

JOHN BROWN: Abolitionist Hero or Cold-blooded  
Killer

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For TAH Seminar, *A More Perfect Union-Year Two*

September 15, 2010

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The Abolitionist movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was spear headed by a man named William Lloyd Garrison. He was a leader in the Antislavery Society, and tried wholeheartedly to push his antislavery agenda. He believed that the Society should not align itself with any particular political party, that women should be allowed to participate, that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document, and that words rather than violent action would be the true way for the movement to break the chains of bondage. Still, there were many in the Antislavery Society that did not agree with Garrison's beliefs. By 1840, a great rift developed resulting in the formation of two more abolitionist organizations, the Liberty Party, and the American and Foreign Antislavery Society. Even Garrison's protege Frederick Douglass, decided that Garrison's apolitical stance was a detriment to the cause. Douglass struck out on his own to argue that the Constitution, was at its core an antislavery document. They all believed that slavery was morally wrong, and should be abolished, but the schism shed light on the fact that many could not agree on the best way to end the greatest of our social ills.

During this time period more radical members of the abolitionist movement seemed to come to light. One historical figure that stands as a symbol of this fraction is the legendary John Brown. Born in Torrington, Connecticut to an extremely devout Christian family, who were staunch abolitionists. From a young age John was taught that slavery was a moral wrong. As Brown grew up and moved across the country to multiple places he tried various business ventures; from farming, to owning a tannery, from a wool merchant to a land speculator. Never very wise in the business sense, none of these

endeavors proved to be very successful. Despite his setbacks, the one constant that seemed to pervade through-out his life was his dedication to the eradication of slavery.

He took part in the Underground Railroad, and even established the League of Gileadites, a society that helped escaped slaves avoid those who were out to capture them. Brown also moved his family to the predominantly black community of North Alba, New York where he vowed to help the struggling families there learn how to better farm the land. Hence, he was essentially living amongst, and socializing with the black families in North Alba. This was something that was rarely seen in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Frederick Douglass said of John Brown, "though a white gentleman, [Brown] is 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." Nevertheless, very little attention was paid towards Brown's contributions to the abolitionist movement, until he followed his five sons to the turmoil filled Kansas territory.

It was in Kansas that pro-slavery factions terrorized those that supported the free soil movement. When the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed in 1854, it dictated that the free/slavery issue would be voted upon by the people that inhabited the territory. This led to great violence amongst the citizens. Brown's sons, being free-soil, found themselves caught directly in the cross fire. In retaliation for their treatment and the attack of the free-soil town of Lawrence, Brown led a small group of men to the homes of pro-slavery settlers in Pottawatomie Creek. By the end of the incident, five men had been taken from their homes and killed. The leader, would later say that he approved of the actions, but had not actually taken part in the killings. Still his legend started to grow. It was evident

that he believed, that actions spoke louder than words. If it was God's will, he would fight slavery with the “sword”. It was now that Brown received attention around the country, especially in the abolitionist North.

Building off this popularity, Brown traveled for two years through-out all of New England, in the hopes that he could raise the funding and the weapons to bring his war on slavery directly to the South. Ultimately, it would be a group of men called the “Secret Six” that funded Brown in his next endeavor. He had become a powerful player, albeit controversial one in the fight against slavery. This status was sealed when he, and 21 other men attempted to raid the arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. It was their hope that they could arm slaves with the weapons they took. Despite the fact that the raid was thwarted, and John Brown ultimately was put to death for his part in the raid, he would eventually be seen as a hero by many northerners who supported the abolitionist cause. Still he has been called many things, from saint to sinner, from hero to cold-blooded killer. The debate over the man, his moral character, and his motivations, still continues to garner our attention today. It has been said after-all that it was his actions that led to the break-out of the Civil War. Perhaps, he did not fire the first shot at Fort Sumter, but his raid at Harper's Ferry ended any veiled attempt to compromise on the issue of slavery.

