

Creating a Cultural Identity: Interpreting John Brown

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In the 151 years since John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, there has been a struggle to identify his rightful place in American memory. Should people remember him as a martyr or a murderer? How should educators and historians interpret Brown and his radical abolitionism today? These questions lie at the heart of the examination of Brown's life, his infamous raid on Harper's Ferry on the eve of the U.S. Civil War, and his intent to ignite a slave revolt that would spread throughout the Southern states. This essay will explore the evolution of Brown's cultural identity by examining critical moments in its development. These moments include the responses of Americans to Brown's earliest assaults on slavery in Kansas and Missouri, as well as to his raid on Harpers Ferry and his execution. They also encompass the justification of Brown's abolitionism that resulted from the Union victory in the Civil War, as well as the anxieties and struggles of Reconstruction-era America. Lastly, twentieth and twenty-first century attempts to reconcile history and memory have become the most recent critical moments in the development of Brown's cultural identity. As a whole, these moments have generated works of literature and art, as well as museum exhibits and historic site interpretations which reveal the evolving perceptions of Brown.

Brown's radical abolitionism began when he was growing up in the Western Reserve region of Ohio. His family was firmly against slavery and his father was a supporter of early abolitionist movements in the 1830's. He was involved in drumming up antislavery support at Western Reserve College, as well as in promoting racial integration at Oberlin College. Despite his father's involvement at local institutions of higher education, Brown was not formally educated; however, he would follow in his father's footsteps in regards to antislavery activism. His family was Congregationalist and of Puritan heritage and Brown's religious convictions would later manifest themselves as the main force that influenced his abolitionism.¹

In the second half of the 1850's, Brown's abolitionism, initially expressed through his support of the Underground Railroad, took a violent turn as he participated in two raids prior to his assault on Harpers Ferry. In 1856, in what would become known as the Pottawatomie Massacre, or "Bleeding Kansas," Brown and several abolitionists murdered five Kansas men who were in support of making the new U.S. territory into a slave state.² Two years later, Brown and his men attacked two pro-slavery homesteads in Missouri. They ransacked the slave owners' property and freed several slaves, who they transported to freedom in Canada.³

These two raids were instrumental in the establishment of early perceptions of Brown. For instance, the play *Ossawatimie Brown*, written by British born playwright Kate Edwards Swayze, opened on Broadway on December 16, 1859. Its plotline suggested that Brown's enemies had framed him as the perpetrator of the massacre. Thus, when Brown denied his role in the Pottawatomie Massacre, many Northern abolitionists took him at his word.⁴ This theater production is a very early illustration of one way in which Brown's abolitionist actions would be popularized within American culture.

A speech by President Andrew Johnson in 1865 emphasized a different view of Bleeding Kansas and Brown. Instead of supporting the rumors of Brown's innocence as portrayed in *Ossawatimie Brown*, Johnson stated frankly that Brown's actions were in no way justifiable and that they were certainly not the actions of the true Christian that Brown claimed to be.⁵ Therefore, Brown's raids in Missouri and Kansas contributed to the earliest development of conflicting cultural perceptions of him; on one hand he was seen as a glorified liberator of slaves, but others, such as President Johnson, saw his actions as wholly unwarranted.

The raid that would forever shape Brown's historical identity occurred on October 16th, 1859 in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. On this evening, Brown and 21 abolitionists entered the village of Harpers Ferry to raid the town's federal

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¹ Paul Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 4-5.

² Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 5.

³ Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 6. It should also be noted that at the time of the Bleeding Kansas massacre, the seizure of land from Mexico had resulted in a debate over whether new territories should permit slavery. This was an extremely contentious issue because allowing slavery in the new states would affect the balance of slave state representatives in Congress; thus, radical abolitionists such as John Brown viewed killing as a necessary means in order to prevent this from happening.

⁴ Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 6.

⁵ Andrew Johnson, "History of Old John Brown," *The Old Guard* 3, no. 7 (1965), 324.

arsenal for weapons, rally the townspeople, and then continue south to lead a massive slave revolt. Brown and his men cut the town's telegraph wires and took control of the arsenal, but were soon cornered by a company of U.S. Marines. The raid, which lasted just over one day, saw the death of 22 people, including 12 of Brown's raiders and 10 civilians.⁶ Shortly after the raid, Brown was tried in Charlestown, Virginia and convicted of multiple charges, including treason. Two months later he was hanged.⁷ At the time, it seemed that Brown's raid had been a complete and utter failure.

