Abolitionist John Brown to Hang, December 2, 1859 for Attack at Harpers Ferry

Following a week-long trial and a mere 45 minutes of deliberation, a jury found Brown and his codefendant Shields Green guilty of treason, murder, and inciting a slave insurrection. On October 16, 1859, Brown and his men seized the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry and held it for nearly two days. On the morning of October 18, a group of marines led by Robert E. Lee reclaimed the arsenal. In the ensuing raid, 13 men perished, seven escaped, and Brown and Green were captured. Of the seven escapees only two, including Brown's son Owen, remain unapprehended. A public hanging is scheduled for December 2, 1859, in the vicinity of the Harpers Ferry jail.

A lifelong abolitionist, Brown had cultivated his antislavery sentiments since childhood. His father, Owen Brown, was a deeply religious man who instilled in his children the belief that human bondage was a sin against God. When only 12 years of age, young Brown witnessed the brutal beating of a slave child. This memory haunted him for the rest of his life and fueled his antislavery crusades.

In 1837, Elijah Lovejoy was murdered by proslavery assassins for publishing an antislavery newspaper. At Lovejoy's memorial service, Brown publicly vowed vengeance and vehemently pledged himself to the abolition of slavery.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, authored by Senator Stephen Douglas (D.) from Illinois, added fuel to the fire. It guaranteed “a popular sovereignty” vote on the issue of slavery by new territories in the United States. This proposition nullified the Missouri Compromise that made slavery illegal in new states. This act created a climate of extremism in the new state of Kansas. Settlers from the North, including John Brown and his family, were determined to make Kansas a free territory.

John Brown began his crusade in Lawrence, Kansas, on May 24, 1856. In retaliation for the sacking of a “free settlement” by a proslavery mob, Brown and his sons, under the cover of darkness, murdered five southern settlers at Portawatomie Creek. Brown’s son Frederick perished in the attack. This initial act of violence garnered the attention of antislavery activists in Boston who would ultimately become the “Secret Six,” the financiers of Brown’s siege of the arsenal at Harpers Ferry.

“I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with Blood.”

Benét’s Epic “Homeric” Poem “John Brown’s Body” Captures America’s Tragedy

Poet Stephen Vincent Benét captures the tragedy of the Civil War for all Americans in his soon-to-be-published poem “John Brown’s Body.” Simultaneously slated for publication by Rinehart and Co. in New York and by Clark, Irwin, and Co. in Toronto, this harrowing account eerily depicts the defeat at Harpers Ferry:

“...John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave
Already the corpse is changed under the stones
Cotton will grow next year in spite of the skull
Slaves will slave next year in spite of the bones
Nothing is changed John Brown, Nothing is changed.

The effects of John Brown’s raid would be felt in the years leading up to the first shots fired at Fort Sumter, marking the start of the Civil War in 1861. The South had feared a bloody uprising, and Brown would be the first of many to die for the North. Claiming the lives of more than 620,000 Americans, the Civil War’s cost in American lives was as great as in all of the nation’s other wars combined through Vietnam. The war’s end in 1865 did bring an end to slavery through President Lincoln’s signing of the 13th Amendment; four million slaves were liberated: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” But freedom came at a costly price, echoing Brown’s prophetic last words, “I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with Blood.”

“George Washington: A National Treasure” is organized by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, and made possible through the generosity of the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation.
Sojourner Truth is slated to join Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison on an antislavery lecture circuit this fall. Truth began her diligent career in activism after her home state of New York passed legislation to emancipate slaves in that state in 1827. Her first crusade was to sue for the return of her son Peter, whose towering size garnered a high price in an illegal slave auction across New York state lines.

Religious fervor prompted the courageous Truth to change her name from Isabella Baumfree, the name given to her by a brutal Dutch master, and to begin speaking on behalf of black freedom, women’s rights, and temperance. Her lectures often begin with the ominous instruction, “children, I speak to God, and God speaks to me.”

The controversial Truth has both shocked and electrified audiences at recent abolitionist events in the Northeast. The statuesque Truth stands six feet tall, with a powerful frame. In response to the jeers of hecklers who protested that she was “too forceful to be a woman,” Truth proudly bared her breasts, proving without a doubt that despite her brusque manner she certainly is a woman.

Truth has at times alienated both foes and friends of her cause. A loyal women’s suffragist, Truth has been ostracized by some feminists who fear association with her would serve only to diminish their cause. However, at a national women’s rights convention in New York, Truth’s resounding speech silenced those misguided critics. The following excerpt from that speech stirred many in the audience and attests to her powerful influence: “No one ever helped me into carriages, over puddles and aren’t I a woman? I could work as much, and eat as much (when I could get it) and aren’t I a woman?”

Please join Truth in her crusade for human rights by attending her upcoming lectures on the “Freedom Riders” and their campaign to end segregation on streetcars in northern cities. We’ll see you there.