## SUMMARY

The following lesson is designed to help students explore the differing viewpoints that were found amongst those in the abolitionist movement. Using John Brown as a case study, students will be exposed to the more radical use of violence in order to make change. Through this examination students will be asked to analyze the actions of John Brown and critically connect it to their own thoughts and feelings on abolitionism, as well as other passionate causes. During the process, documentary film, and primary sources will be used to help the students develop the fundamental skills to successfully build a comprehensive, organized and well thought out argument in defense or prosecution of John Brown's actions.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **Learn** and be able to **recognize** the varying viewpoints of abolitionists on how to solve the issue of slavery in America.
- **Examine** primary sources, and documentary film to enhance their understanding of the life of John Brown and the opinion of others as it applies to the issue of slavery.
- **Participate** thoughtfully in classroom discussions, using the readings, documents and film.
- **Prepare** and hold a trial of John Brown, applying what they have learned.
- **Compose** a persuasive essay, which uses their own **analysis**, to **summarize** their own opinion of John Brown's actions.

## ALIGNMENT WITH MASS. STATE FRAMEWORKS

### *U.S. History I Learning Standards*

1. **USI.31** Describe the formation of the abolitionist movement, the roles of various abolitionists, and the response of southerners and northerners to abolitionism. (H)
2. **USI.35** Describe how the different economies and cultures of the North and South contributed to the growing importance of sectional politics in the early 19th century. (H)
3. **USI.36** Summarize the critical developments leading to the Civil War. (H)
  - A. the Missouri Compromise (1820)
  - B. the South Carolina Nullification Crisis (1832–1833)
  - C. the Wilmot Proviso (1846)

D. the Compromise of 1850

E. the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

**F. the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854)**

G. the Dred Scott Supreme Court case (1857)

H. the Lincoln-Douglas debates (1858)

**I. John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry (1859)**

J. the election of Abraham Lincoln (1860)

## **RATIONAL**

This lesson plan is designed to take 4-5 days depending on teacher preference and individual curriculum and time constraints. In terms of context, this lesson would best be taught after comprehensive discussion and learning on the formation of the abolitionist movement, and the sectional issues that started to grow between the North and the South involving, westward expansion, economics, and slavery.

## **PROCEDURE**

### ***Day One: Varying Abolitionist Viewpoints***

1. For homework the night before have the students read the hand-out "**I Will Be Heard**". This is in preparation for the Venn Diagram Activity on Day One.
2. Teacher should start the class leading a brief discussion of the previous nights reading. Ask the students the following question: Even if people want the same outcome, can they have very different opinions on how to get to the same resolution? If so, can they give any examples from modern times?
3. Teacher should distribute the hand-out **Abolitionists Venn Diagram**. Students will then individually complete the diagram, using the reading and knowledge they had gained from the previous nights homework, and other prior lessons. Give the students around 10 minutes to complete.
4. The class will then re-group and discuss the results of the Venn Diagram. Compare and contrast the beliefs of William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown. Where did they agree and where did they disagree?
5. To conclude the class teacher should distribute the hand-out **John Brown's Holy War Pre-Viewing Assignment**. Students should start the assignment in class and finish the rest for HOMEWORK.

### ***Day Two and Three: John Brown's Holy War***

1. Teacher will open class by collecting the hand-out **John Brown's Holy War Pre-Viewing Assignment**.
2. Teacher will distribute the hand-out **John Brown's Holy War: Graphic Organizer**. The students will use the graph to organize the facts they receive during the documentary. The organizer can also be used in later assignments and classroom activities.
3. Watch the documentary ***John Brown's Holy War***, produced by American Experience. The film will last a total of 60 minutes.

### ***Day Three: John Brown's Holy War continued...***

1. Continue viewing ***John Brown's Holy War***. Should only take about 20 minutes to complete the documentary.
2. At the conclusion of the film, make sure that each student has been able to complete their graphic organizer. For those students missing examples, ask other students to discuss what facts might fit into a particular category.
3. Teacher should then help the students organize for the following days activity; a trial of John Brown. Ask a few students to play the roles of the people that will testify in the next days trial. Five students will be needed to play these individual roles.
4. Teacher should distribute the hand-out **John Brown: Just or Unjust** to the five student volunteers. Assign each volunteer a specific role: John Brown, Mahala Doyle, Ellen Watkins, Henry David Thoreau, a Richmond "Whig" reporter. They will be giving testimony the following day during the trial. They will have to read the primary source excerpts for homework to prepare for their testimony.
5. As a class discuss that the following days activity will be to put John Brown on Trial. Explain to the class that they will be acting as the jury.

