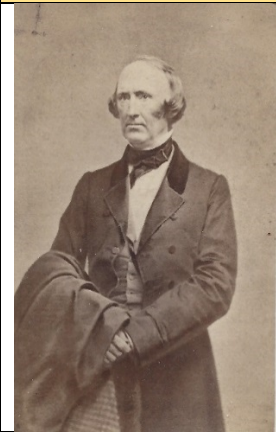


Chapter 279 – The Northern Reaction To Harpers Ferry Shifts Over Time



Dates:
October 1859 Forward

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 - Other Northerners Find A Measure Of Justice In The Harpers Ferry Action
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Date: October 1859

Initial Northern Opinions Are Critical Of John Brown



Horace Greeley (1811-1872)

Contrary to Ruffin’s expectations, the immediate response to John Brown and Harpers Ferry in the North is much like that in the South.

Press coverage is almost uniformly opposed to the raid.

The *New York Evening Post* says that Brown was “driven to madness” by his actions in Kansas, and Harpers Ferry was the tragic result. The *Chicago Press and Tribune* writes that no one could “approve the (raider’s) means or justify their ends.” Even the abolitionist editor, Horace Greeley, initially calls it “the work of a mad man.”

The Northern politicians follow suit in condemning the act.

Two are immediately assumed to have been involved in some fashion. New York Senator Henry Seward legitimately denies any role in the plot. Ohio Governor Joshua Giddings, who has had frequent contact with Brown, responds deceptively, that “Brown never consulted me.”

Other well-known abolitionists concur. John Hale “deeply regrets” the raid; Salmon Chase sees it as “an insane attempt;” Ben Wade says “it is absurd to implicate the Republican Party in the acts of John Brown.”

Lincoln says that the raid is “wrong for two reasons...a violation of law and...futile as far as any effect it might have on the extinction of a great evil.”

Even Brown’s closest backers, members of the Secret Six, distance themselves after a large cache of their incriminating correspondence with him is uncovered at the Kennedy Farm. Gerritt Smith suffers a nervous breakdown and enters an insane asylum, while Parker remains in Italy and Stearns, Sanborn, and Howe flee to Canada, soon to be followed by Frederick Douglas.

At first it seems that the Unitarian Minister, Thomas Higginson, Brown’s staunchest loyalist among the Secret Six, will be left standing alone in Boston to defend his attack on slavery.

But, soon enough other voices join in.

Date: November 8, 1859

The Transcendentalists Rally Early Support For John Brown



Ralph Waldo Emerson And His Surroundings

The first group to come to Brown’s defense are the New England Transcendentalists, who have been introduced to him by Theodore Parker during his January 1857 eastern journey in search of monetary support. At that time, he strikes them as an example of their ideal American, the morally upright and self-reliant man, living amidst nature’s bounty, making his way as a farmer. His purpose in opposing slavery is just and his determination admirable.

While not engaged in his Harpers Ferry plan, they are now wont to defend him against the Southern onslaught.

Their campaign is led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, America’s leading intellectual, whose mastery of the spoken and written word have defined the public’s notion of heroism for over two decades.

On November 8, 1859, twenty-four days before Brown is hanged in Virginia, Emerson delivers a lecture at the Music Hall in Boston that causes many Northerners to begin to imagine him in a different light.

Emerson’s topic is a familiar one, articulating the “qualities which conspicuously attract the wonder and reverence of mankind.” He lists and explores three: selflessness, practicality and courage. The third quality, “courage,” takes him to a prior conversation he has had with Brown.

Captain John Brown, the hero of Kansas, said to me that “for a settler in a new country, one good, believing, strong-minded man is worth a hundred, nay, a thousand men without character, and that the right men will give a permanent direction to the fortunes of a state.”

He goes on, referencing the reported exchanges between Virginia Governor Henry Wise and his captive:

The true temper has genial influences. It makes a bond of union between enemies. Governor Wise of Virginia, in the record of his first interviews with his prisoner...distinguishes John Brown. As they confer, they understand each other swiftly; each respects the other. If opportunity allowed, they would prefer each other's society and desert their former companions

John Brown is no madman, according to Emerson; instead a successor to “the best of those who stood at our bridge on Lexington Common” – ready to sacrifice himself in service to a higher law.

From there comes a line that will register alongside “the shot heard round the world.” It refers to Brown as...

That new saint than whom none purer or more brave was ever led by love of men into conflict and death,—the new saint awaiting his martyrdom, and who, if he shall suffer, will make the gallows glorious like the cross.

This comparison of Brown on the gallows to Christ on the cross will shower Emerson with opprobrium from his critics – but also cause others to find justification for his actions.

