

CONCERNING JOHN BROWN'S ARRIVAL IN KANSAS (1855)

In 1855, John Brown and his five sons moved to Kansas just after that territory had been opened for the possible expansion of slavery by the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Joining the struggle there between proslavery and Free-Soil settlers, Brown settled into the anti-slavery town of Lawrence and appointed himself "captain" of the antislavery forces on Osawatimie Creek. Brown and his sons came prepared to defend the territory against slavery as reported by the Herald, a Free-Soil Kansas newspaper:

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"About noon (December 7), Mr. John Brown, an aged gentleman from Essex County, N. Y., who has been a resident of the Territory for several months, arrived with four of his sons - leaving several others at home sick - bringing a quantity of arms with him, which were placed in his hands by Eastern friends for the defense of the cause of freedom. Having more than he could use to advantage, a portion of them were placed in the hands of those more destitute. A company was organized and the command given to Mr. Brown for the zeal he had exhibited in the cause of freedom both before and since his arrival in the Territory."

Shortly after arriving, John Brown describes the atmosphere in Kansas when he wrote home to his family on December 16th:



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"...About three or four weeks ago, news came that a Free-state man by the name of Dow had been murdered by a Pro-slavery man named Coleman, who had gone and given himself up for trial to Pro-slavery Gov. Shannon. This was soon followed by further news that a Free-state man who was the only reliable witness against the murderer had been seized by a Missourian, appointed Sheriff by the bogus Legislature of Kansas, upon false pretenses...The Free-state man was then rescued by a band of free-soilers, to which Gov. Shannon ordered out all the Pro-slavery force he could muster in the Territory, and called on Missouri for further help to seize all free-soilers and their arms. This is the state of things in Kansas and an attack is constantly looked for... Tension continued on the night we left... company of the invaders of from fifteen to twenty-five attacked some three or four Free-state men, mostly unarmed, killing a Mr. Barber, from Ohio, wholly unarmed...

Your affectionate husband and father,

JOHN BROWN."

CONCERNING JOHN BROWN IN KANSAS (1856-58)

When proslavery forces sacked the “free state” town of Lawrence, John Brown vowed revenge. The success of the proslavery guerrillas inspired Brown, with four of his sons and two other accomplices, to murder five reputedly proslavery settlers who lived along Pottawottamie Creek. Justifying his action as obedience to the will of a just God, Brown soon became a hero in the eyes of northern extremists and was quick to capitalize on his growing reputation. By early 1858 he had succeeded in enlisting a small “army” of insurrectionists, including three of his sons, whose mission was to foment rebellion among the slaves.

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Testimony of Mrs. Doyle...

"WE WERE ALL IN BED, WHEN WE HEARD SOME PERSONS COME INTO THE YARD, AND RAP AT THE DOOR, AND CALL FOR MR. DOYLE, MY HUSBAND. ...SEVERAL MEN CAME INTO THE HOUSE, AND SAID THEY WERE FROM THE ARMY. MY HUSBAND WAS A PRO-SLAVERY MAN. THEY TOLD MY HUSBAND THAT HE AND THE BOYS MUST SURRENDER; THEY WERE THEN PRISONERS. I ASKED THEM, IN TEARS, TO SPARE HIM. IN SHORT TIME AFTERWARDS I HEARD THE REPORT OF PISTOLS; I HEARD TWO REPORTS...THEN MOANING...THEN I HEARD A WILD WHOOP. MY HUSBAND AND TWO BOYS, MY SONS, DID NOT COME BACK ANY MORE. I WENT OUT THE NEXT MORNING AND FOUND [THEM] LYING DEAD IN THE ROAD ABOUT 200 YARDS FROM THE HOUSE."

Testimony of Mrs. Wilkinson...

"WE WERE DISTURBED BY THE BARKING DOG.... I WAS SICK WITH THE MEASLES AND WOKE UP MR. WILKINSON AND ASKED HIM IF HE HEARD THE NOISE. "ARE YOU A NORTHERN ARMIST?" HE ANSWERED, "I AM." I UNDERSTOOD THE ANSWER TO MEAN THAT MY HUSBAND WAS OPPOSED TO THE NORTHERN OR FREE-SOIL PARTY. MY HUSBAND WAS A PRO-SLAVERY MAN, AND WAS A MEMBER OF THE TERRITORIAL LEGISLATURE HELD AT THE SHAWNEE MISSION. "YOU ARE MY PRISONER; DO YOU SURRENDER?" HE SAID, "GENTLEMEN, I DO." THEY SAID, "OPEN THE DOOR." THEY SEARCHED FOR ARMS...THEN TOOK MY HUSBAND AWAY. THE NEXT MORNING, MR. WILKINSON WAS FOUND ABOUT 150 YARDS FROM THE HOUSE, IN SOME DEAD BRUSH. MY HUSBAND WAS A QUIET MAN, AND WAS NOT ENGAGED IN ARRESTING OR DISTURBING ANYONE."

