

Abolitionist Movement and John Brown

John Brown: Hero or Villain?

From the earliest days of our nation's history, there were those who were opposed to the practice of slavery and wanted to "abolish" it. They became known as the abolitionists. It is important to know that, before the Civil War, the abolitionists were always small in number. It is a sad fact that most white Americans believed in the superiority of people whose ancestors came from Europe, northern Europe in particular, and in the inferiority of persons of African descent. The same assessment applied to Native Americans. Most whites sincerely believed that America was a land for the white race only. In Iowa's early statehood days, blacks were denied the right to vote, to serve on juries, to testify in court cases or to serve in the army. Black children were barred from public schools. The roots of the struggles today for racial equality lie deep in American history.

Iowans Complicit to Slavery to Avoid Civil War

In the years leading up to the Civil War, the United States became deeply divided over the issue of slavery. Many of Iowa's earliest white settlers came from the states of the upper south. Many of these people saw nothing wrong with slavery and even believed that it was good for the blacks because it exposed them to "higher" civilization. Other newcomers may not have wanted slavery in Iowa but they were not opposed to it in the southern states. Since many northern states had laws to discourage black immigration, some Iowans feared that without similar restrictions, Iowa would look attractive to free blacks and their population would grow rapidly. Many did not want to risk the issue splintering the nation into north and south. Whether they liked slavery or not, they were willing to let it continue where it existed as the price to pay for national unity.

There were a small number who viewed slavery as a great evil and were committed to eliminating it wherever it existed. These people were the abolitionists. In the 1840s and 1850s, their numbers grew and they became a small but significant political voice. In Iowa, two religious groups provided the leadership for the movement: the Congregationalists with roots in New England and the Friends (Quakers). These people were committed not only to their own private salvation, i.e. getting to heaven, but their religious convictions required them to also work to eliminate evil here on Earth. Many of them also were opposed to drinking alcohol which they saw as the cause of poverty, family problems and many other social problems. Where there was a Congregationalist or Quaker congregation, there was usually a core of abolitionists.

Rise of Abolitionists

Abolitionists played a major role in supporting the Underground Railroad. Networks among Congregationalist ministers and among Quakers provided links between communities that could become partners in moving runaway slaves across the state. John Brown was a radical preacher determined to stir up a massive slave rebellion in the south. He gathered and trained a small band of followers on a Quaker farm near Springdale in Cedar County. His assault on Harper's Ferry, Virginia, failed to rouse slaves to rebellion, and he was captured and hanged. However, he became a symbol of resistance to slavery throughout the North and an object of deep hatred in the South.

The most divisive issue in the years leading up to the Civil War was not about where it existed in the south. The U.S. Constitution allowed slavery, and those whose chief goal was to preserve the Union were willing for it to continue even if they personally opposed it. The problem was what to do about the lands in the west as they prepared to become states. Southern states wanted the right to extend slavery to the new regions while many in the north objected. Abolitionists were divided. Some were willing to dissolve the Union and let the southern states go their own way. They felt that it was a sin to have anything to do with the evil institution. Others wanted the government to outlaw it and put an end to the practice. They wanted the elimination of the slavery to be the goal of the Civil War.

John Brown: Hero or Villain? continued

Slavery was just a concept for most Iowa soldiers at the state of the war. Saving the union of the United States was their primary goal. What changed their minds was when they marched into southern states and saw the conditions in which slaves lived. Many changed their attitudes and became “abolitionists” as a result. They wanted to punish the south for starting the war and they wanted to end the cruel practice. This did not mean that they believed in racial equality. They were still not ready to grant free blacks equal rights or opportunities, but with the defeat of the south, slavery was over forever. In that, abolitionists achieved their primary goal.

Supporting Questions

How did public opinion about John Brown change after his raid at Harpers Ferry?

- [“Pottowatomie Creek, Jan. 17th” - The Herald of Freedom Article, February 7, 1857](#)
- [“A Contrast” - The Herald of Freedom Article, November 19, 1859](#)
- [“John Brown, the Insurgent” - Alexandria Gazette Article, November 21, 1859](#)

How did Iowans view John Brown’s actions to help slaves escape?

- [Eyewitness Account from “John Brown in Iowa - An Exciting Journey to the Front,” May 3, 1883](#)
- [“John Brown’s Last Visit to Tabor \(Iowa\)” from The Annals of Iowa, 1898](#)

What imagery did supporters of John Brown use to justify his actions?

