

# Shared Stories of the Civil War Reader's Theater Project

## *John Brown: Martyr or Madman*

On Saturday night, May 24, 1856, a group of armed men led by John Brown appeared among the settlements near Dutch Henry's crossing along the Pottawatomie Creek in eastern Kansas. Five men – all proslavery settlers – were summoned from their cabins. Their bodies were discovered the next day.

*John Brown: Martyr or Madman* reader's theater script was created using excerpts taken from historical letters, accounts from affidavits recorded after the 1856 Pottawatomie Massacre, and both historical and contemporary newspaper articles. Following the reading, participants will have the opportunity to discuss John Brown's legacy in Kansas and Missouri.

**Please Note:** Regional historians have reviewed the source materials used, the script, and the list of citations for accuracy.



*John Brown: Martyr or Madman* is part of the Shared Stories of the Civil War Reader's Theater project, a partnership between the **Freedom's Frontier National Heritage Area** and the **Kansas Humanities Council**.



FFNHA is a partnership of 41 counties in eastern Kansas and western Missouri dedicated to connecting the stories of settlement, the Border War and the Enduring Struggle for Freedom in this area. KHC is a non-profit organization promoting understanding of the history and ideas that shape our lives and strengthen our sense of community.

### **For More Information:**

Freedom's Frontier National Heritage Area  
Kansas Humanities Council

[www.freedomsfrontier.org](http://www.freedomsfrontier.org)  
[www.kansashumanities.org](http://www.kansashumanities.org)

## Introduction

**Instructions: The facilitator can either read the entire introduction out loud or summarize key points.**

This introduction is intended to provide context to the reader's theater script. It is not a comprehensive examination of the life of John Brown. As we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Civil War in 2011, *John Brown: Martyr or Madman* reminds us to consider the violence and complexities of the time period, including events leading up to the Civil War conflict.

You cannot tell the story of Kansas and Missouri without telling the story of John Brown. To do so would be to ignore one of the most colorful and fiercely debated figures not just in the history of these two states, but also in the history of the nation.

Though John Brown did not live to see the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, or the first African-American President, his actions, noble or not, undoubtedly set in motion the eventual eradication of slavery.

There are important historical facts to remember as we read through this script. In the 1850s, Kansas was not yet a state, and the nation was divided when it came to the contentious issue of slavery. The Compromise of 1850 mandated the Fugitive Slave Law, meaning that any citizen, regardless of whether their state allowed slavery or not, was required to report runaway slaves and assist in their return.

In May of 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act was signed, repealing the Missouri Compromise of 1820, allowing the Kansas Constitution, not the U.S. Congress, to determine whether or not slavery should be legal in the territory. Proslavery supporters in Missouri immediately rushed to cross the border to cast votes for proslavery legislators in the Territorial Congress. Anti-slavery advocates in the East created the New England Emigrant Aid Society and sent members to the Kansas Territory to cast opposing votes. Neighbors suddenly became political enemies, and "Bleeding Kansas" became a topic of national debate.

John Brown did not stay in Kansas long. He arrived in 1855 to further the "Free State" cause. He was an abolitionist, but not a saint: Brown was a failed businessman who had incurred debts, lawsuits, and business entanglements. When proslavery forces sacked Lawrence, the "Free State Fortress," on May 21, 1856, Brown, his sons, and three others sought retaliation through violent action. Some said their actions ensured that slavery would not spread to Kansas. Others said Brown was a lunatic. Most everyone agreed that Brown's actions made "Bleeding Kansas" more dangerous.

This script includes several prominent voices from the national and local debates over slavery and John Brown's role and influence. You will hear from Frederick Douglass who supported John Brown's cause, but not always his actions. You will hear the voices of the victims of the Pottawatomie Massacre, as they describe in their own words the horrific events of that fateful night. You will hear the voices from Kansas and Missouri newspapers, politicians, pundits, and authors, from 150 years ago to today, debate the question: How do we remember John Brown?

