

Territorial Kansas ONLINE

Lesson Plans



Getting to Know John Brown

These cards contain either an excerpt from a primary source, a photograph of an artifact, or a song from the time period. Item numbers are provided for those items included in the Kansas Memory online database. If you wish to investigate these items further you can access www.kansasmemory.org for the complete text and a picture of the actual document.

Cut apart and distribute the cards. Use the information contained on the cards to complete the "Who is John Brown?" worksheet.

www.kshs.org

John Brown's father, Owen Brown, was a strict Calvinist who raised his children to hate the institution of slavery. At the age of twelve John met a man who owned a slave. The man treated John well, but he beat the slave with an iron shovel in front of John. This experience haunted John and strengthened his hatred of slavery. Twenty-five years later, John Brown made a public vow to end slavery.

Item number: 315730



This slave shackle was used to bind the leg of a slave.

Gerrit Smith set aside land at North Elba, New York, on which free blacks and runaways could settle. When John Brown visited this place in the Adirondack Mountains he discovered its inhabitants were unsure how to start their new lives. The settlers found the climate and farming conditions very different from what they were used to farther south. They also lacked the training and experience they needed to manage money and seek employment. Brown wrote this letter to his father about his desire to move to North Elba.

Springfield Mass 10th Jan'y 1849

"I was on some of the Gerrit Smith lands lying opposite Burlington VT last fall that he has given away to the blacks & I found no objection to them but the high Northern Latitude in which they lie...I can think of no place where I think I would sooner go; all things considered than to live with those... Africans to try, & encourage them; & show them a little so far as I am capable how to manage."

The following excerpt is taken from a letter written by John Brown's father, Owen Brown. He is writing to Florella and Samuel Adair, his daughter and son-in-law, who lived in Kansas Territory.

Munroe Falls [New York] August 8, 1855

"John came in a very short time after I stopt writin he thinks to start for Kansas next week he has something of a warlike spiret I think as much as necessary for defence I will hope nothing more."

Item number: 90277

Item number: 4247

John Brown followed five of his sons to Kansas Territory in the fall of 1855. He wrote to his wife, Mary, about the situation he found. She had stayed at home in North Elba, New York.

Osawatomie K.T., October 13, 1855 Saturday Eve

"We found our folks in a most uncomfortable situation with no Houses to shelter one of them; no Hay or corn fodder of any account secured shivering over their little fires all exposed to the dreadful cutting Winds Morning & Evening, & stormy days. We have been trying to help them all....Last Tuesday was an Election day with Free State men in Kansas, & hearing that there [was] a prospect of difficulty we all turned out most thoroughly armed...but no enemy appeared....Indeed I believe Missouri is fast becoming discouraged about making Kansas a Slave State, & think the prospect of its becoming Free is brightening every day."

Item number: 4247

John Brown moved from New York to settle in Osawatomie, Kansas Territory, near his half-sister and her husband, Florella and Samuel Adair. This is an excerpt from a letter Samuel wrote to Rev. S.S. Jocelyn. He never identifies by name the relative discussed in this letter, but he was very likely writing about John Brown.

Osawatomie K.T.
October 15, 1855

"A relation of mine from York State has just arrived, with son & soninlaw, & a lot of revolvers, rifles & muskets he had raised East for the benefit of Kansas- he has much of the war spirit. I hope he will not, however, go beyond strict self defence, or defence of the right of suffrage."

Item number: 90121

John Brown followed five of his sons to Kansas Territory in the fall of 1855. He wrote to his wife Mary about the situation he found. She remained in North Elba, New York.

Brownsville Kansas Territory 2nd Nov 1855

"we found every one here more or less unwell...no crops of Hay, or any thing raised had been taken care of; with Corn wasteing by Cattle, & Horses; without fence; & I may add without any Meat:...any Sugar, or any kind of Breadstuffs but Corn ground with great labour in a hand Mill about Two Miles off...We have got a Shanty Three Logs high chinked, & muded; & roofed with our Tent; & a Chimney so far advanced that we can keep a Fire in it...& we have got their little crop of Beans secured; which together with Jonny Cake, Mush, & Milk, Pumpkins, & Squashes constitute our fare....I feel more, & more confident that Slavery will soon die out here; & to God be the praise."

