

# John Brown (1800-1859)

John Brown is an American legend, who had the courage to face his country when it was in the wrong. Brown was an unyielding opponent of slavery and was willing to and did give his life for the cause.

Brown was born in Connecticut and raised in Ohio in a deeply religious family that was strongly anti-slavery in their views. Brown had very little education and for many years was an unsuccessful and an in-debt businessman. However, during this time, Brown emerged as a great anti-slavery leader. He participated in the underground railroad and helped found the League of Gileadites, which was an organization of whites, free blacks, and runaway slaves dedicated to protecting fugitive slaves from slave catchers. He worked with many famous anti-slavery leaders such as Gerrit Smith and Frederick Douglass.

In 1855, Brown helped defend Lawrence, the center of anti-slavery settlers, from an armed attack by pro-slavery forces. However, later, when Brown was elsewhere, pro-slavery men sacked and burned the free-soil town. Three days later Brown and his band of free-state guerrillas killed five Southern settlers along the Pottowatomie River. He stated that he was an instrument in the hands of God. Later that summer a pro-slavery minister shot and murdered Brown's son, Frederick.

Throughout the rest of 1856, Brown and his remaining sons fought in Kansas and Missouri. By the end of the year, Brown was either one of the most hated or adored figures in what was now known as "Bleeding Kansas," and in the East he became known as "Oswatimie Brown" or "Old Oswatimie." To some, he was seen as a cult figure. To many, he had become a symbol of the emerging holy crusade against slavery.

In 1858, Brown made headlines once again. He invaded Missouri, where he killed one slave owner, liberated eleven slaves, and brilliantly escaped law officers as he led the freed blacks to Canada. Although a wanted man with a price of \$250 on his head, Brown returned to the United States, speaking in Ohio, New York, Massachusetts, and Connecticut.

By this time, Brown's plans were well underway for his organized war against slavery in Virginia, focusing on Harper's Ferry, the sight of the federal arsenal and armory. He spent years of planning, fund raising and recruiting for the raid. While staying in the home of Frederick Douglass for planning, Douglass told him, "You're walking into a perfect steel trap and you will never get out alive." Nevertheless, on October 16, 1859, after visiting his home in New York for the last time and saying good-bye to his wife and daughters, Brown and his men began their raid.

Brown's small army arrived in Harper's Ferry at night and quickly secured the federal armory. With the telegraph wires cut, Brown might have easily seized the weapons in the town, liberated slaves, and then taken to the hills. Inexplicably, though, he remained in the armory, waiting for slaves to flock to his standard. They never came. Instead, townsmen and farmers surrounded the armory, pinning Brown down and shooting two of his men. President James Buchanan dispatched U.S. marines and soldiers with Colonel Robert E. Lee in command, who stormed the engine house capturing Brown and a few of his raiders and killing the rest.

Brown's trial was speedy, not even allowing time to wait for his lawyer to arrive. He was executed on December 2. By this time, the entire nation was fixated on this bearded man, who spoke like a biblical prophet and whose words thrilled, whether with fear or admiration or both, an entire nation. Thoreau stated, "Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light."