## Group Discussion Questions

**Instructions: The facilitator should pose one or more of these questions in advance of the reading of the script. At the conclusion of the reading, participants will return to the questions for consideration.**

1. Does “the end justify the means?” Or does “violence breed violence,” as abolitionist leader James Hanway says in the third episode?
2. Some historians have concluded, “America was founded on breaking the law.” The militias of the American Revolution used violent methods to assert liberation from the British. Is John Brown’s use of violence extreme or is it an extension of the revolutionary spirit exercised against an unjust practice?
3. Consider the words of Henry David Thoreau who, in his defense of John Brown, wrote: “Is it not possible that an individual may be right and a government wrong?” Do you agree?
4. Terry Farr writes that John Brown’s strike at Pottawatomie was “an effective one” because public consciousness was raised about the threat of pro-slavery settlers in Kansas. Should the Doyles, Wilkinsons, and Shermans have stayed out of the Kansas Territory altogether? Or should those sponsored by the New England Emigrant Aid Society have stayed in the North? Who decides who gets to live where?
5. There are few remaining examples today of African-American voices from this time period. We know that many enslaved African Americans were freed by Brown, and some fought in the raid at Harpers Ferry. Other black Americans, like Frederick Douglass, supported Brown’s cause, but not his methods of violence. After John Brown’s death, generations of African Americans continued to view him very favorably. Do John Brown’s contributions to freedom for the enslaved outweigh the impact of his violent acts?

## Script

**Instructions: Each part will be read out loud by an assigned reader. Readers should stand and speak into a microphone when it's their turn. The source of the quote should also be read out loud (this is the information bolded beneath each quote).**

NARRATOR            Episode One – The Myth of John Brown in Kansas

*John Brown left a major mark on American history. For someone who lived in Kansas for only a short while, from 1855 to 1856, Brown has forever been linked to the state. Was he a hero to the anti-slavery cause during the Bleeding Kansas period, or was he an extremist, a murderer?*

READER 1            You can weigh John Brown's body well enough,  
But how and in what balance weigh John Brown?

**Stephen Vincent Benét, *John Brown's Body* (1928).<sup>1</sup>**

READER 2            There have been many attacks made upon his character, but let it be remembered that Brown did not deny his faults. As we search through history, even the Bible, there are few lives that could not be attacked from some angle. Whenever a leader takes a stand for humanity, he is falsely attacked by selfish interests, and so it was with John [Brown]. It was his sincere belief that God had placed him here to fight the cause of the slaves, and to this conviction he increasingly adhered, even to giving his life to the cause.

**David C. Doten, *Osawatomie Graphic News*, May 16, 1935.<sup>2</sup>**

READER 3            John Brown began the war that ended American slavery and made this a free Republic. Until this blow was struck, the prospect for freedom was dim, shadowy and uncertain. The irrepressible conflict was one of words, votes and compromises. When John Brown stretched forth his arm, the sky was cleared. The time for compromises was gone—the armed hosts of freedom stood face to face over the chasm of a broken Union—and the clash of arms was at hand. The South staked all upon getting possession of the Federal Government, and failing to do that, drew the sword of rebellion and thus made her own, and not Brown's, the lost cause of the century.

**Frederick Douglass, May 30, 1881.<sup>3</sup>**

- READER 4            John Brown of Kansas:  
He dared begin;  
He lost;  
But losing, won.  
**Eugene Ware (Ironquill).<sup>4</sup> Inscription on Bronze Statue, John Brown, Osawatomie, Kansas.**
- NARRATOR            *John Brown, a lifelong abolitionist, came to Kansas in 1855 at the urging of his oldest son, John Brown Jr. Both were keenly aware that Kansas could become ground zero for the fight over slavery. Along his journey into Kansas, Brown traveled through Missouri and observed the attitudes of its proslavery citizens.*
- READER 5            Brownsville, also known as Brown’s Station (present-day Franklin County), Kansas  
  