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COMMENTS CONCERNING JOHN BROWN IN KANSAS (1856-58)

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"...there is no one for whom the Border Ruffians entertain a more wholesome dread than Captain [John] Brown. They hate him as they would a snake, but their hatred is composed 9/10ths of fear.... He is a strange, resolute, repulsive, iron-willed, inexorable old man."

-William Philips of The New York Tribune (1856)

SOURCE
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"God sees it; I only have a short time to live—only one death to die, fighting for this cause. There will be no more peace in this land until slavery is done for. I will give them something else to do than to extend slave territory. I will carry the war into Africa [the South]."

-John Brown while watching Osawatimie burn (1856)

SOURCE
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Tuesday, May 27.

... we returned back to Osawatimie. On our way back we heard that 5 men had been killed by Free State men. the men were butchered -- ears cut off and the bodies thrown into the river[.] the murdered men (Proslavery) had thrown out threats and insults, yet the act was barbarous and inhuman whoever committed by[.] we met the men going when we were going up and knew that they were on a secret expedition, yet didn't know what it was. Tomorrow something will be done to arrest them. there were 8 concerned in the act. perhaps they had good motives, some think they had, how that is I dont know. The affairs took place 8 miles from Osawatimie. The War seems to have commenced in real earnest. horses are stolen on all sides whenever they can be taken....

- Edward Bridgman (settler from the North who moved to Kansas as a homesteader but soon became involved in the fight.)

JOHN BROWN'S RAID ON HARPERS FERRY (1859)

On October 16, 1859, abolitionist John Brown led a small group on a raid against a federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), in an attempt to start an armed slave revolt and bring slavery to an end. Brown's plan was the seize control of the armory, use the weapons to arm fugitives slaves, and lead a rebellion that would overthrow the entire institution of slavery.

Born in Connecticut in 1800 and raised in Ohio, Brown came from a very religious family. In 1837, his life changed irrevocably when he attended an abolition meeting in Cleveland. During this meeting Brown was so moved that he publicly announced his dedication to destroying the institution of slavery. As early as 1848 he was formulating a plan to incite an insurrection.

In the 1850s, Brown traveled to Kansas with five of his sons to fight against the proslavery forces that were trying to influence Kansas to become a slave state. On May 21, 1856, proslavery men raided the abolitionist town of Lawrence, and Brown personally sought revenge. On May 25, Brown and his sons attacked three cabins along Pottawatomie Creek. They killed five men and triggered a summer of guerilla warfare in the troubled territory. One of Brown's sons was killed in the fighting.

By 1857, Brown returned to the East and began raising money to carry out his vision of a mass uprising of slaves. He secured the backing of six prominent abolitionists, known as the "Secret Six," and assembled an invasion force. His "army" grew to include 22 men, including five black men and three of Brown's sons. The group rented a Maryland farm near Harpers Ferry and prepared for the assault.

On the night of October 16, 1859, Brown and his band overran the arsenal. Some of his men rounded up a handful of hostages, including a few slaves. Word of the raid spread, and by morning Brown and his men were surrounded. A company of U.S. marines arrived on October 17, led by Colonel Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart. On the morning of October 19, the soldiers overran Brown and his followers. Ten of his men were killed, including two of Brown's sons.

John Brown was tried by the state of Virginia for treason and murder, and he was found guilty on November 2. The 59-year-old abolitionist went to the gallows on December 2, 1859. Before his execution, he handed his guard a slip of paper that read,

"I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood."

It was a prophetic statement. Although the raid failed, it inflamed sectional tensions and raised the stakes for the 1860 presidential election. Brown's raid helped make any further accommodation between North and South nearly impossible and thus became an important impetus of the Civil War.

JOHN BROWN ON TRIAL, 1859

Oct. 26, 1859.

Brown has made no confession; but, on the contrary, says he has full confidence in the goodness of God, and is confident that he will rescue him from the perils that surround him. He says he has had rifles leveled at him, knives at his throat, and his life in as great peril as it now is, but that God has always been at his side. He knows God is with him, and fears nothing.