### ***Day Four/ Day Five: The Trial of John Brown***

1. Prior to the start of class, set-up the classroom as courtroom. Include the following: witness stand, judge's bench (teacher sits here), seats for witnesses on the side of the defense, seats for the witnesses for the prosecution. The rest of the class will be seated so they can clearly oversee the testimony.
2. As the students enter, the teacher should usher the students into the appropriate spot.
3. The testimony can then begin. The teacher can act as the lawyer and ask specific questions of the witnesses.
4. Students should be encouraged to take notes during the testimony, so they might be able to make a more informed decision on the outcome of the trial.
5. Once testimony is complete, teacher should distribute the **Ballot**, and have the class vote on John Brown's guilt or innocence.

6. Teacher should then count the ballots and reveal the outcome of the trial to the class. Hold a brief discussion as to why the students believe John Brown was found guilty or innocent.

### **ASSESSMENT/ RUBRIC**

To assess students' comprehension of this lesson, teacher's can assign an essay in response to the following questions:

***In a 3-5 page paper, respond to the following prompt:***

Using evidence from primary and secondary sources (film) discuss John Brown's zealotry. How did his childhood and family affect him? In what ways was he compassionate? Brutal? What were his goals for society? For his family? Did his ends justify his means? How does one account for his widely varying actions?

# Historical Essay Writing Rubric

Level	Criteria
<b>4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well-developed thesis directly addressing the topic.</li> <li>• Persuasive analysis of the topic, addressing all parts of the topic; analysis demonstrates thorough understanding of all sides of a question (as appropriate).</li> <li>• Outstanding grasp of general historical issues raised by topic.</li> <li>• Numerous specific examples demonstrate detailed knowledge of relevant history.</li> <li>• Extremely well organized, with a clear introduction, argument, and conclusion.</li> <li>• Well written in appropriate standard English; few grammatical errors or colloquialisms</li> </ul>
<b>3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear thesis addressing the topic.</li> <li>• Good analysis of the topic, addressing most parts of the topic; analysis demonstrates understanding of all sides of a question (as appropriate), though may be unevenly developed.</li> <li>• Good grasp of general historical issues raised by topic.</li> <li>• Several specific examples demonstrate good knowledge of relevant history.</li> <li>• Well organized, with an introduction, argument, and conclusion.</li> <li>• Clearly written in appropriate standard English; some grammatical errors or colloquialisms.</li> </ul>
<b>2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thesis indicates some aspect of the topic; more a restatement of than a point about the topic.</li> <li>• Analysis of the topic, addressing most parts of the topic; analysis adequate but unevenly developed.</li> <li>• Some grasp of general historical issues raised by topic, though some significant issues may be omitted.</li> <li>• Some specific examples demonstrate knowledge of relevant history; some clearly relevant examples omitted.</li> <li>• Contains at least two of the following: introduction, argument, and conclusion; organization may be somewhat unclear.</li> <li>• Understandable, but contains several grammatical errors or colloquialisms.</li> </ul>
<b>1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No discernible thesis and/or serious misunderstanding of the topic.</li> <li>• Descriptive rather than analytical; marginally related to the topic; significant logical gaps.</li> <li>• Little grasp of general historical issues raised by topic.</li> <li>• Few and/or erroneous specific examples demonstrate little knowledge of relevant history.</li> <li>• Poorly organized: no clear introduction, argument, or conclusion.</li> <li>• Pattern of grammatical errors and/or inappropriate colloquialisms.</li> </ul>

## **ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY & FURTHER RESOURCES**

The following resources were used in the creation of this lesson. They also offer background information for teachers preparing to teach this lesson or other relevant lesson plans and activities.

### **BOOKS and ARTICLES**

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. New York: Dover Publications Inc. , 1995.

Finkelman, Paul. *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the raid on Harper's*

*Ferry*, "Manufacturing Martyrdom: The Antislavery Response to John Brown's Raid". Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1995.

Howe, Daniel Walker. *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007

Kolchin, Peter. *American Slavery 1619-1877*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993.