We propose . . . that the anti-slavery portion of the inhabitants should immediately thoroughly arm, and organize themselves in military companies. In order to effect this, some persons must begin and lead in the matter. Here are five men of us who are not only anxious to fully prepare, but are thoroughly determined to fight. We can see no other way to meet the case. ‘It is no longer a question of Negro slavery, but it is the enslavement of ourselves.’ We want you to get for us these arms. We need them more than we do bread . . .  
**Letter, John Brown Jr. to his Father, May 20 and 24, 1855.<sup>5</sup>**
- READER 2            Dear Wife and Children,  
Indeed I believe Missouri is fast becoming discouraged about making Kansas a slave state, and think the prospect of its becoming Free is brightening every day. Try to be cheerful and always hope in God who will not leave nor forsake them that trust in him. Try to comfort and encourage each other all you can.  
**Letter, John Brown to his family, October 13, 1855.**
- NARRATOR            *Episode Two – The Pottawatomie Massacre*  
  
*On May 21, 1856, proslavery crusaders attacked Lawrence, burning the Free State Hotel and destroying several printing presses. Three days later, on May 24, Brown, four of his sons, and two other men — including fellow abolitionist James Townsley — traveled to nearby Mosquito Creek to carry out what was later known as the Pottawatomie Massacre.*  
  
*Farmer James P. Doyle was a proslavery man, like many of his neighbors in the Pottawatomie Valley. An emigrant from Tennessee, he lived*

*modestly with his wife, Mahala, and their six children. On the evening of May 24, John Brown and his men confronted Doyle at his property.*

READER 2 About eleven o' clock at night, after we had all retired . . . we heard some persons come into the yard and rap at the door and call for my husband . . . My husband opened the door and several came into the house, and said they were from the army. They told my husband that he and the boys must surrender, they were their prisoners.

**Mahala Doyle, Affidavit, June 7, 1856.**<sup>6</sup>

READER 3 The old man Doyle and his two sons were . . . marched some distance from the house where a halt was made. Old John Brown drew his revolver and shot Doyle in the forehead, and Brown's two youngest sons immediately fell upon the younger Doyles with their swords.

**James Townsley, Affidavit.**<sup>7</sup>

READER 2 He [John Brown] said if a man stood between him and what he considered right, he would take his life as coolly as he would eat his breakfast. His actions show what he is. Always restless, he seems never to sleep. With an eye like a snake, he looks like a demon.

**Mahala Doyle.**

NARRATOR *Brown and his men continued to move down Pottawatomie Creek, 20 miles south of present-day Ottawa, targeting alleged slavery sympathizers. Their next stop was the house of Allen and Louisa Wilkinson, who had emigrated to Pottawatomie from Tennessee two years earlier. Like the Doyles, the Wilkinsons owned no slaves. Allen Wilkinson served in the Territorial Legislature, which anti-slavery Kansans dismissed as the "bogus legislature"*<sup>8</sup>

READER 1 I begged them to let Mr. Wilkinson stay with me, saying that I was sick and helpless, and could not stay by myself. My husband also asked them to let him stay with me, until he could get someone to wait on me; told them that he would not run off, but he would be there the next day, or whenever called for; the old man who seemed to be in control looked at me, and then around at the children, and replied, "You have neighbors." I said, "So I have, but they are not here, and I cannot go for them." The old man replied, "It matters not," and told him to get ready. My husband wanted to put on his boots, and get ready, so as to be protected from the damp and night air, but they would not let him. They then took my husband away.

**Louisa Wilkinson, Affidavit, June 13, 1856.**<sup>9</sup>

NARRATOR *Brown and his men proceeded to the cabin of James Harris, whose house was a known rendezvous point for proslavery settlers. They expected to find “Dutch” Henry Sherman, a known proslavery advocate. Though Dutch Henry was not among the many men staying at Harris’ cabin that night, Sherman’s brother, known as Dutch William, was.*

READER 5 Old man Brown asked Mr. Sherman to go out with him, and Sherman then went out with Brown. I heard nothing more for about fifteen minutes. Two of the “northern army,” as they styled themselves, stayed with us until they heard a cap burst, and then these two men left. Next morning, about ten o’ clock, I found William Sherman dead, in a creek near my house. I was looking for him; as he had not come back, I thought he had been murdered.

