Treasonous Patriots: The Secret Committee of Six and Violent Abolitionism

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TREASONOUS PATRIOTS

The Secret Committee of Six and Violent Abolitionism

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by
Kristen Kimberly Epps
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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Kristen Kimberljp Epps

Approved by the Committee, May 2005

Dr. Carol Sheriff, Chair

Dr. Melvin Ely

Dr. Kris Lane
To my family and friends for all of their love and support
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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine how the Secret Committee of Six, a group of radical abolitionists who funded John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry in 1859, defined their role in the greater movement for black emancipation. I present a before-and-after picture of the guiding principles and motivations that drove these six men. Although there is significant scholarship concerning John Brown, there has been little discussion about the Secret Six, who provided him with funds and moral support and who shared his conviction that slavery would die by the sword. Thus, I decided to look at how the raid affected the individuals closest to this enigmatic veteran of Bleeding Kansas.

My first chapter lays the framework by discussing the beginnings of abolitionism and how it developed a sense of urgency on behalf of the enslaved. I then tie in the Secret Six, demonstrating their role in the abolitionist movement and their growing acceptance of violent means. I move on from there to a discussion of the raid at Harper’s Ferry and public reactions to the practical implementation of militant abolitionism, including how the Secret Six responded to the raid’s failure and Brown’s hanging. Finally, I address how most of the Six continued in the cause through the Civil War.

I conclude that the Six perceived their role in abolitionism differently after the raid. Before the incident at Harper’s Ferry, all of the Six were active in the abolitionist movement, and for the most part they remained active in the years after the raid. After 1859, however, the nature of sectional relations had been altered so dramatically that abolitionists had to adjust their thinking. Thus, the Six began to see their role in the movement in a new light. Furthermore, I argue that the Six did not change their attitudes toward militant abolitionism—but, now that they had seen the far-reaching consequences of violence, they were less comfortable with its use. Still, none of them denied that violence was indeed necessary for the downfall of the slave system.
TREASONOUS PATRIOTS
INTRODUCTION

"The only question is, whether it [slavery] shall die a peaceful or a violent death—whether it shall quietly recede before advancing truth, or resist unto blood." Gerrit Smith, 1854

"My call here has met with a most hearty response," wrote John Brown, "so that I feel assured of at least tolerable success. I ought to be thankful for this. All has been effected by a quiet meeting of a few choice friends."1 In a Boston hotel room on March 4, 1858, Brown had outlined his plans for insurrection to a gathering of Massachusetts abolitionists who, along with a colleague from New York, would henceforth call themselves the Secret Committee of Six. These men pledged to support Brown's proposed raid on the slaveholding South that eventually took place at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in 1859. Although these six individuals—George Stearns, Samuel Howe, Thomas Higginson, Gerrit Smith, Franklin Sanborn, and Theodore Parker—hailed from different backgrounds and vocations, they were united in their admiration for the weathered veteran of Bleeding Kansas who would soon be immortalized as an American legend.

Each of the Six contributed his own perspective and resources to the abolitionist cause. George Luther Stearns was an affluent businessman, involved in manufacturing

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FIGURE 1

THE SECRET SIX

lead pipes, who had a reputation for being methodical and sensible. Gerrit Smith, also a
businessman, was one of the wealthiest landholders in the United States and a close
friend of Frederick Douglass. Smith was the only member of the Six who lived in New
York State; the others resided in the Boston area. Samuel Gridley Howe, a doctor who
served during the Greek Revolution, had been imprisoned for seven months in a Prussian
jail, an event which led to bouts of paranoia.² His colleagues noted that he tended to be
strong-willed and impatient. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, also considered radical and
hot-headed, worked actively for both abolition and women’s rights and served as a
Unitarian minister in Worcester, Massachusetts. Theodore Parker, another Unitarian
minister, wrote numerous tracts and sermons on the evils of the slave system. The
youngest of the group, Franklin Sanborn, was a Concord schoolteacher who counted
Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau among his friends.³ These Six men—
ministers, businessmen, and a teacher—had little in common outside of abolitionism.
Yet, although their individuality may have prevented consensus on every issue, they
agreed that the Southern system of human bondage must end.

