

## Civil War Era Module

### Slavery and a Growing Sectional Crisis

John Brown's raid happens in the year 1859 and then the Civil War breaks out in 1861. Northerners and Southerners have been growing apart on the issue of slavery. But the question that has really been dividing Northerners and Southerners at the time that John Brown's raid happens is, what should the ultimate fate of slavery be as the nation expands? New territories are being added. Should they be slave or should they be free?

Northern opinion is very divided. Some just don't want to talk about it. Others think, slavery exists in the Southern states and it's not really our business to touch it there. You can keep it if you already have it, but we don't want to send it anywhere else.

Then there's Southern opinion, which says, we need this institution. It's central to our way of life. Not allowing it to spread first of all goes against the will of God and, second of all, is going to be dangerous. What if we become so outnumbered that all the other states in the Union can get together in Congress and can outlaw slavery.

For many white Northerners, it can be kind of an abstract issue; this isn't something they live with every day. Most white Southerners live among slaves every day, whether or not they actually own any. The institution of slavery is an inherently violent institution.

So for Southerners, the fear of a slave uprising is never absent. When somebody like John Brown, an outsider, a man from the North, comes into the South to incite an uprising of slaves, it sounds like your worst nightmare. That clearly shows that we have to take dramatic steps to protect ourselves. And for some white Southerners, the only step that will really protect us is to separate, to leave the Union.

So John Brown is one man. He's certainly not indicative of majority opinion. He only gets 19 people to help him. The rebellion doesn't work. It lasts less than 36 hours. He's tried and executed. The great uprising, all the slaves flocking to him, that he had envisioned never happened. But its impact shouldn't be underestimated. Because he really does stand for so much of what white Southerners fear by 1860.

Harper's Ferry. He found six wealthy Northeasterners, mostly New Englanders, who thought that they were supporting Kansas who really are the people who financed his raid. They're known as the "Secret Six." He also met with a number of free African American Northern leaders to try and get them to help him recruit men. Frederick Douglass told him that the plan was insane and wouldn't help him. So Brown entered the raid disappointed. He had hoped for more widespread support.

He and some of his sons and some other compatriots, for a grand total of eventually 19 people, rented a farm house in Maryland, just seven miles from Harper's Ferry. His hope was that he would seize this federal armory, the symbol of the United States government, which he blamed for helping to keep slavery. And then slaves from all around would flock to his banner and they would march to the South and free slaves as they went.

They seize the armory without too much difficulty. They do it in the middle of night. Nobody's expecting a raid on Harper's Ferry. But after that, it's a little mysterious as to exactly what Brown thought would happen because he really just stayed put. Probably he was waiting for all of these slaves to rush to his banner and they didn't. So eventually the locals surround Brown.

Brown and his men eventually congregate in one building at the Harper's Ferry arsenal, the engine house.

Meanwhile, local people have contacted the United States military. A force of Marines under Colonel Robert E. Lee comes to Harper's Ferry and is able to capture Brown and his followers. A few of them escape. Some are them killed. Most of them are captured and will go on trial.

That this is certainly not a man who's a hero right away. So you begin to see a shift in newspaper articles when John Brown is hanged. But then you really see a shift as the war progresses. One thing that would be really useful would be to find some newspaper articles about John Brown from those three different times: when the raid first happens; when he is executed; and then the during the war. And I think you'd see a big change in how people thought about John Brown.

I think you might also benefit from looking at the letters that Union soldiers wrote during the war. What did they say about slavery before they go to war? When they first go to war? And after they've been there for a while? For some, there's not a change. Some either always thought slavery should go away. Some never wanted to fight for the end of slavery.

But there's a big group in the middle who really hadn't given the topic a whole lot of thought when they went to war but whose minds changed as a result of being in the South, of seeing slavery. And, also, as they fight the war, they think, if it's slavery that started this war in the first place or if at least without slavery there wouldn't have been a war, then the only way we can assure there will never be another one is to get rid of slavery. So I think soldier's letters will help you see a change in soldiers' views of slavery and also what the relationship between slavery and the war would be.