- [“Execution of Capt. John Brown” Broadside, 1859](#)
- [John Brown’s Address to the Virginia Court, 1859 \(Document\)](#)
- [Portrait of John Brown, December 12, 1859 \(Image\)](#)
- [Illustration of “Old John Brown’s Career,” 1860 \(Image\)](#)
- [“Heroes of the Colored Race,” 1881](#)
- [“John Brown’s Body” Song, 1861](#)

*Printable Image and Document Guide

Additional Resources

National Park Service: [Harpers Ferry National Park Video Interview with Stephen B. Oates](#) - The audio and video clips capture an interview with Dr. Stephen B. Oates at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park on June 30, 1994. Oates an author and historian who is recognized for his work in the field of Civil War studies. The interview includes Oates answering questions like “What impact did John Brown have upon the nation with regard to the slavery issue?” and “Why did John Brown choose violence?”

Iowa Pathways: [Video about Iowans Helping Abolitionist John Brown](#) - The Iowa Public Television video highlights how Iowans helped John Brown in his cause to abolish slavery. Brown spent time in Iowa from the early to mid-1800s. The video contains photos and illustrations of Brown, his associates and their collaboration with Iowans.

“Pottowatomie Creek, Jan. 17th” - The Herald of Freedom Article, February 7, 1857

Pottowatomie Creek, Jan. 17th.—In passing south, before coming to the Pottowatomie Creek, we passed the ruins of several Free State houses; amongst them the distinguished Capt. John Brown's and his sons', John Brown, Jr., and Jason Brown. These were all intelligent and enterprising men, and came to Kansas to build up homes for themselves, improve the country and save it to freedom.

Old Capt. Brown has been a man of distinction, in the East. He was of the firm of Perkins & Brown, in Ohio, who took the premium at the World's Fair in London, and also in New York, on the finest and best wool. They were known through the country as importers of the best Spanish, French and Saxony sheep.

Capt. Brown traveled over Europe, and examined the various woollen manufactories, for the purpose of benefiting the wool growers and manufac-

Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Pottowatomie Creek, Jan. 17th," The Herald of Freedom, Kansas, 7 February 1857

Description

This 1857 article from Kansas newspaper, The Herald of Freedom, recounts the life and actions of "Old Capt. John Brown" and his sons, John Brown, Jr., Jason Brown and Frederic Brown. The description of the family frames the men as "the most patriotic and enterprising of men" who were driven out of Kansas.

[Transcript of "Pottowatomie Creek, Jan. 17th"](#)

[Printable Image of "Pottowatomie Creek, Jan. 17th" Article](#)

