

TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT

Lesson Title – John Brown: Hero or Villain from the Perspective of Era Newspaper Articles by Spiro Mandes

Grade – 11th

Length of class period – 43 minutes (2 periods if all ten articles are included)

Inquiry – (What essential question are students answering, what problem are they solving, or what decision are they making?)
Should American History consider John Brown a hero or a villain?

Objectives (What content and skills do you expect students to learn from this lesson?)
Student will examine a series of newspaper articles beginning on November 30th, 1859 through December 09, 1859 (Brown execution was Dec. 02, 1859).
Students will analyze these articles and create a list (through t-chart) comparing and contrasting arguments supporting John Brown as a hero and arguments as a villain.
Through discussion and writing, students will determine for themselves if John Brown should be considered a hero in American history or a villain.

Materials (What primary sources or local resources are the basis for this lesson?)

All articles can be located at end on this lesson and were obtained from Furman University Department of History, Secession Era Editorial Project. The following articles are included *(you may use some or all)...

- 1). From the Philadelphia Press. Albany, New York, *Evening Journal* [Republican] (30 November 1859).
- 2). The Reign of Terror. - Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, *Gazette* [Republican] (30 November 1859).
- 3). The Fatal Friday. Chicago, Illinois, *Press and Tribune* [Republican] (2 December 1859).
- 4). No Title. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, *Gazette* [Republican] (3 December 1859).
- 5). EXECUTION OF JOHN BROWN. Raleigh, North Carolina, *Register* [Opposition] (3 December 1859).
- 6). Our Harper's Ferry and Charlestown News. Cincinnati, Ohio, *Enquirer* [Democratic] (3 December 1859).
- 7). An Insurrection Without Negroes. Cincinnati, Ohio, *Enquirer* [Democratic] (4 December 1859).

8). What Shall the South Do? Wilmington, North Carolina, *Daily Herald* [Opposition] (5 December 1859).

9). The Execution of Brown. Raleigh, North Carolina, *Register* [Opposition] (9 December 1859).

10). The Martyr's Death and the Martyr's Triumph. New York, *Tribune* [Republican] (9 December 1859).

11). Paper or notebook and writing utensil.

Activities (What will you and your students do during the lesson to promote learning?)

Ten articles have been included. Depending on class size, length of period, student ability and course level, some or all of these articles may be used.

1). Students will be arranged in pairs and given 2 copies of all ten articles (or a selection from the list). They will read the articles and fill out a student generated t-chart in their notebook. On one side, students will record information that suggests, implies, or simply states John Brown was a hero. On the other side, students/pairs will record information revealing him as the villain. Allow about 20 minutes to complete this portion. Don't rush the students, however, encourage them to work quickly- they don't need to have every point written on the t-chart.

2). For the following 15 to 20 minutes, hold a whole-class discussion about John Brown. Begin the discussion with the injury question in mind: Based on these articles, *should American History consider John Brown a hero or a villain?* Obviously, responses will vary as there is evidence to support both positions.

3). Spend the last few minutes of class explaining the homework (and assessment) for the evening- that is- a persuasive essay addressed to the editors of your textbook. Pass out and discuss a short writing prompt like the following....

"The editors of your textbook are revising the chapter that includes John Brown. They are unsure if they should portray him as an American hero fighting to end slavery or a murderous madman who would do anything, no matter how wrong, to accomplish his goal. Write a persuasive letter to the editors of your textbook that details how John Brown should be portrayed in the new edition of the textbook."

How will you assess what student learned during this lesson?

1). Informal based on both t-charts and whole-class discussion

2). Formal assessment based on the essays completed (See #3 from activities).

Connecticut Framework Performance Standards –

- Formulate historical questions and hypotheses from multiple perspectives using multiple sources

- Use primary source documents to analyze multiple perspectives
- Gather, analyze and reconcile historical information, including contradictory data, from primary and secondary sources to support or reject hypotheses

Secession Era Editorials Project
Furman University Department of History

<http://history.furman.edu/editorials/sec.py?ecode=papgb591203a>

From the Philadelphia Press.

Albany, New York, *Evening Journal* [Republican] (30 November 1859).