**John Harris, Affidavit, June 6, 1856.<sup>10</sup>**

NARRATOR *Episode Three – Reaction to the Killings*

*Brown initially denied involvement with the Pottawatomie Massacre, although his “Northern Army” defended Brown for his preemptive strike against the ruffians. Brown then invoked the fear of God in his defense. Abolitionists’ sentiments toward Brown were split, while proslavery settlers grew cautious at the mounting threat of Brown.*

READER 1 I did not [kill them]; but I do not pretend to say that they were not killed by my order, and in doing so, I believe I was doing God’s service.

**John Brown, when asked if he committed the Pottawatomie killings.**

READER 5 All men of real good sense condemned these midnight assassinations [but] . . . It appears from general opinion that they were extreme men, and very obnoxious to the free state men – thus, violence breeds violence. Again: No sooner the news of the destruction of the Hotel at Lawrence and the two printing presses, than the *Border Times*, a violent paper published at Westport after given a short statement of the pillage and destruction of Lawrence, comments thus—it says—“This is right, nuisances should be suppressed,” and then recommends the pro-slavery party of the Territory to drive and exterminate every “black hearted abolitionist and drive them out of the Territory.” They advocate assassination and now that five persons have been murdered on their side perhaps they will learn that such hellish sentiments when carried into effect, will work equally to the destruction of pro-slavery men.

**James Hanway, Kansas abolitionist, May 1856.<sup>11</sup>**

READER 4 I own slaves, and have a crop of corn and wheat growing. Have never taken any active part with the proslavery party—only voted and sustained the law. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of May, somewhere between the hours of 10 and 12 at night, perhaps earlier, a party of men, about 20 or 30 I think, surrounded my house, and called to me to open the door and raise a light. I asked them what they wanted. They said they wanted to search my house, and if they had to burst open the door, they would kill me . . . These men said I must leave in a day or two, or they would kill me . . . I left for fear of my life and the lives of my family. They said that the war was commenced, that they were going to fight it out, and drive the proslavery people out of the Territory.

**Morton Bourne, June 11, 1856.<sup>12</sup>**

READER 2 Douglas City, Kansas Territory (two miles from present-day Lecompton)

My Dear Sister,

These are exciting times here . . . I have my rifle, revolver, and old home-stocked pistol where I can lay my hand on them in an instant, besides a hatchet and axe. I take this precaution to guard against the midnight attacks of the Abolitionists, who never make an attack in open daylight, and no pro-slavery man knows when he is safe here in this Territory. Some of them go so far as to guard out every night. There are three families of us here in a hundred yards of each other, with seven men in the three families, so that if no more than a dozen or fifteen comes at once, we will be able to stand our hand pretty well. We hear so much news about attacks, depredations, etc., that I can scarcely believe, or least tell what to believe. All accounts are generally exaggerated, but still there is still some foundation for them.

**Letter, Axalla Hoole to his sister, Mary, June 8, 1856.<sup>13</sup>**

READER 3 I desire also to say that I did not then approve of the killing of these men, but Brown said it must be done for the protection of the free state settlers; that the pro-slavery party must be terrified and that it was better that a score of bad men should die than that one man who came here to make Kansas a free state should be driven out.

**James Townsley, “The Pottawatomie Killings: James Townsley’s Statement,” *Paola [Kansas] Republican Citizen*, December 6, 1879.**

READER 2 One of our neighbors has missed a Negro fellow and supposes that he has been carried off by the Abolitionists. He thinks that they had to carry him off by force, as he does not think the Negro would go off willingly. [The Abolitionists] have tried to induce a good many to run away.

