

John Brown's Antislavery Raid

By ReadWorks



Slavery in the United States of America started in British North America during the early colonial days of European settlement on the continent. By 1800, a few northern states had abolished (gotten rid of) slavery. Abolitionism continued to spread throughout the North in the decades that followed. At the same time, southern states saw a rapid expansion of the cotton industry by using slaves as unpaid labor on cotton plantations. By 1860, there were 15 slave states in the South. 400,000 families in these states had slaves in their households. Southern states were threatening to leave the United States in order to protect their growing cotton industry and retain the ability to have slaves.

John Brown was an American abolitionist who had an extreme take on opposing slavery. He believed the only way to end slavery was through armed fighting. In 1846, Brown and his business partner Simon Perkins moved to the city of Springfield, Massachusetts. The city was considered to be ideologically progressive. The Springfield community, including most churches, politicians, and wealthy businessmen, was involved in the antislavery movement. John Brown was a parishioner at the Sanford Street Free Church from 1846 until he left Springfield in 1850. The church was one of the United States' most prominent opponents of slavery and featured many abolitionists in its services to lecture against the evils of slavery, including Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass.

While in Springfield, John Brown became deeply involved in helping transform the city into a safe and significant stop on the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was a secret network of houses and routes used by slaves in the United States to escape north to the free states and Canada. It was run with the help of abolitionists and allies, who were both black and white. It is thought that more than 30,000 slaves escaped through the Underground Railroad.

Right before Brown left Springfield, the United States Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The law mandated that authorities in free states aid in the return of escaped slaves to their Southern owners. The law also imposed penalties on those who helped slaves escape. John Brown founded a group in response to the new law called the League of Gileadites. They were dedicated to defying the new act by helping slaves pass through Springfield. From the founding of the group until the abolition of slavery, not one person was forced back into slavery from Springfield, Massachusetts.

After spending time at his farm in upstate New York in the town of North Elba, Brown returned to New England in November of 1856. He was back in Springfield to raise funds and gather forces for a planned raid on Harpers Ferry. Wealthy merchants financially supported Brown in his antislavery activities. Even though the group of supporters knew Brown would be using its funds to fight slavery, it is unclear how much of Brown's scheme the supporters were aware of.

In the early months of 1859, Brown rented the Kennedy Farmhouse with a small cabin nearby, four miles north of Harpers Ferry in Maryland. There he gathered his arsenal of weapons—rifles, ammunition, and pikes (a pole weapon, with a spear on the end)—and began training his volunteer army. The plan was to capture the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry and provide local slaves with stolen weapons. Brown believed that armed slaves would revolt against their masters and free more slaves as they spread rebellion through the surrounding areas; however, this was not to be.

On October 16, 1859, John Brown began the raid on Harpers Ferry. At first, the raid went well for him and his 21 men. Brown's men were able to cut the telegraph wire to prevent communication with the government. They also seized a passing train. However, the train was foolishly permitted to continue on. This was a mistake, as the conductor alerted authorities about the raid farther along on his route.

Brown's plan rested on the belief that local slaves would join in the rebellion, but this did not occur. Brown and his men seized the federal arsenal and armory, but without the support of local slaves, Brown was outnumbered. He was surrounded by the local militia and eventually captured by U.S. Marines.

Brown was taken to the courthouse in nearby Charlestown, West Virginia, for trial. He was found guilty of treason, murder, and slave insurrection and was hanged on December 2, 1859. Brown's fellow abolitionists, who mostly disapproved the use of violence, thought the raid was misguided; however, Brown became a martyr for the antislavery cause.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What was John Brown's opinion on abolitionism?

- A) He believed ending slavery was best achieved through church support.
- B) He did not support or believe in the movement to end slavery.
- C) He believed ending slavery was only possible through armed fighting.
- D) He believed ending slavery was only possible through political discussion.

2. The passage sequences John Brown's raid Harpers Ferry. What happened after Brown's army let the train pass?

- A) The train conductor notified the authorities of the raid.
- B) John Brown trained his volunteer army.
- C) John Brown began the raid on Harpers Ferry.
- D) John Brown rented the Kennedy Farmhouse.

3. The Sanford Street Free Church in Springfield was a strong supporter of abolitionism. What evidence from the passage best supports this conclusion?

- A) "John Brown was a parishioner at the Sanford Street Free Church from 1846 until he left Springfield in 1850."
- B) "The city [of Springfield, Massachusetts] was considered to be ideologically progressive."
- C) "The Springfield community was involved in the antislavery movement."
- D) "The church featured many abolitionists in its services to lecture against the evils of slavery."

4. Read the following sentences: "The plan was to capture the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry and provide local slaves with stolen weapons. Brown believed that armed slaves would revolt against their masters and free more slaves as they spread rebellion through the surrounding areas; however, this was not to be."

Based on this, which of the following conclusions can be made?

- A) Brown did not have a concrete plan for the raid.
- B) Brown had unrealistic expectations for the raid.
- C) Brown was able to hold the arsenal in the raid.
- D) Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry was supported by slaves.

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A) John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry
- B) decisive battles in the U.S. Civil War
- C) how the issue of slavery divided the U.S.
- D) the history of Springfield, Massachusetts

6. Read the following sentences: "The issue of slavery began to divide the nation into free states and slave states. By the middle of the 19th century, the southern states were threatening to leave the United States in order to protect their growing cotton industry and **retain** the ability to have slaves."

What does the word "**retain**" mean?

- A) release
- B) argue
- C) keep
- D) get

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

_____, John Brown's raid went well. Ultimately, it ended in failure and Brown's arrest.

- A) Therefore
- B) Although
- C) Specifically
- D) Initially

8. What was the League of Gildeadites, and what did it do?

9. Why was the raid on Harpers Ferry unsuccessful?

10. Explain whether Brown helped the abolitionist cause throughout his lifetime.
