



## TRIAL OF JOHN BROWN

### INTRODUCTION

The abolitionist John Brown led a raid on the arsenal at Harpers Ferry in October 1859. His intent for the raid was to acquire weapons to start a slave uprising throughout the South. John Brown became involved in the fight against slavery in 1837 after the murder of white abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy, after which Brown declared that his whole life will be focused on “the destruction of slavery!” He drafted a new constitution that eliminated slavery throughout the United States, attended lectures given by abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, and created The League of Gileadites to help protect African Americans against the Fugitive Slave Act (1850). He would bring the ideas of this militant group to Kansas to fight against pro-slavery forces during a time that came to be known as “Bleeding Kansas.” Over the next three years, Brown worked to raise money to head back into Kansas. However, he decided to use these resources to attempt a secret raid on the arsenal at Harpers Ferry. His intention was to use the confiscated weapons to aid in the abolition movement.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of this lesson plan middle school students will be able to:

- Analyze primary source documents
- Explain why John Brown became involved in the abolition movement
- Understand public reaction to the raid at Harpers Ferry
- Write an argument in defense of, or in opposition to, the actions of John Brown at Harpers Ferry

### GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What were the cultural issues that divided the nation?
- What tensions in the United States led to the raid at Harpers Ferry?

### LEARNING STANDARDS

This lesson is compatible with:

- *Virginia Standard of Learning USI.8d*—The student will demonstrate knowledge of westward expansion and reform in American from 1801 to 1861 by identifying the main ideas of the abolitionist and women’s suffrage movements.
- *Virginia Standard of Learning USI.9a*—The student will demonstrate knowledge of the causes, major events, and effects of the Civil War by describing the cultural, economic, and constitutional issues that divided the nation.
- *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards D2.His.4.6-8*—Analyze multiple factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.
- *C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards D2.His.16.6-8*—Organize applicable evidence into a coherent argument about the past.

### PREPARATION INSTRUCTIONS

Resources:

- *Troubling the Water: John Brown as a Child* vodcast from the Harpers Ferry Project  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWKINcNnL\\_E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWKINcNnL_E)

Equipment and Handouts:

- Equipment to screen vodcast (computer, project, etc.)
- *'Troubling the Water' Warm Up* worksheet
- *Vodcast Analysis* worksheet
- *John Brown's Portrait* primary source worksheet
- *John Brown's Last Speech* primary source worksheet
- *Documents for the Defense of John Brown* primary source worksheet
- *Documents for the Prosecution of John Brown* primary source worksheet
- *Trial of John Brown Closing Argument* worksheet

## VODCAST DESCRIPTIONS

- *Troubling the Water: John Brown as a Child*: What made John Brown a leader... a radical... a martyr? Students from Harpers Ferry Middle School interpret what occurred in John Brown's life that propelled him to take action against slavery.

## LESSON ACTIVITIES

### Activity 1

**Pretest/Warm up:** Students will be formatively assessed on their knowledge of John Brown. Teachers should display the image of John Brown as students enter the classroom. Students will answer three questions about the picture on the *'Troubling the Water' Warm Up* worksheet. Teacher may choose on how to assess the answers: walk & observe, graded by neighbor, graded by teacher. This quick assessment should help teachers to determine their students' level of understanding before continuing with the rest of the lesson.

### Activity 2

**Vodcast Viewing: *Troubling the Water: John Brown as a Child*:** Students will watch the vodcast, *Troubling the Water: John Brown as a Child*, which is an interpretation by students of primary source documents. Students will answer questions in the top three boxes on the *Vodcast Analysis* worksheet during viewing. Students should discuss with each other their impressions of the video before moving on to Activity 3.

### Activity 3

**Vodcast Analysis:** Students may work individually or in pairs to answer the remaining questions on the *Vodcast Analysis* worksheet. Teacher leads whole class discussion of answers.

### Activity 4

**Primary Source Analysis:** Students will imagine that they are lawyers during the trial of John Brown. They will work in pairs and choose to write a closing argument prosecuting or defending the actions of John Brown.

