

Textbook Account

In the fall of 1859, John Brown, an antislavery **zealot** whose bloody actions in Kansas had inflamed the crisis there, staged an even more dramatic episode, this time in the South itself. With private encouragement and financial aid from some prominent eastern abolitionists, he made elaborate plans to seize a mountain fortress in Virginia, from which, he believed, he could **foment** a slave **insurrection** in the South.

Source: American History: Connecting with the Past by Alan Brinkley, 2015.

Vocabulary

zealot: a person who is a fanatic about their ideals

foment: instigate or stir up, usually a violent action

insurrection: a violent uprising against a government or group

Guiding Question:

According to the textbook, what did John Brown hope to accomplish with a raid on Harper's Ferry?

Document A: Frederick Douglass (Modified)

Frederick Douglass was a highly influential abolitionist. He was born into slavery and escaped when he was twenty years old. In this excerpt from his 1881 autobiography, Douglass recalled a meeting he had with John Brown in the weeks before the raid on Harper's Ferry.

We sat down among the rocks and talked. The taking of Harper's Ferry, of which Captain Brown had merely hinted before, was now declared as his settled purpose. I at once opposed the measure. To me, such a measure would be fatal to running off slaves [to freedom] (as was the original plan), and fatal to all engaged in doing so. It would be an attack upon the federal government and would array the whole country against us.

Captain Brown did not object to **rousing** the nation; it seemed to him that something startling was just what the nation needed. He thought that the capture of Harper's Ferry would serve as notice to the slaves that their friends had come, and as a trumpet to rally them.

Our talk was long and earnest ... he [was] for striking a blow which should instantly **rouse** the country, and I [was] for the policy of gradually and unaccountably drawing off the slaves to the mountains, as at first suggested and proposed by him.

In parting he put his arms around me and said: "Come with me, Douglass, I will defend you with my life. I want you for a special purpose. When I strike the bees will begin to swarm, and I shall want you to help hive them."

Source: The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, *by Frederick Douglass*, 1881.

Vocabulary

rouse: to awaken or excite

Document B: John Brown's Son

The following is from an award-winning book by journalist Tony Horowitz. In this excerpt, John Brown's son, Salmon, explains what his father had hoped to accomplish at Harper's Ferry. Salmon had participated in the Kansas campaign but not the attack on Harper's Ferry.

Salmon [Brown] offered his analysis fifty years after Harper's Ferry, while explaining to a researcher why he'd stayed home when his father and brothers went ahead to Virginia.

More telling, perhaps, was another comment Salmon made in the same interview: "Father's idea in his Harper's Ferry movement, was to **agitate** the slavery question. Not to create an **insurrection**." This disturbance, Salmon said, would spark the great conflict Brown believed was necessary to end slavery: "He wanted to bring on the war. I have heard of him talk of it many times."

Source: *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid that Sparked the Civil War*, by Tony Horowitz, 2011.

Vocabulary

agitate: to arouse concern in the hopes of causing action

insurrection: a violent uprising against a government or group

Document C: John Brown's Speech at Trial

The following is from a speech that John Brown delivered just before he was sentenced to death at his trial in 1859.

I have, may it please the Court, a few words to say. In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted, of a design on my part to free slaves. I intended certainly to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter when I went into Missouri, and there took slaves without the **snapping** of a gun on either side, moving them through the country, and finally leaving them in Canada. I designed to have done the same thing again on a larger scale. That was all I intended to do. I never did intend murder or **treason**, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite the slaves to rebellion, or to make **insurrection**.

Source: *John Brown's speech was reported in an 1859 book titled The Life, Trial, and Execution of John Brown.*

Vocabulary

snapping: firing

treason: crime of betraying one's country

insurrection: a violent uprising against a government or group

Document D: John Brown Letter

John Brown wrote the following in a letter to Andrew Hunter, a Virginia attorney and politician who had been a prosecutor in Brown's trial. The letter was written on November 22, 1859, twenty days after Brown was sentenced to death. In the letter, Brown was addressing an apparent contradiction between what he said in his final speech at trial (Document C) and what he had told officials when he was awaiting trial.

I have just had my attention called to a seeming confliction between the statement I at first made to Governor Wise and that which I made at the time I received my sentence, regarding my intentions respecting the slaves we took about the Ferry. ...

I was taken wholly by surprise [when they allowed me to speak at my trial], as I did not expect my sentence [to be handed down] before the others. In the hurry of the moment, I forgot much that I had before intended to say and did not consider the full bearing of what I then said. I intended to convey this idea, that it was my object to place the slaves in a condition to defend their liberties, if they would, without any bloodshed, but not that I intended to run them out of the slave States.

Source: *A letter from John Brown to Andrew Harper, November 22, 1859.*

Guiding Questions

Document A

1. (Close reading) According to Frederick Douglass, what did John Brown hope to accomplish by attacking Harper's Ferry?
2. (Sourcing) Is Frederick Douglass's account a trustworthy source for learning about John Brown's intentions? Explain.
3. (Corroboration) How does Douglass's account compare to the textbook account? Does it support it or undermine it? Explain.

Document B

1. (Close Reading) According to Salmon Brown, what did John Brown hope to accomplish by attacking Harper's Ferry?
2. (Sourcing) Is Salmon Brown's account a trustworthy source for learning about John Brown's intentions? Explain.
3. (Corroboration) How does Salmon Brown's account compare to Frederick Douglass's account? To what extent do they agree or disagree?
4. (Corroboration) How does Salmon Brown's account compare to the textbook account? Does it support it or undermine it? Explain.

Document C

1. (Close Reading) What does John Brown say he planned to accomplish with the attack at Harper's Ferry?
2. (Sourcing) Is Brown's account a trustworthy source for learning about his intentions? Explain.
3. (Corroboration) How does John Brown's account compare to those offered by Salmon Brown and Frederick Douglass?
4. (Corroboration) How does John Brown's account compare to the textbook account? Does it support it or undermine it? Explain.

Document D

1. (Close Reading) What does John Brown say he intended to accomplish with the attack at Harpers Ferry in this letter?
2. Is this a trustworthy account for understanding John Brown's intentions? Explain.
3. (Corroboration) How does this account compare to Brown's speech at trial (in Document C)? Does this affect your evaluation of Document C? Explain.

4. (Corroboration) How does this account compare to the textbook account? Does it support it or undermine it? Explain.

Final Evaluation

1. Overall, how well did the textbook do explaining what John Brown hoped to accomplish at Harper's Ferry? Explain.

2. Historians often weigh contradictory and inconclusive evidence when interpreting the past. Based on the evidence in Documents A-D, which one of the following four explanations do you think is true?
 - a. John Brown intended to start an insurrection by enslaved people in the South.
 - b. John Brown intended to agitate the conflict over slavery and bring about war.
 - c. John Brown intended to transport enslaved people to freedom.
 - d. John Brown intended to peacefully arm enslaved people so they could defend themselves but not to start an insurrection.

3. (Contextualization) Below are four facts related to Brown's raid. Evaluate whether each fact would affect your explanation (from Question 2). Does it make your case stronger or weaker? Explain.

Fact 1: Brown had developed plans to transport enslaved people to freedom for decades and had helped eleven people escape in Missouri the year before.

Fact 2: Brown took over the federal armory in Harper's Ferry but made no major efforts to secure or transport the thousands of guns stored there.

Fact 3: Brown had ordered hundreds of pikes (a type of spear used in war) from a blacksmith and had been storing them at his farmhouse outside Harper's Ferry. However, he did not bring the pikes with him on the raid.

Fact 4: Brown made no systematic attempt to spread the word of his raid to enslaved people.