

Introductory Text

Slavery existed in the British North American colonies and the United States for close to 250 years, from the first Africans brought to Virginia in 1619 until the passage of the 13th Amendment in 1865.

How could such an inhumane system persist for so long? Historians have debated the answer to this question for generations. Once initiated, slavery became powerfully entrenched in many aspects of America's culture and economy, and was thus not easily overturned. For African Americans to resist or rebel had serious consequences: loss of one's home, one's family, one's livelihood or even death.

Despite the dangers and uncertainty, slaves, free blacks and white abolitionists did resist slavery in a variety of ways. The enslaved resisted by refusing to work or to work hard, fleeing captivity, using physical violence against slaveholders, and occasionally in organizing rebellions. By the 1800s, free blacks and whites began to oppose slavery as well, publishing anti-slavery newspapers and books, speaking out in churches, and pushing for anti-slavery legislation.

By 1830, states north of the Mason-Dixon Line and Ohio River had gradually eliminated slavery, and northern abolitionists began to advocate the immediate emancipation of the country's remaining three to four million slaves. This triggered a fierce repression of slaves by the South, especially after Nat Turner led a failed slave rebellion in Virginia in 1831. As southerners clung to slavery with greater intensity over the next two decades— and abolitionists and free blacks increasingly came under attack— some abolitionists argued that force had to be met with force. Some believed only a violent slave uprising could, in theory, overturn such a deep-rooted institution.

The most powerful realization of this idea came when John Brown, a white abolitionist, raided the United States National Armory and Arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, on October 16, 1859. Brown and his small band of black and white allies hoped to begin a freedom revolution, but he was captured and within six weeks, tried, and executed.

Brown's raid became a significant factor in the outbreak of the Civil War. The period between his capture and his execution saw wide debate over the methods favored by abolitionists. Some thought

Harpers Ferry / Title Page

Brown's actions too radical; others thought them the only approach that could succeed. The enslaved, the free blacks, and the abolitionists differed in their support of Brown's raid and what tactics the cause should adopt in order to achieve its goal.

You are now invited to participate in that debate, from the perspective of a free black resident of Harper's Ferry. Try to imagine the following:

- it is late 1859.
- John Brown sits in jail convicted of treason awaiting execution.
- Brown's actions have stirred tremendous controversy across the nation and angered people across the South.
- editorials, speeches, and articles reveal many northerners are divided over John Brown's raid. Some condemn Brown's actions, some applaud his actions, and some are unsure what to think.

Lost to history are the thoughts and opinions that African Americans of Harpers Ferry had about this event. It is your task to recreate what those people may have felt. As your character, you will decide what impact John Brown and his raid had on your life, your beliefs, and your thoughts.

To begin, you will design a character for yourself - an African American who lived in or near Harpers Ferry in 1859. Next, you will use primary documents to research the various reactions to John Brown's raid from across the country. Finally, you will write a letter to the editors of the northern newspapers stating your own and your community's opinions on Brown's act of militant resistance and how it furthers the quest for freedom in 1859.