In the immediate aftermath of Brown's raid and his execution, perceptions of him began to evolve. In fact, a geographic polarization of feelings regarding Brown and the Harpers Ferry raid took hold very quickly.⁸ In the North, while some whites rejected Brown because of his use of violence, many others instead took note of his courageous efforts to end slavery. For instance, in an editorial from the Pittsburg, Pennsylvania *Gazette* in December, 1859, a citizen voiced the opinion that Brown acted with noble unselfishness and that the execution of someone with such a high degree of morality provided evidence that the institution of slavery was unjust.⁹

In addition to common citizens, several well known New Englanders also supported Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. Two of these supporters were the Transcendentalist authors Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson.¹⁰ Thoreau had met Brown in 1857 and had listened to him speak. He was impressed by Brown, but declined when Brown asked him to contribute money to an unspecified cause. Thoreau later learned of Brown's cause - the raid on Harpers Ferry - on October 19th, and he immediately wrote a lengthy journal entry in which he recorded his thoughts on Brown. Large segments of this entry would appear in "A Plea for Captain John Brown," a speech written by Thoreau and delivered in Concord, Massachusetts before Brown's execution. Today, this speech is considered by scholars to be the first cultural representation of Brown and his raid. Thoreau's "A Plea..." has been described as a powerful piece of prose, and one that placed Brown, the romanticized individualist, at odds against an unjust society. Thoreau took a man who many were ready to place on the margins of society, and instead placed him in the cultural foreground.¹¹ In his speech, Thoreau described Brown as, "a man of rare common sense," and "a Transcendentalist." He also refuted claims of Brown's insanity and criticized northern newspapers' negative reports of the raid. By the time Thoreau closed his speech with a plea for Brown's "immortal life," he had successfully created a new image of Brown as a heroic martyr and an exemplum of the ideals of liberty which all Americans should follow.¹²

After Thoreau's speech, several northern newspapers, including the *Boston Daily Advertiser* and the *Chicago Tribune*, printed more positive opinions of Brown, echoing Thoreau's characterization of Brown as a liberator and courageous martyr. "[Brown's] act may stand as a symbolical expression of the intense hatred of slavery entertained by a man of integrity and courage," said the *Advertiser*. Similarly, the *Tribune* withdrew its initial characterization of Brown as insane and later declared him to have done a great service in the name of antislavery.¹³

Thoreau's friend and fellow author, Ralph Waldo Emerson, also supported Brown. Five days after Brown's trial, Emerson gave a lecture on courage, in which he proclaimed Brown as "the new saint awaiting his martyrdom, and who, if he shall suffer, will make the gallows glorious like the cross."¹⁴ The positive images of Brown championed by Thoreau and Emerson prior to his execution were no doubt influential in later interpretations of Brown.

While Brown was being exalted by many white Northerners, white Southerners were expressing views of Brown as a lunatic and criminal.¹⁵ The day after the raid, the *Richmond Dispatch* referred to Brown's act as a "mad and hopeless" attempt.¹⁶ Southern views of Brown also began to intensify as Brown's trial progressed. For instance, emerging evidence of the large amount of weapons Brown possessed, in addition to surfacing correspondence be-

⁶ Bill Rasmussen, "The Portent: John Brown's Raid in American Memory" (lecture, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA, October 15, 2009).

⁷ David S. Reynolds, *John Brown Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 348.

⁸ Dennis E. Frye, "John Brown's Smoldering Spark," *Hallowed Ground Magazine*, Fall, 2009, <http://www.civilwar.org/hallowed-ground-magazine/Fall-09/john-browns-smoldering-spark.html>. The term "geographic polarization" is used by Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Chief Historian, Dennis E. Frye to describe the contrast between Northern and Southern opinions of Brown and his raid on Harpers Ferry. He notes that the two regions were further divided by their reactions to the raid.

⁹ Editorial, *Pittsburgh Gazette*, December 3, 1859.

¹⁰ A transcendentalist was one who embraced the philosophy of transcendentalism. This philosophy, popular in early 19th century America, called on people to embrace the personal intuition and the idea that knowledge of reality comes through contemplation and observation of the natural world. Transcendentalists also believed that God transcends the physical world, but that he is manifested in nature.