We do not believe there is any purpose, such as the Enquirer intimates, to attempt the rescue of John Brown on the 2d of December. We do not believe that any body of men would make such an experiment, especially in view of the somewhat formidable preparations of the military of the gallant State. John Brown will meet his fate, whether as a bad man or as a madman, with comparative little sympathy. Our own belief is that he should not be executed; but if the seeds of future excitement are planted on his tomb, we do not doubt it will be found that they were placed there as well by his Southern enemies as by his Northern sympathizers.

Whatever of sympathy the fate of John Brown awakens, will be occasioned by his bearing through an ordeal so trying, rather than any complicity of feeling in his lawless enterprise. Upon the question whether he had any right to go there with such intentions, or whether, when taken, he ought to be punished, there is no general difference of opinion or sentiment. Though we "would that all men" were Free, we should as readily go to Virginia to run off their Horses and Cattle, as their Slaves. By the Constitution and Laws, Slavery is recognized and tolerated. It was a compact made by our Fathers, and one that binds their heirs. We will oppose both its extension and its encroachments. Thus far, and no farther, goes our sense of duty to Freedom.

John Brown seems to have counted the cost of his enterprise; and, like a brave man, is prepared to meet his fate. Since the day that Paul spoke to Agrippa, we have read nothing more truly sublime than John Brown's response to the Tribunal before which he stood to receive Sentence of Death.

The "pomp and circumstance of War" with which the execution of Brown is to be surrounded, was wholly unnecessary. The rescue rumors were entirely unfounded. All this display of Troops is for effect. Gov. Wise intends to make what capital can be made out of this Execution.

We agree with the "*Press*" in the opinion that in this case *forbearance* would be *wisdom*, though neither John Brown or his Family ask it. But Gov. Wise is entitled to and means to insist upon all that is "nominated in the bond." And John Brown, imbued with the conviction that "hanging is the best use" that can be made of him, calmly awaits his day and hour of doom.

The Reign of Terror.--

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, *Gazette* [Republican] (30 November 1859).

Free speech is now denied at the South. Every man who opens his mouth to utter a word of sympathy for old Brown, or dares to advance a single sentiment favorable to liberty, is at once arrested and committed to prison. Men have been thus imprisoned for saying that they voted for Fremont in 1856; that old Brown

was right; that slavery was wrong; and a man has been compelled to give \$2000 bail to keep the peace, in Washington City, for saying that he believed in the doctrine of the "irrepressible conflict."

It would be useless to undertake the enumeration of these cases. The Southern papers are full of them. Every Northern man now in the South is an object of suspicion; many have already been driven off; others have received notice to quit; and the rest are to be harassed with prosecutions for using "seditious language" in giving vent to their natural feelings, doubtless under strong provocation. It is a complete reign of terror. Every man is liable to be an object of suspicion; and he who expects to retain his foothold upon that soil must put a padlock upon his lips, lest some incautious word slip out and thereby endanger "the institution." It is enforced silence, instant departure, or imprisonment; and he who tarries among the hospitable citizens of that chivalrous clime has his choice of those pleasant predicaments. Over the gate at the entrance to the South is written -- "He who enters here leaves all liberty behind."

We do not write to find fault with this state of things. It is the legitimate fruit of Slavery, and it affords an unanswerable argument against the extension of an institution, over free territory, which exacts such submission from its victims. It is impossible for us to free such States as Virginia from her bondage; but we can, at least, save the embryo States from a curse which would reduce them to the level of Virginia.

There is another view of this subject which it behooves the South to take note of -- every man who is thus suspected, driven off or punished for his free speech will become, in the North, a proselyter for free sentiments. They will become, in 1860, the most efficient laborers in the cause of Republicanism. The South had better be careful, or it may send home too many of them.

The Fatal Friday.

Chicago, Illinois, *Press and Tribune* [Republican] (2 December 1859).

