

# John Brown

Late on the night of October 16, 1859, John Brown and twenty-one armed followers stole into the town of Harper's Ferry, Virginia, as most of its residents slept. The men--among them three free blacks, one freed slave, and one fugitive slave--hoped to spark a rebellion of freed slaves and to lead an "army of emancipation" to overturn the institution of slavery by force. To these ends the insurgents took some sixty prominent locals as hostages and seized the town's United States arsenal and its rifle works.

The upper hand which nighttime surprise had afforded the raiders quickly eroded, and by the evening of October 17, the conspirators who were still alive were holed-up in an engine house. In order to be able to distinguish between insurgents and hostages, marines under Colonel Robert E. Lee waited for daylight on October 18 to storm the building.

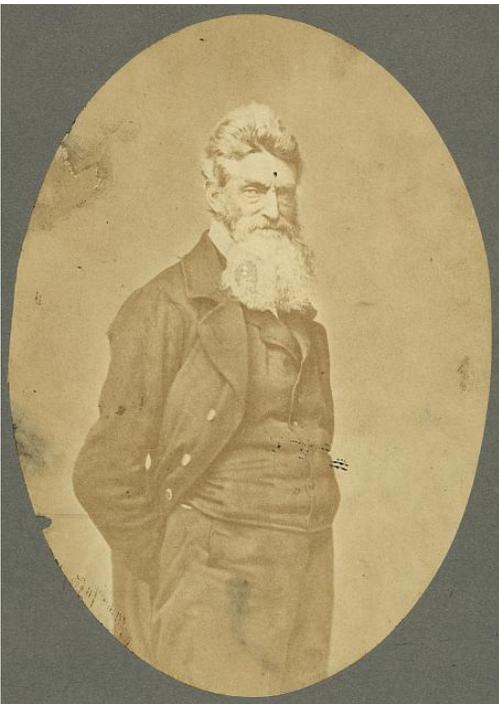
Brown and most of his men were veteran foes of slavery. In 1849, he and his family had settled at a black community at North Elba in New York State. Brown had become increasingly militant during the 1850s in his quest to eradicate slavery. In 1855, he had migrated to the Kansas Territory to become the leader of a band of anti-slavery guerrillas. He led a nighttime raid in retaliation for the sack of Lawrence, Kansas, by pro-slavery forces and helped to liberate slaves and to transport them safely to Canada.

In 1858, Brown drafted a constitution for a provisional United States government of which he was elected president. He intended to establish an effective means of freeing the slaves of Maryland and Virginia. Most of his raiders held commissions in the government's army. Apparently, only the black conspirators held no commissions. Even the ill-conceived plan for the raid had been germinating in Brown's thoughts for some time; he had moved to nearby Kennedy Farm in July to prepare for the raid.

Brown claimed he, "knew the proud and hard hearts of the slave-holders, and that they would never consent to give up their slaves, till they felt a big stick about their heads," and that a slave-holding community was, by its nature, in a state of war and, thus drastic actions were necessary and justified. His supporters felt they had a moral imperative to take action. The raid enflamed the emotions of parties on both sides of the conflict while Northern and Southern press fanned the flames that had been smoldering hotter and hotter with the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Dred Scott

decision, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Fear and anger totally eclipsed any other motivations that had been factors in the battle over slavery.

For his actions, Brown was quickly tried and convicted of murder, slave insurrection, and treason against the state and sentenced to death by hanging. The simplicity and sincerity of Brown's address after his sentencing astounded listeners on both sides of the issue. While awaiting his fate in the Harper's Ferry jail, he received a sympathetic letter from Massachusetts' writer and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. "I think of you night and day," she wrote, "bleeding in prison, surrounded by hostile faces, sustained only by trust in God and your own heart. I long to nurse you--to speak to you sisterly words of sympathy and consolation."



John Brown's actions made him a martyr to abolitionists. Of the five conspirators who escaped from the engine house and were never caught, four served in the Union Army during the Civil War (only Brown's son Owen did not.) The Harper's Ferry raid remains one of the more controversial events of the country's history. Frederick Douglass sums up his assessment of his friend's actions:

*"Did John Brown fail? He certainly did fail to get out of Harper's Ferry before being beaten down by United States soldiers; he did fail to save his own life, and to lead a liberating army into the mountains of Virginia. But he did not go to Harper's Ferry to save his life. The true question is, Did John Brown draw his sword against slavery and thereby lose his life in vain? and to this I answer ten thousand times, No! No man fails, or can fail who so grandly gives himself and all he has to a righteous cause."*

References:

"Today in History: October 16." *American Memory*. Web. 2 Aug. 2011.  
<<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/oct16.html>>.

**Title:** John Brown

**URL:** <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2009633569/>

**Creator:** Black, James Wallace, 1825-1896, photographer

**Date:** c1859 December 12.