

Chapter 242– John Brown Advances His Insurrectionist Plan



Dates:
Winter 1857

Sections:

- Brown Flees Kansas After The Battle At Osawatomie
- Brown Travels East To Seek Funds For His Virginia Plan

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Brown Flees Kansas After The Battle At Osawatomie

While James Buchanan begins to plan for his presidency and a peaceful resolution to slavery, “Captain” John Brown is plotting his violent raid into Virginia at Harpers Ferry.

Since “consecrating his life to the destruction of slavery” in 1837 after the murder of Elijah Lovejoy, the notion of such a strike has been on Brown’s mind. He is convinced that the South will never free its slaves without a violent confrontations occurring on its own soil. He intends to spark this outcome by recruiting, arming, training, and leading a small band of fellow whites and blacks in a series of guerrilla raids on Virginia plantations. After each attack, he will retreat into the sanctuary afforded by the Allegheny and Appalachian Mountains, where he expects to welcome an ever growing army of run-away slaves to the cause.

Brown sees precedents for his plan in Nat Turner’s five week long rebellion in 1831, and in the successful black uprising led by Toussaint L’Overture in Haiti at the turn of the century. As he formulates his strategy, he begins to share it with potential supporters. One of the first outside his family is Frederick Douglass, whom he meets after a lecture at the Free Church in Springfield, Massachusetts in November 1847. Upon hearing Brown’s plan, Douglas is impressed by his commitment, albeit dubious about the likely outcome.

While Brown is eager to act, a series of external events will delay him off and on over the next twelve years.

In 1849 he is slowed by a financial crisis, as his wool trading partnership in Springfield, Massachusetts with Isaac Perkins collapses, and he ends up moving his wife and seven children to North Elba, New York, to join an “experimental community” founded by the philanthropist and abolitionist, Gerritt Smith. It is another of Smith’s many reform schemes, in this case intended to teach slaves and freedmen to become successful farmers. Brown purchases a 244 acre plot and joins the community.

This North Elba land will become home base for Brown and his extended family over the decades to follow. Brown himself will divide his time between farming the land, alongside his black neighbors, and trying to restore his other business interests in Springfield, some 220 miles to the south.

His energy for the crusade is rekindled by passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. In response he organizes his League of Gileadites, a mixed band of 45 black freedmen and whites dedicated to protecting run-aways around Springfield and nearby Boston. The League stands as a precursor to the strike force he hopes to recruit in Virginia.

The actual call to arms for Brown comes in the conflict in Kansas between the pro-slavery Border Ruffians in Missouri and the Free State emigres from New England, backed by Amos Lawrence and the eastern anti-slavery establishment. He quickly moves west to joins up with five of his sons in the state and to march into battle.

Within a year he emerges as “Osawatomie Brown,” both famous -- and notorious -- nationwide for his savage Pottawatomie Massacre, his defense of the Free State forces throughout Kansas, and his victory at the Battle of Black Jack. Along with “General” James Lane, “Captain” John Brown is now the symbol of all who oppose the expansion of slavery in the territories.

His personal losses in this crusade are punishing. On August 30, 1856, Brown loses his son Fred during the futile effort to defend the town of Osawatomie. He becomes the first of three sons who will eventually die alongside their father.

By the Fall of 1856, Brown is a hunted man in Kansas, both among the pro-slavery forces and the local U.S. Marshal who is intent on jailing him and trying him for murders committed. He flees for his life in early October, smuggled in a wagon to Tabor, Iowa, an Underground Railroad stop, where he recuperates before heading back east to advance his Virginia plan.

Date: January 1857

Brown Travels East To Seek Funds For His Virginia Plan



Gerritt Smith's Mansion In New York

After the defeat at Osawatomie, Brown makes another of his eerily prophetic dedications – this time promising “to die fighting” on behalf of his invasion into the heart of “Africa,” the state of Virginia.

I have only a short time to live – only one death to die, and I will die fighting for this cause. There will be no more peace in this land until slavery is done for. I will give them something else to do than to extend slave territory. I will carry the war into Africa (i.e. the South).

To do so, however, will require assembling, arming and training his army of black and white warriors, and this becomes his next challenge. Resources are now the priority, and he goes back east to find them.

Good fortune strikes in the form of Franklin Sanborn, the 27 year old secretary of the Massachusetts State Kansas Committee, whom he meets in early January 1857 in Boston. Despite his relatively roughshod history, Sanborn is immediately impressed by Brown's bearing – “a soldier and a deacon” – and by his

single-minded dedication to abolishing slavery. He responds by introducing him to others in the so-called “Secret Six,” the men who will help fund and support Brown’s attack at Harpers Ferry.