¹¹ Bruce A. Ronda, *Reading the Old Man: John Brown in American Culture* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2008), 21-22.

¹² Henry David Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," in *Henry David Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems*, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2001), 396.

¹³ Merrill D. Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 17.

¹⁴ Peterson, *John Brown*, 23.

¹⁵ Rasmussen, "The Portent."

¹⁶ Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 150.

tween Brown and his “secret six,” or northern abolitionist allies, convinced southerners that Brown was part of a larger Northern conspiracy that aimed to start a violent slave uprising in the South.¹⁷ In contrast to the early dismissals of Brown’s raid as a pitiful attempt at a slave insurrection, later examinations of the event led Southerners to possess a very real fear that the North was ready and able to take up arms against the Southern institution of slavery. This fear only increased as Northerners continued to support and celebrate Brown.¹⁸ The geographic polarization of views regarding Brown and his raid on Harpers Ferry developed further as many white Northerners celebrated Brown’s courage and the high ideal of liberty to which he had pledged himself and as white Southerners incorporated the actions of Brown the madman into the larger picture of a conspiracy to end slavery in the south.

Northern conceptions of Brown thus played a part in the eventual creation of his image as a Christ-like or God-like figure, while Southern conceptions of him portrayed him as a devilish conspirator. Northerners such as Thoreau and Emerson connected Brown to Christ by identifying him as a martyr, and by comparing the gallows to the cross. Southerners associated him with devilishness and evil by acknowledging him as a commanding force in the North’s quest to end slavery. This contraposition of views of Brown as on one hand God-like and on the other devilish would remain prominent in later cultural representations of his identity.

Initially, black Americans reacted to the raid in ways quite similar to whites. Some admired Brown for his dedication to abolitionism, while others grappled with his use of violence; most abolitionists were, after all, pacifists. Ultimately, however, the black population tended to look past the violence of the raid and instead focus on the moral grounding of Brown’s commitment to ending slavery. The perception of Brown as a martyr was very common among blacks, and many went to great lengths to ensure that his efforts were properly honored. The *Weekly Anglo African* reported on the day of Brown’s execution that many black businesses were closed and that blacks could be seen wearing black rosettes in mourning. The day was even declared “Martyr’s Day” by the reverend of New York’s Shiloh Church.¹⁹ The same newspaper also documented a meeting that took place at a Detroit church on the day of Brown’s hanging. The meeting leader described how Brown had fought tyranny and offered his life as a “ransom” for enslaved blacks. He also declared Brown’s remembrance to be sacred, and the community resolved to forever call him their “redeemer.”²⁰ These reactions from the black community indicate that, like many Northern whites, blacks perceived Brown as a martyr. Their use of words like “redeemer” to describe Brown, however, indicates that the ties blacks felt were much more personal than those felt by most whites.

In the years between his execution and the outbreak of the Civil War, John Brown’s story became a popular subject in works of poetry. Two of the most well known examples are Herman Melville’s “The Portent” and John Greenleaf Whittier’s “Brown of Ossawatimie.” In “The Portent,” written in 1859 and published in 1866 as part of a collection of poems entitled *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War*, Melville explored Brown’s identity and death. The title of the poem, signifying an ill-omen, introduced a theme of foreboding and ill things to come. The lines of the poem continued this tone of foreboding with Melville’s description of Brown’s broken body hanging from the gallows: “Hanging from the beam, / slowly swaying... / The cut is on the crown...” Such a description had multiple interpretations. First, the image of Brown’s broken body was representative of his actions as a martyr and the sacrifice he made for his beliefs. Alternatively, it also symbolized the broken and unstable mentality that led him to commit atrocious acts of violence. Another line of the poem described Brown’s face as being hidden. It read, “Hidden in the cap / Is the anguish none can draw.”²¹ This most likely made the reader feel distanced from Brown, and may have evoked feelings of shame that Brown was put to death for what he did. Melville’s imagery, therefore, supported both the development of perceptions of Brown as a martyr and as a madman.