John Brown dies to-day! As Republicans, maintaining as we do, that neither individuals nor parties in the North have a right to interfere with slavery where it exists under the sanction of positive law in the States, we cannot say that he suffers unlawfully. The man's heroism which is as sublime as that of a martyr, his constancy to his convictions, his suffering, the disgraceful incidents of his trial, the poltroonery of those who will lead him forth to death, have excited throughout all the North strong feeling of sympathy in his behalf, but no where, within our knowledge, is the opinion entertained that he should not be held answerable, for the legal consequence of his act. As long as we are a part of the Union, consenting to the bond by which the States are bound together, supporting the constitution and the laws, and using the language and entertaining the sentiments of loyalty, we cannot join in the execration of the extreme penalty which the unfortunate and infatuated old man will suffer. We may question the wisdom of the method by which he is punished -- may believe that Virginia would have added to her honor and confounded her enemies, by an act of clemency toward him and his associates -- may condemn in unmeasured terms the cowardice and blood-thirstiness which her people have displayed -- but when we question the right of a Sovereign State to inflict a penalty for so glaring and fatal an infraction of her laws, we are advocating disunion in its most objectionable form. For that we are not prepared. We would be glad to avert the axe which hangs over the old man's head, if persuasion and entreaty would do it; but we see no way under Heaven by which, doing our duty as law-abiding citizens, we could counsel the use of force for his rescue, or by which we could join in a crusade against those by whom he has been legally though hastily, and because hastily, shamefully, condemned! We are not debarred, however, the right of praising the inherent though mistaken nobleness of the man, of pitying the fanaticism which led him into his present strait, of regretting that a character which might have been so illustrious in the history of his country, must be loaded with the consequences of his errors.

To our more radical readers these views will be unpalatable; but there are such that Republicans must entertain. When the fanatical action of the South and the accumulated aggressions with which she has afflicted the North, dissolve the ties that hold the North and South together, and when we no longer owe allegiance to the constitution and laws which the propagandists of Slavery have long trodden under their

feet, then we may have reason, upon the broadest principles of human right, to not only bless but aid any work that will assist in the emancipation, by arms if necessary, of every human being on American soil. Until that time comes there is but one course left. That we have pointed out.

We have firm belief that this execution of Brown will hasten the downfall of that accursed system against which he waged war. Throughout all this land, men will not fail to see that there is a conflict between the principles of humanity that have obtained a lodgment in every human heart, and obedience to laws which all have tacitly agreed to support. The shock caused by his death will be more than a nine days wonder. The emotions excited and the reflections provoked by the tragedy, will go to the very foundations of our political structure; and in all parts of the Union men will ask themselves how long this institution which compels men to put to death their fellows like Brown, who act upon motives and for objects that command the approbation of the world, shall be suffered to disgrace the age and the civilization in which we live. The question will reach hearts that have been callous heretofore; and ere many years it will bring the opposing forces which now distract the country -- right on the one side and wrong on the other -- enlightenment and barbarism -- Christianity and Atheism -- Freedom and Slavery -- face to face for a final conflict. We have no apprehension of the result, whenever it comes. The events of to-day, bring it nearer than it has ever been before since the struggle began at Charlestown, Massachusetts, in 1775. It is ours, as it should have been Brown's to labor and wait!

No Title.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Gazette [Republican]

(3 December 1859)

The immolation of John Brown was, in short, in accordance with the philosophy of slavery -- *a necessity*. He had dared to act on the conviction of his life, and these settled principles of his were the only ones which such a man could entertain. He was too brave to have thought differently from what he did, and the same noble impulses which inculcated a love of Freedom and Right, impelled him constantly and irresistibly to the practical development of his theory. He has failed, according to the popular mode of calculating failure and success; but that his life and tragic death must of necessity constitute a failure, is a point too broad and high to be disposed of in this summary manner. We cannot but disapprove his mad and folly-stricken act, but the unselfishness of the deed; his moderation, when victorious, over the town which he captured; his spartan courage in defending himself and his fellows, and his sublime contempt of death while overborne and made the manacled tenant of a prison; his stern integrity in scorning the technicalities of the law, and his manliness *in all things*, will not be quickly forgotten; but rather a contemplation of this heroic old man's character will irresistibly compel thinking men to ask themselves whether it is John Brown, of Ossawatimie, or the system of slavery which has failed in this conflict.