On January 5, 1857 Brown appears before the Massachusetts State Kansas Committee which agrees to send 200 Sharps rifles to his supply post in Tabor, Iowa, along with \$500 for expenses. Two days later he meets with Amos Lawrence, scion of the cotton textile industry in New England and philanthropist backer of many anti-slavery emigres currently residing in his namesake town of Lawrence, Kansas. He donates \$1,000 to the cause.

On January 9 he is with Reverend Thomas Higginson, who becomes his most ardent and faithful supporter. Despite his role as a Unitarian minister, Higginson believes that violence will be needed to end slavery. In 1854 he suffers a saber cut to the face while storming the Boston jailhouse in a futile attempt to free the run-away, Anthony Burns. During the Civil War, he will join the Union army, be wounded in combat, and eventually serve as Colonel of a regiment of black troops.

Next into the fold is Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, a Byronic figure who fights in the 1824 Greek war with Turkey and the second French Revolution before coming home to open a clinic for the blind. Like Higginson, Howe opposes the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, and goes on to join the Kansas Committee. He will support John Brown while remaining skeptical of his Harpers Ferry raid.

Brown reaches another source of real financial wealth in George Stearns, a factory owner, who helps fund the New England Emigrant Society’s efforts to send anti-slavery settlers to Kansas. He also serves as President of the Massachusetts State Kansas Committee, and will purchase both the Sharp’s rifles and pikes that Brown uses in Virginia. His wife, Mary, also donates to Brown, with “his erect military bearing and fine courtesy of demeanor.”

Others are also drawn to Brown’s magnetic persona. When the Unitarian minister and ardent abolitionist, Theodore Parker, holds a reception for Brown, he is introduced to many of Parker’s friends in the Transcendentalists Club, including Emerson, Thoreau and Bronson Alcott. In him they seem to see the self-reliant man of action they write about, the “Puritan Warrior” as Lawrence calls him, another Cromwell ready to fulfill the “righteous judgment of God.”

The Transcendentalists will not be drawn into the Harpers Ferry plot, but they will do more than that by immortalizing Brown in their poetry and prose after he is martyred in 1859. And, throughout the Civil War, Union soldiers will march to the tune they are said to have composed – “John Brown’s body lies a moldering in his grave” – which prompts Samuel Howe’s wife, Julia, to write her stirring “Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

While in Boston, Brown meets William Lloyd Garrison, whose pacifist beliefs lead Brown to avoid mentioning his Virginia plan. Also Wendell Phillips, one of the few men who will match Brown in his conviction that blacks could and should be assimilated into white society. Finally there is Charles Sumner, still recuperating after 18 months from being caned on the senate floor, but eager to show Brown the bloodstained jacket he was wearing at the time.

On January 24, 1857, Brown is off to New York City where he makes his plea for support to the National Kansas Committee. He tells them that his focus will be on the conflict in Kansas, but several members are cautious, given his reputation for violence. They promise him \$5,000 “for defensive measures only,” but deliver only \$150 in the end.

Another priority in the city involves his search for a military man capable of training the recruits he will take to Harpers Ferry and those run-away slaves he expects to attract once there. His choice is Hugh

Forbes, a forty-nine year old ex-British soldier, engineer and linguist, who has fought with Giuseppe Garibaldi in the 1848-49 revolution in Italy. His wanderlust brings him to New York, where he teaches fencing and horsemanship and authors a book on guerrilla warfare titled, *The Patriotic Volunteer*. Brown reads the book, locates Forbes, and offers him \$600 for six months to shape up his anticipated troops. As events unfold, this hire will result in a costly backfire that almost ends Brown's quest.

With high hopes, he next heads to Peterboro to see Gerritt Smith. But the ever vacillating Smith too is having second thoughts about the need for violent reform and, while wishing him well, fails to ante up additional funding.

His final formal stop, again courtesy of Sanborn, is before the Massachusetts State Legislature for a speech on February 18, 1857, updating conditions in Kansas and requesting aid to the settlers there.

After two weeks with his family in North Elba, Brown hears that a U.S. marshal is closing in on him, and he decides in mid-April to head back toward Tabor, Iowa to begin recruiting the "army" he hopes to assemble. His trip east has been a bit disappointing in regard to fundraising, but it has put his crusade on the national map, and has given him a core of valuable support among the "Secret Six."