The Six came to accept violence as the only truly effective tool for combating
slavery. They agreed that peaceful means could still be useful, but, as Gerrit Smith put it
succinctly, “the hot purpose of the South to maintain and extend slavery can be quenched
only in blood.”⁴ By the 1850s, the Six deemed political abolitionism “an experiment,
serving its purpose perhaps in providing a medium through which the anti-slavery forces

York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 56, 41, 2. This book provides excellent biographies of the Six, with the
first four chapters dealing with Gerrit Smith, John Brown, Samuel Howe, and Theodore Parker
respectively. The others are included in later chapters.
could work for a time, but ineffective in bringing about the freedom of the slaves."

The time for peaceful resistance had passed.

Scholars often describe the Secret Six as "militant abolitionists" or "radical abolitionists," terms that appear frequently in this work as well. But what makes an abolitionist "radical"? Historian Gerald Sorin writes that all abolitionists were radicals because "they recognized that nothing short of a restructuring of American society would uproot slavery and racial injustice." He does, however, qualify this statement and de-emphasize their radicalism, arguing that white abolitionists' paternalistic attitudes, middle-class economic values, and imperfect understanding of class divisions hindered the development of radical tendencies. These characteristics, which Sorin uses to temper his earlier statement, are crucial: they provide a point of contrast allowing us to distinguish between radical abolitionists and their less radical counterparts. While many mainstream abolitionists fit Sorin's description, I would argue that most radical abolitionists, including the Secret Six, do not fit this mold of mainstream abolitionism. Thus, I use the term "radical abolitionist" to designate those who departed from the standard—those who did understand class divisions, who did not have paternalistic attitudes, and who were forward-thinking individuals of their time.

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5 Harlow, Gerrit Smith, 192. Political and non-violent abolitionists are not the subject of this work, but they will surface periodically in the following chapters. For further reading on this topic, see Aileen S. Kraditor, Meas and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834-1850 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969).

6 Gerald Sorin, Abolitionism: A New Perspective (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), 19. I agree with Sorin that, in a certain light, all abolitionists could be called radical. Herbert Aptheker's Abolitionism: A Revolutionary Movement (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989) supports this idea. He writes that "the movement as a whole was a revolutionary one in every respect"(xi). Aptheker also refers to Lewis Perry, who argues that "to attack slavery was inescapably to call for extensive social change" (xii).

7 I acknowledge that there are many ways to characterize radical abolitionists—including certain traits and excluding others. However, Sorin's distinctions hit at the core issues and thus serve as an excellent guide.
I would also categorize as a subsection of radicalism, "militant" or "violent" abolitionism, signifying those who accepted peaceful methods but agreed that violence was also necessary for the downfall of the slave system. According to Michael Fellman, radical abolitionists divided into two factions—non-resistant radicals and militant abolitionists—over the issue of violent means. Militant abolitionists ranged from those who only condoned violence in the name of self-defense to those who supported slave insurrection, or any combination between these extremes. Militant abolitionists drew from the ranks of radical abolitionists, and it is within this subsection that I place the Secret Six.

Other historians also agree that the Six fell within the category of militant abolitionists, yet there are no studies focusing specifically on how they adapted their attitudes toward violence and put their convictions to practical use. In addition to impassioned rhetoric, how did the Six advocate violence in their day-to-day work for abolitionism? Furthermore, did their attitude toward violence change after the failure of the Harper’s Ferry raid and John Brown’s subsequent death? These men stand as only one example of militant abolitionism during the antebellum period, but their involvement in Brown’s raid drives them into the historical spotlight. Because the Six only lent their financial and moral support, it may be easy to overlook their role as supporting actors who labored behind the scenes. But Brown was penniless and, because many of his allies in Kansas were not much wealthier, the raid could not have occurred without Brown’s New England supporters, especially the Secret Six.

