

Seeking Historical Detectives to Discover Who Was John Brown?

"Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say, let it be done."
--John Brown, statement at his sentencing on Nov. 2, 1859

Overview

John Brown, was he a hero or a villain? In this lesson, students will employ their detective skills to examine the life, ideals, and actions of John Brown, one of history's most controversial abolitionists. Reviewing primary source documents regarding Brown's actions throughout the 1850s, students will work with partners in an inquiry activity to learn about the righteous crusade Brown waged against slavery, based in religious faith yet often carried out with violence. Applying critical thinking skills to the "evidence" presented regarding Brown, students will make a "detective's" determination regarding Brown's character and the justifiability of his actions.

Grades

8-11

Essential Questions

- Who was John Brown and what was his ultimate mission regarding slavery?
- What actions did John Brown take to attempt to end slavery and in what ways were these actions effective or ineffective?
- What impact did John Brown have on the Civil War and on history in general?

Materials

- "Be a Historical Detective" PPT, available in the Database of K-12 Resources (in PDF format) at <https://k12database.unc.edu/files/2012/04/JohnBrownPPT.pdf>
 - To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click "View" in the top menu bar of the file, and select "Full Screen Mode"
 - To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to CarolinaK12@unc.edu
- "Be a Historical Detective – Who Was John Brown," worksheet attached
- The following pieces of "evidence" will be provided to students for examination throughout the lesson (some "evidences" are attached and will be provided in worksheet form; others are available in the PPT and will only need to be projected):
 - Anti-Slavery primary source document (attached and available on slide 2 of PPT)
 - Teachers should make enough copies so that each pair of students can have one document to examine
 - "Tragic Prelude," available on slide 3 of the accompanying PPT
 - Statement by James Townsley describing the Pottawatomie Raid of 1856 (attached)
 - Excerpt from John Brown's Provisional Constitution (attached)
 - John Brown's Speech to the VA Court (attached)
- "We Came to Free the Slaves: John Brown on Trial"
- Tar Heels at Harper's Ferry: <https://www.ncpedia.org/copeland-john-anthony>

Duration

- Approximately 90 minutes (can be split over two class periods)
- The length of the lesson will vary depending on the amount of discussion time provided to students during each step.

Teacher Preparation

This lesson involves guiding students (in partners) to examine various pieces of “evidence” regarding John Brown and his actions. The process culminates with students making a judgment call regarding John Brown, based only on the information provided to them. Teachers should use their discretion regarding how much time to provide partners to examine each piece of evidence; anywhere from 4-10 minutes may be appropriate depending on how detailed the source is and how many questions are provided for students to answer. The time required for this lesson will thus vary based on the amount of time teachers deem appropriate for each step. By design, students will not gain a complete concept of John Brown, his life, and the various aspects of his character until the end of the lesson.

Procedure

Day 1

Be a Historical Detective!

1. At the start of class, project slide 1 of the “Be a Historical Detective Power Point” and explain to students that they have been hired for a very important job: using their super-sleuth detective skills, they are to figure out as much as they can about a controversial figure from the 1800s, John Brown.
2. Do not provide any further information at this point, other than telling students that they will be working with a fellow “detective,” and that in partners, they should begin by examining their first clue - a primary source document. Project slide 2 of the PPT, partner students up, provide them with a copy of the attached “Be a Historical Detective” worksheet, and also provide each pair a printed copy of the Anti-Slavery document from slide 2. (Giving each pair a copy will allow them to closely examine the primary source better, while also having the large projected image to consult.)
3. Tell students to work with their detective partner to examine and discuss the document and questions provided. After 5-8 minutes of working in pairs, ask students to report back regarding their thoughts and further discuss the document as a whole class. Focus students on discussing what they can learn regarding John Brown from this document and their inferences (i.e. he lived during the 1850s, he was a captain of some sort, he was to be executed, he likely had something to do with the anti-slavery movement, his execution must have been significant to the antislavery cause, etc.)

“Tragic Prelude”

4. Tell the detectives you are going to offer another piece of evidence so that they can discover more about this man named John Brown. Display the painting on slide 3 of the PPT (do not tell students the title of the painting at this time.) Tell students that you want them to further call on their investigative skills by taking some time to silently review the image and then pointing out what they first notice or what most readily catches their eye about the image.
 - Optional: Every detective works better with a magnifying glass! Teachers may want to have a piece of large, white cardstock paper that students can take and use as a “magnifying glass” to call attention to a particular part of the painting they want to point out. By simply walking up to the projected image and holding the paper in front of the part of the projection they want to focus on, that part of the image will be magnified on the white paper being held out in front – thus calling attention to that specific part of the image for the seated students.)