Additionally, Melville’s poem created a new identity for Brown: that of a prophet. The last line of the poem called Brown the “meteor” of the Civil War. In both literature and history, meteors represent ill-omens, or prophets of negative things to come. Thus, by comparing Brown to a meteor, Melville identified Brown as a prophet who foresaw the coming of the Civil War.²²

John Greenleaf Whittier’s poem, “Brown of Ossawatimie,” created a slightly different interpretation of Brown. Rather than identify Brown as an ill-omen, Whittier placed him on high moral ground, depicting him as harmless and even saintly. Published in the *New York Independent* only three weeks after Brown’s hanging, the poem described his final walk to the gallows and popularized the myth that he paused to give a slave child a kiss on his way. “The bold, blue eye grew tender, / And the old harsh face grew mild, / As he stooped beneath the jeering ranks / And kissed the Negro child,” wrote Whittier. The poem continued, “That kiss from all its guilty means / Redeemed the

¹⁷ Rasmussen, lecture.

¹⁸ Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 152.

¹⁹ Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 67.

²⁰ “Meeting in Detroit,” *Weekly Anglo-African*, December 17, 1859.

²¹ Ronda, *Reading the Old Man*, 43.

²² Ronda, *Reading the Old Man*, 45.

good intent,” describing how this selfless act made up for the violent acts that were committed in the raid on Harpers Ferry. Given that Whittier was a pacifist, it makes sense that he chose to focus on a more gentle side of Brown instead of on the actual raid, or even the gruesome sight of Brown’s lifeless body.²³

Although Melville and Whittier presented slightly different images of Brown, both acknowledged the morality of his actions. “The Portent” communicated the theme of morality by evoking a sense of shame for what the country did to a man whose objective was to free those who were unjustly enslaved. “Brown of Ossawatimie” communicated the theme of morality by perpetuating a myth that Brown, in the moments before his death, acted lovingly toward a slave child. Thus, though these two poems were part of the developing concept of Brown as a saintly figure, they also demonstrate the differences in interpretation that already existed less than one year after the raid on Harpers Ferry.

Perceptions of Brown as a heroic martyr and as a saintly figure increased during the Civil War, as these perceptions embodied the Union cause. The song, “John Brown’s Body” was one channel through which these perceptions were once again brought to the foreground of America’s understanding of Brown. It was first sung in May of 1861 by members of the Massachusetts 12th Regiment, who paired the lyrics with an already well-known melody. The birth of the song was somewhat coincidental in that it started out as a way to poke fun at a member of the regiment whose name happened to be John Brown. A few months after the song was first sung, it was printed by the *New York Tribune*, at which time it became wildly popular among members of the Union Army. Varying versions of the song emerged, but all versions contained the lines, “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave,” and “His soul goes marching on.”²⁴ Most versions also contained several lines that exalted the Union Army and the abolitionist cause.

The song was significant because it supported Brown’s cultural identity as a martyr and because it established him as a unifying force for the Union Army. Because the lyrics emphasized the impermanence of Brown’s body and the eternal nature of his spirit, they reinforced the interpretations of Brown’s legacy presented in the poetry of Melville and Whittier. “John Brown’s Body” bonded Union soldiers to one another in the name of the common cause of abolition - the cause that had once been Brown’s. When looked at from this perspective, it seems that Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry was not a complete failure after all. His cause did not die on the gallows with him.²⁵ Instead, it lived on in the minds of Union soldiers during the Civil War, and when the Union Army emerged victorious, so did Brown.

The portrayals of Brown’s body in Melville’s “The Portent” and in the lyrics of “John Brown’s Body” also served to convey a belief in life after death. This was especially relevant in the case of Brown because many people believed that as a martyr, Brown’s moral cause would live on and result in his eventual vindication. Analyses of literary and artistic depictions of wounded and dead bodies align such depictions with processes of renewal that were much sought after in pre-Civil War and Civil War years in the midst of violence such as attacks on pro-slavery citizens, the raid on Harpers Ferry and bloody battles such as Gettysburg and Antietam.²⁶ Thus, representations of Brown’s body from the Civil War era paralleled a cultural need to affirm the existence of life after death.

