



JOHN BROWN

and Radical Abolition

Photos National Archives

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From the time of the American Revolution, the founding fathers of our nation struggled with the issue of slavery. References to slavery were edited out of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the word “slave” was not used in the Constitution in 1789. While many Northern states outlawed slavery after the American Revolution, the invention of the **cotton gin** made cotton the cash crop of the South and the increased need for farm labor ensured that slavery remained strong there.

Slavery became a dominant political issue with the battle over Missouri’s statehood in 1820, and the question

of slavery’s spread into western territories acquired during the **Mexican War** dominated politics in the 1850s. During these tense times, some spoke out to end slavery, and these **abolitionists** proposed many ways of accomplishing that. Some wanted to end slavery slowly. Others favored colonization, which involved freeing the slaves and setting up a colony for them in a foreign land. Some, such as former slave Frederick Douglass and newspaper editor William Lloyd Garrison, wanted immediate **emancipation**. Another man, however, took a different approach, and he became the most famous, or **infamous**, of them all.

John Brown, a father of 20 children and a tanner by trade, favored abolition by any means necessary, including the use of violence. A deeply religious man, Brown believed slavery was an **abomination** for which God would punish the United States. He believed it was his duty to end it.

Brown, like many Americans, was enraged by the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which allowed the citizens of Kansas to vote on whether their territory would be free or allow slavery.

Hoping to influence the outcome of the voting, both proslavery and anti-slavery forces moved into Kansas.

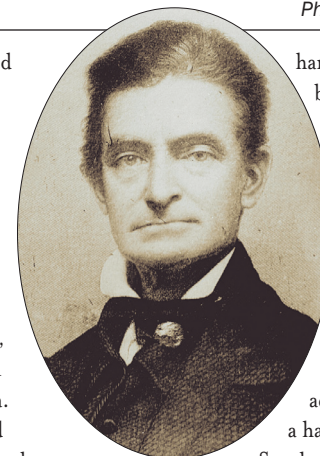
Brown went to Kansas in 1856 when his sons who lived there reported that proslavery settlers were trying to take over the state.

These settlers were using violence to enforce their beliefs, including attacking Lawrence, Kan., a prominent antislavery town. John Brown decided to spill blood for his cause as well. With help from volunteers, Brown captured five proslavery men who were then hacked to death with broadswords in what became known as the Pottawatomie **Massacre**. This brutal attack was part of a border war involving the slaveholding state of Missouri that became known as “Bleeding Kansas.”

After the bloodshed in Kansas, Brown turned his attention to national matters. He designed a plan to attack the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Va., capture thousands of guns stored at the armory, and use them to arm the slaves of Virginia. He hoped this would start an **insurrection** that would sweep south and free slaves as it passed, ending slavery by force.

On October 16, 1859, Brown led a 21-man force against the armory. They easily captured the town and the rifles, but the slave uprising they had expected to reinforce their army never came. Instead, the local **militias** gathered against them and the Marines mobilized under Colonel Robert E. Lee to end the rebellion. In the end, 10 of Brown’s men, including two of his sons, died and Brown himself was captured. He was sentenced to hang for **treason**.

Determined to make the most of his defeat, Brown refused all efforts to help him escape or to have him declared legally insane. He believed that God was using his death to rally supporters of abolition, telling his wife “I have been whipped, but am sure I can recover all the lost capital occasioned by the disaster, by only



hanging a few moments by the neck; & I feel quite determined to make the utmost possible out of a defeat.”

By facing death bravely, Brown became a martyr to the abolitionists’ cause. Because of his actions, he also became a hated man among Southerners, who greatly

feared slave rebellion.

Although most Northerners **condemned** Brown’s use of violence, many did identify with his abolitionist cause and his commitment to righting what he believed to be a great wrong. This was too much for Southerners to take. They saw in John Brown’s actions a terrible Northern plot to end their way of life by violence. While his methods were regrettable and his attack a failure, John Brown’s raid greatly contributed to tension that led to the Civil War and the ultimate destruction of slavery.

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Pictured in this 1865 photograph, the town of Harpers Ferry developed at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers. Some Virginia counties refused to secede from the Union during the Civil War and instead formed the current state of West Virginia, where Harpers Ferry is now located.



1854

The Kansas-Nebraska Act leads to the “Bleeding Kansas” border war and the formation of the Republican Party.

1859

John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry increases tensions between the North and the South.

1860

Abraham Lincoln is elected President. South Carolina secedes from the Union.

1861

The Confederate States of America is formed. Fort Sumter is captured and the Civil War begins.

1862

Missouri is successfully defended by the Union at Pea

Ridge, Ark. Union victory at Antietam leads Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

1863

Victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg turn the war in favor of the Union.

1865

Lee surrenders at Appomattox. Lincoln is assassinated at Ford’s Theater.

1867

Radical Reconstruction begins in the South.

1877

The Compromise of 1877 ends Reconstruction. Without military support, Reconstruction governments collapse in the South.

This Newspaper In Education series was created by The Joplin Globe in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education Teaching American History Project, the East Newton R-6 School District, the Southwest Center for Educational Excellence and the Missouri Southern State University Social Sciences Department.

The Missouri Press Foundation thanks The Joplin Globe and its partners for sharing the series with community newspapers.