1. Once students have chosen their argument, hand out the primary sources.
  - a. Groups working in defense of Brown should receive copies of *John Brown's Last Speech* worksheet as well as *Documents for the Defense of John Brown* worksheet.
  - b. Groups working on the prosecution of Brown should receive copies of *Documents for the Prosecution of John Brown* worksheet.
2. In pairs, students will read the documents, highlighting information that they can use to write their arguments. Encourage students to read for evidence of treason on the part of John Brown. Students should complete their notes on the *Trial of John Brown Closing Argument* worksheet.

### Activity 5

**Summative Assessment: Students Constructing a Closing Argument in the Trial of John Brown:** After highlighting the corresponding documents, students should work in their pairs to write a closing argument on the *Trial of John Brown Closing Argument* worksheet using information from class notes and from the primary sources they used. They also need to include answers to the guiding questions within their arguments:

- What were the cultural issues that divided the nation?
- What tensions in the United States led to the raid at Harpers Ferry?

Once students have finished, have them work with a pair from the opposing side to share their arguments.

### **Extending the Lesson**

The Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership's educational program, Of the Student, By the Student, For the Student®, offers additional student-created content on the Civil War at the YouTube channel "Take the Journey." <http://www.youtube.com/user/TakeTheJourney/videos?view=1>

Extended content includes student created vodcasts for:

- Battle of First Manassas
- Battle of Second Manassas
- Battle of Balls Bluff
- Harpers Ferry
- Battle of Antietam
- Chesapeake and Ohio Canal
- Battle of Gettysburg
- Battle of the Wilderness and the start of the Overland Campaign

For additional information on the Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership's educational programs and resources, please contact us at:

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## John Brown Portrait



***Troubling the Water Warm Up***

1. Who is the man in this image? \_\_\_\_\_

2. What did he do? \_\_\_\_\_

3. How did his actions fuel the tensions between the North and the South in 1859? \_\_\_\_\_

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***Troubling the Water Warm Up***

1. Who is the man in this image? \_\_\_\_\_

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## *Vodcast Analysis*

**Vodcast Viewing Directions:** As you are watching the vodcast *Troubling the Water: John Brown as a Child*, answer the following questions in the boxes below.

What do you see?
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What do you know?
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What questions do you have?
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**Vodcast Analysis Directions:** After having viewed *Troubling the Water: John Brown as a Child* vodcast, answer the questions in the spaces provided.

1. Explain what this vodcast is about:

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2. What types of primary sources were used?

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3. How do those sources corroborate (support) the story the students are telling?

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4. Is the vodcast a good interpretation of history? Why or why not?

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5. Do you think this vodcast is an effective way to learn about John Brown and his views? Why or why not?

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6. How would you present the information differently?

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## John Brown's Last Speech

November 2, 1859

(American State Trials, ed. by J. D. Lawson, Vol. VI, p. 800 ff.)

I have, may it please the Court, a few words to say.

In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted,—the design on my part to free the 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, moved them through the country, and finally left 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.

I have another objection; and that is, it is unjust that I should suffer such a penalty. Had I interfered in the manner which I admit, and which I admit has been fairly proved (for I admire the truthfulness and candor of the greater portion of the witnesses who have testified in this case),—had I so 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; and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.

This court acknowledges, as I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed here which I suppose to be the Bible or at least the New Testament. That 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 say, I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done -- as I have always freely admitted I have done -- in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right. 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 submit; so let it be done!

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 life 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.

Let me say, also, a word in regard to the statements made by some of those connected with me. I hear 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. There is not one of them but joined me of his own accord, and the greater part of them 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 have done.

## **Documents for the Defense of John Brown**

### **Speech by Ralph Waldo Emerson**

**Jan. 6, 1860 in Salem, Mass.**

“I am...surprised at the easy effrontery with which political gentlemen, in and out of Congress, take it upon themselves to say that there are not a thousand men in the North who sympathize with John Brown. It would be far safer and nearer the truth to say that all people, in proportion to their sensibility and self-respect, sympathize with him....All women are drawn to him by their predominance of sentiment. All gentlemen, of course, are on his side....For what is the oath of gentle blood and knighthood? What but to protect the weak and lowly from the oppressor. Who makes the abolitionist? The slave holder!

