

John brown's raid on harpers ferry



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HIST 128 Essay 3 John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry John Brown's beliefs about slavery and activities to destroy it hardly represented the mainstream of northern society in the years leading up to the Civil War. This rather unique man, however, has become central to an understanding and in some cases misunderstandings about the origins of the Civil War. The importance of Brown's mission against slavery was colossal to accelerating the civil war between the North and the South. His raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859 divided the United States like nothing else before, and could have been the main event leading to the Civil War.

Although Brown was a major factor toward antislavery, he was not the first Abolitionist to take serious action in order to reach his goal. William Lloyd Garrison is another example of a white reformer that was serious in his intent to destroy slavery, no matter what it took. Garrison's newspaper, *The Liberator*, was first published on January 1, 1831. He published this newspaper to spread his opinion on slavery, saying that it was "a national sin and demanded immediate emancipation" (Earle 6). This newspaper, and the start of a public view of antislavery in general, led to many more serious events.

For example, Nat Turner's revolt that led to the killing of 55 white men, women and children was directly blamed on abolitionists such as Garrison. John Brown's father was involved in one of the early abolitionist movements, and was the reason why John began his interest in ending slavery in America. John Brown read *The Liberator* at his father's house for the first time in 1833. After reading this newspaper, Brown was encouraged to become much more

active in abolitionism. He thought that God was about to “ bring the South’s slaves ‘ out of the house of bondage’” (Earle 7).

He started to recruit people from his hometown to agree to take in runaway slaves and house them until they are safe. He vowed to adopt a young African American son to give him a proper education, and to also open a school for blacks. He planned to build this black schoolhouse in Pennsylvania, but it was almost impossible given his money situation, since he was bankrupt by 1835. Even though he had problems with money, it did not mean that he was going to stop his mission to end slavery. The issue of slavery in the

United States began to get more and more heated. An antislavery abolitionist and editor, Elijah Lovejoy, was murdered by a mob of proslavery rioters. They also destroyed his offices and his printing press. After his death, John Brown announced during a prayer meeting that he would devote the rest of his life to freeing slaves. John Brown was unique compared to other abolitionists, which is the reason he is more famous than the others. His ideas at the time, such as racial equality, were unheard of in his time and thought of as radical ideas.

He wanted to destroy slavery completely and believed that white people and black people were absolutely equal and that’s how it should be. Brown lived a life full of financial problems, and always seemed to be struggling to stay out of bankruptcy. In order to pay for his mission against slavery while also paying for his family, Brown consulted an extremely wealthy abolitionist by the name of Gerrit Smith. Smith agreed to sell Brown 244 acres of land for

very cheap. He said he would use this land to house a small colony of African Americans, and be like a father figure to them.

He referred to this land as his home for the remainder of his life, even though he traveled all the time and lives in a few separate places from time to time. His efforts became more serious after the Compromise of 1850, and more specifically the Fugitive Slave Law, which led to many runaway slaves being recaptured and brought back into slavery. This is when his mission started to become more and more violent. Brown published an essay instructing African Americans to stay together to resist this new law. He ordered them to even if it took killing the slave catchers, that's what they had to do.

He formed an armed resistance against the Fugitive Slave Law. Brown's United League recruited 44 African Americans. Following this, the Kansas-Nebraska Act surfaced, which allowed settlers to decide whether or not to be free or to practice slavery. Then, in order to achieve the southern support in the 1856 Democratic presidential nomination, Stephen Douglas proposed to divide the new territory into two. This meant that Kansas, since it was in the more southern of the two territories, would be made into a slave state.

This would lead to the start of an organized militia against slavery. John Brown's son was actually the one to convince him to acquire weapons and start up a militia. He left behind his wife, his twentieth child, and all of his lawsuits to join his son in Kansas. The Browns traveled to Lawrence on December 7, 1855 in order to meet with another militia and discuss their plans. This group in Lawrence was attacked after Brown left, and he wanted

to take revenge. John Brown quickly became a wanted man and continued to evade the law for quite some time.

More than fifty people died in 1856, the time named as Bleeding Kansas. His time in Kansas changed Brown, and he wanted to attack the source directly in charge of slavery, the South. Brown's plan was to take a group of armed men and invade the South somewhere in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He predicted that thousands of slaves would join his force and fight along his side. The next thing he did after making his plan public was buying a small farm right across the Potomac River from Harpers Ferry.

After stocking the farmhouse full of weapons and raiders, they were ready to start their raid. It was October 17, and about 10 o'clock at night when they crossed the river and captured the watchman and cut the telegraph wires. At about 1 am, a worker at the hotel had told a train that was headed east that an armed party had taken over the bridge. The group stayed there over night hoping that reinforcements would come to aide them. They never came, and the next day at around noon, two groups had arrived right outside of town to take down Brown and his men.

A few of his raiders who were guarding him got killed by militiamen, which left Brown and only a handful of raiders surrounded with no chance of escape. Ten out of twenty-two men involved in the raid were killed and seven were captured, which left only five that escaped. Brown was taken to jail, where he sent letters accepting everything that happened. He said he was going to make the most out of this defeat and hoped that it would lead to more people to start to take action against slavery. Brown was proved

guilty of treason against Virginia, murder, and inciting slave rebellion and sentenced to hang on December 2.

In his last month before being hung, he made an amazing amount of letters to family friends, which all ended up being opened up to the public and in print. The reactions to John Brown's raid and his execution were very different, obviously. Many Southerners applauded his death, but also prepared for more incidents like this. Antislavery Northerners gained motivation to take action against slavery. John Brown's actions were the most influential to push the United States to the brink of the Civil War.