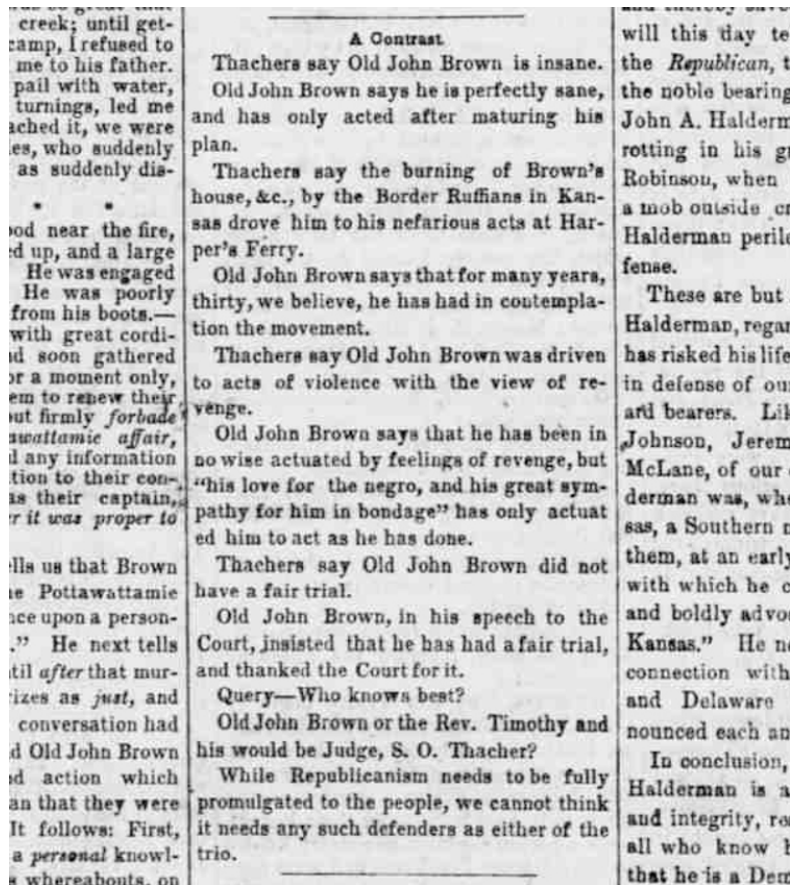
Text-Dependent Questions

- Overall, does this article portray John Brown positively or negatively? Use two or three quotes from the text to support your answer.
- According to the author, what motivates John Brown?

Citation Information

"Pottowatomie Creek, Jan. 17th," The Herald of Freedom, Kansas, 7 February 1857. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

"A Contrast" - The Herald of Freedom Article, November 19, 1859



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "A Contrast," The Herald of Freedom, Wakarusa, Kansas, 19 November 1859

Description

This article appeared in Kansas' The Herald of Freedom newspaper in November 19, 1859. The article was published after the Harpers Ferry Raid. The author contrasts John Brown's actions and motives through how he described it compared to how Solon Otis Thacher, a lawyer and politician, described it. At the time, Thacher was known as a radical but admired Republican politician for speaking out against slavery.

[Transcript of "A Contrast" - The Herald of Freedom Article](#)

[Printable Image of "A Contrast" Article](#)

Text-Dependent Questions

- What does the name of this newspaper suggest about where it stands on the slavery issue?
- What does the author imply about the credibility of the Thachers and John Brown? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Citation Information

"A Contrast," The Herald of Freedom, Wakarusa, Kansas, 19 November 1859. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

"John Brown, the Insurgent" - Alexandria Gazette Article, November 21, 1859

John Brown, the Insurgent.

We desire to contribute our share of testimony as to the true character of John Brown, now under sentence of death at Charlestown, for the numerous crimes charged against him. The following statement is furnished us by John D. Pennybacker, esq., the gentleman who has been elected to represent this District in the Senate of Virginia. We publish this statement, in order to show that this "martyr," as his abolition friends call him, has heretofore been a finished highwayman and robber.

It may be proper to state that Mr. Pennybacker's knowledge of Brown and his movements in Kansas extended up to December, 1857, at which time Mr. P. left the Territory, and heard no more of "Ossawatimie," until he developed himself again in the Harper's Ferry foray — *Rockingham Register*.

MR. PENNYBACKER'S STATEMENT.—I knew John Brown, or "Old Ossawatimie Brown," as we called him in Kansas. That my ac-

Courtesy of Library of Congress, "John Brown, the Insurgent," Alexandria Gazette, 21 November 1859

Description

This article from the *Alexandria Gazette* focuses on the testimony of a "Mr. Pennybacker," who recounts his knowledge of John Brown and his actions in Kansas. The purpose of highlighting this testimony was to try to show Brown as a "highwayman and robber" as opposed to the "martyr" of the abolitionist movement.

[Transcript of "John Brown, the Insurgent"](#)

[Printable Image of "John Brown, the Insurgent" Article](#)

