

# Remembering the Raid on Harper's Ferry An Action that Set the Stage for the U.S. Civil War

Abolitionist John Brown organized a small band of men to invade Harper's Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), a slaveholding state, and capture a federal arsenal. On October 16, 1859 his men raided the arsenal. Many were killed during the attack and the few remaining were captured by the military before they could equip a larger slave uprising.

John Brown was clearly guilty of treason. He was quickly sentenced to death for murder and conspiracy and was hanged on December 2, 1859. At the gallows, Brown handed his guard a slip of paper that read, "I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood."

Although the raid on Harper's Ferry failed and was publically opposed by a majority of Northerners, the South—already fearful of slave insurrections—were now convinced abolitionists would stop at nothing to put an end to slavery.

In an editorial, a contemporary southern newspaper, the *Richmond Enquirer*, seemed to forecast the inevitability of the war between the states with its words. "The Harper's Ferry invasion has advanced the cause of disunion more than any other event that has happened since the formation of the Government..."

After the war, Brown's friend and fellow abolitionist Frederick Douglass said in a speech, "Did John Brown fail? John Brown began the war that ended American slavery and made this a free Republic. His zeal in the cause of my race was far greater than mine. I could live for the slave, but he could die for him."

For more info go to the National Park Service's site at [www.nps.gov/articles/john-browns-raid.htm](http://www.nps.gov/articles/john-browns-raid.htm)

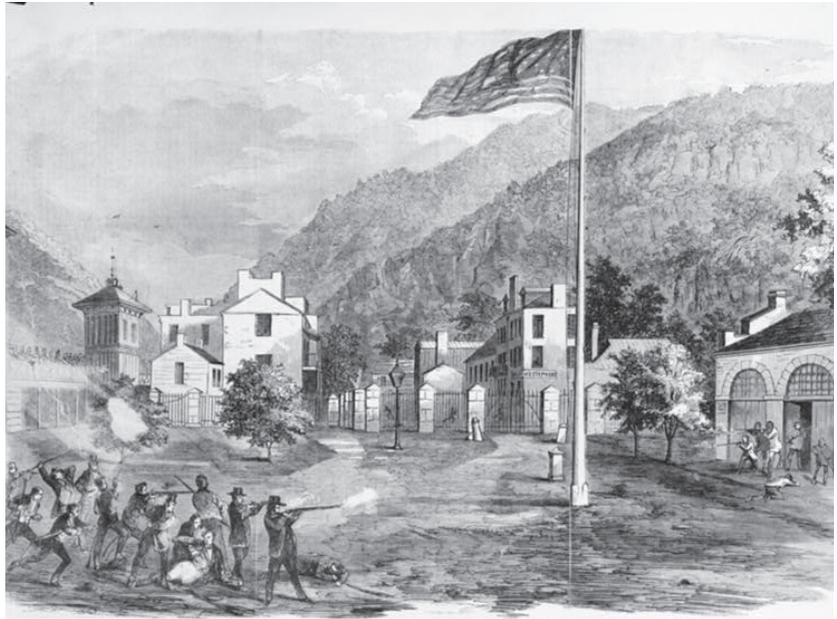


Image of Frank Leslie's illustrated newspaper, Nov. 5 1859 showing Harper's Ferry insurrection - the battle ground - Captain Alberts' party attacking the insurgents - view of the railroad bridge, the engine-house, and the village. Source: Library of Congress

## Newspaper Activities:

- Review several editorials in this newspaper then in the same style, write an argument in defense of, or in opposition to, the actions of John Brown at Harper's Ferry.
- The woodcut illustration above depicts some of the fighting between the factions during the raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859. Look for an action picture in today's newspaper. How does each image tell at least part of the story it's illustrating?

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