*Quotations taken from The Narrative of Sojourner Truth

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**Frederick Douglass — Knowledge, the Primary Emancipator**

“There is no Negro problem. The problem is whether the American people have loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough, to live up to their own constitution.” —FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Frederick Douglass stood at the podium, trembling with nervousness. Before him sat abolitionists who had traveled to the Massachusetts island of Nantucket. Only 23 years old at the time, Douglass overcame his anxiety and gave a stirring, eloquent speech about his life as a slave. Douglass would continue to give speeches for the rest of his life and would become a leading spokesperson for the abolition of slavery and for racial equality.

Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, a slave, about 1818 on a farm on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. His mother was Harriet Bailey; he believed his father was a white man.

Douglass always recognized the attainment of knowledge as his primary emancipator. Sneaking away to read the schoolbooks of his master’s children, or seeking instruction from poor white children, he learned to read. Douglass understood at an early age that with diligence he himself could be master of his intellect, with knowledge he could break the chains of slavery. Never accepting his bondage, Douglass worked, secretly studied, and eventually escaped to New York, a free state in September 1838; he was 20 years old.

Just two years later, in 1841, Douglass addressed the Anti-Slavery Society. In 1845, he published his autobiography despite apprehension that the information might endanger his freedom. He later settled in Rochester, New York, and published an abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star*. In 1850, he became strongly involved in the Underground Railroad. His home in Rochester, close to the Canadian border, became an important station on the route north. He often found runaways sitting on the steps of his newspaper office. At times, as many as 15 fugitives were hiding in his home.

Though Douglass regarded William Lloyd Garrison as his true mentor, in time, Douglass found it increasingly more difficult to adhere to Garrison’s belief that all resistance to slavery be nonviolent. Ten years later, Douglass would completely abandon all hope that the slave issue could be resolved peacefully: “I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than to be false, and incur my own abhorrence.”

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**AFRICAN AMERICAN FIRSTS**

**1787:** In New York, the Abolitionists Society created the African Free School, the first public school for African American children.

**1810:** In Philadelphia, the first insurance company owned and operated by and for blacks guaranteed African Americans a proper burial.

**1823:** Lucius Twilight became the first African American college graduate at Middlebury College in Vermont.

**1835:** A group of ship caulkers created the first African American labor union.

**1841:** W.A. Liedesdorff sailed from the Virgin Islands to the port of San Francisco, created a public school, built steamboats and hotels, and became the nation’s first black millionaire.

**Early 1900s:** Madame C. J. Walker (Sarah Breedlove), who developed a line of hair conditioners and cosmetics for African Americans, became the first African American female millionaire.
On April 12, 1786, a year before he was to preside over the Constitutional Convention, Washington wrote his friend and political ally Robert Morris, “there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of slavery.” On September 9, 1786, he wrote another associate that he never meant “to possess another slave by purchase, it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted by the legislature, by which slavery in this country may be abolished.” Washington, however, did little in a public capacity to oppose slavery.

If Washington felt so strongly about slavery, why didn’t he use his immense public stature and influence to end it? As commander of the Continental army, he took only tentative steps during the American Revolution, urging desegregation for the large number of free blacks fighting in the New England armies and the Rhode Island militia and proposing that slaves in the South be enlisted with the promise of freedom at the war’s end. Nothing came of these efforts. At the Constitutional Convention, where he presided, and where slavery could have been abolished, he did not speak out or act. Since Washington did by his last will and testament free his own slaves, we know he was sincere about his views on slavery, but he avoided taking a public stand on the issue. For instance, when Washington left the presidency he allowed several of his slaves to slip into freedom simply by allowing them to remain in Philadelphia. Writing to the British agricultural reformer Arthur Young, he disclosed his secret plan to rent out most of his Mount Vernon plantation to expert English farmers, who would in turn hire his slaves. But he was never able to implement this plan.

The republican ideology of the American Revolution, which justified a colonial defense of American liberties, did impact Washington. In 1774, he wrote that if Americans accepted British encroachments, “custom and use shall make us as tame as easy” and “comfortable” as “their abject slaves. But he was never able to implement this plan. He intended that God determined events, with men as His instruments. This did not mean on most levels a fatalistic acceptance of slavery’s extinction but probably not in his lifetime. He surely knew in 1787 that it would have been a deal-breaker at the Constitutional Convention; it was the one polarizing issue that would have prevented agreement among the delegates. Washington placed establishing the republic ahead of abolishing slavery. He became angry at the Quakers when they attempted to intervene between Virginia slaves and their masters. Although no southern state had shown any indication of abolishing slavery, Washington hoped the state legislatures would free slaves. The ban on the importation of slaves after 1808 in the Constitution was the only concession the southern states would make. During his second term as President, when he faced bitter political factionalism, the unforeseen development of political parties, and acrimonious debate over the ratification of the Jay Treaty, he was in no position to reopen the debate on slavery. The nation during Washington’s two terms as President was still very much a fragile entity; no one could be sure that independence would be preserved and that the nation would succeed.

Washington’s position on slavery, based partly on what we know about Washington and partly on conjecture, is rooted in his deep belief in the role of Providence in history. By this term he meant that God determined events, with men as His instruments. This did not mean on most levels a fatalistic acceptance of the world. Washington’s sense of duty, his participation in the public sphere, his activism, and his energy precluded such an outlook. Washington viewed the United States as having been blessed by God to become a republican exemplar for other nations. If a large nation such as the United States could establish a republican government, it would stand as a model for the other large and powerful nations in which popular sovereignty did not exist. This theme of America’s destiny has continued to the present time. It was a viewpoint enunciated strongly by Abraham Lincoln when he spoke of the United States as “the last, best hope of earth.”