### **“A Plea for Captain John Brown”**

**Speech by Henry David Thoreau**

**Oct. 30, 1859 in Concord, Mass.**

It was Brown’s peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him. I think that for once the sharps rifles and the revolvers were employed in a righteous cause. The tools were in the hands of one who could use them. Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are not the ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light...

## **Documents for the Prosecution of John Brown**

***A Misnomer, Daily Herald***  
**Wilmington, North Carolina**  
**October 26, 1859**

Why will Editors persist in calling the late affair at Harper's Ferry an "Insurrection?" We have several papers before us -- published in the State and out of it -- and they nearly all of them allude to it as being an insurrection among the negroes. 'Twas no insurrection, and it is a libel upon the slave in designating it as such. They had nothing whatever to do with it. There was not a single slave engaged but what was drawn in by compulsion. The original insurgents consisted of some fifteen or sixteen white men and a half dozen free negroes from the North -- brought there by old Brown. What few slaves engaged in the affair were forced into taking up arms after the original outbreak, through fear of white abolitionists, and not from love of them, or hatred towards their masters. They did not want to join the insurgents. They hesitated, preferring slavery in the South to freedom -- or such freedom as they knew they would get at the hands of old Brown and his devilish crew at the North. We really think the slaves about Harper's Ferry deserve credit for the manner in which they behaved in this treasonable affair. What was easier than for them to seize arms -- for there were any quantity of them on hand -- rush upon their masters in the dead of night, and slay whole families before a step could be taken to prevent the dreadful work. When the deed was done, what easier than to quickly tramp over into Pennsylvania, only a few miles distant, and bury themselves among the abolitionists, where it would be next to impossibility to discover them. These things could have been done easily, but witness how nobly the "poor old slaves," -- as they are called by their would-be friends, but in reality their worst enemies, -- did. They refused to take up arms against their masters -- the only friends they knew -- and not until forced into by threats of death, was it done, and then only a few, comparatively speaking, joined the blood-thirsty, demented fanatics of the North in their treasonable work. Of course, as long as we down South continue to call the late affair an Insurrection, just so long will we be playing into the hands of Northern fanatics. They want it put in that light. It strengthens their doctrine, of course. If they can make it appear that the slaves are dissatisfied with their mode of life, and are desirous of changing it, even at the expense of blood, a great point with them is gained. They then have -- according to their incendiary belief -- an excuse for invading Southern territory. They say the slaves are desirous -- aye, even anxious, to throw off the yoke of servitude; and shall we stand idly by and not help our fellow creatures in their hour of need? Thus they reason, and as long as we continue to insist upon calling a fool-hardy invasion of white men and free negroes an insurrection, just so long will we continue to strengthen the cause of our enemies. Divest the thing of the insurrectionary aspect, and what do we behold? The foundation of their whole doctrine overthrown. -- The negroes do not desire freedom. They had an opportunity -- a good one. Months were wasted in consummating the arrangements and yet when the blow was to be struck and freedom granted, -- the great boon which those wild, deluded fanatics of the North and North-West prate so much about -- where do we find the poor slave? Why quietly sitting at home by his master's fire side, or doing his master's bidding, while a dozen or more crazy fools are battling for his rights which he will not accept.

We are surprised that Southern papers should call this invasion of a few treasonable men upon the South an insurrection, when not the first feature of it assumes that aspect. We say desist from it. It is exactly what the abolitionists want. We could not please them better. And besides it is robbing the slave of his just dues. He is deserving of praise say we, and we almost feel rejoiced that this thing has happened, for it has taught us two things, first that we can put confidence in the fidelity of the blacks as a mass (though of course there must necessarily be some bad ones among so large a number) and secondly it has taught northern fanatics that in future if they desire to liberate the slaves from bondage they must resort to other means, for this thing has taught them that expecting aid and comfort from the slaves themselves is putting faith in a broken reed.

