle works. During the night, a church bell began to ring, the signal that residents in the area understood as a warning that a slave rebellion had begun. Immediately, well-armed townspeople gathered in the streets to put down the rebellion. Militia companies from neighboring areas soon cut off all possible escape routes for the supposed rebel slaves. By Tuesday morning, U.S. Marines under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant J.E.B. Stuart arrived and stormed the fire house where Brown and his army had taken refuge in a standoff. As a result of the bloody battle, most of Brown's party were either captured or killed; only five men escaped. Within a week, though the raid had taken place on federal property, Brown was on trial in a Virginia Court.

John Brown's raid and its aftermath captured the nation's attention. On November 2, 1859, Brown was convicted of treason, murder, and inciting an insurrection. An insurrection is a rising against a civil or political authority. His execution by hanging took place on December 2. By the time of the execution, Northern newspapers described John Brown as a righteous martyr for the cause of abolition. Southern newspapers stirred fears of rampant slave rebellions, invasion from the North, and speculation that abolitionists would lead a force to rescue Brown before the execution could be carried out. John Brown rode from the jail to the gallows seated on top of his own dark walnut coffin. He left behind in his cell a note containing this statement: "I am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood."

Discussion Question:

In your opinion, was John Brown's use of violence to achieve his goal justified? Support your answer with specific evidence from the background essay.

Timeline:

- 1800 – John Brown was born in Connecticut.
- 1804 – Brown’s family moved to Ohio.
- 1812 – John Brown declared eternal war against slavery.
- 1820 – Brown married Dianthe Lusk; lived in Pennsylvania.
- 1831 – Four-year-old son Frederick died; John Brown became ill; businesses struggled.
- 1832 – Dianthe died shortly after their seventh child died at birth.
- 1834 – John Brown married Mary Ann Day; Brown was deeply in debt, struggled at several different businesses.
- 1837 – After the murder of Elijah Lovejoy in Illinois, Brown consecrated his life to destruction of slavery.
- 1846 – Brown moved his large family to Springfield, Massachusetts.
- 1847 – In one of many long conversations with Frederick Douglass, Brown laid out his plan: creating an armed force of white and black abolitionists concealed in the Blue Ridge Mountains to help fugitive slaves gain their freedom by heading north.
- 1849 – Brown moved his family to North Elba, New York.
- 1855 – Brown left the family in New York and followed his adult sons to Kansas.
- 1856 – (May 21) Proslavery forces sacked Lawrence, Kansas.
- 1856 – (May 25) Brown and followers attacked and killed five proslavery settlers at Pottawatomie Creek, Kansas.
- 1858 – Brown killed a slaveholder in Missouri and led 11 enslaved people to Canada.
- 1859 – (March) Brown met with Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists in Detroit, seeking support for his plan to free slaves in Virginia.
- 1859 – (October 16) Brown led raid on federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.
- 1859 – (October 18) Robert E. Lee and J.E.B. Stuart led U.S. Marines in the battle to end the raid and arrest the surviving insurgents, including Brown.
- 1859 – (October 27 – November 2) Trial of John Brown, resulting in conviction on all three charges: murder, conspiracy, and treason
- 1859 – (December 2) John Brown was executed by hanging.