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Several historians have addressed the abolitionists' shift to violent techniques, although there is debate about when abolitionists began to condone violence. Herbert Aptheker's article "Militant Abolitionism" (1941) was among the first to address this issue, arguing that militant abolitionism was not a new idea in the early nineteenth century. Besides citing abolitionist literature from the Revolutionary War era, he declares that by the 1850s "militant ideas were so frequently expressed that one is justified in declaring that, among anti-slavery folk, they became common-place."\(^9\)

Other prominent historians disagree. John Demos's "The Antislavery Movement and the Problem of Violent 'Means'" (1964) argues that the anti-slavery movement only became receptive to violent techniques during the 1850s, when non-resistance and more peaceful avenues had been deemed unfruitful. Similarly, "Confrontation and Abolition in the 1850s," published in 1972 by Jane and William Pease, concludes that, while abolitionists had always been radical, by the 1850s moral indignation led to confrontation as abolitionists not only sought to annihilate the slave system, but also began to aid fugitive slaves. Both Demos and the Peases pinpoint the Fugitive Slave Law as the pivotal moment for this transformation.\(^10\)

Lawrence Friedman, author of *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism* (1982), finds the middle ground, contending that there was not a seamless conversion—abolitionists as a whole did not move from 100 percent acceptance

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\(^9\) Herbert Aptheker, "Militant Abolitionism" *Journal of Negro History* 26 (1941), 463. However, in *Abolitionism: A Revolutionary Movement* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), Aptheker confines this militancy to the approval of slave resistance only, defining militancy as the acknowledgement "of the propriety and justice of armed resistance by the slaves" (124). This limits its definition rather sharply. In my thesis I take this definition a step or two further to include the acceptance of violence in other contexts besides slave resistance.

of moral suasion to 100 percent passion for violence. According to Friedman, there was a dual commitment to both techniques, although starting in the 1830s the balance shifted toward militant abolitionism.\textsuperscript{11}

Each of these historians has contributed to our understanding of violent abolitionism by raising powerful questions about how (and when) violent abolitionism gained a foothold. I hope to build on their foundation by looking specifically at the real-world contexts and implications of violence, in addition to militant rhetoric. The Secret Six, as a faction within radical abolitionism, perfectly illustrate these principles, since all of the Six became more radicalized by their personal experiences during their abolitionist work.

Looking at the historiography of the Secret Six as a collective unit, the four authors who have tackled this intriguing assembly of men portray them in very different manners. Jeffery Rossbach's \textit{Ambivalent Conspirators: John Brown, the Secret Six, and a Theory of Slave Violence} (1982) paints the Six as reluctant advisors and financiers who were uneasy with violent abolitionism. Edward Renahan's \textit{The Secret Six: The True Tale of the Men Who Conspired with John Brown} (1995) clearly demonstrates their involvement in violence, and Renahan maintains that the Six accepted violent techniques prior to their relationship with Brown.\textsuperscript{12} John McKivigan's article, "His Soul Goes

\textsuperscript{11} Lawrence J. Friedman, \textit{Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830-1870} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 196-197. In many ways, this interpretation is the most logical because it acknowledges that abolitionists wanted to succeed in their efforts, and thus would accept whatever means would be the most useful—violent, non-violent, and anything in between.

\textsuperscript{12} Jeffery Rossbach, \textit{Ambivalent Conspirators: John Brown, The Secret Six, and a Theory of Slave Violence} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983) and Edward J. Renahan, Jr., \textit{The Secret Six: The True Tale of the Men Who Conspired with John Brown} (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995). While there are biographies and other works dealing with the role of a particular member of the Six, these do not provide a sense of the grander narrative. Jeffery Rossbach and Edward Renahan build the narrative foundation and demonstrate the internal inconsistencies and struggles of these men. Because these authors
Marching On: The Story of John Brown's Followers after the Harper's Ferry Raid," argues that the Six did continue to accept violence after 1859, citing their involvement in civil rights and emancipation.\textsuperscript{13} Otto Scott's depiction of the Six in \textit{The Secret Six: John Brown and the Abolitionist Movement} (1979) is unflattering and unsympathetic to their cause and to the entire abolitionist movement.\textsuperscript{14}

