

A B C  C L I O

# DEFINING MOMENTS

## Abolition and John Brown's Raid



### COMPLETE LESSON AND ACTIVITY GUIDES

Stimulating lessons that bring two of the most powerful and engaging research tools to the classroom: the analysis of primary documents and the revealing speculation of alternative history.

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*COVER PHOTO:* A militant U.S. abolitionist, John Brown led an unsuccessful raid against the federal arsenal in Harper's Ferry, (West) Virginia, hoping to spark a local slave rebellion. This event contributed to the growing tensions between the North and South that led to the American Civil War in early 1861.

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# Series Introduction

This packet is part of a 34-part series of primary source—based lessons for high school American History courses. Each packet focuses on one defining moment in our history, with specific background information and key concepts to help teachers become more knowledgeable in the history they are charged with teaching. To help with classroom lessons, two activities are included in the packet: one based on the real history, the other on a “counterfactual”—alternate—history. Both activities are rooted in student analysis of primary source material, and both will help teachers meet standards-based requirements through varied and stimulating teaching methods.

Every packet is arranged in the same manner. Teachers need to read the Introduction, which provides a “big picture” survey of the period of history in question. The Defining Moment is a short passage that focuses on a single, key event that was a turning point in history—a fork in the road after which the behaviors and fortunes of individuals, peoples, and places changed. The Need to Know section provides a more detailed discussion of the events leading up to and including the Defining Moment; this is followed by a short Timeline of events. These first several pages are concerned entirely with history as it actually happened. The What If? section supposes what might or could have taken place if events within the Defining Moment turned out differently.

The final components are the two Activities, each based on primary source documents. Activity 1 is based on the real history and is intended to help students learn the facts and understand the concepts—enabling teachers to meet the requirements of standards-based lessons. Activity 2 is based on the counterfactual history. Both lessons require creative, analytical thinking and include work across the spectrum of Bloom’s Taxonomy. To help teachers, each lesson also includes explicit lesson objectives, materials needed, and specific instructions.

## Introduction

John Brown's Raid on the armory at Harpers Ferry in 1859 has correctly been placed by historians as one of several main catalysts in bringing about **secession** and the Civil War. The attack itself was, in total, a rather small event. Some two dozen men smuggled themselves into Virginia and attacked one of two federal depositories and factories for firearms and ammunition. The idea that someone would actually strike at such a facility was deemed so unlikely that the entire place had only a single night watchman. Within days, the attackers were dead, in custody, or on the run. The slave revolt that Brown had so desperately prayed for did not materialize. The actual event was therefore a failure.

While the attack was a failure, the aftermath, from any perspective, was explosive. From the view of Brown, he ensured his death as a martyr in the antislavery cause. For Northern **abolitionists**, the Virginia trial was simply a matter of Southern injustice and power. Southerners viewed Brown as a potential representative of future attacks that might succeed in launching



John Brown, whose raid on Harper's Ferry helped ignite the Civil War. (Library of Congress)

**Secession:** The term used to describe Southern states' attempts to remove themselves from political union with the United States, beginning in late 1860.

**Abolitionist:** A person who, before and during the Civil War era, sought to abolish slavery by some means or another.

widespread slave rebellions, a terrifying thought for any white living in the South.

Finally, Brown's raid represented the powerful growth of the abolitionist movement as an outcropping of the Second Great Awakening—a religious revival during the 1830s. For Brown and his followers, this was truly God's work. Slavery was a sin, and therefore believers had to act against it. Such religious fervor did much to make Brown appealing to his Northern brethren and horrifying to his Southern enemy.

## Defining Moment

In 1857, Brown capitalized on his renown by launching a fund-raising campaign of speaking engagements in the Northeast. He claimed that the money was to continue the fight in Kansas, but he was already formulating plans for a raid on the town of Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). Brown used some of the funds raised to order 1,000 pikes from a forge master in Connecticut, again claiming that they were meant as weapons for the Kansas struggle. Brown believed that violence was the only way to rid the country of slavery because of the South's reliance on and staunch defense of the institution as instrumental to their economy and way of

life. Brown felt that God was calling him to lead the violence in a region that deserved such tactics for its grievous wrongs.

Brown planned to seize the town's federal **armory** and arsenal and seize the sizeable cache of firearms there. Then he planned to move into the nearby Blue Ridge Mountains and arm slaves, who he claimed would rise up against their masters to join his men. From his mountain base, he would raid nearby areas to launch widespread slave insurrections to begin freeing the four million slaves in the United States. In July 1859, under the alias Isaac Smith, he rented a farmhouse in Maryland known as the Kennedy Farmhouse, about seven miles from his planned target of Harpers Ferry.

