



Sectional Conflict Increases

PRIMARY SOURCE READING

An Unlikely Hero

In the heated political atmosphere of the late 1850s, some unlikely people became heroes. John Brown was one such man. His wild scheme in 1858 to raid the South (beginning with the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia) and start an uprising of enslaved people would probably never have occurred under normal circumstances. However, Brown hoped that escaped slaves would readily join in his efforts to liberate other slaves. Unfortunately, Brown made two major mistakes: he failed to gain the support of local slaves, and he neglected to plan an escape route. In this excerpt, one of the hostages captured during the raid offers his eyewitness testimony and his impressions of John Brown.

John Brown's Raid

On Sunday night, Oct. 16, 1859, about twelve or one o'clock, the gatekeeper of the bridge over the Potomac leading into Maryland was startled by the steady tramp of many men approaching the gate, having with them weapons, who, upon reaching the gate, ordered it to be opened to them. This the gate-keeper refused to do. They seized him and, presented a pistol at his head, compelled him to be silent. They then wrenched off the locks and came over, he thinks about sixty strong.

Upon getting over, the first building taken possession of was the depot of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, then in charge of a very trusty negro, who slept in the building. Upon Brown's men demanding admittance, he refused to let them come in, saying he was in charge, and his directions were to let no one in at night. He was then shot down, a negro faithful to his trust being the first victim of those whose mission it was to free the African race from bondage.

We were not kept closely confined, but were allowed to converse with him. I asked him what his object was; he replied, "To free the negroes of Virginia." He added that he was prepared to do it, and by twelve o'clock would have fifteen hundred men with him, ready armed.

Up to this time the citizens had hardly begun to move about, and knew nothing of the raid.

During the day and night I talked much with John Brown, and found him as brave as a man could be, and sensible upon all subjects except slavery. Upon that question he was a religious fanatic, and believed it was his duty to free the slaves, even if in doing so he lost his own life.

During a sharp fight one of Brown's sons was killed. He fell; then trying to raise himself, he said, "It is all over with me," and died instantly.

Brown did not leave his post at the port-hole, but when the fighting ceased he walked to his son's body, straightened out his limbs, took off his trappings, then turning to me, said, "This is the third son I have lost in this cause." Another son had been shot in the morning and was then dying, having been brought in from the street. While Brown was a murderer, yet I was constrained to think that he was not a vicious man, but was crazed upon the subject of slavery. Often during the affair in the engine-house, when his men would want to fire upon some one who might be seen passing, Brown would stop them, saying, "Don't shoot; that man is unarmed."

From Eyewitness to America: 500 Years of America in the Words of Those Who Saw It Happen, edited by David Colbert. Pantheon Books, 1997.

■ UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. How many men were part of the raiding party?

2. What was significant about the first person killed in the raid?

3. Why was John Brown dedicated to freeing the slaves?

4. How does Brown's reaction to his sons' deaths illustrate his dedication to his cause?

5. What example does the narrator give to prove Brown's humanity?

6. What is the narrator's chief impression of John Brown?

ACTIVITY

Imagine that you are a newspaper reporter who has the opportunity to interview John Brown following his failed attempt on the Harpers Ferry arsenal. Compile a list of questions to ask him and responses he might make to them. Then write the article and an attention-grabbing headline.

3. Whittier believed that Webster succumbed to temptation when he argued for a compromise on slavery. Whittier writes that since everyone may at some time fall prey to temptation, Webster should not be hated for his action.
4. John Brown's hanging body was a portent, or an omen, of the violence and horror to come.
5. A meteor produces a bright light that draws attention to its destruction, just as Brown's raid drew attention to the slavery issue and preceded the nation's destruction in the Civil War.
6. Although Melville was a Quaker and might have abhorred Brown's violence, he might also have regarded Brown as a hero and a martyr for his antislavery beliefs.

ACTIVITY

Students' poems will vary, but should be historically based.

PRIMARY SOURCE

1. 60
2. He was an African American, one of the very people the raid was to benefit.
3. He was a religious fanatic, and believed it was his duty to free the slaves, even if in doing so he lost his own life.
4. Possible answer: He acknowledges their deaths with sorrow but no show of emotion. He does not allow the deaths to disrupt his mission.
5. He will not fire on an unarmed man.
6. He was brave and sensible except when it came to slavery; he was not a vicious man.

ACTIVITY

Articles should reflect an understanding of the reading.

BIOGRAPHY

1. being a businessman, tanner, shepherd, and farmer
2. He wanted to collect arms and ammunition for his planned slave rebellion.
3. violence; peaceful demonstrations, plead for new legislation
4. He claimed that his actions were willed by God.

ACTIVITY

Students' answers should include that Brown's whole life was dedicated to ridding the South of slavery, and that he felt violence was an acceptable means to achieve that because it was the will of God.

CHAPTER 12

LITERATURE

1. a soldier who is on the losing side in a battle
2. bones and bloodstains on the battlefield, as well as dead men: "Men too straight to stoop again"; powerful images suggesting brokenness: "Piles of solid Moan," "Chips of Blank—in Boyish Eyes—," "scraps of prayer"
3. Some soldiers might rather have died than to have caused the carnage required for victory.
4. a soldier who is on the winning side of the battle
5. At first he is proud, but later ashamed, and even wishes himself among the dead.
6. His sorrow or repentance over having killed means nothing to the soldiers who have died.
7. The word "today" in the first line of the first poem implies that the defeat is temporary; tomorrow will bring another battle and with it possible victory (or another defeat). The first two lines of the second poem describe the soldier's sense of victory lasting only until the drums at the battle scene ended and he saw the bodies of the dead.

ACTIVITY

Students' poems and prose pieces should contain many descriptive metaphors.

PRIMARY SOURCE

1. Lincoln had a high-pitched voice that sounded almost like a shriek. He spoke slowly and deliberately, though without much expression.
2. He thinks they were perhaps expressions of personal opinion on the part of other reporters.