The end of the Civil War and the failure of reconstruction brought to light new interpretations of Brown. Though the Northern states were victorious and slavery had been abolished, Jim Crow laws legalized segregation in the South. At the same time, more and more immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were entering the country, and militant labor movements were beginning to grow. These major societal changes merged to instill an intense fear of social disorder among Americans in the decades after the Civil War.²⁷

Beginning in the 1870’s and continuing well through the 1890’s, several authors released works that placed Brown within the context of the social anxiety that had emerged after the war. One such author was Elizabeth Avery Meriwether. Her novel, *The Master of Red Leaf*, which was published in 1872, presented Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry as part of the North’s larger plan to invade the South. *The Master of Red Leaf* was the story of Hestor Stanhope, a girl raised by a radical abolitionist father, and her narration of the events surrounding the raid on Harpers Ferry. On the day of Brown’s execution, a group from Hestor’s community gathered together and vowed to take vengeance on the South. Thus, Meriwether’s novel echoed the fear present in the minds of many white Southerners after the raid that the North was planning a massive slave rebellion. Furthermore, Meriwether not only presented Brown as the catalyst for a conspiracy to invade the South; she also presented his spirit as a force of vengeance and doom, which would swoop down, wreaking havoc on the region. Even though Brown was not a principle character in *The Master of Red Leaf*, Meriwether still established him as the main cause of the misfortune and destruction that the South faced during the reconstruction years.²⁸

²³ David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 461-462.

²⁴ Reynolds, *John Brown*, 466-468.

²⁵ Franny Nudelman, *John Brown’s Body: Slavery, Violence and the Culture of War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 15.

²⁶ Nudelman, *John Brown’s Body*, 71-72.

²⁷ Ronda, *Reading the Old Man*, 63.

²⁸ Ronda, *Reading the Old Man*, 68-70.

Just as authors explored Brown's story and themes of heroism, insanity, martyrdom and destruction in their poetry and novels, artists explored them in their paintings. Two works of art from the 1880's and the 1930's echoed the notions of Brown that were first developed in literature. In 1884, the artist Thomas Hovenden completed a painting entitled, *The Last Moments of John Brown*. This oil painting depicted the mythical scene in which Brown kissed a slave child on his way to the gallows, which was previously described in Whittier's poem "Brown of Ossawatimie." The Brown in the painting was not the violent madman that many thought him to be. On the contrary, he appeared to be very kind. Therefore, the work appealed to those who believed Brown to be quite gentle, and who bought into his legacy as a hero. In fact, historians have said that *The Last Moments of John Brown* became the "iconic image" of Brown's martyrdom in the years after his death.²⁹

Another interpretation of Brown was presented by the artist John Steuart Curry in the late 1930's. *Tragic Prelude* was one of 12 murals conceptualized by Curry for the state capitol in Topeka, Kansas. In *Tragic Prelude*, Curry painted Brown wild-eyed, wielding a rifle in one hand and a Bible in the other. The scene in the background was one of chaos, as a wild fire and a tornado ripped across the prairie. In contrast to Hovenden's painting, Curry's work certainly supported perceptions of Brown as a madman. It has been noted that Curry based his image of Brown off of a sculpture of Moses done by Michelangelo, and that Brown's outstretched arms were an allusion to the crucifixion. However, instead of using these Biblical allusions to emphasize Brown's morality, Curry used them to aid his creation of Brown as a religious fanatic. Because Brown stands in the foreground of this painting, with chaos and violence occurring in the background, it appears that Curry also endorsed the perception of Brown as the root of violence in Kansas, and consequently the root of the Civil War.³⁰ Work on the murals was halted in 1939 before their completion, due to widespread outcry regarding the painting's depiction of the most unsettled and violent time in the state's history. Although the murals remain unfinished, the stark contrast between this painting and that of Hovenden (one is the portrayal of a martyr, and the other is the portrayal of a religious fanatic) illustrated part of the controversy that surrounded Brown and his identity in American culture.

The raid on Harpers Ferry served not only a catalyst for interpretations of Brown's cultural identity in works of literature and art, but as a catalyst for the opening of new discourses on the creation of cultural identity and historical interpretation. In the fields of museum studies and historic site interpretation, debates often center on how to appropriately present historical people and events to diverse audiences. The following discussion of several interpretations of Brown and his raid in museum exhibits and at historic sites shows how professionals in the field of public history have chosen to approach the controversy surrounding Brown and the raid on Harpers Ferry.