**Letter, Axalla Hoole to his sister, Mary, October 12, 1856.**

- NARRATOR *Episode Four – John Brown Remembered Today.*  
*Do we choose to remember John Brown as a fearless advocate who gave up his own life to end slavery? Or do we remember him as a murderer? As we will see in some present-day perspectives, the answer remains unclear.*
- READER 1 The charitable thing to say of Brown is that he was a lunatic. He was a disturber even in the east, a dead beat, a swindler . . . His hands were bloody, and his nature was that of a wolf. His desire was to kill and to slay . . . It is time to remove the halo from the head of John Brown, and sell it to the junk man.  
**Lawrence Weekly Journal, May 12, 1900 (Centennial of John Brown’s Birth).**
- READER 2 We assure the outside world that John Brown is strong in Missouri . . . There is no State in the Union where the march of John Brown’s soul is more unimpeded, a fact which the successors of our two Senators will be anxious to acknowledge. Absentees during the rebellion take up the Kansas affair where they left it, but the majority of the people of Missouri have become converts to the gospel of Brown.  
**“John Brown in Missouri,” St. Louis Globe-Democrat, December 28, 1880.**
- READER 3 Many perceive Brown as diabolical and insane, but the blow he struck at Pottawatomie was an effective one. It forced the Free State leadership off the fence, made them fight back. After Pottawatomie, all bets were off in Kansas. And that’s what Brown intended.  
**Terry Farr, Curator of the John Brown Museum, Osawatomie, Kansas (quoted in Kansas City Star, May 21, 1994).**
- READER 4 Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters.  
**Frederick Douglass.**
- READER 5 Few if any Americans today would question the justness of John Brown’s cause: the abolition of human bondage. But as the nation prepares to try Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, who calls himself the architect of the 9/11 attacks, it may be worth pondering the parallels between John Brown’s raid in 1859 and Al Qaeda’s assault in 2001.

Brown was a bearded fundamentalist who believed himself chosen by God to destroy the institution of slavery. He hoped to launch his holy war by seizing the United States armory at Harpers Ferry, Va., and arming blacks for a campaign of liberation. Brown also chose his target for shock value and symbolic impact. The only federal armory in the South, Harpers Ferry was just 60 miles from the capital, where “our president and other leeches,” Brown wrote, did the bidding of slave owners. The first slaves freed and armed by Brown belonged to George Washington’s great-grandnephew.

**Tony Horwitz, “The 9/11 of 1859,” *New York Times*, December 1, 2009.**

READER 2

By today’s standards, his crime was arguably of a federal nature, as his attack was on a federal arsenal in what is now West Virginia. His actions were prompted by federal slavery rulings he considered despicable, especially the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision. Brown was captured by federal troops under Robert E. Lee. And the Virginia court convicted him of treason against Virginia even though he was not a resident.

Justice would be served, belatedly, if President Obama and Governor Kaine found a way to pardon a man whose heroic effort to free four million enslaved blacks helped start the war that ended slavery. Once and for all, rescue John Brown from the loony bin of history.

**David S. Reynolds, “Freedom’s Martyr,” *New York Times*, December 1, 2009.**

READER 3

No one today doubts that his cause was right. I mean, no one (well, essentially no one). Can a person really be a terrorist if at least 96% of humanity endorses the moral virtue of his goal?

**Michael Tomasky, *The Guardian*, December 2, 2009.**

READER 1

You can weigh John Brown’s body well enough,  
But how and in what balance weigh John Brown?

**Stephen Vincent Benét, *John Brown’s Body* (1928).**

***Instructions: The facilitator will now return to the questions found on page 3 for consideration by the group.***

***At the conclusion of the event:***

- ***The local coordinator will indicate whether the scripts need to be returned.***
- ***The page titled Citations is intended to be a take-home handout for participants.***

Footnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> *John Brown's Body* (1928) was a Pulitzer Prize-winning American poem written by Stephen Vincent Benet. Considered one of the few great American epic poems, it examines how John Brown's martyrdom was the impetus to the Civil War.

<sup>2</sup> David C. Doten, Kansas state legislator, Democrat. Born in Paola, KS, Doten served two years in the Kansas House of Representatives (1935-1936).

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), editor, orator, abolitionist. Douglass was a confidante of John Brown's, but disapproved of Brown's plan to start an armed slave rebellion in the South. He temporarily fled to Canada after Brown's execution to avoid guilt by association, but returned to the United States and conferred with Abraham Lincoln over the treatment of black soldiers.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Fitch Ware (1841-1911) was a lawyer and poet originally from Hartford, Connecticut. Upon moving to Kansas in 1867, he was admitted to the bar, and eventually served as newspaper editor, congressman, and commissioner of pensions under President Roosevelt. His most famous poem, "John Brown," was published in *The Crisis* at the time of his death.