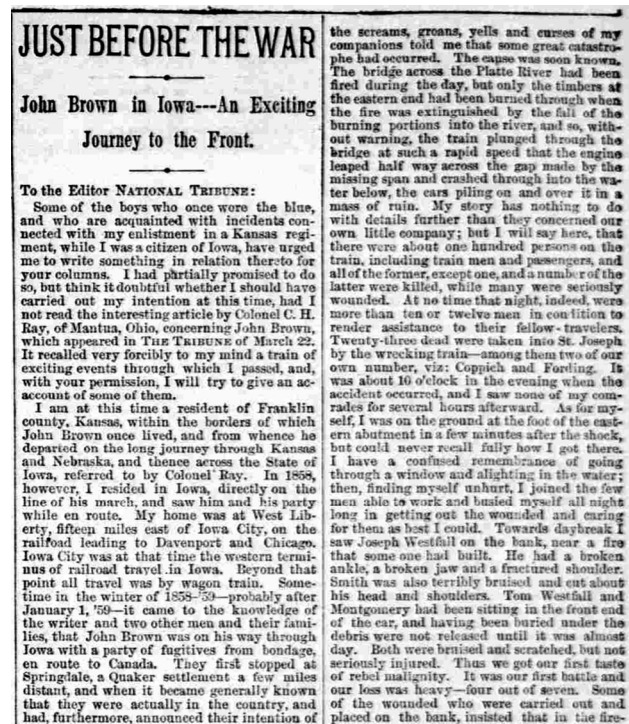
Text-Dependent Questions

- Why do you think Mr. Pennybacker makes a point to say that "There was not a slave within forty miles of Pottawattomie Creek"?
- Mr. Pennybacker gives accounts of several attacks by John Brown and his men. How do you think Mr. Pennybacker's accounts affected how the public viewed Brown?

Citation Information

"John Brown, the Insurgent," *Alexandria Gazette*, 21 November 1859. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Eyewitness Account from "John Brown in Iowa - An Exciting Journey to the Front," May 3, 1883



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Gregg, E.H., "John Brown in Iowa - An Exciting Journey to the Front," *The National Tribune*, Washington, D.C., 3 May 1883

Description

This newspaper article was written by an eyewitness to John Brown's actions in Iowa in 1883. The author was E.H. Gregg, a soldier, who spoke about the "taste of rebel malignity" in relation to John Brown and his actions. The article appeared in the Washington, D.C., newspaper, *The National Tribune*.

[Full Transcript of "John Brown in Iowa - An Exciting Journey to the Front"](#)

[Transcribed Excerpts from "John Brown in Iowa - An Exciting Journey to the Front"](#)

[Printable Image of "John Brown in Iowa..." Article](#)

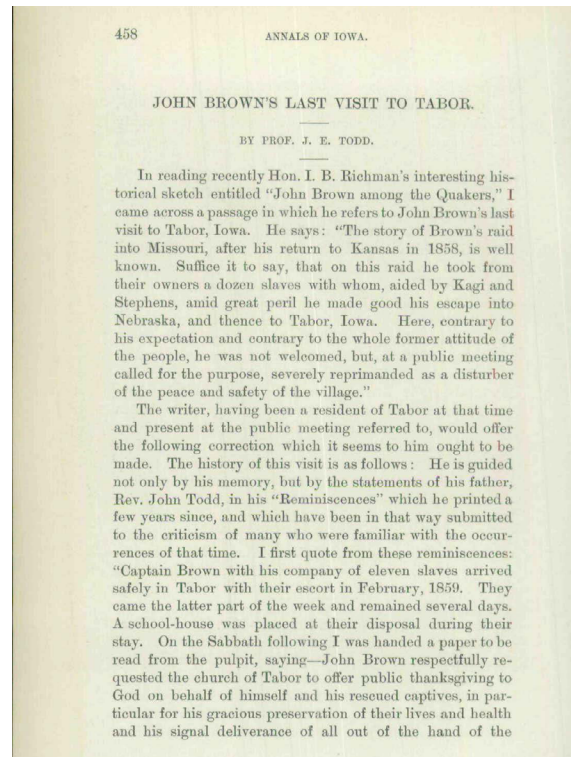
Text-Dependent Questions

- Using evidence from the text, describe how Iowans referred to in the article reacted to John Brown helping slaves escape through their town in early 1859.
- What do you think is the author's opinion of John Brown and his followers?

Citation Information

Gregg, E.H., "John Brown in Iowa - An Exciting Journey to the Front," *The National Tribune*, Washington, D.C., 3 May 1883. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

“John Brown’s Last Visit to Tabor (Iowa)” from *The Annals of Iowa*, 1898



Courtesy of the University of Iowa, Todd, J.E., "John Brown's Last Visit to Tabor," *The Annals of Iowa*, pp. 458-461, 1898

Description

The town of Tabor in southwestern Iowa played a significant role in the 1850s because it was located in a strategic position to impact the future of slavery in the west. John Brown used the town square for camping and drilling exercises before his raid on Harpers Ferry. Brown came through Tabor on many occasions, and his last visit was in the beginning of September 1859, less than two months before he was captured at Harpers Ferry.

