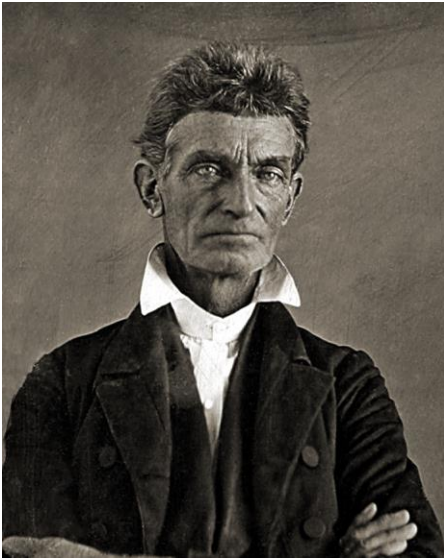


The Abolitionists: John Brown

By Biography.com Editors and A+E Networks, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.03.16

Word Count **611**



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

Synopsis: John Brown was born on May 9, 1800, in Torrington, Connecticut, in a Calvinist household. Calvinism is a religion that believes God controls people's actions and has already decided their fates. Brown was an ardent abolitionist who worked with the Underground Railroad and the League of Gileadites, among other endeavors to end slavery. He believed in using violent means to end slavery and, with the intent of inspiring a slave uprising, eventually led an unsuccessful raid 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, who was a Calvinist and worked tanning leather and hides, ardently 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 to come and inspired his commitment to freeing slaves.

Though Brown initially studied to work in the ministry, he instead decided to take up his father's trade. Brown wed Dianthe Lusk in 1820, and the couple had several children before her death in the early 1830s. He remarried in 1833, and he and wife Mary Ann Day would have many more children.

Ardent Abolitionist

Brown worked in a number of professions and moved around quite a bit from the 1820s to 1850s. During this time he experienced great financial difficulties. Brown also took part in the Underground Railroad, a secret network that helped slaves to freedom, gave land to free African-Americans and eventually established the League of Gileadites, a group formed with the intention of protecting black citizens from slave hunters.

Brown met with renowned speaker and abolitionist Frederick Douglass in 1847 in Springfield, Massachusetts. In 1849, Brown moved and settled in the black community of North Elba, New York, which was created on land provided by philanthropist Gerrit Smith. In 1855, Brown moved to Kansas, where five of his sons had relocated as well. With the passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, there was conflict over whether the territory would be a free or slave state. Brown, who believed in using violent means to end slavery, became involved in the conflict. In 1856, he and several of his men killed five pro-slavery settlers in a retaliatory attack at Pottawatomie Creek.

Harpers Ferry Attack

In 1858, Brown liberated a group of enslaved people from Missouri and helped guide them to freedom in Canada. It was also in Canada that Brown spoke of plans to form a free black community in the mountains of Maryland and Virginia.

On the evening of October 16, 1859, Brown led a party of 21 men on a raid of the federal armory of Harpers Ferry in Virginia (now West Virginia), holding dozens of men hostage with the plan of inspiring a slave uprising. 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, and he was captured. Brown's case went to trial quickly, and on November 2 he was sentenced to death. In a speech to the court before his sentencing, Brown stated his actions to be just and approved by God. Debate ensued over how Brown should be viewed, deepening the divide between North and South and having an important effect on the direction of the country. Several of his colleagues also petitioned that the courts should look at Brown's questionable mental state when it came to his actions. Brown was executed on December 2, 1859.

Quiz

1 The author develops Brown's determination to help slaves find freedom in each of the following ways EXCEPT:

- (A) Brown took part in the Underground Railroad.
- (B) Brown gave land to free African-Americans.
- (C) Brown established the League of Gileadites.
- (D) Brown experienced great financial difficulties.

2 Which sentence BEST summarizes how slavery affected John Brown?

- (A) John Brown slowly learned that slavery was wrong, but it took him years to stand up against it.
- (B) John Brown used to own slaves, but he released them once he realized slavery was wrong.
- (C) John Brown believed slavery was terribly wrong, and he dedicated his life to helping slaves find freedom.
- (D) John Brown fought against slavery in his youth, but he stopped fighting once he had children

3 Read the following paragraph from the section "Ardent Abolitionist."

Brown worked in a number of professions and moved around quite a bit from the 1820s to 1850s. During this time he experienced great financial difficulties. Brown also took part in the Underground Railroad, a secret network that helped slaves to freedom, gave land to free African-Americans and eventually established the League of Gileadites, a group formed with the intention of protecting black citizens from slave hunters.

Why does the author include this paragraph in the article?

- (A) By detailing all of his accomplishments as an abolitionist, this paragraph shows the reader how dedicated John Brown was to ending slavery.
- (B) By discussing his employment challenges, the author uses this paragraph to suggest that John Brown was not entirely stable or honest.
- (C) By mentioning his many different professions, this paragraph shows the reader that John Brown had difficulty following through with his goals.
- (D) By highlighting his constant movement around the country, the author suggests that John Brown was always running away from problems he started.

4 Read the following paragraph from the article.

In 1855, Brown moved to Kansas, where five of his sons had relocated as well. With the passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, there was conflict over whether the territory would be a free or slave state. Brown, who believed in using violent means to end slavery, became involved in the conflict. In 1856, he and several of his men killed five pro-slavery settlers in a retaliatory attack at Pottawatomie Creek.

What does this paragraph accomplish?

- (A) This paragraph provides background information that explains how John Brown's family were important supporters of his abolitionist efforts.
- (B) This paragraph provides background information that explains John Brown's historical context and his role in causing the Civil War.
- (C) This paragraph suggests that slave owners were using Kansas as a place to strategically catch runaway slaves.
- (D) This paragraph suggests that John Brown sought out opportunities to fight slavery and was willing to use violence when necessary.