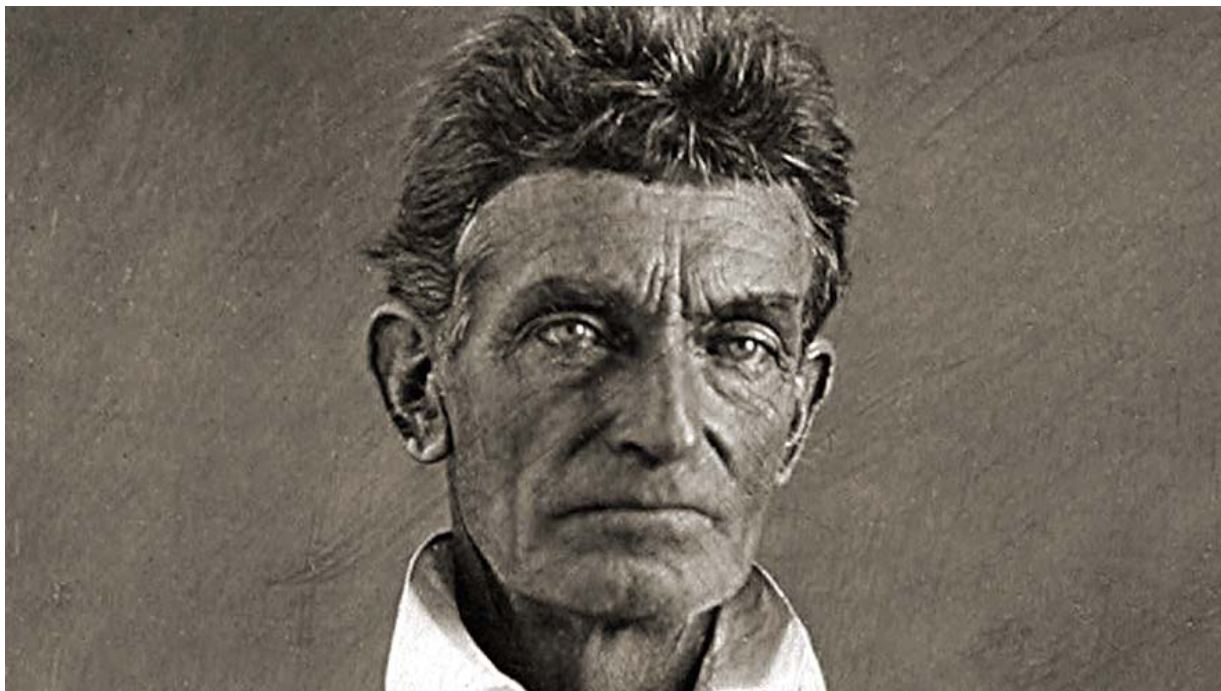


The Abolitionists: John Brown

By Biography.com Editors and A+E Networks, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.22.16

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An 1856 daguerreotype of John Brown. BELOW: Harper's Weekly illustration of U.S. Marines attacking John Brown's "Fort." Boston Athenaeum

Synopsis: John Brown was born on May 9, 1800, in Torrington, Connecticut. His family practiced Calvinism, a type of Christianity that says God decides everything that happens. He had many children. Brown did not have much money during his life. He was a fierce abolitionist, or someone who works to end slavery, which is the practice of owning another person. He worked with the Underground Railroad and the League of Gileadites, among other efforts to free slaves. He believed in using physical means to end slavery. Brown wanted to start a slave revolt and eventually led an unsuccessful attack on the Harpers Ferry federal armory, where the government stored weapons. Brown went to trial and was executed on December 2, 1859.

Early Life

John Brown was born on May 9, 1800, in Torrington, Connecticut, to Ruth Mills and Owen Brown. Owen Brown was a tanner, or someone who makes leather. He was a Calvinist and strongly believed that slavery was wrong. As a 12-year-old boy traveling through Michigan, John Brown witnessed an enslaved African-American boy being beaten. It haunted him for years and made him want to free slaves.

Brown first studied to work in the church, but he instead decided to work as a tanner, like his father. Brown married Dianthe Lusk in 1820. The couple had several children before her death in the early 1830s. He remarried in 1833, and he and wife Mary Ann Day had many more children.