Slaves love, honor and obey their masters, and it would be well for the "Liberators" before making such another foolish attempt as that of Harper's Ferry to bear this in mind. We don't know of any little event connected with this affair which has pleased us more than this reluctance of the slaves to engage in the dirty work. Not even the

capture of old Brown himself can equal the pleasure we experience when thinking about it. To old Brown it must be the unkindest cut of all, if we except the last cut he will experience when the Sheriff cuts the rope which is to rob him of his worthless life.

***The Insurrection at Harper's Ferry, Commonwealth***

**Frankfort, Kentucky**

**October 21, 1859**

The details by Telegraph of the insurrection at Harper's Ferry take up so much space as to prevent their publication in our paper. It appears, however, that the insurgents were lead on by the notorious Abolitionist Brown, who was so conspicuous in the Kansas difficulties; his two sons; and a school teacher named Cook. The developments indicate a conspiracy on the part of a few Abolitionists to revolutionize the entire South by inciting an insurrection among the slaves, which conspiracy, however, we cannot but believe existed chiefly upon paper, and in the minds of a few zealots, whose acts prove them to have been stark mad. In fact, derangement alone can account for their preposterous attempt to effect a revolution in the slave States with only 50 men, with the illusory hope, it is true, that the unarmed and undisciplined slaves would rise and successfully strike for their liberation. The slaves were evidently unprepared for such a step, and those who were implicated at all appear to have been coerced into the ranks. The mob has been promptly quelled and routed and peace restored. For the prisoners, a Lunatic Asylum would be a more proper punishment than the gallows. Below we give a list of the killed and wounded:

Killed, 5 citizens and 15 insurgents; wounded 3 insurgents; prisoners, 5 insurgents.

The names of all his party at the ferry on Sunday night, except three white men, who he admits he sent away on an errand, are as follows, with their proper titles under the Provisional Government, viz: General John Brown, Commander in Chief, wounded but will recover; Capt. Oliver Brown, dead; Capt. Watson Brown, dead; Capt. John Koge, of Ohio, raised in Virginia, dead; Capt. Aaron C. Stephens, of Connecticut, wounded badly; he has three balls in his body and cannot recover; Lieut. Edwin Coppie, of Iowa, unhurt; Lieut. Edwin Coppie, of Iowa, unhurt; Lieut. Albert Haslett of Pennsylvania, dead; Lieut. Wm. Loman, of Maine, dead; Capt. John Cook, of Connecticut, escaped. Privates -- Stewart Taylor, of Canada, dead; Wm. Thompson, of New York, dead; Dolph Thompson, of New York, dead. The above, with three whites previously sent off, make in all seventeen whites. Negroes -- Dangerfield, recently of Ohio, and raised in Virginia, Emperor, of New York, raised in South Carolina, not wounded, a prisoner; the latter was elected a member of Congress of the Provisional Government some time since; Lewis Leary, of Ohio, raised in Virginia, dead; Copeland, of Ohio, raised in Virginia, not wounded, a prisoner at Charleston. Gen. Brown has nine wounds, but none of them are fatal. A bushel of letters were discovered from all parts of the country; one from Geritt.

## Trial of John Brown Closing Argument

On October 27, 1859, John Brown was brought to trial for the raid on Harpers Ferry. He was charged with conspiring with slaves to start a rebellion, murdering four whites and one black, and treason against Virginia. After a week, the jury found Brown guilty on all counts and was he sentenced to be killed on December 7, 1859. As a result of this ruling, tensions escalated throughout the country and set the stage for further conflict.

**Directions:** Imagine that you are a lawyer hired in the trial of John Brown. Your role will be to prosecute (prove guilt), or defend (prove innocence), Brown on the charges of treason. You will be using primary sources and class notes to write the closing argument for the trial.

1. Circle which side is your group working on:      **PROSECUTION**                      **DEFENSE**
  
2. Read through the primary sources connected with your role. As you are reading, highlight information that you will use in your closing argument that either helps you prove his guilt or innocence for the raid at Harpers Ferry.
  
3. After you have highlighted, write down at least three pieces of information from each primary source. These must be written in your own words.

Primary Source #1 \_\_\_\_\_

a. \_\_\_\_\_

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b. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

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Primary Source #2 \_\_\_\_\_

a. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

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