<sup>5</sup> John Brown Jr. (1821-1895) was the oldest child of John Brown. Alongside his brothers, John Jr. emigrated to Kansas from Ohio, where his farm suffered through harsh conditions in the southeast part of the state. Unlike his father, John Jr. was actively involved with Kansas politics, having been a candidate for state office under the Topeka government. During the Civil War, he served as Captain in the 7<sup>th</sup> Kansas Cavalry, and quietly spent the rest of his life in Put-in-Bay, Ohio.

<sup>6</sup> Mahala Doyle and her husband, James, along with their six children moved from Tennessee to Kansas in November, 1855. James Doyle was an illiterate farmer who was killed alongside his sons, William and Drury. The Doyles' other son, 16-year-old John, was spared after Mahala "asked them in tears to spare him," and had not been a member of the proslavery Law and Order party like his father and brothers. Immediately after the burials, Mahala abandoned the Doyle farm and moved with her four remaining children to Missouri.

<sup>7</sup> James Townsley was born in Maryland in 1815. A painter by trade, he moved to Anderson County, Kansas, in 1855, and joined the Pottawatomie Rifle Company (led by John Brown Jr.) soon thereafter. After the Pottawatomie Massacre, he was advised to stay away from Kansas for a while, which he did. He did not join Brown's forces at Harpers Ferry, and only saw Brown once more.

<sup>8</sup> By 1855, the Kansas Territorial Legislature was overrun with proslavery delegates, elected by some 5,000 Missourians who had crossed the border (at the helm of Missouri Senator David Rice Atchison). 37 of the 38 candidates for the Legislature had been elected by Missourians, leading anti-slavery Kansans to refer to it as the "Bogus Legislature."

<sup>9</sup> Allen Wilkinson, who was originally from Illinois, and his wife Louisa moved to Kansas Territory from Tennessee in November, 1854. They were claimed to be only the second

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permanent settlers in the Pottawatomie Creek area. The best known of the five victims, he served as postmaster for settlers along the creek, was a member of the Kansas Territorial Legislature, and was a part-time member of the territory's judicial branch. After her husband's death, Louisa Wilkinson returned to Tennessee.

<sup>10</sup> John Harris, an employee of "Dutch" Henry Sherman, provided the lodging for William Sherman, Henry's brother. The brothers were German immigrants and cattle herders who had resided in Kansas for over a decade. Henry was a prominent slavery advocate known to have provided aid to Buford's Georgians. The land he occupied was known as Shermansville, and though no town was ever laid out, a post office had been established there in 1854, with Allen Wilkinson serving as the postmaster. The Sherman brothers and two companions had been searching for cattle all day May 24, and planned to stay the night at Harris' house. Henry opted to stay out much later than the other three, thus sparing his life.

<sup>11</sup> James Hanway (1809-1882) was a friend and distant neighbor of John Brown's. James, his wife Rebecca, and their three sons moved from Ohio to Pottawatomie, Kansas in March, 1856 to support the free-state movement. Though he remained firmly abolitionist, seeing his Pottawatomie neighbors murdered permanently severed Hanway's ties with Brown. He served as an active member of the Underground Railroad.

<sup>12</sup> Morton Bourne (1794-?) was a pro-slavery settler who settled in Douglas County, Kansas, near Washington Creek, in April, 1855. He was in favor of the Territorial Laws, and served on a grand jury in LeCompton. He was robbed by Free Soilers on May 28, 1856, four days after the Potawatomie Massacre.

<sup>13</sup> Axalla Hoole (1822-1863) was a captain of a South Carolina militia until March 20, 1858, his wedding day, when he and his bride, Betsie, left for the Kansas territory. He served as probate judge of Douglas County (having been elected by the Proslavery party) and returned to South Carolina the next year upon the outbreak of hostilities at Fort Sumter. Captain, and later lieutenant colonel of Confederate forces, he was killed in the Battle of Chicamauga on September 20, 1863.