5. As a class, discuss:
 - What do you see? What symbols or objects do you notice that may be important to figuring out what this painting is representing? (Students should discuss items such as the tornado, flags, rifle, bible, fire, bloody hands, size of main character picture in middle, shape of his arms, etc.)
 - Look even closer. What can you point out about this painting that you think is important, but that people may miss on first glance?
 - What clues can you find in this painting that may tell us what time period is pictured?
 - What do you think the setting of this painting is? What evidence makes you think this?
 - Discuss the people pictured. What can you identify or note about them based on what you see? Who do you think they may be and why? What might they be doing and what evidence makes you think this?
 - What do you think the story of what you see is? Meaning, what is happening, and what do you think took place before and after this moment?
 - How could this art connect to the document we just examined?
6. As students discuss, eventually let them know that the man pictured in the center is John Brown. Further discuss:
 - Based upon the last document we examined, what do we already know about John Brown? (He was to be executed, he was a captain, he likely had something to do with the issue of slavery, etc.)
 - What additional information might this painting tell us about John Brown? Who could he be and what might be important about him?
7. Tell students to turn back to their detective partner and take three minutes to discuss what they feel is the most important clue regarding John Brown that is offered in this artwork. They should note their final thoughts on their worksheet. Let students know that you will return to this piece of art later in the lesson to discuss it further.
8. Next, project [slide 4](#) and give students a “detective’s briefing,” offering a bit of general introductory information about John Brown:

“John Brown is a man who remains one of the most controversial figures in American history. He dedicated his life to the abolition of slavery; for him, any means used to achieve this goal were justified. He was prepared to kill or be killed in this effort, a decisive break with the nonviolent resistance embraced by most abolitionists at that time. He has been called a saint, a fanatic, and a cold-blooded murderer. The controversy over his memory, his motives, about the true nature of the man, continues to stir passionate debate. It is said that John Brown was the spark that started the Civil War.” (Source: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/peoplevents/pande01.html>)

The Kansas-Nebraska Act and “Bleeding Kansas”

9. Tell students you want to give them some historical context of the time. Project [slide 5](#) and review the Kansas Nebraska Act with students. Afterwards, project [slide 6](#) and have them discuss section III on their worksheet with their detective partners:
 - How do you think John Brown would have felt about the Kansas Nebraska Act?
 - Given what you know so far, how might he have responded? What actions may he have taken?
10. Tell the students you are going to present them with another piece of evidence that will help them discover John Brown’s response to the Kansas Nebraska Act. Project [slide 7](#) and provide students with the attached Statement by James Townsley,” in which he provides an account of what is known as the Pottawatomie Raid of 1856.” Tell students to read and discuss the first-person account with their detective partners, answering the questions in section IV on their worksheets.

11. Next, go through slides 8-10 and explain to students that the Pottawatomie Raid of 1856 was one event in a larger stream of violence that erupted in Kansas in response to the Kansas Nebraska Act. In fact, the period of 1854-1858 became known as “Bleeding Kansas” due to all of the strife. After discussing the information on the slides with students, further discuss:
 - Why did John Brown head to Kansas and get involved?
 - What or who was to blame for the violence occurring there?
 - How do you think slave owners viewed John Brown? If you were in favor of states being free and slavery being prohibited, how might you view or talk about John Brown?
 - What does it seem that John Brown’s ultimate goal is thus far? How is he trying to achieve his goal?
 - What is your opinion of John Brown’s actions thus far towards achieving this goal?

John Brown’s Provisional Constitution

12. Next, project slide 11 and provide students with a copy of an excerpt from “John Browns Provisional Constitution” (attached), letting students know that Brown composed this document in May 1858. Interestingly, the document was not made public until the following year, when John Brown was put on trial for treason and murder. The Provisional Constitution was presented in Brown’s trial by his own lawyer, who tried to argue that the Constitution was evidence of Brown’s insanity, and that he was thus not guilty of treason. Tell students you’ll talk more about the trial in a moment and what led up to it, but first you want them to review the excerpt with their detective partners.