[Full Transcript of "John Brown's Last Visit to Tabor"](#)

[Transcribed Excerpts from "John Brown's Last Visit to Tabor"](#)

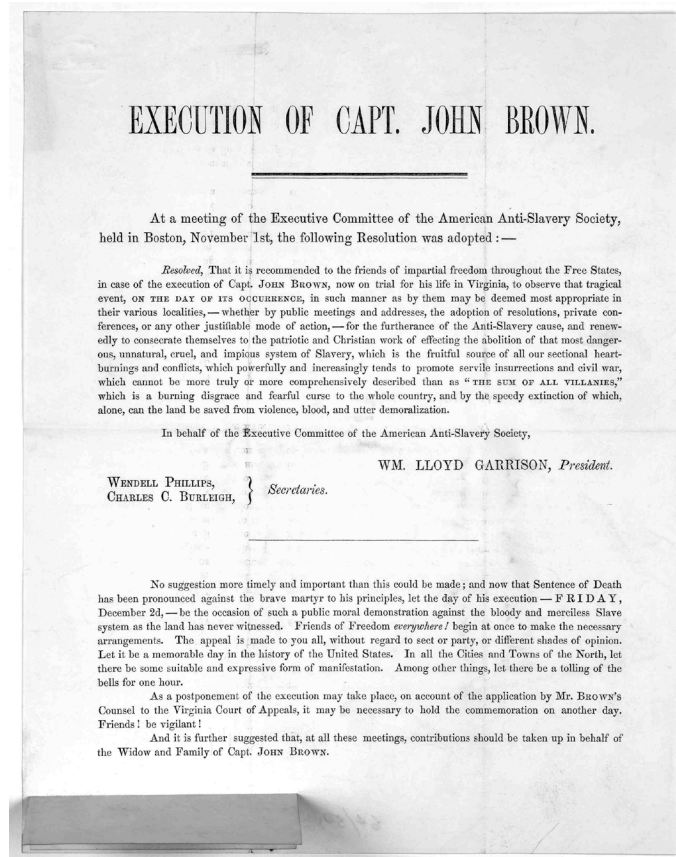
Text-Dependent Questions

- How does the author of the article let you know why his version of the events should be believed?
- According to the author, how did the people of Tabor respond to the violence of John Brown?

Citation Information

Todd, J.E., "John Brown's Last Visit to Tabor," *The Annals of Iowa*, pp. 458-461, 1898. [Courtesy of the University of Iowa](#)

“Execution of Capt. John Brown” Broadside, 1859



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “Execution of Capt. John Brown,” American Anti-Slavery Society, Boston, 1859

Description

This image is a broadside (poster) published by the American Anti-Slavery Society in Boston in 1859 about the execution of abolitionist John Brown. The broadside describes the struggle between the anti-slavery movement and the “dangerous, unnatural, cruel and impious system of Slavery” and what can be done by supporters of John Brown as his execution approached.

[Transcript of “Execution of Capt. John Brown”](#)

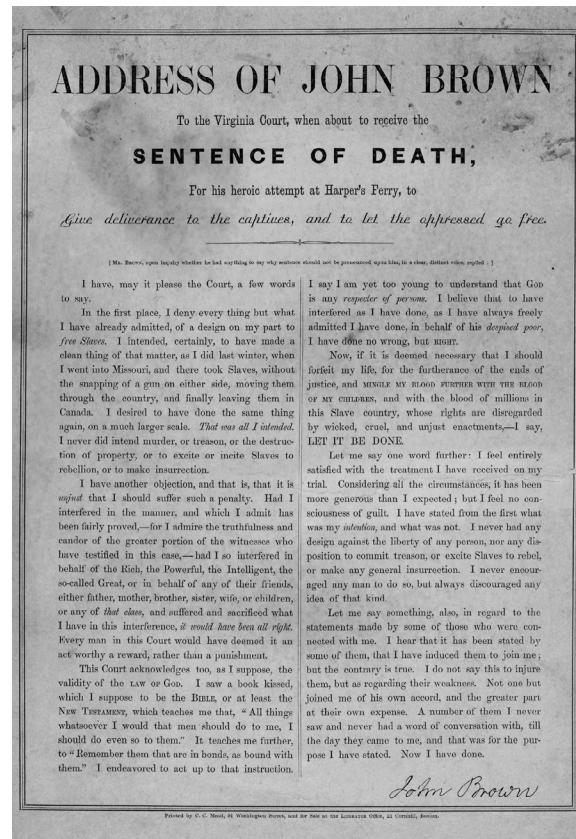
Text-Dependent Questions

- Based on the title of the document, would you predict that the author views John Brown as a hero or a villain?
- For the author, what cause was John Brown dying for?
- Using evidence from the text, describe how and why the author encourages readers to honor John Brown.

