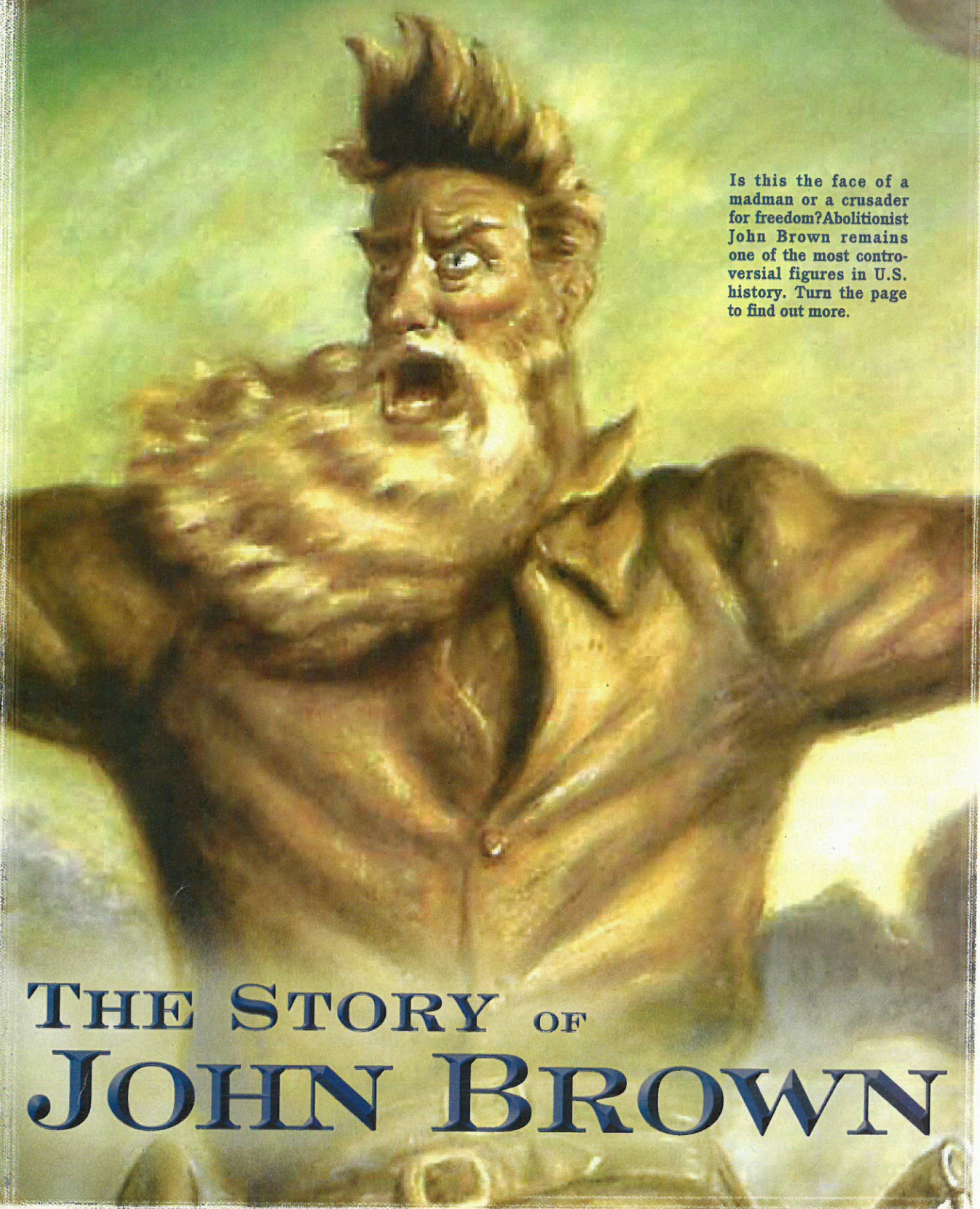


**Current Events**

**Special Report**



Is this the face of a madman or a crusader for freedom? Abolitionist John Brown remains one of the most controversial figures in U.S. history. Turn the page to find out more.

THE STORY OF  
**JOHN BROWN**

In this 1849 engraving, a shackled slave pleads for mercy.