It was Lincoln, not Washington, who best understood and explained to the people of his generation the vision of the founding fathers and how it related to “Providence” and slavery. In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln turned the nation’s view back to the birth of our nation, and placed America’s mission, slavery, and the Civil War within the Revolutionary generation’s providential view of history. The war had been going on for three terrible years, and there had been hundreds of thousands of casualties—God’s calling for a national sacrifice for the nation’s sins. Lincoln would look to Washington and the other founders to create a new birth of freedom. He first reiterated that slavery need not have caused disunion or a civil war. When war did occur, however, “all knew” that slavery was the cause. Lincoln was struck by the fact that both sides in the conflict “read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.” But in Lincoln’s almost Calvinist view, God’s purposes were not determined by man’s prayers. And it was God’s design that man would commit offenses that God would deal with in His own time. Lincoln’s concept of God’s own time was key to his meaning of “providential.” If American slavery was “one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come,” and “having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove,” God would now give this war to both North and South. As many of the founding fathers feared, God in His time, would bring on a great conflagration to wipe clean America’s offense. Abraham Lincoln, who came to realize that it was his generation who must complete the unfinished task of abolishing slavery, nonetheless was not critical of the founding fathers and viewed their creation of the nation as the beginning of a sacred errand. Four-score-and-seven years after the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln would travel to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to consecrate ground on which stood a cemetery, containing the bodies of the soldiers who had given their lives in battle to continue the errand, so that a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

1772 COURT QUESTIONS VALIDITY OF YOUNG SLAVE’S POETRY

WE, whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the Poems specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an unenlightened Barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.

“To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth”
—by Phillis Wheatley

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch’d’d from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent’s breast?
Steel’d was that soul and by no misery mov’d
That from a father seiz’d his babe below’d:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

Phillis Wheatley by an unidentified artist, engraving, 1775

“What sorrows labour in my parent’s breast?
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During the 1800s, more than 100,000 enslaved fugitives sought freedom through the Underground Railroad. “Underground Railroad” is the symbolic term given to the routes enslaved black Americans took to gain their freedom as they traveled, often as far as New York. The following transcripts lend insight into the harrowing trials of those who worked “stations” along the Underground Railroad. Is there truth to those statements?

S.B.: How many trips did you make back and forth, North to South?
H.T.: In all, I believe it was 19 trips both ways. There were many miles to cover and each of them supplied its own terror. By this time, there was a $40,000 reward for my capture, dead or alive. We were forced into hiding for days at a time, surviving without food or water, hiding in ditches and trees, dragging babies with paralytic [an opiate] to keep their cries from getting us discovered. But we had some help along the way.

S.B.: Why did you begin taking the slaves to Canada?
H.T.: Again, in 1850 the government passed the Fugitive Slave Law. I decided, “I can’t trust Uncle Sam with my people no more!” By that time Joe, a very valuable slave, was with us and he had a $10,000 price on his head. Sam Green, a free Negro in Maryland, had been sentenced to 10 years in prison for owning a copy of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and the pursuit of fugitive slaves was intensifying. But, did you know not a single slave who I helped to freedom was ever returned to slavery? Amen!

S.B.: Why did you begin taking the slaves to Canada?
H.T.: In those days, slaves were not even supposed to speak to one another. The ole masters thought too much talking would lead to conspiring on slave uprisings. On the night that I left that plantation, I walked through the slave quarters singing the hymn: “I’m bound to de promise land, fri’en’s I hate to leave you, farewell, I’ll meet you in de mornin’.”

S.B.: Did you go alone on your initial escape?
H.T.: No, I did not. Two of my brothers slipped away with me under the cover of darkness, but as we walked on they became scared and returned without me. I told them, “I have a right to liberty or to death. If I can not have one, I will have the other. No man shall take me alive.”

S.B.: Did you have a plan for what you would do once you got away?
H.T.: Well, I knew that New York had emancipated the slaves in that state in 1827. All I had to do was make it there and I was free. This was in 1848, two years before the government instituted the Fugitive Slave Law that required folks to report fugitive slaves. That is something I dealt with later. In the meantime, I worked for a nice family and saved every penny I earned.

S.B.: Why did you decide to return to the South?
H.T.: One day “I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person, now that I was free” and I knew “if I was free, they should be free also.” So, I returned the way I came; traveling at night, hiding by day, scaling mountains, and crossing streams until I made it back to those slave quarters, singing: “Go down Moses … let my people go.”

S.B.: How many times were you scared and returned without me?
H.T.: Six. I knew that New York had emancipated the slaves in that state in 1827. All I had to do was make it there and I was free. This was in 1848, two years before the government instituted the Fugitive Slave Law that required folks to report fugitive slaves. That is something I dealt with later. In the meantime, I worked for a nice family and saved every penny I earned.

S.B.: Did you have a plan for what you would do once you got away?
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