

## The Time Trial of John Brown

### Purpose

By debating the legacy of John Brown, students will build reasoning and critical thinking skills and an understanding of the complexity of historical events and historical memory.

### Program Summary

In this presentation, offered as a public program at the National Museum of American History beginning in 2011, an actor portrays a fictionalized John Brown, radical abolitionist and organizer of a raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in 1859. In this program Brown, in dialogue with an audience that is facilitated by an arbiter, discusses his actions in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry and responds to questions about his use of violence to achieve his ends. At the conclusion of the program, audience members consider how history should remember John Brown. Included in this resource set are Brown's arguments divided by theme to enable teachers to recreate the *Time Trial of John Brown* in the classroom. Note: Brown speaks in the language of his day (e.g. "Negro" for "African American").

### Grade level 8-12

Time Two to three 45 minute periods

### National Standards

*National Center for History in the Schools*

United States History Standards; Era 5: Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877);

Standard 1: The causes of the Civil War

Historical Thinking Standards

3B: Consider multiple perspectives of various peoples in the past by demonstrating their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears.

3H: Hold interpretations of history as tentative, subject to changes as new information is uncovered, new voices heard, and new interpretations broached.

*Common Core Standards for Literacy in History and Social Studies: Speaking and Listening Standards*

Comprehension and Collaboration, standard 1:

Grade 8: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade level topics, texts, and issues*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Comprehension and Collaboration, standard 3:

Grade 8: Delineate a speaker's argument and specific claims, evaluating the soundness of the reasoning and relevance and sufficiency of the evidence and identifying when irrelevant evidence is introduced.

Comprehension and Collaboration, Grade 9-10

1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on *grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

Comprehension and Collaboration, Grade 11-12

1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on *grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

3. Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

### **Historical Background**

As a boy of five, John Brown witnessed a slave his own age being beaten with a fire shovel. He vowed to become a foe of slavery. By the mid-1800s, Brown was fulfilling his vow. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 allowed the two territories to decide the issue of slavery by popular ballot. The fight in Kansas was so intense that the state earned the nickname of “Bleeding Kansas.” As Missouri pro-slavery “Ruffians” flocked to Kansas, New England abolitionists bankrolled “Free-Soilers” to move to the settlement of Lawrence, Kansas. In 1856, after abolitionists were attacked in Lawrence, John Brown led a raid on scattered cabins along the Pottawatomie Creek, killing five people.

John Brown had another plan to bring about an end to slavery. On October 16, 1859, Brown and a small group of militants seized the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, hoping to ignite a slave rebellion. They waited in vain for the uprising they hoped would follow. The next day, U.S. Army officers Robert E. Lee and J. E. B. Stuart brought in a company of marines and stormed the armory’s fire-engine house where Brown had taken cover. They captured him and his band, and killed two of his sons. Brown was hanged, along with six other conspirators. In death he became a martyr for abolitionists. “I am worth inconceivably more to hang,” he said, “than for any other purpose.”

Brown’s execution further polarized a nation already divided over the question of slavery. In the North, it galvanized abolitionists—a small but vocal minority, comprised of Christian reformers, women, free blacks, and fugitive slaves. Appalled that the “land of the free” was the world’s largest slave-holding nation, they advocated federal intervention to rid the nation of a moral evil. Brown’s execution also energized “Free-Soilers,” Northerners who were willing to leave slavery alone in the South but opposed its spread to new territories in the West.

In the South, Brown’s martyrdom further alienated whites. Southerners felt a strong allegiance to their states and region and a shared fear that they were in danger of being dominated by Northern interests. Of the total Southern white population of eight million in 1860, only 384,000 owned slaves, and over 80 percent of these had fewer than twenty. Still, the slave system made the South’s agricultural economy viable and shaped the region’s cultural identity. Southern planters and small farmers alike were committed to keeping the region’s 3.5 million African Americans enslaved.

### **Preparation**

Video files are available for Windows Media Player, and include captions. Captions must be turned on by right clicking on the toolbar and selecting lyrics, captions, and subtitles. Video files will also be available on YouTube.