### **FILM**

Kenner, Robert. *The American Experience: John Brown's Holy War*. Boston: WGBH Educational Foundation, 2000.

### **WEBSITES**

[The American Experience: John Brown's Holy War](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/index.html)  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/index.html>

This site works in conjunction with the American Experience documentary of the same name. It makes available to educators, maps, biographies of key figures, a time line, and a teacher's guide that coincide with the documentary.

[I Will be Heard: Abolitionism In America](http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/abolitionism/) <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/abolitionism/>

This site provides an overview of the abolitionist movement and divides the many facets of the movement into different themes. Easy to use in the classroom, this site is organized well and navigates easily.

The African American Mosaic <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam005.html>

This site is a Library of Congress resource guide for the study of Black History and Culture. Items that can be found in this collection include newspapers, periodicals, sermons, children's publications, speeches, abolitionist society reports, broadsides, and memoirs of former slaves. It has a wealth of primary source documents, which would enhance a lesson of the Pre-Civil War period.

Africans In America <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html>

This site was built to coincide with the PBS documentary of the same name. It offers a wealth of information, including a massive collection of primary source documents, that are offered by time period, since the documentary was divided into four specific films.

Territorial Kansas Online [http://www.territorialkansasonline.org/~imlskto/cgi-bin/index.php?SCREEN=bio\\_sketches/brown\\_john](http://www.territorialkansasonline.org/~imlskto/cgi-bin/index.php?SCREEN=bio_sketches/brown_john)

This site, offers a biographical sketch of John Brown. It provides access to 75 individual primary resources, predominantly letters and photographs that provide an inside look at the life of John Brown. It specifically looks at his life in the Kansas Territory.

American Memory <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>

This site put together by the Library of Congress, offers 17 different collections on African American History, multiple resources on the abolitionist movement, as well as primary, and secondary sources on John Brown.

# DAY ONE ACTIVITIES

# “I Will Be Heard” : Famous Abolitionists

From Cornell University Library

In the 1830s, American abolitionists, led by Evangelical Protestants, gained momentum in their battle to end slavery. Abolitionists believed that slavery was a national sin, and that it was the moral obligation of every American to help eradicate it from the American landscape by gradually freeing the slaves and returning them to Africa.. Not all Americans agreed. Views on slavery varied state by state, and among family members and neighbors. Many Americans—Northerners and Southerners alike—did not support abolitionist goals, believing that anti-slavery activism created economic instability and threatened the racial social order.

But by the mid-nineteenth century, the ideological contradictions between a national defense of slavery on American soil on the one hand, and the universal freedoms espoused in the Declaration of Independence on the other hand, had created a deep moral schism in the national culture. During the thirty years leading up to the Civil War, anti-slavery organizations proliferated, and became increasingly effective in their methods of resistance. As the century progressed, branches of the abolitionist movement became more radical, calling for the immediate end of slavery. Public opinion varied widely, and different branches of the movement disagreed on how to achieve their aims. But abolitionists found enough strength in their commonalities—a belief in individual liberty and a strong Protestant evangelical faith—to move their agenda forward.

***DIRECTIONS: Please read the following descriptions of William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown. You will be asked to complete an assignment that will compare and contrast the varying viewpoints of these three men.***

William Lloyd Garrison

William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879), the lightning rod of the abolitionist movement, promoted “moral suasion,” or nonviolent and non-political resistance, to achieve emancipation. Although he initially supported colonization, Garrison later gave his support to programs that focused on immediate emancipation without repatriation. In 1831, he began publishing *The Liberator*, the single most important abolitionist publication, and later led the American Anti-Slavery Society. His vociferous language and his very presence outraged anti-abolitionist Northerners who attacked him, sometimes physically, with mob-driven violence. His avid support for a woman’s right to participate in the movement and his attack on the American Constitution as a pro-slavery document created irretrievable divisions in the abolitionist movement. However, his unflinching conviction and his influence in promoting “immediatism” shaped the course of abolitionism in America.