Sidebar: The “Secret Six” Who Aid John Brown

When correspondence between Brown and his supporters is uncovered after Harpers Ferry, calls go out in Washington to arrest and try “his co-conspirators.” High on the list are Frederick Douglas and members of the Secret Six.

Douglass has known of Brown’s plot to lead a slave uprising into Virginia since 1849; the others since January 1857. All fear reprisals and most scramble to cover up their involvement.

Fred Douglass flees to Canada on November 19 before heading to England. Three others will escape across the northern border, first Frank Sanborn and then George Stearns and Samuel Howe. Despite proof to the contrary, Howe sends a letter to the *New York Tribune* denying all prior knowledge of the raid.

The most extreme response belongs to Gerritt Smith. At first he is consumed by guilt and talks of going to Richmond to join Brown in jail. Then when he learns of the guilty verdict he enters the New York State Asylum for the Insane, where he remains from November 5 to December 29, 1859. After that he will spend the rest of his life denying that he was ever close to John Brown. He burns a host of incriminating letters and files various libel suits against those who publicly challenge his subterfuge.

Theodore Parker defends the raid, but has no such need to conceal his role, since he is in Italy at the time on his way to dying of tuberculosis in May 1860.

That leaves the last of the Secret Six, and Brown’s most ardent ally, the Reverend Thomas Higginson. He is fully aware of the invasion plan and encourages greater speed rather than restraint. He contemplates an attempt to rescue Brown from jail -- but the old man is committed by then to martyrdom. He is also appalled by the response of those who try to conceal their involvement, writing Sanborn:

Is there no such thing as honor among confederates?

Higginson remains in the States and stands his ground throughout the post-raid inquiries. Along with Sanborn and Stearns, he will continue to honor Brown’s memory and make ongoing visits to his grave site in North Elba.

The official inquiries do materialize, but they are relatively tame and inconclusive, amidst the growing turmoil over disunion. A congressional committee led by Virginia Senator James Mason is convened among claims from the South that Sumner and Seward were somehow involved. But only Sanborn and Stearns are interrogated and none of the Secret Six are ever indicted or tried.

Profiles Of The “Secret Six”

The Ever Loyal Four	Dates	Profile
Thomas Higginson	1823-1911	Brown’s fiercest supporter, Harvard, Unitarian minister, wounded when storms jail to free run-away Burns, joins Mass State Kansas Committee, time in Kansas tells him violence needed, supports disunion, plots rescue plan after Brown captured, never flees after Secret Six revealed, serves as Col of 1 st SC Vols, regiment of black soldier, wounded in action in the Civil War, life- long activist for slaves, women, other causes.
Theodore Parker	1810-1860	Harvard Divinity grad, Unitarian minister but seen as too unorthodox, Transcendentalist Club with Emerson, Alcott and Thoreau, his church members include Garrison, Stanton, Howe and other reformers, Boston Vigilance Committee, helps the Crafts escape, supports Brown to end and writes that blacks are justified in killing their masters.
Franklin Sanborn	1831-1917	Introduces Brown to his Boston inner circle, Harvard, fiery temper, anti-slavery as youth, Free Soil politics, secretary of Mass State Kansas Committee, saved by villagers after federal marshals try to arrest him for Secret Six activities, later a journalist and historian.
George Stearns	1809-1867	Self-made businessman who makes his fortune manufacturing pipe lead, free soiler by 1848, President of the Mass State Kansas Committee, helps finance the NE Emigrant Society sending anti-slavery settlers to Kansas, purchases the rifles and pikes Brown uses at Harpers Ferry and provides other funds, flees briefly to Canada after the event, then returns.
The Wavering Two		
Gerritt Smith	1797-1874	Vast fortune inherited from his father, Peter, a partner of John Jacob Astor, philanthropist who supports a broad range of social reforms, founds Liberty Party and runs for president in 1848, US House in 1852, abolitionist who sponsors North Elba integrated community, various donations estimated to total over \$8 million during his lifetime.
Samuel Howe	1801-1876	Harvard Medical School, Lord Byron fan, surgeon and warrior in the Greek army during 1824 war against Turkey, joins second French Revolution of 1830, back home to head the NE Asylum for the Blind, fails in US House bid as Conscience Whig, joins Higginson in attempting to rescue Anthony Burns and as member in Mass State Kansas Committee, Founds anti-slavery newspaper, backs Brown but perhaps not his Harpers Ferry plan, flees to Canada after fearing arrest as part of the Secret Six.