Date: December 1859 Forward

Other Northerners Find A Measure Of Justice In The Harpers Ferry Action

While most Northerners will reject the notion of sainthood for John Brown, a very sizable number will conclude that his actions were in many ways understandable, even heroic and long overdue.

This group comprises people who have become fed up with the South's efforts to “nationalize slavery,” to impose the presence of blacks on white citizens who want nothing to do with them.

Antagonism toward the South among this group has been building for decades.

For many, it is heightened by the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, the presence of bounty hunters in local towns, and the intrusive demands that citizens help capture run-aways. It grows with the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Bill, reneging on the 36'30" line of demarcation and opening up the Louisiana acreage to the wealthy Southern planters. Then comes the bullying tactics by the Missouri Ruffians in the 1856 Kansas elections, the caning of Charles Sumner, and the fumbling attempts by Buchanan to ram the pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution through congress, negating the will of the voters.

It is during this period that these Northerners comes to define the South as a whole as “The Slave Power.”

Their feeling is that if the South insists on continuing to have slaves, that is their problem – but they have no right to force it on the rest of the nation. To do so reflects a form of arrogance that needs to be slapped down once and for all.

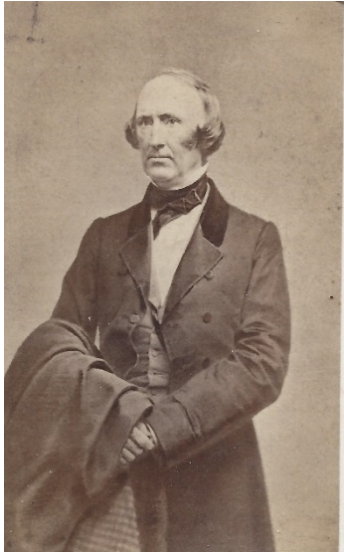
In turn, the actions at Harpers Ferry represent the kind of bloody nose the South deserves – with John Brown as the necessary messenger.

While they will never regard him as the Christ-like figure conjured up by Emerson, he will become another of the archetypal icons embedded in the American psyche:

*The right-minded vigilante, exercising frontier justice on his own,
to strike out against the wrong-doers in the name of essential justice.*

Date: December 2, 1859

Brown's Execution Is Mourned In Many Northern Cities



Wendell Phillips (1811-1884)

As John Brown's execution date approaches, supporters frame a variety of plots for a last minute rescue -- but in addition to being impractical, he also signals his intent to die a martyr to his cause.

What's left then are various forms of protests, small and large.

At 11am on December 2, as he stands on the gallows, church bells are rung in towns and cities across the North and West in support of his suffering. Memorial events follow.

A large gathering at Tremont Hall in Boston listens to praise for him from Wendell Phillips and from William Lloyd Garrison, who finally acknowledges that insurrections may be needed to abolish slavery.

I am prepared to say: success to every slave insurrection at the South and in every slave country.

Cleveland's Melodeon Hall is decked out in black crepe for over a thousand mourners, under a banner claiming: JOHN BROWN, The HERO of 1859.

A speaker at an assembly in Rhode Island proclaims that...

In his strong love for freedom, in his heroic spirit, in his fidelity to his convictions (we see) a noble spirit.

Nowhere is reverence for John Brown greater than in the free black communities of the North. Special praise for him comes from Charles Henry Langston, born in Virginia to a white planter and his black common law wife, educated at Oberlin College, and a founder of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society. Langston asks his audience "why should I honor the memory or mourn the death of any of the white people of this land?" He answers his own question, in praise of John Brown:

A lover of mankind – not of any particular class or color, but of all men...He fully, really and actively believed in the equality and brotherhood of man...He alone has lived up to the Declaration of Independence...He admired Nat Turner as well as George Washington.

Other Northern remembrances of John Brown and Harpers Ferry are tinged with animosity toward the South.

In Connecticut, Virginia Governor John Wise is hanged in effigy.

Then in Boston, there is the English born journalist, James Redpath, who uses Harpers Ferry to continue his vitriolic attacks on the Slave Power. Redpath's reporting on Brown goes back to Kansas, where he interviews him soon after the Pottawatomie Massacre, and he will go on to publish a favorable biography of him in 1860. But for the moment he is happy to sing his praises as the warrior whose actions reveal the cowardice of the South.

Never before, among modern nations, did seventeen men produce so terribly and universally a panic as Old Brown at Harpers Ferry....Everyone believed the South to be full of fighting pluck until Brown demonstrated that she was only a cowardly braggart after all.