While these authors have focused on creating a narrative account of events, I plan to paint a before-and-after picture of the Six's involvement in abolitionism that illuminates their acceptance of violent means by outlining their role as radicals prior to the raid and their (for the most part) continued adherence to militancy after 1859. Also, this work will discuss how the Six interacted with other abolitionists, such as William Lloyd Garrison and Lewis Tappan. These discussions will point the way to my main research question: Did the Secret Six's understanding of their role in the abolitionist movement change after the failure of the Harper's Ferry raid, particularly regarding militant abolitionism? If not, why? Ultimately, I argue that the Six did not necessarily change their opinions about militancy and violence, although some did distance themselves from Brown himself. They lauded him as a hero and martyr, but avoided linking themselves directly to his actions at Harper's Ferry (a paradox which I will explore in the last chapter). The Six did continue to advocate violent means, but after the raid they became more inclined to temper their violent message, having now seen the

\textsuperscript{13} This essay is found in \textit{Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America}, ed. John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harrold (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 274-297. McKivigan's article focuses mostly on Brown's other supporters, such as Richard Hinton and James Redpath, instead of emphasizing the work of the Secret Six.

consequences of violent abolitionism. With the exceptions of Gerrit Smith and Franklin Sanborn, the Six continued steadfastly in their abolitionist work, convinced that, even though Brown’s attempt had failed in the most obvious sense, his courage in the midst of failure would stir Northern hearts, drawing others to the cause.\textsuperscript{15} Brown had only been one warrior in the struggle against slavery, and his time had passed.

This thesis will focus on neither a narrative history of the Six’s involvement with John Brown nor a detailed analysis of the attack on Harper’s Ferry. I am interested instead in the Six as a case study of violent abolitionism, uncovering the motivations behind their dedication to militancy. I endeavor to provide appropriate background material without digressing into a synthesis of radical abolitionism—a topic which has already received worthy treatment. Chapter 1 will focus primarily on the nature of abolition in the nineteenth century, discussing the rise of immediatism and the development of radical abolitionist principles. I will also elaborate on the Secret Six and their significance within the greater reform movement, outlining their shift toward violent means. Chapter 2 will focus on the Harper’s Ferry raid and its aftermath, particularly the Secret Six’s reactions to Brown’s failure. In addition, I will address the public responses from Northerners and Southerners alike.

\textsuperscript{15} Gerrit Smith did not continue to support abolitionism due to his nervous breakdown shortly after the raid. Franklin Sanborn’s move away from abolitionism was partly thanks to his growing obligations as a schoolteacher in Concord. Both of these situations will be discussed further in later chapters.
CHAPTER I

THE CHANGING FACE OF ABOLITIONISM

"What can the friends of emancipation effect while the spirit of slavery is so fearfully prevalent? Let every man take his stand, burn out this prejudice, live it down." Theodore S. Wright, 1837

From the moment when escaped slave Frederick Douglass first flipped through the pages of William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator*, his “soul was set all on fire.”¹ Garrison’s newspaper, as Douglass wrote in his first autobiography, “became my meat and my drink…. Its sympathy for my brethren in bonds—its scathing denunciations of slaveholders—its faithful exposures of slavery…sent a thrill of joy through my soul, such as I had never felt before!”² Spurred on by the encouraging words he found within its pages, Frederick Douglass began attending anti-slavery meetings, eventually becoming one of the most eloquent, passionate advocates of abolition. He knew the horrors of slavery firsthand. The beatings, mutilations, and abuse he had witnessed and had himself endured would remain imprinted in his memory. Douglass and his fellow abolitionists did more than simply speak out against slavery; they revealed the injustice of the system through former slaves’ personal stories and physical scars—tangible proof of its brutality. Abolitionists gave slavery a human face and demonstrated that it could

² Ibid.
not be ignored by whites resting comfortably on their freedoms while their black brethren
languished under the bonds of the evil institution.