The execution of the old man at Charlestown yesterday, was a plain admission on the part of Slavery that they dare not spare a brave man's life, and that magnanimity is impossible to a system based on wrong and upheld by violence. History will do justice to the institution of Slavery and its uncompromising foe alike, when both are gone; and, in the meantime, the comparison which this affair provokes between the two, which none can clearly foresee, but enough of which is now plainly visible to change the popular judgment. Slavery in all the plenitude of its triumph and power is a failure; and old John Brown of Ossawatimie has succeeded -- Sampson-like -- in dragging down the pillars of Slavery in his fall, and his victory is complete! While millions of prayers went up for the old martyr yesterday, so millions of curses were uttered against the hellish system which so mercilessly and ferociously cried out for his blood. Every heart in which a free spirit throbbed gave utterance to its pent-up agony in contemplating the enormities of this bloody institution -- this sum of all villainies -- in the dispensations of its power and the exactions of its bloody code.

EXECUTION OF JOHN BROWN.

Raleigh, North Carolina, *Register* [Opposition] (3 December 1859).

The chances are ninety-nine in a hundred, that before this paper reaches our subscribers John Brown will have paid the penalty of his crimes on the gallows, and gone to render an account of his life to that Being who says "thou shalt do no murder."

While we have not the slightest fear that any attempt has been made to rescue Old Brown, we are not without painful apprehensions that among such a large body of inexperienced and excited soldiery, mischief has happened from the incautious use of fire arms.

It is to be hoped, with Brown's exit from the world, the excitement at the North will subside. But we must confess that this hope is but of the faintest character. Fanaticism at the North is rampant, and overrides every thing. On yesterday, the godly city of Boston, built up and sustained by the products of negro slave labor, went into mourning, fasting and prayer, over the condign punishment of a negro stealer, murderer and traitor, and from fifty pulpits the Praise-God-Bare-bones belched forth volumes of blasphemy and treason.

In all the Noo England towns and villages, we may expect to hear that mock funerals have been celebrated, and all kinds of nonsensically lugubrious displays made. (It is a pity that they haven't a witch or two to drown or burn, by way of variety.) We hope that Gov. Wise will have the gallows on which Brown was hung burned, and give notice of the fact. Our reasons for this wish is this: The Yankees have no objection to mingling money making with their grief, and they will, unless Brown's gallows is known to have been burned, set to work and make all kinds of jimcracks and notions out of what they will call parts of Old John Brown's gallows and, sell them. Let the rope which choked him, too, be burned and the fact advertised, or we shall see vast quantities of breast pins, lockets and bracelets, containing bits of the "rope which hung Old Brown" for sale. Barnum is already in the market for Old Brown's old clothes, and hopes and expects to make as good a speculation out of them as he did out of his Woolly Horse, and Joyce Heth, "Washington's nurse."

Our Harper's Ferry and Charlestown News.

Cincinnati, Ohio, *Enquirer* [Democratic] (3 December 1859).

Elsewhere we publish a letter and dispatch from our special reporter at Harper's Ferry and Charlestown. They disclose a great state of excitement in Virginia. The arrest of those three merchants on the cars is evidence of the extent to which the authorities of Virginia have deemed it necessary to go for the public safety. But what a great wrong has been inflicted on Virginia by her brethren of the North, that compels her to resort to such extreme measures for her safety. She has done nothing to merit such treatment.

She is now as she was in the days of the Revolution, at the adoption of the Constitution, and has done nothing since to demand worse treatment from the people of the free States than she merited at these periods from those with whom she was laboring for the liberties of the people and the establishment of a National Government. She was slave then; she is no more so now. And the people of the free States have entered into a compact with her not to interfere in her internal domestic affairs, and if any of her slave property escapes, to interpose no obstacle to its return. Why, then, should her peace be threatened, the lives and property of her citizens jeopardized by citizens of the free States?

We rejoice that old BROWN has been hung. He was not only a murderer of innocent persons, but he attempted one of the greatest crimes against society -- the stirring up of a servile and civil war. He has paid the penalty for his crimes, and we hope his fate may be a warning to all who might have felt inclined to imitate his aggressive conduct.

An Insurrection Without Negroes

Cincinnati, Ohio, *Enquirer* [Democratic] (4 December 1859).