Brown on Trial for Treason & Murder

13. Share the information on slide 12 with students, letting them know they will be reading a bit more regarding the details of Harper’s Ferry for homework. First however, as their final detective assignment, explain that you want them to jump to the end of Brown’s life and examine one last piece of evidence: the speech he gave before he was sentenced to death by hanging. Provide students with the attached excerpt from the speech, and again have them read, discuss, and fill out their detective worksheets. (Students will learn the details of Brown’s Raid on Harper’s Ferry, his trial, and his conviction in their homework reading; for now however, it is preferable they only have a vague knowledge so that they must work to patch together whatever “clues” they can to assess Brown’s character.)
 - Optional: Should teachers choose to play it, a dramatic reenactment of an excerpt of John Brown’s final speech, by actor David Strathairn, is available at: <http://www.history.com/topics/john-brown/videos/john-browns-last-speech>
14. Finally, project slide 13 and tell students that they have now reviewed all the evidence available at this time for assessing John Brown, who he was, and his character. Either as a class, or in their detective partners, review the evidence that students have examined thus far, further discussing if necessary, and tell students that it is time for them to make their final determination based on what they have learned. Instruct students to take 10 final minutes with their detective partner to fill in the last section of their worksheet, offering their interpretation of the mystery of who John Brown was. Provide a piece of chart paper to each set of students and tell them to write their final “detective’s report” on the paper. Let students know that they will be sharing their work. Encourage students to back up their determination by citing particular pieces of evidence they examined.
15. If time permits, allow students to hear the various detective reports. (If time has run out, this can also be done at the beginning of the following class.) Options include:
 - Option 1: Have students post their pieces of chart paper around the room. Instruct students to then circulate around the room reading one another’s detective reports. Students can additionally be told to place a check on any report that they agree with, or that relates to their own detective findings. After circulating, debrief the various findings as a class:
 - What common ideas and themes emerged in the reports regarding John Brown?

- Were there any thoughts or findings that were unique?
- Do you think John Brown made some mistakes? If so, what were they and why were these mistakes?
- Why do you think John Brown remains such a controversial figure?
- Overall, how does it seem that we view John Brown? Is history judging him too harshly? Not harshly enough?
- Option 2: Ask for volunteers to present their detective report to the remainder of the class. Allow other students to ask questions. Teachers can also ask for detectives whose reports were similar or different in some way to go next. Again, culminate the questions above.

Synthesizing the Evidence – A Review of John Brown’s Life

16. For homework, provide the attached reading, “We Came to Free the Slaves: John Brown on Trial” and let students know that this final reading will give them an overview and comprehensive understanding of John Brown, his life, actions, views, etc. As they read, they will get a historical sense of where the various evidences they have examined fit. Tell students to answer the questions at the end of the reading and that tomorrow in class, they will discuss whether anything they read has led them to think about John Brown differently. Do they still stand by their detective’s report, or would they amend anything they wrote?

Day 2

17. As a review of the previous day’s lesson and the homework reading, again project slide 3. Remind students that they first viewed this artwork at the beginning of yesterday’s class, before they knew as much about John Brown and his actions. Tell students you’d now like them to reexamine the image, knowing what they now know. Discuss:
- How do you now interpret this painting and the symbols you see within it?
 - Based on what you have learned about John Brown, what do you think the artist is trying to convey? How is he portraying John Brown?
 - The title of this painting is “Tragic Prelude.” What do you think this title means? Does the title change your interpretation of the art at all?
 - After students have discussed, share some background information on the painting, which was designed by John Steuart Curry in 1937, when he was commissioned to create a set of murals for the Kansas State Capitol building. However, as Curry was painting this mural of John Brown, controversy arose regarding his work. Specifically, “the committee objected to the blood on John Brown’s hands, the prairie fires, and tornadoes. These inclusions were thought by some to show the state in a negative light due to the fact that Brown, who was executed for leading a raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia in 1859, was considered by some to be a traitor and a murderer. Curry tried to explain that while the blood on Brown’s hands was not literal, his acts caused bloodshed, and that the tornado was a symbol of the abolitionist’s passion. However, the people of Kansas saw its inclusion as a negative statement about bad weather. In defense of his work, Curry expressed that he wanted to get into his pictures the iron that is the Kansas people; not a soft, sappy presentation.” (*Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Steuart_Curry*) Due to the controversy, Curry refused to sign the murals. They were still unsigned upon his death in 1946.
18. Next, review the reading students completed for homework and their thoughts on the questions that were provided. Further discuss:
- Have any of your opinions changed regarding John Brown since your work in class yesterday? Why or why not?
 - Given what you know about America in 1859, which people probably had the strongest emotional reactions to the raid (including anger, fear, approval, disappointment, relief)? Why?
 - Some people believed (and still believe) that John Brown’s actions ignited the Civil War. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