### *Frederick Douglass*

As a lecturer, writer, editor and ex-slave, Frederick Douglass (ca. 1818-1895) emerged as the most prominent African American of the nineteenth century to fight for racial justice. Under Garrison’s mentorship, Douglass adopted “moral suasion” as an abolitionist strategy. Impatient with this approach, Douglass later broke from Garrison, believing that political activism was the only way to achieve freedom. Although vehement in his rhetoric, Douglas refused to use violence. Indeed, he refused to defend or take part in John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry. Douglass wrote three autobiographies, edited four newspapers, lectured nationally and internationally, and recruited black soldiers for the Civil War. He advised and pressured Lincoln to make slavery the single most important issue of the Civil War and remained committed to integration and civil rights for all Americans throughout his life.

### *John Brown*

In 1859, with the financial support of six wealthy abolitionists, militant John Brown attempted an insurrection against the federal armory at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. He believed the raid would incite a major slave revolt, but when it failed, he was tried and hanged for treason. Most abolitionists disagreed with his tactics, but they greatly admired his strong convictions and his calm eloquence at his trial and execution. Ralph Waldo Emerson described Brown as “The Saint whose fate yet

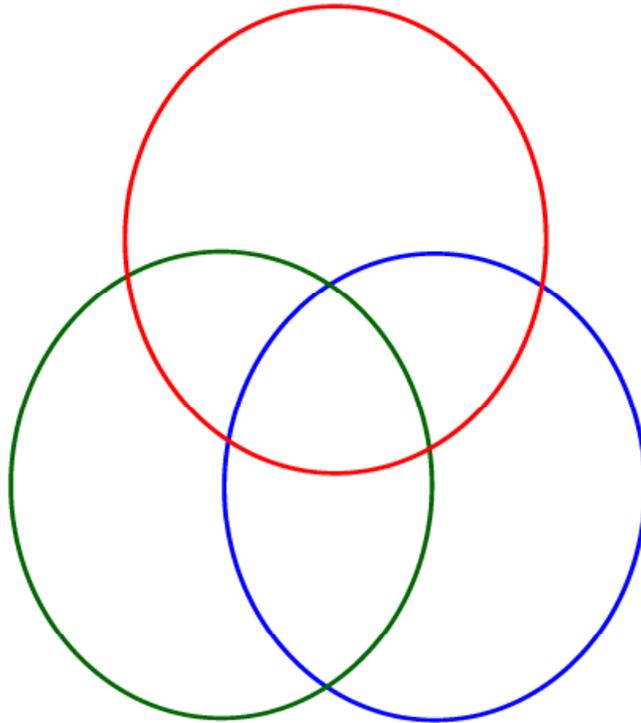
hangs in suspense, but whose martyrdom, if it shall be perfected, will make the gallows glorious like the Cross.”

## Abolitionists Venn Diagram

***DIRECTIONS:*** Please read the following list of descriptions and place the corresponding numbers in the appropriate places on the

***Venn Diagram. Remember some views may be shared by two or more of the abolitionists.***

1. Believed that the political process should be used to try and gain emancipation for all slaves in the United States.
2. Believed slavery was a national sin, and it was America's moral obligation to put an end to the horrific practice.
3. Believed violence and physical action was necessary, in order to free the slaves in America.
4. Attacked the U.S. Constitution as a pro-slavery document, and argued for female participation in the abolitionism.
5. Did not believe that violence should be used to gain emancipation for the slaves.
6. Believed his fight against slavery was God's will, and was seen as a martyr by some.



John Brown's Holy War: Pre-Veiwing Assignment



# DAY TWO ACTIVITIES

John Brown's Holy War

**Directions:** Please fill-in the graph below, writing in 4 facts from the documentary that align with the five main topics on John Brown.

Religion	Economic Endeavors	Abolitionist Experiences	Bleeding Kansas	Harper's Ferry and Outcome

# DAY THREE ACTIVITIES

## John Brown: Just or Unjust

**DIRECTIONS: Use the following quotes from primary source documents, to help develop the testimony for your trial of John Brown.**

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## **John Brown's Last Prophecy**

Charlestown, Va, 2nd, December, 1859

I John Brown am now quite **certain** that the crimes of this **guilty, land: will** never be purged **away**; but with Blood. I had **as I now think: vainly** flattered myself that without **very much** bloodshed; it might be done.

(John Brown's last letter, written on day he hanged. From "John Brown: a Biography," by Oswald Garrison Villard.)

