

John Brown Raids Harpers Ferry

Document Based Questions

Questions:

- Based on these newspaper articles from the Sun in Baltimore in 1859, what kind of reaction do you think the general public had about the raid and why?
- Look at a map of Maryland. Why would news travel to Frederick first about a raid on Harpers Ferry?
- Based on the "Background" information compare the newspaper account with the real story. What stands out that is most different?
- Based on the newspaper article, how far was Brown willing to go with his insurrection?
- Define at least three different positions the general public might have taken sides on about the raid on Harpers Ferry.
- The subject of slavery polarized the American public. What do you think opinions were like in Maryland at the time and why?
- What contemporary topic is as emotional as slavery and causes people to commit acts of violence?

Background

On October 16, 1859, John Brown, an extreme slavery abolitionist, and 21 of his followers, raided the Federal Arsenal at Harpers Ferry in order to free slaves in America using whatever means including murder. After 2 days of bloodshed, most of his 21 men had been killed or ran away, and Brown himself was captured, tried and soon executed. First to respond to the raiders were local militia in the form of volunteer firefighters, including groups from Frederick.

Consider This

This event was a catalyst for American historical events that would soon begin to unfold. Gripped by the fear of slave insurrection, newspapers were sensationalizing this event and stoking emotions with less than factual information. Maryland was a slave state located below the Mason Dixon Line, however there were more free blacks than slaves in Maryland in 1859.

The Troops Arrived at Harper's Ferry.
ENCOUNTER WITH THE INSURRECTIONISTS.
Several Killed on Both Sides.
THE PLOT CONFESSED.
DYING STATEMENT OF ONE OF THE INSURGENTS.

HARPER'S FERRY, Oct. 19.—1 A. M.—Train arrived and halted below town, where runners communicated the state of affairs. The Jefferson county regiment had entered the town from the Virginia side, and the Frederick troops crossed the bridge. There had been a good deal of firing and some nine persons were killed.

Mr. Beckham, agent of Railroad Company, was shot through and his murderer fell almost at the same instant pinned by a rifle ball from a friend of Beckham.

The troops have landed and are in the town. The insurgents are willing to surrender, but on terms of safe conduct out of difficulty; otherwise they threaten to sacrifice the lives of Lewis Washington and Col. Dangerfield, whom they now hold as prisoners.

Capt. Aaron Stephens, of Norwich, Conn., is now dying of his wounds, and makes the following statement:

The plan has been concocting for a year or more; the parties rendezvoused at a farm a few miles from here, rented for the purpose by Capt. Brown, of Kansas notoriety, under the name of Smith.

Among the insurgents are Kagg, of Ohio, Todd, of Maine, Wm. Neaman and Brown, of Ohio. [At this hour (2 o'clock) we are compelled to go to press.]

SLAVE INSURRECTION
AT HARPER'S FERRY.
HEADED BY 250 ABOLITIONISTS.
The U. S. Arsenal Seized—Trains Stopped.

The Citizens in a State of Terror—White Persons Imprisoned—Slaves Set Free—Several Lives Lost—Requisitions for Troops—Departure of Military from Baltimore, Washington, Frederick and Old Point Comfort—Latest Accounts from the Seat of War.

We were startled yesterday morning, between nine and ten o'clock, by the receipt of the following telegraphic dispatch:

FREDERICK, Oct. 17.—Information has been received here this morning of a formidable negro insurrection at Harper's Ferry. An armed band of abolitionists have full possession of Harper's Ferry and the United States Arsenal. One of the railroad hands, a negro, was killed whilst trying to get the train through the town.

They have arrested two men who came in with a load of wheat, and took their wagon and loaded it with rifles, and sent them into Maryland.—They are led by about two hundred and fifty whites, with a gang of negroes fighting for their freedom. They gave Conductor Phelps notice that they would not allow any more trains to pass.

The telegraph wires are cut east and west of Harper's Ferry. This intelligence was brought by the train from the West. Great excitement here. The leader told Conductor Phelps, of the Baltimore and Ohio railroad train, that "they were determined to have liberty, or die in the attempt."

Their object in stopping further trains was to save bloodshed by preventing the arrival of troops. One of the passengers was imprisoned by them for half an hour.



John Brown Raids Harpers Ferry: Mid 19th Century in Maryland

Document Based Lesson Plan

Maryland Room Frederick County Public Library

Teacher Lesson:

Objective - Students Will:

Examine a 19th Century Maryland Newspaper article to

Identify how the raid in Harpers Ferry in October 1859 was reported and

Recognize the impact of the raid on the opinion of the general public as well as the power of the press.

Curriculum Standards

Maryland Voluntary State Curriculum Social Studies/History grade

SS4&8 4; SS8 4a-5b

Type of lesson: Mastery Teaching

Action Plan:

Anticipatory Set: - (10 minutes) Students are given the document and worksheet after some introduction about this era in American History

Check for Understanding - (20 minutes) On a separate sheet of paper students should write complete sentences to all questions. Students are encouraged to use the document to formulate their own answers.

Independent Practice/Assessment (15 minutes) - Collect responses for assessment, and discuss the document by projecting it. (20 points each and 20 for bonus)

Background Resources:

Scott, John Anthony. John Brown of Harper's Ferry. New York: Facts on File, 1988.

Brendan, January. John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry. Danbury: Children's Press, 2000.

John Brown's Raid; To Do Battle In The Land. [videorecording] National Park Service, 1989.