- Historian Michael Eric Dyson once noted of the American Revolution, "America was founded on breaking the law." What do you think he meant and how does this quote connect to John Brown's actions? In your opinion, is it ever right to break the law for something you consider to be a "higher cause?" What specific circumstances do you consider worthy of insurgency, if any? (Source: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/tguide/index.html>)
- Frederick Douglass said of John Brown, "I could live for the slave, but he could die for him..." Why might someone devote his or her life to a cause? (Discuss aspects such as religious calling, government-sanctioned oppression, social oppression, and a variety of significant life experiences, i.e. health, education, wealth, family, etc.) What causes, if any, do you feel are worth devoting one's life to? What causes, if any, are worth risking one's life or the lives of others for? Was John Brown's cause worthy in this way? (Source: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1550.html>)
- Frederick Douglass also remarked, "Did John Brown fail? John Brown began the war that ended American slavery and made this a free Republic." Do you agree with Frederick Douglass - was John Brown's fight at Harper's Ferry the first step towards ending American slavery? What were the positive and negative aspects of the Harper's Ferry incident? What were immediate outcomes? What outcomes occurred in the long run? Who benefited, and how? Who lost, and how? Were the lives lost worth the freedoms gained? (Source: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1550.html>)

Tar Heels at Harper's Ferry

19. Let students know that there were two free men of color from North Carolina, John A. Copeland and Lewis S. Leary, whose lives were linked by a family connection and who were both involved in the abolitionist cause and participated in John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry. They had remarkably similar backgrounds in addition to being related by marriage. Born a year apart, [Lewis S. Leary](#) and [John A. Copeland, Jr.](#) were free, mulatto, and the children of free people. They both came from educated, hard-working and well-respected families. One was a harnessmaker and leatherworker, the other a college student. One came to the north in his early twenties following in the path of several siblings; the other traveled there as a child with his family. Additional information on each man can be found at the hyperlinks, and their lives provide an excellent conversation point for discussing the agency and resistance of individuals during this period.

Culminating Activity: Closing Argument for John Brown's Trial

20. As an optional culminating activity, give students the following assignment:
- Imagine the year is 1859 and you are a lawyer for either the prosecution or the defense at John Brown's trial. Write a closing argument in which you attempt to prove to the court why Brown should either be convicted or set free. (If you are arguing that he should be convicted, you must also decide whether to argue for prison time or the death penalty.)
21. Once students have completed their closing argument, volunteers representing both the prosecution and defense should present their arguments in dramatic fashion the class (as jurors.) After the presentations, allow students to debate and vote regarding what sentence should rightfully be given to John Brown. Compare student thoughts to the actual death sentence John Brown received. Alternatively, students can read their arguments in small groups and discuss the similarities and differences of opinions expressed.

Additional Resources

- Have students review Jacob Lawrence's series of art, "The Legend of John Brown:" <http://www.artswa.org/mwebcgi/mweb?request=record;id=23;type=901>
- For additional primary sources related to John Brown, see <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/johnbrown/brownhome.html>

Name: _____

Be a Historical Detective – Who Was John Brown?

What clues can you uncover regarding the mystery of John Brown? Carefully review the evidence as it is presented to you then discuss the questions provided with your partner. Summarize your answers on notebook paper.

I: Anti-Slavery Mass Meeting Primary Source Document

1. What do you first notice about the document? What clues do you think are most important to further explore?
2. What is the date and location of the meeting? Can you identify and significance regarding this date or location?
3. What is the purpose of this document? What evidence makes you think this?
4. Who do you imagine would show up for this meeting and why?
5. How long ago did this meeting take place?
6. What (if anything) do you already know about John Brown?
7. What clues can you decipher from this document regarding John Brown?

II: Painting

8. After the class discussion regarding this painting, discuss with your partner what you feel is the most important clue regarding John Brown that is offered in this artwork?

III. Kansas-Nebraska Act

9. How do you think John Brown would have felt about the Kansas Nebraska Act? Given what you know so far, how might he have responded? What actions may he have taken?