## **Letter from Mahala Doyle**

Altho' vengeance is not mine, I confess that I do feel gratified to hear that you were stopped in your fiendish career at Harper's Ferry, with the loss of your two sons, you can now appreciate my distress in Kansas, when you then and there entered my house at midnight and arrested my husband and two boys, and took them out of the yard and in cold blood shot them dead in my hearing. You can't say you done it to free slaves. We had none and never expected to own one...My son John Doyle whose life I begged of you is now grown up and is very desirous to be at Charlestown on the day of your execution.

(A letter sent to John Brown while in jail. From "To Purge This Land with Blood" by Stephen Oates.)

## **Letter from Frances Ellen Watkins**

Nov. 25, 1859

Dear Friend: Although the hands of Slavery throw a barrier between you and me, and it may not be my privilege to see you in the prison house, Virginia has no bolts or bars through which I dread to send you my sympathy...I thank you that you have been brave enough to reach out your hands to the crushed and blighted of my race. You have rocked the bloody Bastille; and I hope from your sad fate great good may arise to the cause of freedom...

(A letter from Frances Watkins, a free black living in Kendallville, Indiana. From "Freedom's Unfinished Revolution," by William Friedheim and The American Social History Project.)

## **A Plea for Capt. John Brown**

By Henry David Thoreau

I am here to plead his cause with you. I plead not for his life, but for his character, - his immortal life; and so it becomes your cause wholly, and is not his in the least. Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; his is an angel of light.

(Read to the citizens of Concord, Mass., Sunday Evening, October 30, 1859.)

## **Richmond "Whig" Newspaper Editorial**

Though it convert the whole Northern people, without an exception, into furious, armed abolition invaders, yet old Brown will be hung! That is the stern and irreversible decree, not only of the authorities of Virginia, but of the PEOPLE of Virginia, without a dissenting voice. And, therefore, Virginia, and the people of Virginia, will treat with the contempt they deserve, all the craven appeals of Northern men in behalf of old Brown's pardon. The miserable old traitor and murderer belongs to the gallows, and the gallows will have its own

(Richmond "Whig" newspaper editorial quoted in the "Liberator", Nov. 18, 1859. From "John Brown: a Biography," by Oswald Villard)

## **John Brown Writes From Jail**

Charlestown, Jefferson County, VA, Nov. 1, 1859

My Dear Friend E. B. of R. I. :

You know that Christ once armed Peter. So also in my case, I think he put a sword into my hand, and there continued it, so long as he saw best, and then kindly took it from me. I mean when I first went to Kansas. I wish you could know with what cheerfulness I am now wielding the "Sword of the Spirit" on the right hand and on the left. I bless God that it proves "mighty to the pulling down of strongholds." I always loved my Quaker friends, and I commend to their kind regard my poor, bereaved widowed wife, and my daughters and daughters-in-law, whose husbands fell at my side. One is a mother and the other likely to become so soon. They, as well as my own sorrow-stricken daughter[s], are left very poor, and have much greater need of sympathy than I, who, through Infinite Grace and the kindness of strangers, am "joyful in all my tribulations."

Your friend,

**John Brown**

(From "John Brown: a Biography," by Oswald Villard)

## DAY FOUR/FIVE ACTIVITIES

### *John Brown: Just or Unjust*

BALLOT: Please check off guilty or not guilty depending on your opinion in this case. You will be asked to justify your vote in an essay.

\_\_\_\_\_ GUILTY \_\_\_\_\_ NOT GUILTY

John Brown: Just or Unjust

BALLOT: Please check off guilty or not guilty depending on your opinion in this case. You will be asked to justify your vote in an essay.

\_\_\_\_\_ GUILTY \_\_\_\_\_ NOT GUILTY

John Brown: Just or Unjust

BALLOT: Please check off guilty or not guilty depending on your opinion in this case. You will be asked to justify your vote in an essay.

\_\_\_\_\_ GUILTY \_\_\_\_\_ NOT GUILTY

John Brown: Just or Unjust

BALLOT: Please check off guilty or not guilty depending on your opinion in this case. You will be asked to justify your vote in an essay.

\_\_\_\_\_ GUILTY \_\_\_\_\_ NOT GUILTY