The debate surrounding the legacy of Brown and his place in American memory continues to exist today. The nature of Brown as a controversial and intriguing figure in American history, as well as the 150th anniversary of the raid on Harpers Ferry, commemorated in 2009, have brought Brown forth as the focus of several recent exhibitions. Two 150th anniversary exhibits, one at the New York Historical Society, and the other at the Virginia Historical Society, were reviewed by the *New York Times* in an article entitled, "One Man's Crusade Against Slavery, Seen From Two Angles."³¹

The New York Historical Society's exhibit, "John Brown: The Abolitionist and His Legacy," places Brown within the larger context of pre-Civil War sectionalism, emancipation, and the 1960's Civil Rights Movement. The exhibit discusses how the 1850's witnessed intense debates regarding slavery and the status of blacks in America. These debates precipitated such things as the Dred Scott Decision, which declared that people of African descent had no right to citizenship.³² It also declared the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which restricted slavery in certain territories, to be unconstitutional. Debates such as these, the exhibit explains, created much tension, and even led to violence, such as the beating of antislavery senator Charles Sumner by proslavery senator Preston Brooks while Congress was in session. The exhibit discusses such incidents in order to create context for Brown's raid. In doing so, it is pointing out that acts of violence in response to the slavery debate were not unheard of at the time. Therefore, the New York Historical Society interprets Brown and his raid as being well within the realm of typical responses to the debate regarding slavery in pre-Civil War America.

The exhibit also associates Brown's raid with the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, as well as with the 1960's Civil Rights Movement. By doing so, it suggests that Brown's legacy is not so much about whether he was a martyr or a madman, but about how he contributed to the end of slavery and to the expansion of black civil rights. Therefore, the New York Historical Society's exhibit ultimately interprets the effects of Brown's raid as being

²⁹ "The Last Moments of John Brown," *The Portent: John Brown's Raid in American Memory*, Virginia Historical Society, http://www.vahistorical.org/johnbrown/mem_lastmoments.htm (accessed March 19, 2012).

³⁰ "Tragic Prelude," *The Portent: John Brown's Raid in American Memory*, Virginia Historical Society, http://www.vahistorical.org/johnbrown/mem_tragic.htm (accessed March 19, 2012).

³¹ Edward Rothstein, "One Man's Crusade Against Slavery, Seen From Two Angles," *The New York Times*, October 27, 2009.

³² Rothstein, "One Man's Crusade."

positive and long term.³³

In contrast, the Virginia Historical Society's exhibit, "The Portent: John Brown in American Memory," addresses the legacy of Brown in terms of how he has been portrayed in art, literature and other mediums in the 19th and 20th centuries. The exhibit presents conflicting opinions of Brown, making the focus of the story of Brown less about his role in bringing about the Civil War and emancipation, and more about the debate that embroils his cultural identity. The opinions of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Victor Hugo, who glorified Brown in comparisons to Christ, are presented right alongside the opinions of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Abraham Lincoln, who voiced disgust at the violence of Brown's actions.³⁴

Going beyond these notable opinions of Brown and his raid, the exhibit also raises profound questions regarding whether acts of violence can be justified by noble intentions. Though some, such as the curators of the New York exhibit, think it is inappropriate to remove Brown's actions from their historical context and place them in the context of the 21st century, "The Portent's" message is quite different. It concludes that contemporary discussions of Brown often center on whether people armed with "righteous" intentions are justified in carrying out acts of violence. The exhibit asks, "Is Brown so different from the bombers [terrorists] of today?"³⁵ Indeed, he was driven by deep religious convictions, and willingly forfeited his life for his cause. This exhibit asks stirring questions and demonstrates that interpretations and cultural perceptions of Brown are certainly not fixed; instead, they continue to evolve.

Although the creation of exhibits focused on Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid has presented a challenge for places such as the New York and Virginia Historical Societies, the challenge to interpret significant sites related to Brown's life and his raid has been monumental in comparison. While the significance of Brown's raid within American history is undeniable, Brown's troubled legacy has presented a dilemma. In the case of the town of Brown's birth, Torrington, Connecticut, residents and historians debated whether to create an interpretive site on the grounds of the birthplace (the actual house burned down in the early 1900's). The debates came to a head in 1996, when the state tourism director argued that historic interpretation at the Brown birthplace would draw large numbers of visitors to Torrington. However, some residents voiced discontent, arguing that acknowledging Brown would be equivalent to approving of his violent actions.³⁶ In 2002, the heated debate seemed to cool, and the town of Torrington moved ahead on the development of plans to create an interpretive walking trail on the grounds of the Brown birthplace. Despite some remaining disputes regarding the interpretation of Brown, the residents came to the general consensus that controversial or not, Brown was a significant catalyst for the start of the Civil War, and that the story of his radical abolitionism is rooted in Torrington.³⁷ Therefore, they concluded it would be appropriate to educate townspeople and tourists on the birthplace's significance.