Pottawatomie Raid

10. According to what you read in the passage, how would you describe the Pottawatomie Raid? Why did it occur and what was its purpose?
11. What specific actions did John Brown and his sons take? What was the purpose of these actions?
12. What additional clues does this passage offer regarding John Brown, his life and his character? How would you characterize John Brown based on this testimony alone?
13. How did John Brown's actual actions compare to your prediction above?

John Brown's Provisional Constitution

14. Why do you think John Brown drafted an alternative Constitution? What is the purpose of this document?
15. How does this differ from the US Constitution of the time?
16. Would you characterize this document as radical? Why or why not?
17. John Brown was put on trial for treason and murder in 1859 and his lawyer used this Constitution as evidence, stating it proved Brown was insane. Why do you think the lawyer felt this Constitution were the words of an insane man? What do you think Brown's lawyer's goal was in pleading insanity for John Brown?
18. How would you describe John Brown based on this document?

John Brown's Speech to VA Court

19. Read through Brown's speech, then decode his message in each paragraph. What message is he trying to convey?
 - Paragraph 1:
 - Paragraph 2:
 - Paragraph 3:
 - Paragraph 4:
 - Paragraph 5:
 - Paragraph 6:
20. Remember that this is the speech John Brown gave before he was sentenced to death by hanging. Given this fact, what do you think the overall purpose of his words was? How does his speech compare to what you would imagine someone getting ready to be sentenced to death would say?

Solve the Mystery – Who WAS John Brown?

John Brown has been called a saint, a fanatic, and a cold-blooded murderer. The controversy over his memory, his motives, and about the true nature of the man, continues to stir passionate debate. It is said that John Brown was the spark that started the Civil War. Review all of the evidence you have examined and write a 3-5 sentence statement explaining who John Brown truly was. Was he a hero? A villain? Was he someone who was wrongfully executed or did he receive just punishment? Solve the historical mystery once and for all.

ANTI-SLAVERY MASS MEETING!

Agreeably to a call, signed by about 50 persons, and published in the Lawrence Republican, a Mass Meeting of the friends of Freedom will be held at Miller's Hall, at 2 o'clock P. M., on Friday, Dec. 24 the day on which

CAPT. JOHN BROWN IS TO BE EXECUTED,

To testify against the iniquitous **SLAVE POWER** that rules this Nation, and take steps to

Organize the Anti-Slavery Sentiment

of the community. Arrangements have been made with prominent speakers to be present and address the meeting.

PER ORDER OF COMMITTEE OF ARRANGEMENTS.

Lawrence, Nov. 26, 1859.

**Statement by James Townsley (of Lane, Kansas) describing the
Pottawatomie Raid of 1856**

...After my team was fed and the party had taken supper, John Brown told me for the first time what he proposed to do. He said he wanted me to pilot the company up to the forks of the creek some five or six miles above, into the neighborhood in which I lived, and show them where all the Pro-slavery men resided; that he proposed to sweep the creek as he came down of all the Pro-slavery men living on it....

We started, the whole company, in a northerly direction, crossing Mosquito Creek ... The next place we came to was the residence of the Doyles. John Brown, three of his sons and son-in-law went to the door, leaving Frederick Brown; Winer and myself a short distance from the house...The old man Doyle and two sons were called out and marched some distance from the house toward Dutch Henry's in the road, where a halt was made. Old John Brown drew his revolver and shot the old man Doyle in the forehead, and the two youngest sons immediately fell upon the younger Doyles with their short two-edged swords. One of the young Doyles was stricken down in an instant, but the other attempted to escape, and was pursued a short distance by his assailant and cut down. The company then proceeded down Mosquito creek to the house of Allen Wilkinson. Here the old man Brown, three of his sons and son-in-law, as at the Doyle residence, went to the door and ordered Wilkinson to come out, leaving Frederick Brown, Winer and myself standing in the road east of the house. Wilkinson was taken, marched some distance south of the house, and slain in the road with a short sword by one of the younger Browns. After he was killed his body was dragged out to one side and left.

We then crossed the Pottawatomie and came to the house of Henry Sherman, generally known as Dutch Henry. Here John Brown and the party, excepting Frederick Brown, Winer and myself, who were left outside a short distance from the door, went into the house and brought out one or two persons, talked with them some, and then took them in again. They afterward brought out Wm. Sherman, Dutch Henry's brother, and marched him into Pottawatomie creek, where he was slain with swords by Brown's two youngest sons, and left lying in the road.

It was the expressed intention of Brown to execute Dutch Henry also, but he was not found at home. He also hoped to find George Wilson, Probate Judge of Anderson Co., there, and intended, if he did, to kill him too. Wilson had been notifying Free State men to leave the Territory. I had received such a notice from him myself.