It is reported, among the other doings of the late "Old Brown" in his last hours, that he severely reprehended Cook for having falsely informed him that the negroes of Virginia were ready to rise. The prominent idea connected with this piece of information is, that BROWN was mistaken in respect to the disposition of the negroes, and that but for this mistake—which was the result of false intelligence received through one of his associates—he would not have embarked in the affair. It was rather late in the day to produce such a pretense. According to Mrs. BROWN, the notion of slave insurrections was one that had for many years been familiar to her husband. It was he who selected the place where the first attempt was to be made. Before COOK became associated with him a rising was determined upon. Like all men of his order, he assumed as a fundamental fact that all the negroes of the South were groaning in servitude, and only wanting an invitation to throw off their shackles and declare for liberty or death. It is upon this assumption -- to the proof of whose falsity they refuse to listen -- that all Abolition, Anti-slavery and Freesoil operations are based, from such insurrections as that of BROWN to the inflammatory and equally wicked harangues of BEECHER, WHEELLOCK, PHILLIPS and EMERSON, and the milder but not less insidious adjurations of GREELEY, GIDDINGS, SEWARD, CHASE, and their associates and collaborators.

What reply the subordinate made to his commander on the production of this charge does not appear, nor is it of much importance. There is, however, one thing in the circumstances that is not without significance—the admission, by the leader of the movement, that the negroes of Virginia are not insurrectionally inclined.

Old BROWN had spent his life in contemplation of servile insurrection. He had selected the place and devoted many months to the accumulation of the means to give absolute certainty to his first attempt. He had been well supplied with money, and had been able to accumulate all the necessary material. He had as many followers as he deemed necessary, and so far as appears, encountered no impediment in his choice and improvement of the means calculated to insure success. He had been able, without exciting the slightest suspicion, to place his men and munitions precisely where he desired them to be, and at any moment before giving the signal to begin, could have retired, free from all danger or disturbance. In every element but one he was the master of circumstances; and if that were only propitious, he had the right to expect a most complete and triumphant consummation.

Yet the failure was utter and unmitigated. There was not only no insurrection, but no signs nor symptoms of one. The parties in whose favor all this labor, expense and risk were undertaken, all this danger encountered, and all this pain, ignominy and death suffered, were apparently the only ones that took no sort of interest in the affair. The negro stood by an unconcerned spectator of pseudo-insurrection, in which, according to the programme, he should have played the leading character. It is this fact, which, however it may be obscured by a multiplicity of philanthropic common-places, will give to the Harper's Ferry tragedy the aspect of a farce, to remain in history as the bitterest possible satire upon the flummery, grandiloquence and sublimated trash of anti-slavery efforts and literature.

A negro insurrection without negroes will have to stand as one of the great inventions of modern philanthropy. Whether our philanthropists have discovered, in its full length and breadth, the intense and unmitigated absurdity of the one thing, and are throwing in a few extra howls to keep it out of sight of others, or whether it has not yet broken upon their understandings, is more than easy to determine. But the time will come when the transaction will be permitted to appear as it really is: and then, perhaps, we shall be able, without bias, not only to measure the character of Old BROWN, but to get a true estimate of those exceedingly shallow and foolishly mischievous men who are professing to discover the late Harper's Ferry abortion a great event in the progress of abolition.

What Shall the South Do?

Wilmington, North Carolina, *Daily Herald* [Opposition] (5 December 1859).

The chief actor in the affair at Harper's Ferry has expiated his crime upon the gallows. Old Brown has been hanged. What will be the result of this enforcement of the law? Will the effect be salutary upon the minds of the Northern people? Have we any reason to suppose that it will cause them, for one moment only, to pause and reflect upon the course they have persistently followed towards the South and her institutions?

It is useless to disguise the fact, that the entire North and Northwest are hopelessly abolitionized. We want no better evidence than that presented to us by their course in this Harper's affair. With the exception of a few papers (among them we are proud to notice that sterling Whig journal, the *New York Express*.) that have had the manliness to denounce the act as it deserved, the great majority have either sympathized with the offenders, or maintained an ominous silence.