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Last Address of Brown to the VA Court (Nov 2, 1859):

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.



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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.

JOHN BROWN AWAITING HIS HANGING (1859)

LETTER TO GOV. WISE.

Wayland, Mass., Oct. 26th, 1859.

Governor Wise:

I have heard that you were a man of chivalrous sentiments, and I know you were opposed to the iniquitous attempt to force upon Kansas a Constitution abhorrent to the moral sense of her people. Relying upon these indications of honor and justice in your character, I venture to ask a favor of you. Enclosed is a letter to Capt. John Brown. Will you have the kindness, after reading it yourself, to transmit it to the prisoner?

I and all my large circle of abolition acquaintances were taken by surprise when news came of Capt. Brown's recent attempt; nor do I know of a single person who would have approved of it, had they been apprised of his intention. But I and thousands of others feel a natural impulse of sympathy for the brave and suffering man. Perhaps God, who sees the inmost of our souls, perceives some such sentiment in your heart also. He needs a mother or sister to dress his wounds, and speak soothingly to him. Will you allow me to perform that mission of humanity? If you will, may God bless you for the generous deed!

I have been for years an uncompromising Abolitionist, and I should scorn to deny it or apologize for it as much as John Brown himself would do. Believing in peace principles, I deeply regret the step that the old veteran has taken...

Sincerely, Lydia Maria

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20th November 1859.

John Brown,

Sir, Altho vengeance is not mine, I confess, that I do feel gratified to hear that you ware stopt in your fiendish career at Harper's Ferry, with the loss of your two sons, you can now appreciate my distress, in Kansas, when you then and there entered my house at midnight and arrested my husband and two boys and took them out of the yard and in cold blood shot them dead in my hearing, you cant say you done it to free our slaves, we had none and never expected to own one, but has only made me a poor disconsolate widow with helpless children while I feel for your folly. I do hope & trust that you will meet your just reward. O how it pained my Heart to hear the dying groans of my Husband and children if this scrawl give you any consolation you are welcome to it

NB my son John Doyle whose life I begged of (you) is now grown up and is very desirous to be at Charleston on the day of your execution would certainly be there if his means would permit it, that he might adjust the rope around your neck if gov: wise would permit it

Mahala Doyle

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FINAL THOUGHTS ON JOHN BROWN

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"John Brown is that new saint, than whom none purer or more brave was ever led by love of men into conflict and death,--the new saint awaiting his martyrdom, and who, if he shall suffer, will make the gallows glorious like the cross."

-Ralph Waldo Emerson (1859)

SOURCE 2

"Old John Brown has just been executed for treason against the state. We cannot object even though he agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong. That cannot excuse violence, bloodshed and treason. It could avail him nothing that he might think himself right."

-Abraham Lincoln (1859)

SOURCE 3

"The murderer and robber & fire-raiser so notorious for these crimes in his Kansas career, & now the attempter of the thousand-fold horrors in Virginia, is, for these reasons, the present idol of the north."

- Edmund Ruffin, November of 1859. Ruffin is referring to John Brown, the radical abolitionist.

SOURCE 4

"Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified. This morning, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not 'Old Brown' any longer; he is an Angel of Light... I foresee the time when the painter will paint that scene, no longer going to Rome for a subject; the poet will sing it, the historian record it, and with the landing of the Pilgrims and the Declaration of Independence it will be the ornament of some future national gallery. We shall then be at liberty to weep for Captain Brown."

-Henry David Thoreau (1859)

Written: This song was written in 1861 by the soldiers of the Massachusetts 12th Regiment. It soon spread to become the most popular anthem of Union soldiers during the Civil War.

John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
But his soul goes marching on.

Chorus:

Glory, glory, hallelujah,
Glory, glory, hallelujah,
His soul goes marching on.

He's gone to be a soldier in the Army of the Lord,
He's gone to be a soldier in the Army of the Lord,
His soul goes marching on.

Chorus:

John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,
John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,
His soul goes marching on.

Chorus:

John Brown died that the slaves might be free,
John Brown died that the slaves might be free,
His soul goes marching on.

Chorus:

The stars above in Heaven now are looking kindly down,
The stars above in Heaven now are looking kindly down,
His soul goes marching on.

Chorus:

SOURCE 5

SOURCE 6

We are satisfied that every intelligent man in the South has been completely disgusted at the pathetic farce that has been played off by "Old Brown."

Mercury, a newspaper published in Charleston, South Carolina