I desire to say here that it was not true that there was any intentional mutilation of the bodies after they were killed. They were slain as quickly as possible and left, and whatever gashes they received were inflicted in the process of cutting them down with swords. I understood that the killing was done with these swords, so as to avoid alarming the neighborhood by the discharge of firearms.

I desire also to say that I did not then approve of the killings of these men, but Brown said it must be done for the protection of the Free State settlers; that the Pro-slavery party must be terrified and that it was better that a score of bad men should die than that one man who came here to make Kansas a free State should be driven out.

Brown wanted me to pilot the party into the neighborhood where I lived, and point out all the Pro-slavery men in it, whom he proposed to put to death.

Source: <http://www.kansashistory.us/pottamassacre.html>

Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the people of the United States.

PREAMBLE.

Whereas slavery, throughout its entire existence in the United States, is none other than a most barbarous, unprovoked, and unjustifiable war of one portion of its citizens upon another portion-the only conditions 'of which are perpetual imprisonment and hopeless servitude or absolute extermination-in utter disregard and violation of those eternal and self-evident truths set forth in our Declaration of Independence:

Therefore, we, citizens of the United States, and the oppressed people who, by a recent decision of the Supreme' Court, are declared to have no rights which the white man is bound to respect, together with all other people degraded by the laws thereof, do, for the time being, ordain and establish for ourselves the following Provisional Constitution and Ordinances, the better to protect our persons, property, lives, and liberties, and to govern our actions

ARTICLE I

Qualifications for membership

All persons of mature age, whether proscribed, oppressed, and enslaved citizens, or of the proscribed and oppressed races of the United States, who shall agree to sustain and enforce the Provisional Constitution and Ordinances of this organization, together with all minor children of such persons, shall be held to be fully entitled to protection under the same.

**John Brown's Speech to the Virginia Court
(when about to receive the sentence of death)**

1

I have, may it please the Court, a few words to say. In the first place, I deny everything but what I have already admitted, of a design on my part to free slaves. I intended, certainly, to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter when I went into Missouri, and there took Slaves without the snapping of a gun on either side, moving them through the country, and finally leaving them in Canada. I designed to have done the same thing again on a larger scale. That was all I intended. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite Slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection.

2

I have another objection, and that is that it is unjust that I should suffer such a penalty. Had I interfered ... in behalf of the Rich, the Powerful, the Intelligent, the so called Great, or in behalf of any of their friends, either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of that class, and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right. Every man in this Court would have deemed it an act worthy a reward rather than a punishment.

3

This Court acknowledges too, as I suppose, the validity of the LAW OF GOD. I see a book kissed, which I suppose to be the BIBLE, or at least the NEW TESTAMENT, which teaches me that, "All things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them." It teaches me further to, "Remember them that are in bonds as bound with them." I endeavored to act up to that instruction ...I believe that to have interfered as I have done, as I have always freely admitted I have done in behalf of this despised poor, is no wrong, but RIGHT.

4

Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and MINGLE MY BLOOD FURTHER WITH THE BLOOD OF MY CHILDREN, and with the blood of millions in this Slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, -- I say LET IT BE DONE.

5

Let me say one word further: I feel entirely satisfied with the treatment I have received on my trial. Considering all the circumstances, it has been more generous than I expected; but I feel no consciousness of guilt. I have stated from the first what was my intention, and what was not. I never had any design against the liberty of any person, nor any disposition to commit treason or excite Slaves to rebel or make any general insurrection. I never encouraged any man to do so, but always discouraged any idea of that kind.

6

Let me say also in regard to the statements made by some of those who were connected with me; I hear that it has been stated by some of them, that I have induced them to join me; but the contrary is true. I do not say this to injure them, but as regretting their weakness. Not one but joined me of his own accord, and the greater part at their own expense. A number of them I never saw, and never had a word of conversation with, till the day they came to me, and that was for the purpose I have stated. Now, I am done.

"We Came to Free the Slaves": John Brown on Trial

Throughout American history people have protested and broken the law. Once in court, they often have tried to use their trials to advance their causes. Before the Civil War, John Brown, a tireless crusader against slavery, fought his last battle against slavery in an American courtroom.