Let us look calmly at the case: A sovereign State, in the peaceful enjoyment of the rights guaranteed by the Constitution, has been invaded by an armed force, not foreign mercenaries, but citizens of the same Confederacy, and her people shot down in the public highways. The question is a natural one -- Why is this thing done? Why is murder and rapine committed? -- And who are the perpetrators? -- The answer is found in the fact, that the State whose territory has thus been invaded, is a Southern State in which the institution of slavery exists according to the law and the gospel; and the actors in the terrible drama were but carrying out the precepts and teachings of our *Northern brethren*. The "irrepressible conflict" between the North and the South then, has already commenced; to this complexion it must come at last. It is useless to talk of the conservatism of the North. Where has there been any evidence of it? Meetings upon meetings have been held for the purpose of expressing sympathy for murderers and traitors; but none, no, not one solitary expression of horror, or disapprobation even, for the crime committed, have we yet seen from any State North of Mason & Dixon's line. And yet they claim to be our brethren, speak the same language, worship the same God. We yield to none in our veneration for the Union, but it is not the Union, now, as our Fathers bequeathed it to us. -- Then, the pulse that throbbed upon the snow-capped mountains of New Hampshire, vibrated along the Gulf and the marshes of the Mississippi; then, there was unison of feeling, brotherly kindness and affection, and the North and the South, in friendly rivalry, strove together how they could best promote the general welfare. Now, all is changed. Do you ask why? Watch the proceedings of Congress, read the publications that are scattered by the North broadcast over the country, listen to the sentiments expressed at nearly all their public gatherings. The stereotyped cry, that these things are the work of fanatics only, will no longer answer; but if it be so, then fanaticism rules the entire North; for what has been the result of the elections held during the past summer? Ask Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut, -- ask Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Iowa, Wisconsin, and even the great State of New York; -- all, all, have given in their adhesion to the "higher law" principle, and the mandate for "irrepressible conflict." Do these things indicate affection, brotherly kindness, Union? There can be no union without affection, -- there can be no Union unless this aggressive policy of the North is stopped.

We confess that we look forward with gloomy apprehension towards the future. If Congress fails to apply the remedy, then it behooves the South to act together as one man -- ship our produce direct to Europe, - import our own goods, -- let the hum of the spinning-wheel be heard in our homes, as in the days of the Revolution, -- manufacture our own articles of necessity or luxury, and be dependent upon the North for -- nothing. If such a course does not produce a different state of affairs, then set us down as no prophet, -- if such a course does not cause the *Conservatives* of the North to give some tangible evidence of their existence, then we must of necessity conclude, that that principle has no lodgment in their midst.

The Execution of Brown.

Raleigh, North Carolina, *Register* [Opposition] (9 December 1859).

We give to-day full accounts of the scenes attending the execution of the traitor, murderer, and thief, John Brown. He died, as he lived, a hardened criminal, and when the wretched confederates shall have paid the penalty of their crimes, we hope that their allies and sympathizers at the North will realize the fact that the South has the power to protect her soil and property, and will exercise it in spite of all the measures which can be levelled at her by the abolitionists and their aiders and abettors.

Much very silly ridicule has been aimed at Gov. Wise for assembling a large military force at Charlestown. He can very well afford to treat it with the contempt it deserves. Had he not assembled that force, an attempt to rescue Brown would have been made, blood would have been spilled, and in the end the Union would have been burst asunder. Gov. Wise lacks a great deal of being an especial favorite of ours, but believing that in the present emergency he has acted properly, we do not hesitate to say so.

The Martyr's Death and the Martyr's Triumph

New York, *Tribune* [Republican] (9 December 1859).

Notwithstanding the inclemency of the weather last evening, a large and attentive congregation assembled in the church of the Puritans, to hear a discourse from Dr. Cheever on the above subject. The reverend gentleman took for his text Matthew x., 27, 28. The tribute which he paid to the character of John Brown was lofty and eloquent. He described the lineage of the martyr, from Peter Brown, one of the Pilgrims of the Mayflower. He showed that God had impersonated His almighty protest against the reigning iniquity of the land in John Brown, and had sent him to throw it in the face of the very perpetrators themselves. He pointed out various reasons for applying the word Martyr to the memory of John Brown, and said that excess had never made a martyr. John Brown's trial was that of a martyr; his deportment was that of a martyr; and like a martyr, he was a man of prayer; and it was a great consolation that God had chosen a Christian man to do justice to the discourse by mere allusion. We understand that the discourse is to be published in pamphlet form -- the profits accruing from the sale of which are to go to the family of John Brown.