### **Additional Secondary Sources**

Abels, Jules. *Man on Fire John Brown and the Cause of Liberty*. New York: MacMillan, 1971.

Horwitz, Tony. *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid that Sparked the Civil War*. New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2011.

PBS American Experience. *John Brown’s Holy War* [<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/>] Accessed 15 July 2012.

Stauffer, John. *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.

## **Motivation**

Ask students to examine closely the mural by John Steuart Curry from the Kansas State Capitol, paying special attention to the figure at the center. Ask them to describe what they see in the image and discuss what adjectives they would use to describe the man at the center.

Next, read or have students read the following quotes:

Governor Henry Wise of Virginia, on interviewing John Brown in 1859: "He is cool, collected and indomitable, and he inspired me with great trust in his integrity as a man of truth."

Henry David Thoreau, "[A Plea for Captain John Brown](http://thoreau.eserver.org/plea.html)," [<http://thoreau.eserver.org/plea.html>] an address to the people of Concord, MA in October 1859: "A man of rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles, that was what distinguished him. Not yielding to a whim or transient impulse, but carrying out the purpose of a life. I noticed that he did not overstate anything, but spoke within bounds."

Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Chiefly About War Matters by a Peaceable Man," article in *The Atlantic*, 1862: "I shall not pretend to be an admirer of old John Brown...this blood-stained fanatic...Nobody was ever more justly hanged. He won his martyrdom fairly, and took it firmly."

The *Chicago Press and Tribune* in 1859 on the raid on Harpers Ferry: "A squad of fanatics whose zeal is wonderfully disproportioned to their sense, . . . commanded by a man who has, for years been as mad as a March hare, unite in making an insurrection at Harper's Ferry . . . They are guilty of the most incomprehensible stupidity and folly as well as unpardonable criminality in all these acts . . . There is not a public journal of any party, or public man of any shade of opinion found to approve their mean or justify their end."

Ask students how well they think the quotes describe the central figure in the mural. Ask them to note when each source was produced. Discuss John Brown's actions using the historical background included in this lesson, and note that while there were some in Brown's lifetime who considered him a fanatic or considered him mad, there were others like Wise and Thoreau who described him otherwise, and that the mural represents an interpretation of John Brown based on his legacy, or how he has been remembered over time. Explain that the purpose of this lesson is to consider this legacy. How should he be remembered, as a hero, a madman, or something more complex?

As a further introduction to Brown and his actions at Harpers Ferry, complete the [John Brown's Legacy](http://americanhistory.si.edu/militaryhistory/resources/Lesson6.pdf) [<http://americanhistory.si.edu/militaryhistory/resources/Lesson6.pdf>] lesson from *The Price of Freedom: Americans at War* online exhibition.

Or, using [this resource page](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/lyrical/songs/john_brown.html) [[http://www.loc.gov/teachers/lyrical/songs/john\\_brown.html](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/lyrical/songs/john_brown.html)] from the Library of Congress, have students listen to "John Brown's Body" and discuss the qualities of the person described by the song. Use the quotes included above or the mural painting as a counterpoint to the song and discuss the history of John Brown using the historical background included in this lesson.

## **Procedure**

Explain that students will have the opportunity to hear directly from John Brown about his actions, and will be able to debate with him directly. Play [John Brown's introduction](https://vimeo.com/129554643) [<https://vimeo.com/129554643>], then ask students what they know about Brown. As they offer information on his background, play the related sections.

### [What happened at Harpers Ferry?](#)

[<https://vimeo.com/129577715>]

Possible discussion prompt:

- At Harpers Ferry, John Brown was making war on the government – when, if ever, is that justified?

### [Is violence against the government ever justified?](#)

[<https://vimeo.com/129679331>]

Possible discussion prompts:

- John Brown has just argued that we are living today in a nation founded as the result of violence against a government. Can we compare George Washington and John Brown? Are there similarities? Are there differences?
- You've just heard John Brown give a defense of violence in pursuit of a political goal, the abolition of slavery. Are any political goals/causes so important, so right, that they justify violence?