Strong Abolitionist

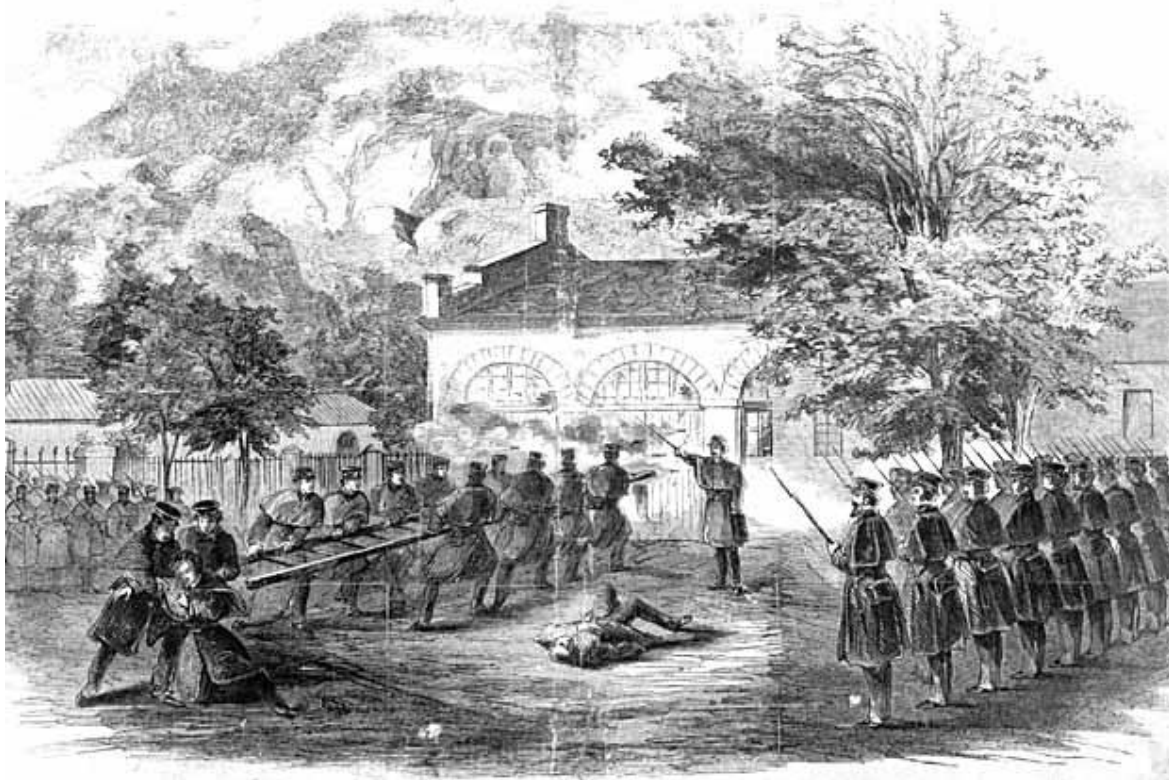
Brown worked many different jobs and moved around a lot from the 1820s to 1850s. During this time he did not have much money. Brown took part in the Underground Railroad. This was a secret network of routes that abolitionists used to help slaves escape to the North, where they could be free. He also gave land to free African-Americans. He eventually established the League of Gileadites, a group that protected black citizens from slave hunters.

Brown met with famous speaker and abolitionist Frederick Douglass in 1847 in Springfield, Massachusetts. In 1849, Brown moved to the black community of North Elba, New York. This community was created on land that was donated by a generous man named Gerrit Smith.

In 1855, Brown moved to Kansas, where five of his sons also lived. When the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 was passed, people fought over whether the territory would be a free or slave state. Brown believed in using physical means to end slavery and became involved in the fight. In 1856, he and several of his men killed five pro-slavery settlers in an attack at Pottawatomie Creek.

Harpers Ferry Attack

In 1858, Brown freed a group of enslaved people from Missouri. He guided them to freedom in Canada. Brown had plans to form a free black community in the mountains of Maryland and Virginia.



On the evening of October 16, 1859, Brown led a group of 21 men on an attack of the federal armory of Harpers Ferry, where the government stored guns and weapons. It was located in what is now West Virginia. The plan was to start a slave uprising. They held dozens of men hostage. Brown's forces held out for two days. They were eventually defeated by military forces led by Robert E. Lee. Many of Brown's men were killed, including two of his sons. Brown was captured. His case went to trial quickly, and on November 2 he was sentenced to death.

Brown gave a speech to the court before his sentencing. He said his actions were right and approved by God. People debated over how Brown should be viewed. This deepened the divide between North and South and greatly affected the direction of the country before the Civil War. Several of his friends told the courts that Brown had mental problems that caused his actions. Brown was executed on December 2, 1859.

Quiz

- 1 According to the article, how did John Brown hope his attack on Harpers Ferry would help his cause?
- (A) It would put him in charge of the military.
 - (B) It would inspire a slave uprising.
 - (C) It would help slaves escape Harpers Ferry.
 - (D) It would lead to the defeat of Robert E. Lee.
- 2 What effect did witnessing an enslaved boy being beaten have on John Brown?
- (A) It motivated him to actively fight against slavery using any means.
 - (B) It scared him so much at first that he decided to work in a church to avoid the fight against slavery.
 - (C) It inspired him to write a book about slavery to share what he saw with others.
 - (D) It angered him but left him feeling powerless to help.
- 3 What is the connection between the article's first paragraph in the section "Early Life" and the final paragraph in the section "Harper's Ferry Attack"?
- (A) The first paragraph describes John Brown's birth and childhood, and the last paragraph describes the events leading up to his death.
 - (B) The first paragraph describes John Brown's parents and their views, and the last paragraph describes his own sons and their actions.
 - (C) The first paragraph explains how John Smith's anti-slavery beliefs began, and the last paragraph explains how these strong beliefs affected others.
 - (D) The first paragraph explains how John Brown came to be an abolitionist, and the last paragraph details how his views changed before his execution.
- 4 Fill in the blank in the sentence below.
- Overall, the article is organized around. . . .
- (A) stories about John Brown's mistakes.
 - (B) the significant events in John Brown's life.
 - (C) details about John Brown's family members and their impact on him.
 - (D) historical data about slavery in Kansas.