Citation Information

“Execution of Capt. John Brown,” American Anti-Slavery Society, Boston, 1859. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

John Brown's Address to the Virginia Court, 1859



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Brown, John, "Address of John Brown to the Virginia Court," C.C. Mead, Boston, 1859

Description

The document features the words of John Brown before he received a sentence for the charge of treason in a Virginia courtroom. Brown would receive the sentence of death for his participation in the raid at Harper's Ferry. The raid was an effort by armed abolitionists, led by Brown, to initiate an armed slave revolt in 1859 by taking over a United States arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

[Transcript of John Brown's Address to the Virginia Court](#)

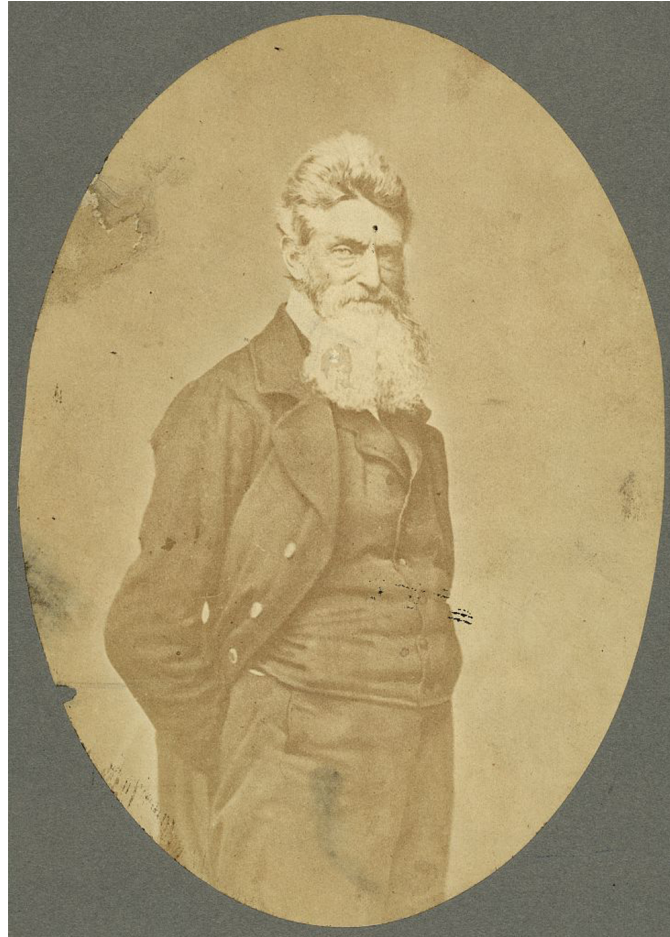
Text-Dependent Questions

- How does John Brown justify his actions in this address?
- Based on these last words, does Brown convince you that his actions were right? What specific quotes from the text can you use to support your opinion?

Citation Information

Brown, John, "Address of John Brown to the Virginia Court," C.C. Mead, Boston, 1859. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Portrait of John Brown, December 12, 1859



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Black, James Wallace, and Martin M. Lawrence, Black & Batchelder, 12 December 1859

Description

The portrait is of abolitionist John Brown and was published 10 days after he was executed for charges of treason against the United States. The photograph shows a three-quarter length portrait of Brown with beard at the age of 59.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Based on the photograph and the notes regarding the photograph, how do you think the photographer views John Brown?
- What three adjectives would you use to describe John Brown's appearance in this photo?

Citation Information

Black, James Wallace, and Martin M. Lawrence, Black & Batchelder, 12 December 1859. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Illustration of “Old John Brown’s Career,” 1860



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Queen, J. F. & Pilliner, F. J., “Old John Brown’s career illustrated,” E.S. Dean Publisher & Proprietor, Philadelphia, 1860

Description

The illustration highlights John Brown’s movements in Kansas and Virginia. The print shows five vignettes from the life of the abolitionist, three related to “doing his Kansas work” and the fourth “commencing his Virginia work,” while the fifth vignette, at center, showed his execution and was labeled “The Traitors Doom.” The vignettes show Brown receiving money and weapons and attacking the Doyle family during what is now called the “Pottowatomie massacre.” Another vignette shows John Brown and his associates trying to recruit black men to join their cause in Virginia.