Brown then continued to recruit men, money, and support. His sons Oliver, Owen, and Watson joined him. Five African Americans joined his group of raiders; these were Osborne Perry Anderson, Lewis Sheridan Leary, Shields Green, John Anthony Copeland Jr., and fugitive slave Dangerfield Newby, who hoped to free his wife from a Virginia plantation. The other raiders included Jeremiah G. Anderson; William Thompson; Dauphin Thompson; Stewart Taylor; William H. Lee-man; Iowa Quaker Barclay Coppoc; Bostonian Francis Jackson Meriam; Kansas fighters John E. Cook, Albert Hazlett, and Charles P. Tidd; Edwin Coppoc; Aaron D. Stevens; and John Henri Kagi, who would serve as one of Brown's lieutenants.

Brown's fund-raising efforts were crucial to his ability to carry out his plan. Prominent northern abolitionists had provided him with secret financial support, the bulk of the money from a group that came to be known as the "Secret Six." They were wealthy New York **reformer** Gerrit Smith, Concord teacher Franklin Sanborn, Boston Unitarian ministers Theodore Parker and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Boston businessman George Luther Stearns, and physician and reformer Samuel Gridley Howe. Brown repeatedly warned his financiers that the plan could fail but that he hoped it would still divide the nation and cement northern hatred of slavery, perhaps resulting in a war to bring its end.

One prominent abolitionist whose support Brown actively sought was the well-known African American speaker and writer Frederick Douglass. Douglass was himself a fugitive slave, having escaped from Maryland in 1838 at the age of 21. He had achieved renown through his eloquent speeches, his autobiography, and the abolitionist newspaper *The North Star*. In their first meeting about the planned raid, Douglass had hosted Brown at his home but had expressed skepticism about his plans. Brown once again sought Douglass's support at a second meeting in 1859. If Brown could convince the well-known and respected Douglass to support his plans during this visit, he believed the chances of the raid's success would be greatly increased. Frederick Douglass told Brown that although he shared Brown's goals, he would not provide his support because he felt the plan was suicidal and doomed to failure. A disappointed Brown continued with his plans, although he received little new money, supplies, or recruits after Douglass's refusal.

**Armory:** A storage facility for weapons, ammunition, and other related supplies.  
**Reformer:** Someone who seeks sociopolitical change by peaceful means, working within the system as it exists.

## Need to Know

John Brown's raid on the federal armory and arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, began on the night of October 16, 1859. Brown and his men set off in the dark for Harpers Ferry, cutting the town's telegraph lines upon their arrival. Three raiders led by Brown's trusted lieutenant John Kagi captured Hall's Rifle Works, which was located near the armory and produced weapons for the federal government. The main group of raiders captured the federal armory after taking its night watchman by surprise, while a smaller group stood guard on the

bridges leading to town. Some of Brown’s men seized three hostages, including Col. Lewis W. Washington, a descendent of President George Washington.

Ringling church bells heard throughout the town and its surrounding countryside signaled an **insurrection**. Brown’s next actions were puzzling, leading many future historians to question his true motives. After holding a captured Baltimore and Ohio Railroad train for several hours, he allowed it to leave the engine house near the armory, taking with it news of the raid. Area slaves did not rise up to help the raiders, and Brown’s decision to remain at the armory rather than to seize weapons and quickly flee doomed the short-lived raid to failure.

Local **militia**, townsmen, and farmers rushed to the armory and surrounded the raiders, trapping them in the small engine house where they had moved a group of hostages by the morning. Intermittent shootings continued from both inside and outside the engine house, killing two town residents and the town mayor, Fontaine Beckham. The townsmen shot raider William H. Leeman as he attempted an escape.

Meanwhile, President James Buchanan dispatched a detachment of U.S. Marines under the command of Col. Robert E. Lee, which arrived the following afternoon. Brown’s attempts to negotiate a cease-fire with the militia and later with U.S. forces failed, resulting in the mortal wounding of Brown’s son Watson. The troops entered the armory on Tuesday, October 18, at Lee’s command and quickly captured the raiders. Brown’s sons, Oliver and Watson, lay dead and Brown had been stabbed and beaten. Seven other raiders were killed. Marine Luke Quinn and two slaves belonging to hostages had also died in the struggle.

Colonel Lee and his men immediately captured five raiders, including Brown. Seven other raiders successfully escaped, but two were later captured. The rest eluded capture with the help of friends and supporters who provided shelter and supplies. Meanwhile, news of the events at Harpers Ferry quickly spread throughout the nation.