John Brown's Secret Plan

No one had a deeper moral hatred of slavery than John Brown. He had grown up on the Ohio frontier, the son of a stern man who believed slavery was a sin against God. As John grew up, he became an active abolitionist -- someone who fights to abolish slavery -- by helping runaway slaves escape. He married and in 1849 moved his family to North Elba, New York, to join a farming community of ex-slaves and free blacks.

A few years later, his anti-slavery views took him away from his wife and younger children to continue his personal crusade in Kansas. The Kansas territory had become known as "**Bleeding Kansas**" because of many pitched battles over slavery. Small homesteaders wanted Kansas to enter the Union as a free state. Bands of pro-slavery gunmen called "border ruffians" crossed over from Missouri to attack them. Brown's older sons had moved to Kansas earlier, and he joined them to help defend the free-soil homesteaders.

Border ruffians attacked Lawrence, Kansas, in May 1856, and burned down much of the town. Brown led a counter-raid (the Pottawatomie Raid) and ordered five pro-slavery settlers hacked to death with sabers. This brutal response was one of the most controversial events in his life. Brown fought several other battles in Kansas, defending free-soil towns, and he led guerilla raids into Missouri.

During this period, Brown began to develop a much bigger plan, designed to free all slaves. He traveled to Boston in 1857 and again in 1858 to ask wealthy abolitionists for arms and money. He said he had a vision that God would make him "the deliverer of the slaves the same as Moses had delivered the children of Israel."

Many abolitionists were scared off by his reputation for violence. But finally he won over a small group of financial backers, known as "The Secret Six." He convinced them that only by force could "this slave-cursed Republic be restored to the principles of the Declaration of Independence."

In May 1858, Brown held a secret anti-slavery convention in Canada. About 50 black and white supporters adopted Brown's anti-slavery constitution. In December, Brown moved beyond talk and plans. He led a daring raid from Kansas across the border into Missouri, where he killed one slave owner and freed 11 slaves.

In the spring of 1859, Brown traveled east to complete his plan for a large slave revolt. He gathered recruits and ordered guns, spears, and other supplies. At a meeting of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, he denounced the endless discussions of many abolitionists.

"Talk! Talk! Talk!" he cried. "That will never free the slaves. What is needed is action -- action!"

As the starting point for the rebellion, John Brown chose Harpers Ferry, a small town at the junction of the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers. It was far away from the large plantations near the Atlantic where most of the slaves were. But it had an arsenal where Brown's raiders could seize guns.

On July 3, 1859, Brown and a few supporters rented an old farmhouse near Harper's Ferry. For five months they studied maps and finalized plans. Boxes of arms came by wagon. His remaining recruits trickled in. The raiders were all young, idealistic, and bitter opponents of slavery. Five of them were free black men who had given up their safety in the North to fight for their slave brothers and sisters.

Brown believed that after he seized the arsenal, masses of slaves would rebel against their masters and join the revolt. He planned to distribute guns and spears to his new army, strike southward, and set off a chain reaction of slave uprisings throughout the South. Unfortunately, he did little to spread the word among the slaves nearby. All his attention was focused on seizing the arsenal. He made few plans for what would happen the day after.

The Raid

On Sunday night, October 16, 1859, Brown and 18 others, swept down on the armory and took several prisoners. In the darkness and confusion, one raider shot and killed the baggage master at the railroad station. Sadly, this free black man was the first victim of a raid to free the slaves.

Brown sent some of the raiders into the countryside to try to spread the rebellion. His men returned with two slave owners and about a dozen slaves. Since Brown had given no advance warning, the slaves were as surprised and confused as their masters.

By the next morning, word had spread of a massive slave uprising. Armed citizens and militia units struck back. Townspeople drove the raiders into a small fire engine house, where they traded rifle fire for most of the day. Brown appeared confused and uncertain about what to do next. This delay gave federal authorities in nearby Washington time to send a unit of U.S. Marines under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee.

When Brown's men peered out through their gun holes in the early light of Tuesday, the second day of the revolt, they saw Lee's Marines. Beyond the Marines, more than 2,000 spectators waited to see the final assault. Lee demanded that Brown surrender, and Brown refused. The Marines then rushed the engine house. Brown and most of his men resisted to the last. One of the Marine officers wounded Brown with his saber, and then used the hilt to beat him unconscious.

Seventeen men died in the raid on Harper's Ferry. In addition to the African-American baggage master, the raiders killed three white townspeople and one Marine. Ten of the raiders, including two of Brown's sons were killed, plus two of the slaves they liberated. Brown and four others were taken alive. A few raiders waiting at the farm nearby escaped.