Item number: 4249

Two months after John Brown arrived in Kansas Territory a vote was scheduled on a state constitution. This was an important election in the Kansas territory. Brown arrived in Kansas Territory optimistic that the question of slavery would be settled through the ballot. In this letter Brown talks about his views to Orson Day of White Hall, New York.

Browns Station, Kansas Territory, 14th Decem 1855
"I will only say at this time that the Territory is now entirely in the power of the Free State men; & not withstanding this result has been served by means of some bravery, & tact; with a good deal of trickery on the One side; & of cowardice, folly, & drunkenness on the other yet so it is; & I believe the Missourians will give up all further hope of making Kansas a Slave State. Tomorrow the people of Kansas will decide whether to adopt or to reject the Free Constitution submitted to them; & I have no doubt of its adoption. Indeed I consider it no longer a question whether this is to be a Free or a Slave State."

Item number: 4251

Voting fraud and a proslavery threat to Lawrence reinforced John Brown's commitment to making Kansas free. In a letter to his wife and children, Brown speaks of his life in Kansas Territory and the family and life he left behind in North Elba, New York.

Osawatomie Kansas Territory 1st Feby 1856

"The weather continues very severe: & it is now nearly Six Weeks that the Snow has been almost constantly driven (like dry sand) by the fierce Winds of Kansas....The idea of again visiting those of my dear family at North Elba; is so calculated to unman me that I seldom allow my thoughts to dwell upon it: & I do not think best to write much about it.... We have just learned of some new; & shocking outrages at Leavenworth: & that the Free State people there have fled to Lawrence: which place is again threatened with an attack. Should that take place we may soon again be called upon to "buckle on our Armor"; which by the help of God we will do"

Item number: 4257

John Brown led a brutal attack on William Sherman and four other proslavery settlers living along Pottawatomie Creek in 1856 in retaliation for acts of violence by proslavery supporters. In this letter James Hanway writes about the incident to a biographer of John Brown.

Shermansville Franklin Co. Kansas Ty.

March 12, 1860

"Old John Brown was at my house several days....He asked me 'how do the people on the Creek regard the killing of the Shermans etc at this time.' My remark was, that I did not know a settler of 56, but what regarded it as amongst the most fortunate events in the history of Kansas—that this event saved the lives of the free state men on the creek: that those who did the act were looked upon [as] our deliverers. The old man remarked, that the first shock frightened the free state men, almost as bad as the ruffians, but he knew when the facts were understood that a reaction would take place. He then remarked that 'if killing of these men was murder, then he was a accessory.'"

Item number: 90224

John Brown went into hiding to escape capture by government and proslavery forces. He often disguised himself as a surveyor, which helped him move more freely in his fight for the free-state cause. In this illustration Samuel Reader directs Brown (with the ox gad) and his son Frederick (standing near the wagon) to a free-state camp. Note the surveying equipment in the wagon.



Item number:
209883

John Brown and his men tried unsuccessfully to defend Osawatomie from a proslavery attack. Brown's son Frederick was killed during this battle. News of the Battle of Osawatomie propelled John Brown to national attention. In this letter Brown tells his wife about the battle.

Lawrence 7th September 1856

"I have one moment to write you to say that I am yet alive....On the morning of the 30th Aug an attack was made by the ruffians on Osawatomie numbering some 400 by whose scouts our dear Fredk [Frederick] was shot dead without warning he supposing them to be Free State men as near as we can learn....Four or Five Free State men were butchered during the day in all....Things now seem to be rather quiet just now; but what another hour will bring I cannot say."

Item number: 4091

In this letter John Jr., the oldest son of John Brown, writes to his father about the Battle of Osawatomie. Brown and one son, Jason, survived while a second son, Frederick, was killed.

Monday morning Sept 8th/56

"Having before heard of Frederick's death & that you were missing my anxiety on your account has been most intense. though my dear brother I shall never see again here, yet I thank God you and Jason still live. Poor Frederick has perished in good cause! the success of which cause I trust will yet bring joy to millions. The Battle of Osawatomie is considered here [in Kansas Territory] as the great fight so far and considering the enemies loss, it is certainly a great victory for us, certainly a very burning of the town for them. This has proved most unmistakable that 'Yankees' will 'fight.' Every one I hear speaking of you are loud in your praise. The Missourians in this region show signs of great fear."