Similar debates surrounded the fire engine house, later known as the John Brown Fort, where Brown and his men hid out during the raid on Harpers Ferry. In the late 1800's, a number of townspeople began to fear that the fort, a symbol of abolition, would attract black visitors. Much to the approval of such Harpers Ferry residents, the fort was moved to Chicago in 1893, where it was displayed as part of the World's Columbian Exposition; however, the fort attracted few visitors.³⁸ After being moved several times, the building was acquired by the U.S. National Park Service (NPS) in 1960. In 1968 it was placed in its current location, 150 feet from where it stood on the day of Brown's raid.³⁹

The John Brown Fort is now part of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, an operation of the NPS. The U.S. government passed legislation creating the national park in June of 1944. In the 1930's, NPS officials had used the John Brown Raid, as well as the Civil War, to justify the historical importance of Harpers Ferry and the creation of the national park.⁴⁰ In the decade after the park's establishment, the NPS faced the challenge of interpreting the national significance of Brown and his raid. Park superintendent Frank Anderson recognized a crucial difference between making Harpers Ferry a "memorial" to John Brown, and making the raid a main theme in the park's historical interpretation. Thus, the park's original focus was on presenting objective facts related to the politics of slavery, Bleeding Kansas, the raid on Harpers Ferry, and Brown's execution.⁴¹

³³ Rothstein, "One Man's Crusade."

³⁴ Rothstein, "One Man's Crusade."

³⁵ "Conclusion," *The Portent: John Brown's Raid in American Memory*, Virginia Historical Society, <http://www.vahistorical.org/johnbrown/conclusion.htm> (accessed March 19, 2012).

³⁶ David Howard, "What's to Be Done About John Brown?" *The New York Times*, December 1, 1996.

³⁷ Dick Ahles, "The View/From Torrington; Famous or Infamous, John Brown Was Born Here," *The New York Times*, December 15, 2002.

³⁸ Peggy A. Russo, and Finkelman, Paul, eds., *Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 181-182.

³⁹ "The John Brown Fort," National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/hafe/historyculture/john-brown-fort.htm> (accessed March, 2011).

⁴⁰ Teresa S. Moyer and Paul A. Shakel, *The Making of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park: A Devil, Two Rivers, and a Dream* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 86.

⁴¹ Moyer and Shakel, *The Making of Harpers Ferry*, 94.

As Brown's cultural legacy has evolved over time, the NPS's interpretation of Brown has varied, though only slightly. Limited funding and complications relating to government procedure have limited the park's development; however, in the 1980's, for example, a new exhibit incorporated cultural representations of Brown and responses to the raid as represented in art and literature. The exhibit remained committed to maintaining objectivity, as well as to leaving a significant amount of interpretation up to the visitor, so as not to endorse any specific opinion of Brown and his actions.⁴² In addition, today the park seeks to use the John Brown story to open dialogues regarding historical fact and fiction.⁴³

The exhibits of the New York and Virginia Historical Societies demonstrate that various interpretations of Brown and his raid are made available to the public, and the debates surrounding the interpretation of the Brown birthplace reveals that Brown continues to pose a challenge to contemporary historical institutions. The NPS strives to preserve the site of Brown's infamous raid and to interpret the event in an objective manner. In doing so, it has made Harpers Ferry one of the most popular National Historic Sites in the country. Each of these cases provides evidence that Brown has been, and will continue to be one of the most controversial, as well as intriguing figures in American history.

The case of John Brown demonstrates that the way in which Americans view well-known historical figures is more often the result of interpretation than pure historical fact. The numerous ways in which Brown's identity has been created and recreated in literature, artwork, in museum exhibits and at historic sites since the 19th century are testaments to this fact. Though perceptions of him have evolved over time, there is no doubt that Brown was a radical and revolutionary abolitionist, and that he will continue to be a controversial presence in the minds of historians.

⁴² Moyer and Shakel, *The Making of Harpers Ferry*, 99.

⁴³ Moyer and Shakel, *The Making of Harpers Ferry*, 101.