

Garrison and Ballou on the John Brown Raid at Harper's Ferry

In October 1859, an abolitionist John Brown led a small militia to raid Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. These men captured two slaveowners and emancipated the people they held in bondage. While holding the slaveowners hostage, some in Brown's militia continued on to alert slaves at properties nearby to revolt and join them.

Ten of John Brown's men were killed and another six arrested and subsequently hanged. John Brown was also arrested and hanged. Six others were killed during the raid. This event increased the national tension significantly. The Civil War broke out just 18 months later.

Adin Ballou believed strongly in non-violence. After John Brown's raid on West Virginia, Ballou found himself at odds with almost all of his fellow abolitionists because of his opposition to the use of violence in the cause for abolition.

ADIN BALLOU

In his autobiography, Adin Ballou recounts the meeting held at the Worcester County South Division Anti-Slavery Society, where he witnessed strong support for the raid.

His account of that meeting is below:

“The raid of Brown occurred on the seventeenth of October, 1859, and on the next Sunday, October 23, a special meeting of the Worcester County South Division Anti-Slavery Society was held at Worcester for the purpose of considering and taking action upon the matter.

By reason of the recent decease of its president, Effingham L. Capron, I, as first vice president, was called upon to act as moderator of the proceedings. I had no doubt it was intended on the part of its projectors that the meeting should conduce not alone to more active hostility to the slave power, but to the diversion of the society from its hitherto peaceful channels of operation into those of violence and blood, by eulogizing and glorifying John Brown and his daring exploit.

I determined to meet this aspect of the case at the outset and put myself on record against the scheme, though I had little hope of preventing its consummation. I did so by introducing a series of resolutions reaffirming the peace principles announced in the original organization of the society and insisting on a faithful adherence thereto. These resolutions I defended and illustrated, in several speeches during the day, against a considerable array of opponents, among whom several of my old Non-Resistant brethren stood conspicuous. Though my arguments could not be answered, I was overborne by numbers, my resolutions being laid upon the table and others passed in their stead almost unanimously.

The gist of the adopted ones was contained in the last, to wit:

Resolved, that as Abolitionists we have no disclaimers, no apologies to offer for the recent attempt of certain anti-slavery men at Harper's Ferry to break the rod of the oppressor by the same means by which our revolutionary fathers secured our national independence. On the contrary, while in the absence of all reliable information we are unable to judge of the wisdom of

their measures, we are prompt to avow our cordial sympathy with the spirit and our devout admiration of the heroism of that valiant little band who preferred to die struggling for their country's freedom to living in a land where education is a crime, where marriage and the family relation are trampled in the dust, and where a million women as dally offered in the market for purposes of prostitution.

I contrasted this resolution, when it came to be discussed, with the antislavery declaration and constitutional pledge of 1833, and chose to abide by the old platform, leaving the new heroes of the cause to glory in the sword on their own responsibility.

But where were my high-professing Non-Resistant brethren? Alas, they were shouting with the rest for John Brown and his insurrectionary methods. He had captured them, though himself a captive, wounded and helpless at the feet of the slave power. Brother Stephen S. Foster at the Worcester meeting and elsewhere could stand shoulder to shoulder with Andrew T. Foss, Charles L. Remond,

Thomas W. Higginson, and others, whose voice was still for war, exclaiming, 'I am a Non-Resistant, but not a fool,' and so incite men on to deeds of blood and death. **And - must I write it! - even Brother William Lloyd Garrison, the man who penned the declaration and constitution referred to - who penned the 'declaration of sentiments' adopted by the Peace Convention of 1838, whence sprang the New England Non-Resistance Society - this man became more than an apologist, he became a eulogist of the blood-shedding hero of the Harper's Ferry tragedy.'**

WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON

As noted in the edited version of Ballou's autobiography, he had paraphrased Garrison's speech from that day. It is in its entirety below:

"A word upon the subject of Peace. I am a non-resistant - a believer in the inviolability of human life, under all circumstances; I, therefore, in the name of God, disarm John Brown, and every slave at the South.

But I do not stop there ... I also disarm, in the name of God, every slaveholder and tyrant in the world ... I am a non-resistant, and I not only desire, but have labored unremittingly to effect the peaceful abolition of slavery, by an appeal to the reason and conscience of the slaveholder; yet, as a peace man - an 'ultra' peace man - **I am prepared to say, 'Success to every slave insurrection at the South, and in every slave country.'**

And I do not see how I compromise or stain my peace profession in making that declaration ...I thank God when men who believe in the right and duty of wielding carnal weapons are so far advanced that they will take those weapons out of the scale of despotism, and throw them into the scale of freedom. It is an indication of progress, and a positive moral growth; it is one way to get up to the sublime platform of non-resistance; and it is God's method of dealing retribution upon the head of the tyrant."

JOHN BROWN

Read his last speech, given in November 1859, or watch it [here](#).

BALLOU ON GARRISON

Adin Ballou also recorded Garrison's remarks on the occasion of Brown's execution.

Ballou was frustrated with his friend, and fellow activist, "did not sound much like what he uttered in September 1838." Here, Ballou is referring to the [Declaration of Sentiments Adopted by the Peace Convention \(1838\)](#).

"Mr. Garrison then paid a tribute to the courage and character of Captain Brown. His mission, the speaker alleged, at Harper's Ferry was peaceful. He did not mean to shed blood. And if he had weapons of war, they were only to be put into the hands of slaves that they might defend themselves in retreating to Canada."

"He would that we had the spirit of the Revolution that it might make the Commonwealth too hot to hold them. The speaker was a peace man and therefore disarmed John Brown. He was also a Non-Resistant, but he was emboldened to say, 'Success to every insurrection against slavery here and everywhere?' His heart was always with the oppressed, therefore 'Success to revolution.'"

Sensing a great change in his friend's values, Ballou explained the disconnect with Garrison further in his *Autobiography*:

"I was therefore grieved and disturbed by the speech, dissenting from it and remonstrating against it in the columns of my paper. My old friend's response was brief and decisive. He had 'spoken deliberately' and 'had nothing to take back.'"

"I was in no wise satisfied with his curt rejoinder, having no sympathy whatever with those professed Non-Resistants who vied with avowed pro-war men in paying homage to one whom I could regard only as a well-meaning, misguided, unfortunate zealot. So much for the John Brown episode and my position in reference to and controversy with the Abolitionist leaders concerning it."

"The slaveholders took the insurrection business into their own hands, leaped into the vortex of civil war, and gave these professed peace men the opportunity which many of them seemed to covet of helping on the compulsory abolition of the system of American oppression. Some of them went into the Federal army, others encouraged their sons to enlist, while the more masterly by pen, oratory, and various expedients, urged the war-chariot on its bloody way to victory. And when the victory at length came, they had been converted to the doctrine of the rightfulness of forcible resistance of evil, or to some indefinite conservative peace policy, or to silent indifference upon the whole subject. Scarcely a survivor of the antislavery Insurrectionary Non-Resistants was to be found."