Item number: 4344

Acting territorial governor Hugh S. Walsh requested permission to offer a reward for James Montgomery, John Brown, and other free-state supporters engaged in violence in southeastern Kansas Territory.

Executive office, K.T. Lecompton Nov 19th 1858

"The measures are the same as pursued by Montgomery last Winter, [they are] depriving the inhabitants of their Arms singly and alone and robing them...and committing simultaneous outrages upon families separate and apart & thereby stiking terror throughout the two Counties....A reward of three Hundred dollars for Montgomery and five hundred dollars for old Brown and their delivery at the Fort [Leavenworth] would secure their persons and break up their organization or dive them from the Territory. Smaller rewards would secure any of their Men and no use of Troops would be necessary."

Item number: 90600

Samuel C. Smith wrote to Dr. Charles Robinson about the actions of John Brown and James Montgomery. Smith, Robinson, Brown, and Montgomery all supported the free-state cause.

Lawrence, Dec. 29 /58

"Captains Brown & Montgomery continue their 'reign of terror' in Linn and Bourbon Counties. Brown lately made a foray into Missouri with his men, killed one man, released some six or eight slaves from bondage, mounted [them] on their masters horses and returned with them ...Gov. Medary sent Sheriff Walker down into that region to investigate....He confirms the tales of horror, before received, loudly condemns Montgomery and Brown and says that they cannot and ought not to be sustained....He says that the Missourians excited by the robber incursions of Brown have assembled in considerable numbers on the border and there await the action of their Gov. to whom they have sent a deputation."

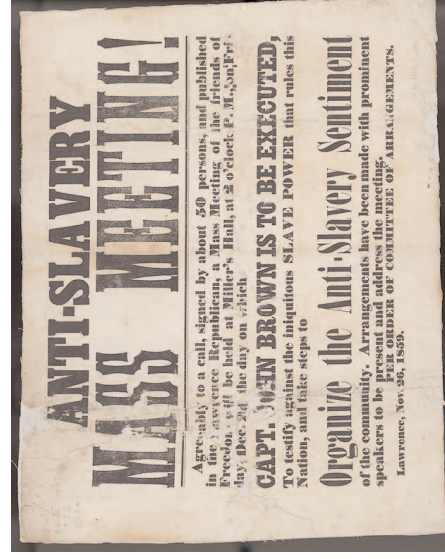
Item number: 90394

During a trip east to raise money for the free-state cause John Brown contracted with a Connecticut blacksmith to make several hundred pikes like the one pictured here. Brown planned to use the pikes to arm escaped slaves he expected to join him after he successfully attacked the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. He hoped to start a slave uprising.



Item number: 209884

John Brown led an attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, on October 18, 1859, as part of a plan to start a slave uprising. He was wounded, caught, tried, found guilty of treason, and hanged on December 2, 1859. This is an advertisement for an antislavery meeting to be held in Lawrence, Kansas Territory, on the day of his execution.



Item number: 90549

On October 18, 1859, John Brown led an attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in an attempt to start a slave uprising. Federal troops overwhelmed Brown and his twenty-man army. He was wounded, caught, tried, found guilty of treason, and hanged on December 2, 1859. The following are the last words he wrote before his death.

2 December 1859
Charleston, Va

I John Brown am 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 was captured as he led an attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in an attempt to free slaves. He was found guilty of treason and hanged on December 2, 1859. Many saw John Brown as a hero and honored him with songs, poems, paintings, and at least one Broadway play. During the Civil War the Union army marched to this song sung to the tune of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, (repeat 3 times)
But his soul goes marching on.

(chorus) Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! (repeat 3 times)
His soul goes marching on.

He captured Harpers Ferry with his nineteen men so true;
He frightened old Virginia 'til she trembled through and through.
They hanged him for a traitor, themselves the traitor's crew,
His soul goes marching on.

John Brown died that the slave might be free, (repeat 3 times)
His soul is marching on.

The stars above in Heaven are looking kindly down, (repeat 3 times)
On the grave of old John Brown.



Name: _____

What does John Brown say about himself and his cause?

What do others say about John Brown?



John Brown,
1800-1859

What does John Brown do to end slavery?

What do I think about John Brown and why?