

John Brown Lesson Plan

JOHN BROWN'S RAID ON HARPERS FERRY

CIVIL WAR TRUST

Grades: 9-12

Approximate Length of Time: 1 class meeting

Goals:

Students will gain a historical knowledge of John Brown's 1859 raid and an understanding of how to utilize primary sources to study a historic event.

Objectives:

- 1.) Students will be able to answer the question, "Was John Brown a Hero or Traitor," citing specific content from primary sources.
- 2.) Students will be able to explain possible causes of the raid and the state of the country leading up to the 1859 raid.
- 3.) Students will be able to discuss the events of the raid on Harpers Ferry.
- 4.) Students will be able to answer questions related to the use of primary documents in the study of history.

Materials:

1) Readings:

- Guided Readings: The Impending Crisis 1850s (Gilder Lehrman)
- Trigger Events of the Civil War: John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry

2) Images:

- John Brown's Fort
- Inside John Brown's Fort
- Map of Harpers Ferry (Valley of the Shadow)
- Map of Lower Town, Harpers Ferry (National Park Service)
- "Tragic Prelude" by John Steuart Curry (Mural at Kansas State Capitol in Topeka)

3) Primary Sources –

- [John Starry’s Testimony \(PDF\)](#)
- [Robert E. Lee’s Report \(PDF\)](#)
- [John Brown’s Address \(PDF\)](#)

4) Worksheets:

- [Primary Source Document Analysis Worksheets \(PDF\)](#)

5) Evaluation:

- ["Was John Brown a Hero or a Murderer" Assignment \(PDF\)](#)
- [“Was John Brown a Hero or Murderer?” Rubric \(PDF\)](#)

Before the Lesson:

Assign the following pre-lesson readings as preparation:

The Impending Crisis 1850s - Harper's Ferry

Trigger Events of the Civil War - John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry

Vocabulary:

Summons – a request to appear or to do something such as surrender

Bayonet – a knife like weapons attached to the end of a gun

Insurgent – a member of a group who violently goes against those in charge

Anticipatory Set:

Provide the background and context for the raid.

Explain to your students that while the election of Abraham Lincoln and the secession of the Southern states were immediate causes of the Civil War, many people believe that another “trigger” event of the Civil War was John Brown's 1859 Raid at Harpers Ferry.

Others “triggers” of the war can be traced back further:

- The South depended on slavery directly for its economic well-being; the North did not.
- Many Southern states claimed the "right" to secede from the Union if the government no longer represented its interests - banning slavery would wreck the Southern economy (as well as disturb Southern culture). No compromise seemed to work.
- Westward expansion led to disagreements over the new states' and territories slave laws
- Legislation and court decisions such as the Fugitive Slave Act and the Dred Scott decision brought about arguments over whether or not the federal government was going to support slave-owners.

Procedure:

Part 1:

Ask students what they already know about John Brown. If necessary, review with the students.

Summary:

On the night of October 16, 1859, John Brown and 21 of his men attacked Harpers Ferry. They seized the armory and several other key points within the town. When citizens and local militia attacked, Brown's “army of liberation” was forced to take refuge in the armory's fire engine house. They took several hostages with them. President Buchanan sent Col. Robert E. Lee to lead a group of Marines in capturing Brown and his raiders. On October 18, Lee's men stormed the fire house, ending the raid within several minutes.

Brown was tried for murder, treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia, and conspiring with slaves to create an insurrection. He was executed on December 2, 1859. Right before he was hung he said, “I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood.”

The raid caused intense emotions on both sides of the Mason Dixon Line. Some people called him a "martyr". Some called him a "traitor". Others thought he was insane. A sense of shock and confusion caused written and oral accounts of the event to vary. While the Civil War probably would have occurred without John Brown, he played a role in quickening its arrival.

Activity:

Ask students what they know about America in 1859.

Ask for volunteers; make notes on the board.

Part 2:

Explain to students that to fully understand the consequences of John Brown's 1859 Raid, they need to examine primary sources. Diaries, letters, institutional records, court testimonies, photographs, newspapers and political cartoons are some examples of primary sources. Instead of providing information about an event long after it occurred, by someone who wasn't there, primary sources give us a window into the past directly through the eyes of people who experienced it.

Activity: Have students examine one of the three primary source documents to learn about the event through the eyes of John Brown's contemporaries.

Direct students to read and review their primary document individually

Place students in small groups (or pairs) to answer the document analysis worksheet. (Approximately 20 minutes.) Choose one person to be the spokesperson for the group, and one person to fill out the worksheet.

Move from group to group, asking students to:

- 1) Name the author or speaker;
- 2) Describe their document;
- 3) Ask if they have any questions about their document

After 20 minutes, while students are still in their small groups, use the white board or overhead to write down notes as you discuss the documents as a group.

Conduct a classroom discussion asking the following questions:

- What document did you read?
- Why was your document written?
- How do the documents differ?
- Why might John Brown's raid be considered a "trigger" event? Some people believed (and still believe) the war began with John Brown. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- Given what you know about America in 1859, which people probably had the strongest emotional reactions to the raid (including anger, fear, approval, disappointment, relief)? Why?

- How might people living in your home town have felt about John Brown's Raid? Why?

Collect analysis worksheets

Closure:

Discuss the following questions:

- How do the documents differ?
- Why did we read these documents
- For what reason would people today use these documents?
- What challenges do we face in interpreting primary sources?
- What insights did you gain from reading these primary sources, as opposed to the background materials?
- What insights did you gain about America in 1859?
- If you were to read newspaper editorials about the event, what additional information and insights might you gain?

Assessment:

Provide students with the "Was John Brown a Hero or a Murderer" assignment to complete in written or oral form. Score with the rubric.