

John Brown transcends History:

A history of Civil Disobedience

Just after sundown on the evening of Sunday October 16, 1859, John Brown led a group of 21 men (16 white and 5 black) across the Potomac River from Maryland to Virginia. Their immediate objective was the capture of the cache of weapons stored at the U.S. Arsenal at Harpers Ferry. Brown's ultimate goal was to destroy the slave system of the South. The arms captured by the raid would allow Brown and his followers to establish a stronghold in the near-by mountains from which they could attack slaveholders and draw liberated slaves into their ranks. Brown's raid attained initial success. Slashing the telegraph wires to cut off the town from the outside world, the raiders captured the local armory, arsenal and rifle manufacturing plant. They then rounded up 60 townspeople as hostages. Unfortunately, the raiders were unsuccessful in their attempt to isolate the town. A B&O Railroad train was detained as it passed through, but allowed to continue on its journey to Baltimore. Once it reached its destination, the alarm was raised and federal troops were sent to the rescue. In the meantime, the local militia surrounded the town preventing the raiders' escape. Realizing his predicament, John Brown led his men, along with nine hostages, to the small fire engine house adjacent to the armory.

Federal forces arrived on Monday evening and successfully stormed the stronghold the following day, seriously wounding Brown. He was tried and convicted of treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia. Just before his hanging on December 2, 1859, Brown uttered a prophetic forewarning of the coming Civil War: "I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood."

In 1967, the city of Winneconne, upon being inadvertently left off of the state map, "seceded" from the state of Wisconsin and declared that Winneconne was going to be a sovereign state. A new

governor was sworn in, a cabinet was appointed, and an army and navy were mustered. This was a major media event for a small town and the town peacefully rejoined the state later in the day. A celebration is held every year on July 21st to commemorate their uprising.

Whether peaceful and in jest or deadly serious, rebellion has been a part of United States history. The intent of my project is to help students gain an understanding of the history of some of the most well-known American rebellions. The primary focus will be on John Brown, the Transcendentalists, the Civil Rights Movement, women's rights, and the Winneconne uprising. This lesson will be taught to my seventh grade language arts class concurrent with the history teacher's chapters on the lead-up to the Civil War and continue up through the lessons about the 1960s.

I plan on teaching the unit using primary source documents, document-based questions, images, and I-Search papers. I will also tie in the "thinking like a historian" model by looking at the events using such aspects as cause and effect, change and continuity, using the past to make sense of the present, looking at the past through the eyes of the people who lived it and major turning points in history. My hope is that the students will be active learners and retain the information while immersing themselves in the literature and historical documents.

Primary Source Documents: (examples)

John Brown's Last Prophecy

Charlestown, Va, 2nd, December, 1859

I John Brown am now quite **certain** that the crimes of this **guilty, land: will** never be purged **away**; but with Blood. I had **as I now think: vainly** flattered myself that without **very much** bloodshed; it might be done.

(John Brown's last letter, written on day he hanged. From "John Brown: a Biography," by Oswald Garrison Villard.)

Letter from Mahala Doyle

Altho' vengeance is not mine, I confess that I do feel gratified to hear that you were stopped in your fiendish career at Harper's Ferry, with the loss of your two sons, you can now appreciate my distress in Kansas, when you then and there entered my house at midnight and arrested my husband and two boys, and took them out of the yard and in cold blood shot them dead in my hearing. You can't say you done it to free slaves. We had none and never expected to own one...My son John Doyle whose life I begged of you is now grown up and is very desirous to be at Charlestown on the day of your execution.

(A letter sent to John Brown while in jail. From "To Purge This Land with Blood" by Stephen Oates.)

Letter from Frances Ellen Watkins

Nov. 25, 1859

Dear Friend: Although the hands of Slavery throw a barrier between you and me, and it may not be my privilege to see you in the prison house, Virginia has no bolts or bars through which I dread to send you my sympathy...I thank you that you have been brave enough to reach out your hands to the crushed and blighted of my race. You have rocked the bloody Bastille; and I hope from your sad fate great good may arise to the cause of freedom...

(A letter from Frances Watkins, a free black living in Kendallville, Indiana. From "Freedom's Unfinished Revolution," by William Friedheim and The American Social History Project.)

A Plea for Capt. John Brown

By Henry David Thoreau

I am here to plead his cause with you. I plead not for his life, but for his character, - his immortal life; and so it becomes your cause wholly, and is not his in the least. Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; his is an angel of light.

(Read to the citizens of Concord, Mass., Sunday Evening, October 30, 1859.)

Richmond "Whig" Newspaper Editorial

Though it convert the whole Northern people, without an exception, into furious, armed abolition invaders, yet *old Brown will be hung!* That is the stern and irreversible decree, not only of the authorities of Virginia, but of the PEOPLE of Virginia, without a dissenting voice. And, therefore, Virginia, and the people of Virginia, will treat with the contempt they deserve, all the *craven appeals* of Northern men in behalf of old Brown's pardon. *The miserable old traitor and murderer belongs to the gallows*, and the gallows *will* have its own

(Richmond "Whig" newspaper editorial quoted in the "Liberator", Nov. 18, 1859. From "John Brown: a Biography," by Oswald Villard)

John Brown Writes From Jail

Charlestown, Jefferson County, VA, Nov. 1, 1859

My Dear Friend E. B. of R. I. :

You know that Christ once armed Peter. So also in my case, I think he put a sword into my hand, and there continued it, so long as he saw best, and then kindly took it from me. I mean when I first went to Kansas. I wish you could know with what cheerfulness I am now wielding the "Sword of the Spirit" on the right hand and on the left. I bless God that it proves "mighty to the pulling down of strongholds." I always loved my Quaker friends, and I commend to their kind regard my poor, bereaved widowed wife, and my daughters and daughters-in-law, whose husbands fell at my side. One is a mother and the other likely to become so soon. They, as well as my own sorrow-stricken daughter[s], are left very poor, and have much greater need of sympathy than I, who, through Infinite Grace and the kindness of strangers, am "joyful in all my tribulations."

Your friend,

John Brown

(From "John Brown: a Biography," by Oswald Villard)

Literature:

- *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* by David S. Reynolds
- *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America* by Evan Carton
- *John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry: A Brief History with Documents (The Bedford Series in History and Culture)* by Jonathan Earle
- *The Transcendentalists* by Barbara L. Packer
- *Civil Disobedience* by Henry David Thoreau
- *The Movement and The Sixties* by Terry H. Anderson
- *Winneconne: History's Crossing Place* by Michael J. Goc
- *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Frieden
- *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Malcolm X and Alex Haley
- *Letters from a Birmingham Jail* by Martin Luther King Jr.
- *Secret Six: The True Tale of the Men Who Conspired with John Brown* by Edward J. Jr. Renehan

Jim Jaeger Note: Here is my proposal for year two. The books I have listed would be for my use to learn more about the subject matter. I have not made a concerted effort to look for historical fiction or even non-fiction books about these topics to use with my students (7th grade) yet as I am finishing two online classes this week. I am open to any suggestions but plan to start looking more closely next week.