*In the United States in the early 1800s, there was a burning issue that refused to go away and grew more intense with each passing year. That issue was slavery. This is the story of John Brown, who, more than any person, polarized the nation over slavery and set the United States on a course toward civil war. Even today, John Brown remains a controversial figure. To some, he is a hero of conscience. To others, he is a madman and a cold-blooded killer.*

**J**ohn Brown was born on May 9, 1800, to Owen and Ruth Brown of Torrington, Conn. He was brought up strictly and religiously—as a boy, he had memorized every verse of the Bible. When John was 5, his family moved from Connecticut to Hudson, Ohio. There, his father carved out a homestead in what John later remembered as “a wilderness, filled with wild beasts and Indians.”

When he was only 12, John delivered a herd of cattle from Ohio to Michigan through 100 miles of wilderness. At the end of the cattle drive, he stayed at the home of a slave owner. The man was kind to John, but he mercilessly beat his one slave with an iron shovel. John was shocked to the core. To hold other humans in bondage, the boy strongly believed, was a sin against God.

Growing up in this Connecticut farmhouse, young John Brown memorized every verse of the Bible.



### A STRICT FATHER

At age 20, John Brown married Dianthe Lusk and moved to the Pennsylvania wilderness. Before her death in 1832, Dianthe had borne him seven children. Within a year, Brown married Mary Ann Day, with whom he had 13 children. Brown was known as a strict but fair father. “He made me keep an account book of the punishment that was due me,” said his son John Brown Jr. “For disobeying Mother, I got eight lashes with a whip; three lashes for not paying attention to my work; for telling a lie, another eight lashes.” Another son, Jason Brown, remembered a kinder side: “Father would sit in front of a lively fire and take us children, one, two, or three at a time, and sing until bedtime. We loved to hear him sing.”

In 1836, John Brown moved his family to Franklin Mills, Ohio, a center of the antislavery movement. Ohio was directly across the river from Kentucky and slave country, and Brown became a station master on the Underground Railroad. He hid runaway slaves, then guided them in their flight north at the risk of his own life. In 1837, after the brutal murder of an antislavery minister, Brown stood up in church and said, “Here before God, in the presence of these witnesses, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery.” During the next 19 years, he failed at one business after another but never wavered in his conviction that God had chosen him to end the injustice of slavery. At the end



of the 1840s, he moved to New Elba, N.Y., a community of freed slaves.

### BLOODY KANSAS

In 1854, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which gave settlers in those territories the right to decide by majority vote whether they would become free or slave states. Five of Brown's sons

moved to Kansas to vote to make it a free state. On March 30, 1855, pro-slavery forces from Missouri, known as Border Ruffians, invaded Kansas. They seized polling places, voted in their own legislature, and threw into prison any man who spoke against slavery.

John Brown Jr. sent an urgent letter to his father asking for arms to fight the Border Ruffians. The day after he received the letter, John Brown left New Elba, taking every gun he had. "I'm going to Kansas to make it a free state," he told his wife. He joined his sons in a group of cabins they called Brown's Station.

In January 1856, the Border Ruffians set upon an antislavery man and hacked him to death, throwing the mangled body on his ice-covered doorstep. On May 21,

Then he ... led us toward the [pro-slavery] cabins at Pottawatomie Creek."

The cabins were occupied by the Doyles, a pro-slavery family that didn't own any slaves. One of the Doyle women, Mahala, remembered the visit. "[John Brown told us] if a man stood between him and what he considered right, he would take a life as coolly as he would eat his breakfast. With an eye like a snake, he looked like a demon."

### 'MAN ON FIRE'

At the first cabin, Brown's men brutally killed three Doyle men, splitting open their heads and cutting off their arms. Brown himself reportedly watched as if in a trance. When his men were done, he put a bullet through the head of James Doyle. Then the party went to two more cabins, dragging out and killing two more pro-slavery men. They killed five in all.

The murders were as brutal as one can imagine and were to become famous all over the country as the Pottawatomie Massacre. Slaveholding states called for Brown and his men to be hanged, and the Border Ruffians burned Brown's Station to the ground. The massacre ignited all-out war in Kansas between pro-slavery and antislavery forces.

Brown was now a known murderer and fugitive who nevertheless denied that he was a violent man. According to a Scottish reporter, James Redpath, "Old Brown would say that the Lord had directed him in visions; that, for himself, he did not love warfare, but peace."