[Transcript of the “Old John Brown’s Career” Illustration](#)

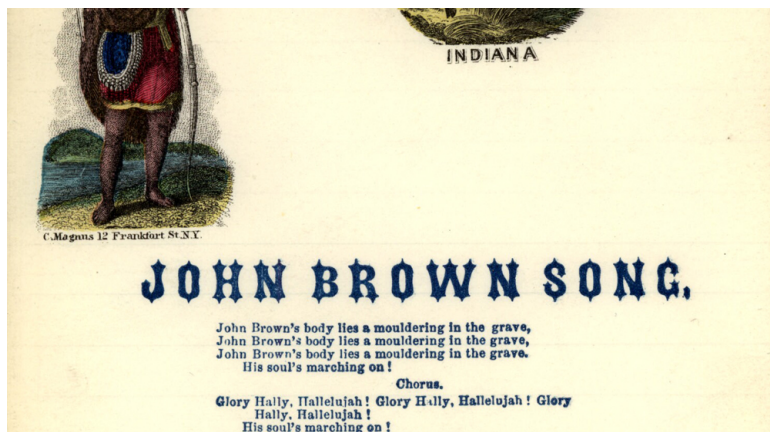
Text-Dependent Question

- Overall, would you say the artist has a positive or negative opinion of John Brown? What two or three images do you think are the most important to illustrate the artist’s view of Brown?

Citation Information

Queen, J. F. & Pilliner, F. J., “Old John Brown’s career illustrated,” E.S. Dean Publisher & Proprietor, Philadelphia, 1860.
[Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

“John Brown’s Body” Song, 1861



[Link to Audio Resource](#)

Courtesy of Library of Congress, “John Brown’s Body,” 1861 (Document) / J. Weldon Norris Chorale, “John Brown’s Body,” Washington, D.C., 2003 (Audio)

Description

Great songs sometimes seem to have a life of their own and survive by adapting to changing times and sensibilities. The song we now know as “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” has endured for more than 150 years and during that time underwent several dramatic changes in personality, as different writers and singers adapted it to meet their needs. The original version was a religious camp meeting song written in the 1850s. A new version appeared that used the old tune for a more militant cause. When the abolitionist John Brown was executed in 1859, a new, fiercer set of lyrics was created and the song now declared that “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave. His soul is marching on!” By the time the Civil War began in 1861, the John Brown version of the song had spread throughout the Union army. Soldiers added new verses as they marched through the south, including one that promised to hang Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy, from a tree. Meanwhile, Confederate soldiers answered back with their own version, which John Brown was hanging from a tree. The version known today was adapted by abolitionist author, Julia Ward Howe, who overheard Union troops singing “John Brown’s Body.” Within a year, the new lyrics were being sung by civilians in the north, Union troops on the march and even prisoners of war held in Confederate jails.

[Original “John Brown’s Body” Lyric Sheet](#)

[Transcript of “John Brown’s Body” Song](#)

Text-Dependent Questions

- How do you think the lyrics of the John Brown version of this song inspired Union soldiers? Cite at least three specific lines to support your answer.
- According to the lyrics, who was John Brown fighting for?

Citation Information

Document: “John Brown’s Body,” 1861. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Audio: J. Weldon Norris Chorale, “John Brown’s Body,” Washington, D.C., 2003. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

“Heroes of the Colored Race,” 1881



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Hoover, J., “Heroes of the Colored Race,” Philadelphia, 1881

Description

The print shows head-and-shoulders portraits of Blanche Kelso Bruce (left), Frederick Douglass (center) and Hiram Rhoades Revels (right) surrounded by scenes of African-American life. The image also features portraits of Jno. R. Lynch (top left), Abraham Lincoln (top center left), James A. Garfield (top center), Ulysses S. Grant (top center right), Joseph H. Rainey (top right), Charles E. Nash (bottom right), John Brown (bottom center) and Robert Smalls (bottom left). The print commemorates men prominent in and representative of the advancement of African-American civil rights movement of the 19th century.

Text-Dependent Question

- Where does the artist place John Brown on this design of heroes? Explain the significance of where the artist placed each hero.

Citation Information

Hoover, J., “Heroes of the Colored Race,” Philadelphia, 1881. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)