A few hours after his capture, Brown regained consciousness. He was surrounded by an excited crowd, including Virginia's governor, members of Congress, and news reporters. When they asked him why he did it, Brown said simply, "We came to free the slaves, and only that."

John Brown on Trial

Troops transported Brown and his surviving raiders to the county courthouse in Charleston. The governor wanted a speedy trial to prevent either a lynching or a rescue attempt.

One week after the raid, Brown and four of his raiders, two black and two white, were brought to court under heavy guard. The state appointed two Virginia defense attorneys. The next day, the court read the grand jury indictment. Brown and his followers were charged with treason against the government of Virginia, conspiracy to induce slaves "to rebel and make insurrection against their masters and owners," and premeditated murder. The five pleaded not guilty, and each was given a separate trial.

In the afternoon John Brown, still suffering from his wounds, was carried into court on a cot to open his trial. Prospective jurors were examined and anyone who had been at Harper's Ferry during the raid was eliminated. The final jury was made up of 12 men, some of whom were slave owners.

As the trial opened, one of the court-appointed defense attorneys surprised Brown. He read a telegram from an Ohio resident who claimed that several of Brown's close relatives suffered from insanity. Brown protested. He wanted the trial to be a forum to attack the institution of slavery. He insisted that the insanity defense was "a miserable artifice and pretext" to avoid discussing slavery. The judge ordered the trial to continue.

The prosecution called as witnesses many Harper's Ferry townspeople and those Brown had held hostage. Under cross-examination, the hostages admitted that Brown had treated them well and had ordered his men not to shoot unless fired upon.

The Secret Six in Boston hired a young Massachusetts lawyer named George H. Hoyt to help defend Brown. He was also told to scout the possibility of a rescue, but when the lawyer arrived, Brown refused to be rescued. He knew he would not have his forum if he escaped. He seemed to feel that he had to become a martyr in order to stir up more anti-slavery feeling.

The prosecution introduced into evidence Brown's anti-slavery constitution, letters from his backers, and other materials found at the farmhouse. After a few defense witnesses were called, Brown denounced his Virginia attorneys. He asked for a delay because more legal help was being sent from the North. The two appointed lawyers withdrew, but Judge Parker ruled against a delay.

The following morning, Samuel Chilton of Washington and Henry Griswold of Cleveland, Ohio, joined Brown's defense. They asked for a delay to prepare, but the judge refused again. The remaining defense witnesses were examined, but Brown himself did not testify.

Griswold and Chilton made the closing arguments for the defense. They said that the state had failed to prove the charges. Since the state had kept the trial focused on the legal issues of treason and murder, the defense had to respond to simple questions of evidence. Brown showed little interest in this defense. He wanted to attack slavery, but had not yet found a way to do so in court.

The jury deliberated for less than an hour and found John Brown guilty of all the charges. Two days later, Judge Parker sentenced Brown to be hanged.

At the sentencing, Brown finally found his forum. He stood in court and made a passionate attack on slavery. Brown brushed aside questions of treason and other legal issues. He said he was simply trying to free slaves, as he had done the previous year in Missouri. He insisted that fighting against slavery was the right thing to do. His statement was published in papers all over the country.

A gaunt but defiant John Brown walked to the gallows at age 59. On this last walk, he had one more chance to argue his views. He offered a terrible prophecy: "I John Brown am now quite *certain* that the crimes of *this guilty land will never be purged away, but with Blood.*"

Source: Constitutional Rights Foundation, <http://www.crf-usa.org/brown-v.-board-50th-anniversary/we-came-to-free-the-slaves.html>

Answer:

1. Considering 1860s society, how would you characterize John Brown's goal to "free all slaves?"
2. John Brown said, "Talk! Talk! Talk!...That will never free the slaves. What is needed is action -- action!" Do you agree or disagree with this statement and why? Evaluate the actions John Brown ended up taking. Do you support his actions? Why or why not? Were they effective? Why or why not?
3. In your opinion, why was John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry unsuccessful? Did the raid accomplish anything in your opinion? Explain.

4. Even though an insanity plea may have saved John Brown's life, he refused to plead insanity. Why do you think he refused?
5. Do you think John Brown received a fair trial and a just sentence? Why or why not?
6. John Brown wrote, "I am worth inconceivably more to *hang* than for any other purpose." What did he mean by this?
7. Did you read anything that reaffirmed or changed your prior position on John Brown? Explain.