He traveled north seeking money and arms from antislavery sympathizers. Many treated him not as a fugitive killer but as a kind of frontier hero. He spent the night at the home of writer Ralph Waldo Emerson and had lunch with Henry David Thoreau. "His skills are personal magnetism," wrote one

In this illustration, Marines under the command of Lt. Col. Robert E. Lee storm the Harpers Ferry armory.



In this engraving, John Brown and his men battle to hold on to the armory at Harpers Ferry, Va., which they seized in 1859.

admirer. "He locks his eyes on you, and you feel as if you can see into the depths of his soul. He is like a man on fire."

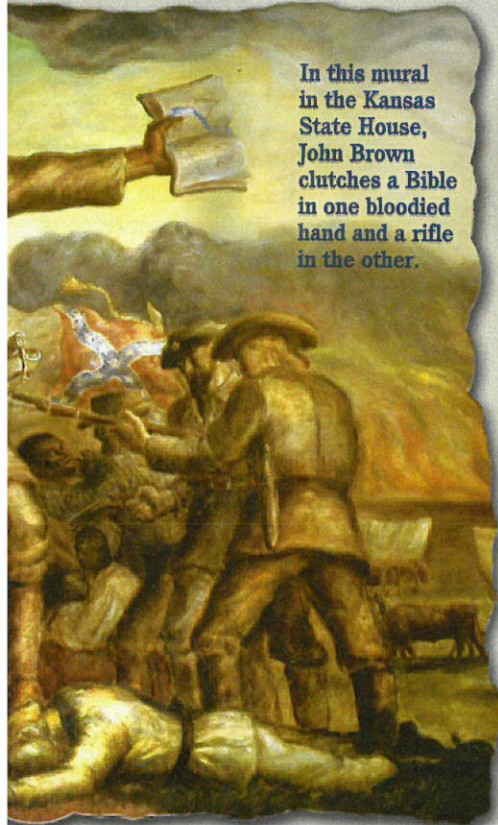
### BROWN'S PLAN

Brown was indeed on fire. By the summer of 1859, he had developed a plan to spark a slave rebellion in Virginia that he was convinced would destroy slavery. He would first capture the U.S. armory and arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Va., with its 100,000 muskets and rifles. Once news of the capture got out, Brown believed, local slaves would rise in revolt, joining his fight. The revolt would spread throughout the South, he said, ending the evil of slavery. Brown and 21 others—16 white men and 5 ex-slaves—rented the Kennedy Farm in Maryland, 5 miles north of Harpers Ferry. They trained in arms and carefully planned the raid.

On the evening of October 16, 1859, Brown gathered his raiders together. "Men, get your arms!" he told them.

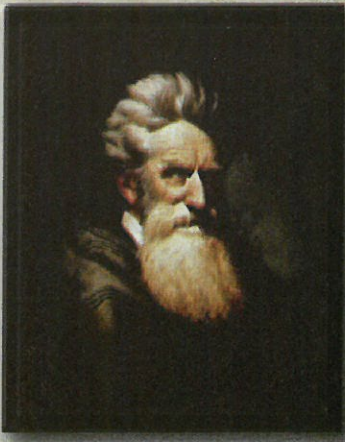


In this mural in the Kansas State House, John Brown clutches a Bible in one bloodied hand and a rifle in the other.



in a show of strength, hundreds of Border Ruffians poured into Lawrence, Kan. Outnumbered, the antislavery men of Lawrence fled or hid.

"Father was furious [about the Lawrence raid]," wrote John Brown Jr. "Late [on May 23], he went into the woods to converse with God. When he came back, he told us all to sharpen our swords.



This portrait of John Brown was painted shortly before his trial in November 1859.

Eighteen of them set out for Harpers Ferry under the cover of darkness.

At first, the plan went like clockwork. Brown's raiders overpowered the armory guards and took 60 hostages. Arsenal workers discovered the takeover the next morning and spread the alarm. The raiders cut the telegraph lines but allowed a train to pass through after detaining it for five hours. When the train reached Washington, D.C., the conductor told authorities about the raid. By midmorning, a "militia" of farmers, soldiers, and shopkeepers had climbed the heights above the armory to take potshots at Brown and his men. Bullets rang off roofs and walls, causing confusion among the raiders.