A Virginia state court in Charlestown tried the captured raiders on charges of treason. The governor of Virginia enlisted militia units to guard all of the approaches to the city as a precaution, and panic over potential slave uprisings remained high throughout the South. Brown’s trial began on October 26, and he had to be helped into court as he was still recovering from his stab wounds. The federal government did not interfere in the state trials that many Northerners claimed were deliberately rushed through the court system.

During Brown’s trial, questions over his behavior and motives emerged because of the miscalculations he had made during the course of the raid. He had secured the armory but then failed to leave quickly, allowing himself and most of his men to become trapped. He had earlier separated his raiders

**Insurrection:** The act of revolting against the established government.  
**Militia:** A group of citizens organized for military service during (usually) emergencies.



President James Buchanan.

and failed to secure avenues of retreat. He had allowed a captured Baltimore and Ohio (B & O) Railroad train to depart, carrying news of the raid to spread beyond the town. He had then refused to surrender when obviously trapped, thus endangering the raiders' lives.

As events continued to unfold, more and more Northerners came to treat Brown as a martyr. For some, his behavior in prison and willingness to give his life to the cause overcame their initial discomfort with his actions. Supporters made several attempts to rescue the captured raiders but Brown did not wish to be rescued because he felt that his death would be more valuable to the militant abolitionist cause. One of his letters from prison stated, "I am worth now infinitely more to die than to live," according to Richard O. Boyer in *The Legend of John Brown: A Biography and a History*.

Brown was sentenced to death on November 2 and hanged on December 2, 1859. In one of his final statements, he declared, "I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood," according to Boyer. Green and Hazlett were executed on March 17, 1860. Meetings of sympathy and prayer were held in the North on the day of Brown's execution and "John Brown's Body" would later become a Civil War rallying song for northern troops. Southerners were alarmed and outraged at these responses as they continued to live in fear of more slave uprisings.

Southerners who initially saw Brown's raid as the work of a single individual quickly came to believe that the entire North supported his cause. They were especially outraged at the revelation of the financial support provided by the "Secret Six" and by northern praise of Brown. This response exemplified their worst fears about abolitionists and the North and they stepped up their defenses of slavery and possible secession. Many politicians and the press claimed that abolitionists would stop at nothing to end slavery. As noted by historian Charles Joyner in *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid*, "The more extreme northern opinions were the most widely quoted, on the grounds that for every Yankee who voiced such views there were thousands who applauded or gave silent assent."

Military companies and private associations formed across the South. There were widespread calls for boycotts of northern products and many Southern students left Northern colleges in protest. Northerners in the South faced insults and rough treatment. "Fire-Eaters" utilized Southern resentment to unite Southerners and gain their support for states' rights and secession. Meanwhile, a Senate committee under the leadership of James Murray Mason, a Democrat from Virginia, investigated the raid. The Mason committee accomplished little, and no one was arrested for assisting Brown.

Northern and Southern reactions revealed how divided the nation had become over the issue of slavery and quickly overwhelmed the voices of compromise. Historian and noted Brown biographer Stephen B. Oates in *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* stated that "Harpers Ferry polarized the country as no other event had done; it set in motion a spiral of accusation and counteraccusation between north and south that bore the country irreversibly toward the civil war."

## TIMELINE

1800: John Brown is born in Connecticut to a Puritan family active in the Underground Railroad.

1820: Brown marries for the first time; he eventually will marry again after his first wife's death; goes on to have a total of 20 children by his two wives.

1825–46: Brown runs a series of businesses, moving his family around the east and Old Northwest; he becomes active in Underground Railroad.

1849–51: Brown works in commune in Elba, New York, teaching free blacks to farm.

1855: With family and weapons in tow, Brown moves to Kansas to take part in the free soil fight growing there.

1857: 'Bleeding Kansas' is no longer as violent; Brown seeks volunteers for invasion of the South.

1859, summer: Brown hatches a plan to seize the arsenal at Harper's Ferry and launch slave revolt.

1859, October: John Brown's Raid fails to ignite desired rebellion and ends in Brown's arrest.

1859, December: John Brown is convicted of treason and hanged.

## What If?

Frederick Douglass had his doubts about Brown's plan but could have agreed to lend his support knowing that it would attract fellow freedmen and that it would help spread word of the raid to slaves in the area. What would have happened if Douglass had openly given his support for Brown? During the weeks leading up to the raid, more recruits and money would have then arrived at the Maryland farmhouse. Secret meetings and whispered communications would have circulated the plan and word of an arranged signal among the nearby slave



A Visit from the Ku Klux Klan, an 1872 illustration by Frank Bellew. (Library of Congress)