Note that in this section during our public programs, we have sometimes asked or been asked if John Brown could be considered a terrorist. Though not a term with which Brown himself would have been familiar, one could make the argument that Brown's use of violence against a standing government to achieve his political ends would be considered terrorism. Teachers are advised to be aware of this possible discussion topic and to determine, based on their own circumstances and students, whether such a discussion is appropriate.

### [What happened in Kansas?](#)

[<https://vimeo.com/129583986>]

Possible discussion prompt:

- John Brown has just described a lawless Kansas with Free State men killed by pro-slavery men and nothing done about it. His violence was a response to this. Is this justified? Why or why not?

Next, encourage students to consider his tactics and motivations and why he chose violence to achieve his goals. Possible prompts and Brown's responses are included below. As students ask questions and listen to John Brown's responses, help students consider the alternative view. After each section, allow students to respond to Brown's argument and consider as a class what argument could be made against Brown's. Suggestions for prompting conversation are included after some sections, and suggestions for prompting discussion throughout the program are included here:

Possible discussion prompts:

- I'm sure we can all agree that fighting against slavery was a noble cause, but does that excuse violence? Might there have been other things he could have done, other ways he could have opposed slavery?
- Even if we say that he was right to attack slavery violently, what about his methods? Was the Harpers Ferry raid doomed from the start?
- What else do we need to know more about to decide how he should be remembered?

### [Was John Brown a religious zealot?](#)

[<https://vimeo.com/129678630>]

Possible discussion prompts:

- John Brown argues that religion has always played a big part in American life. What do we think about this in the context of his actions?
- John Brown has just argued that he was acting as a Christian in opposing slavery with violence. How do we feel about that?

[Why didn't John Brown use nonviolence?](#)

[<https://vimeo.com/129679889>]

Possible discussion prompt:

- John Brown has just recounted to you how moral suasion -- non-violence -- was tried for decades and found unable to stop the spread of slavery. Other abolitionists like Frederick Douglass came to this same conclusion. Does it justify his violence that he and other abolitionists exhausted the avenue of non-violence? Why or why not?

[Was John Brown a murderer?](#)

[<https://vimeo.com/129680688>]

Possible discussion prompt:

- John Brown has just accused us of opposing his violence because it was done in the cause of freedom for enslaved people. Does he have a point? What makes John Brown's violence different from theirs?

[Was John Brown insane?](#)

[<https://vimeo.com/129681875>]

[Would slavery have ended anyway?](#)

[<https://vimeo.com/129682161>]

After the students have had a chance to discuss John Brown's actions, his justifications for them, and their thoughts on the issues, ask how many of them believe that they support John Brown and that his legacy is a positive one. Have students explain their reasoning. Then, ask the students how many do not believe Brown's actions were justified and do not believe that history should remember him positively, and have them explain their reasoning. Play one of John Brown's closing remarks:

[Ending 1](#) (John Brown believes he has received a fair trial)

[<https://vimeo.com/129683332>]

[Ending 2](#) (John Brown does not believe he has been fairly considered)

[<https://vimeo.com/129683836>]

Explain that the purpose of the trial is not to make a definitive judgment on John Brown's actions, but rather to show that history is complicated, that our memory of historical events can be altered over time, and that there are many sides to every event. Have students brainstorm additional figures in history whose legacy has been debated or whose legacy has been contested over time.

**Summary**

To close the activity, have students complete one of the following assignments:

- Write a persuasive essay arguing for the student's view of John Brown's legacy, with specific historical evidence. Use Thoreau's [A Plea for Captain John Brown](#) as a model.
- Create a mural in the style of the Kansas State Capitol building mural that represents the student's view of Brown's legacy.
- Create a new verse or verses to "John Brown's Body" reflecting how the student believes Brown should be remembered.





Mural, Kansas State Capitol  
John Steuart Curry, 1940-1941