### 'DIE LIKE A MAN'

At around noon, one of Brown's men, an ex-slave named Dangerfield Newby, was shot through the head. The angry crowd rushed down and sliced off Newby's ears as souvenirs. Then they beat the body with sticks. The mob broke through a door and grabbed another of Brown's men, William Thompson. They dragged him to the railroad bridge and shot him, and his body fell into the river. To show their rage, they continued to use Thompson's floating corpse for target practice. Alarmed, Brown led his men, along with nine of the hostages, to the fire engine house in the arsenal and barricaded it.

It was clear now that Brown's uprising had failed. Eight of his men were dead or dying. Two of his sons, Oliver and Watson, lay wounded on the floor. Oliver begged his father to kill him to end the pain. John refused and said, "You must be a man; you must die like a man."

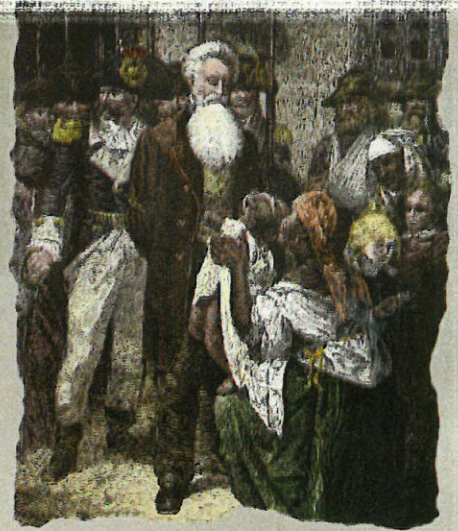
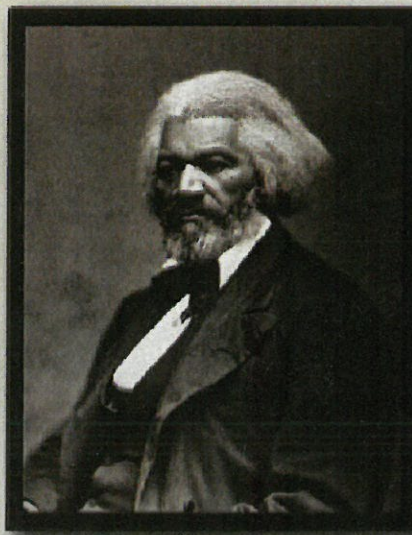
On the morning of October 18, a company of U.S. Marines under the command of Lt. Col. Robert E. Lee arrived and demanded that Brown surrender. He refused, and the Marines stormed the fire engine house, killing or capturing the remaining raiders. Brown was wounded, captured, and tied up.

### SHOCK WAVES

News of Brown's raid flew throughout the South like a shock wave. Many people thought it was the first of a number of Northern raids aimed at causing a slave uprising. From Virginia to Georgia, towns formed vigilante groups and mobilized militias.

Meanwhile, the state of Virginia swiftly brought Brown to trial. Brown's lawyers tried to get him declared insane, but the wounded man rose from his seat to denounce the idea. He presented the court with a long, rational defense of his actions.

The trial took less than a week. On November 2, the jury, after deliberating for just 45 minutes, reached a verdict: guilty of murder, guilty of treason, guilty of inciting a slave insurrection. A month later, on December 2, Brown was hanged in an open field. Before walking to the gallows, he handed his jailer a note with these words: "I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood."



In this illustration, a woman holds her baby up to John Brown before he is led to the gallows; at left, a slave shackle

### 'JOHN BROWN'S BODY'

The Civil War began less than two years later, with the image of Brown still on everyone's mind, and it ended in 1865, with the preservation of the Union and the abolition of slavery. During the war, Union soldiers sang a song called "John Brown's Body" to the tune of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." They sang it sadly if they lost a battle, and they sang it triumphantly if they were victorious.

*John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave,  
John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave,  
John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave,  
But his soul goes marching on.  
Glory, glory, hallelujah,  
Glory, glory, hallelujah,  
Glory, glory, hallelujah,  
His soul goes marching on.*

"Did John Brown fail?" wrote the famous ex-slave and author Frederick Douglass after the war. "John Brown began the war that ended American slavery. ... His zeal in the cause of my race was far greater than mine. I could live for the slave, but he could die for him." **CE**

John Brown secretly met with abolitionist Frederick Douglass to persuade him to join his rebellion, but Douglass refused.