

Background

Born in the first year of the nineteenth century to a devoutly Calvinist family, John Brown credits witnessing a slave being beaten with a shovel as the origin of his devotion to the anti-slavery cause. Unlike most of the abolitionists that arose in the 1830s, Brown was dedicated to both the abolition of chattel slavery and racial equality. This commitment was exemplified in his 1838 decision to escort a free black to sit in his family pew. This bold act led to his family's expulsion from the church. In a fruitless attempt to become economically solvent, Brown moved to Springfield, Massachusetts in 1846 to develop his wool business. In Springfield, Brown befriended, lived among, and attended church alongside African Americans. Brown's sincere empathy for the plight of the slave was reflected in a letter written by abolitionist Frederick Douglass after meeting Brown. Douglass, who made a trip to Springfield expressly to meet Brown, stated that Brown was "in sympathy, a black man, and as deeply interested in our cause, as though his own soul had been pierced with the iron of slavery." During this meeting, Brown revealed what he called his "Subterranean Pass Way." Using the Appalachian Mountains as a base, this plan envisioned a rebellion that would arm slaves, encourage their revolt, and direct people northward to freedom. It was in Springfield where Brown first revealed the elements of what would become the final act of his life: a raid on the South to promote a slave rebellion. In 1849, Brown moved his family to North Elba, New York to live on a communal farm created by abolitionist Gerrit Smith ([Figure 2](#)). Living with black families was a clear indication of Brown's commitment to a biracial society. In 1851, reacting to the Fugitive Slave provisions of the Compromise of 1850, Brown returned to Springfield and established the League of Gileadites. Dedicated to protecting escaped slaves from slave catchers, the League was a concrete expression of Brown's visceral distaste for federal complicity with the institution of slavery. Brown vehemently expressed his

passion for equality in May of 1858, when he presented his “Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States” to an anti-slavery convention in Ontario, Canada. Essentially a new constitution for a slavery-free United States, the document stated that:

Figure 2.



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In 1848, John Brown learned of abolitionist Gerrit Smith's offer of free land to blacks in the Adirondacks. The next year, Brown moved his family to North Elba, New York to join this experiment. Though he soon left for “Bloody” Kansas, he considered North Elba his home and asked to be buried there. In 1935, the John Brown Memorial Association dedicated this statue, designed by Joseph P. Pollia, just north of the gravesite, now part of the John Brown Farm State Historic Site:

[<http://nysparks.state.ny.us/historic-sites/29/details.aspx>](http://nysparks.state.ny.us/historic-sites/29/details.aspx) (Courtesy of photographer David Blakie, [<http://davidblaikie.ca/>](http://davidblaikie.ca/))



Whereas slavery, throughout its entire existence in the United States, is none other than a most barbarous, unprovoked, and unjustifiable war of one portion of its citizens upon another portion—the only conditions of which are perpetual imprisonment and hopeless servitude or absolute extermination—in utter disregard and violation of those eternal and self-evident truths set forth in our Declaration of Independence:

Therefore, we, citizens of the United States, and the oppressed people who, by a recent decision of the Supreme Court, [The *Dred Scott* Decisions] are declared to have no rights which the white man is bound to respect, together with all other people degraded by the laws thereof, do, for the time being, ordain and establish for ourselves the following Provisional Constitution and Ordinances, the better to protect our persons, property, lives, and liberties, and to govern our actions (4).

This was a clear statement of Brown's opposition to slavery and his dedication to equality. Yet for Brown, it was not words, but actions, that seared his name into the pantheon of American history. Speaking to the community of former slaves in Canada, Brown announced his plan to invade the American South and foment a slave rebellion using the mountains of western Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Alabama to provide cover for his uprising. It would be this uprising that occupied much of his travel, speaking, and fundraising between 1858 and his death in 1859.

Brown's first overt public action took place in May of 1856. In Kansas, Brown led a group of men on a raid that killed five proslavery men along the Pottawatomie Creek. Though Brown claimed not to have participated in the actual murders, the brutality of the act has come to symbolize the violence that struck Kansas territory as a result of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. Violence as a tool for change was again employed by Brown in 1858 in Missouri. Brown entered Vernon County, just across the Kansas border, and attacked several proslavery farmers, stole horses and wagons, and secured the freedom of eleven enslaved persons. His raid led to the deaths of several farmers, and consequently a bounty of \$250 was placed on his head by President James Buchanan and his name was splashed over newspapers across the nation. After traveling more than a thousand miles over eighty-plus days, Brown delivered the newly liberated former-slaves into the hands of Canada and freedom.

Secretly funded by six abolitionists from Massachusetts, armed with thousands of pikes purchased in Connecticut, driven by his deep disdain for slavery, and supported by twenty-one other men, Brown headed to western Maryland to reconnoiter for his final attempt to foment a rebellion aimed at destroying the institution of slavery. The raid on the federal arsenal in Harper's Ferry, Virginia was initiated on the evening of October 16, 1859. In what quickly developed into a rout, more than half of Brown's followers were killed and the remaining eight, including Brown, were captured the following day. Indicted, found guilty, and sentenced to die, John Brown was hanged in Charlestown, Virginia on December 2, 1859