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John Brown

(1800-1859)

Owen Brown's son John, the fourth of his eight children, was born on 9 May 1800, the family being then located in Torrington, Connecticut. He was named after Owen's father, Captain John Brown, who fought and died in the 1776 Revolution. As we will see, John would revert to the family's military heritage. On the matter of slavery, John felt that talk had done what it could, but the point had been reached where action was required.

He was first of all pious. At 16, he left the family in search of theological education, thinking to become a minister. He conferred with various people in Connecticut and Massachusetts, and would have continued at Amherst College, but was prevented by an inflammation of the eyes. Rejoining his father at Hudson, he taught himself surveying, and after working for a while at Owen's tannery, acquired a farm of his own in New Richmond, Pennsylvania, still continuing in the cattle and leather business, and doing surveying on the side. His barn included a secret well-ventilated room for fugitive slaves. From 1825 to 1835, Brown's tannery was an important stop on the Underground Railroad; an estimated 2,500 escaped slaves passed through it, on their way to Canada.

In 1832, Brown became ill, his wife died, and he fell into debt. Moving back to Ohio, he borrowed to buy land in Franklin Mills (now Kent) for another tannery. He worked as manager for others, including Simon Perkins of Akron; in 1852 his sheep (another new venture) won first prize at the Ohio State Fair.

He was dithering; a passion in search of a purpose. That needed clarification of the issues was provided with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1750. No more aiding fugitives; now the northerners had to help to bring them back.



Some will tell you that the Civil War began with the firing on Fort Sumter, on April 12, 1861. But that is a schoolroom notion; the Civil War had long been waiting to happen. It was the expansion of the Union that brought on the crisis. The first shots were fired in Kansas, on this question: Would Kansas be admitted to the Union as slave or free? Parallel legislatures ruled both ways.

Lawrence, center of the free-state movement, was sacked by the pro-slavery forces in 1856. In retaliation, Brown attacked slavery supporters at Osawatomie Creek in May 1856. The town of Osawatomie, though defended by Brown's men, was burned by the other side that August.

Brown now went back east, to gather support, and funds, for his movement. He appeared occasionally in public with Frederick Douglass, but traveled in secret. Besides personal contacts, he also solicited support by letter. This letter, of 24 February 1858, to F B Sanborn, gives an idea of his larger purpose:

My dear Friend – Mr Morton has taken the liberty of saying to me that you felt half inclined to make a common cause with me. I greatly rejoice at this, for I believe when you come to look at the ample field I labor in, and the rich harvest which not only this entire country but the whole world during the present and future generations may reap from its successful cultivation, you will feel that you are out of your element until you find you are in it, an entire unit.

What an inconceivable amount of good you might so effect by your counsel, your example, your encouragement, your natural and acquired ability for active service! And then, how very little we can possibly lose! Certainly the cause is enough to live for, if not to die for. I have only had this one opportunity, in a life of nearly sixty years; and could I be continued ten times as long again, I might not again have another equal opportunity. God has honored but comparatively a very small part of mankind with any possible chance for such mighty and soul-satisfying rewards. But, my dear friend, if you should make up your mind to do so, I trust it will be wholly from the promptings of your own spirit, after having thoroughly counted the cost. I would flatter no man into such a measure, if I could do it ever so easily . . .

Sanborn did count the cost; in any event, he declined to participate.

In October 1859, Brown and his followers, including several of his sons and several blacks, attacked the Federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, seeking arms for the slaves, who being thus equipped, would (it was hoped) begin their own rebellion. But the raid was a failure; some of Brown's party were killed, most of the rest were captured. Brown himself was tried and convicted of treason. In his speech to the court, he invoked the higher law:

"This court acknowledges, as I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed here which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament. That teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them,. It teaches me, further, to "remember them that are in bonds as bound with them." I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I say, I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons, I believe that to have interfered as I have done, as I have always freely admitted I have done in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I submit, so let it be done!"

John Brown was hanged on December 2, 1859. The clock continued to tick. Fort Sumter was sixteen months away.