**Who Were the Abolitionists?**

Abolitionists came from all backgrounds and all walks of life—they were
laborers, teachers, ministers, businessmen, husbands, and wives, all joined by a common
cause. Some, like Gerrit Smith, were independently wealthy, while others, like John
Brown, led simple, unadorned lives with little financial stability. Although well-to-do
Northerners comprised most of the movement's leadership, rank-and-file abolitionists
were not bourgeoisie or wealthy professionals. And, while white Southerners (and many
Northerners) depicted them as crazed fanatics with no grasp of reality, this presumption
could not be further from the truth.

Interpretations of the word "abolitionist," historiographically speaking, are highly
subjective. During the first half of the twentieth century, scholars such as Avery O.
Craven and Ulrich B. Phillips portrayed abolitionists as a fanatical minority,
overwhelmed by neuroses that inhibited compromise between North and South. In the
mid-twentieth century, however, more sympathetic studies emerged. This neo-
abolitionist school, led by Lewis Perry, John Demos, Robert Abzug and others, depicted
abolitionists as middle-class, forward-thinking reformers who launched a significant
movement advocating basic human rights for all races. More recent studies at the end of
the twentieth century have embraced this interpretation and expanded it to previously

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neglected fields, focusing on relationships between black and white abolitionists and on abolition in the early republic.⁵

**Beginnings of Abolitionism**

While the American abolitionist movement hit its stride during the 1830s, it was not confined to this period—anti-slavery ideas were germinating during the post-revolutionary era. Religious fervor and the rise of evangelicalism encouraged this fledgling abolitionism by emphasizing free will and equality among all Christian believers.⁶ This dedication to Christian principle convinced these early abolitionists of slavery’s sinfulness, and they opposed slavery on the grounds that, in Christ, there is neither slave nor free, black nor white. Eighteenth-century abolitionists also drew support from Enlightenment ideas, turning to such philosophers as Montesquieu, who claimed that slavery denigrated the humanity of the master as much as the humanity of the slave.

Early abolitionists favored slow progress toward emancipation rather than instantaneous changes in master-slave relations. This doctrine of gradualism was the predominant frame of mind for eighteenth-century abolitionists because it took into consideration that a balance of power within the U.S. government protected slavery, and also, that early abolitionist societies had branches in the South. William Rawle, onetime president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, founded in 1775, expressed the prevailing belief in gradual, conciliatory means, writing that “an abhorrence of slavery would gradually work its way, and that it was the duty of the society patiently to wait the

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event." Anti-slavery advocates could hope to make significant headway in their community, but potential repercussions of emancipation, including disunion and anarchy, kept them from aiming too high. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society, the premier anti-slavery engine of the eighteenth century, fully endorsed gradualism, claiming that "government interference... was the key." This society emphasized working through legal and political avenues, such as providing legal assistance for kidnapped free blacks. Historian Benjamin Quarles has concluded that "when realistically assessed... the abolitionist movement of the federalist era must be accounted a failure.... The early abolitionists created no general sentiment against slavery." This task would be left to the future generation of abolitionist reformers, including members of the Secret Six.

Amid the work of gradualists arose a movement proposing the removal of African Americans to a new home in Africa. Founded in 1816 by Robert Finley, the American Colonization Society believed that colonization would lead to the gradual emancipation of slaves by demonstrating that African Americans were self-reliant. However, undertones of racism pervaded the movement. Some colonizationists argued that all free blacks, whether they were legally freed or fugitives, posed a threat to Northern society, a belief that reflected the common Northern fear of a massive influx of free blacks. The "natural" difference among races, according to some colonizationists, entailed their

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8 David Brion Davis, "The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Antislavery Thought" *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 49 (1962), 217.
10 Ibid.
11 Quarles, 13.
separation instead of equality. However, despite this limited perspective, "the American Colonization Society was the only truly national organization [at this point] that even pretended to deal with the slavery issue," according to historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown. By 1830, the ACS had over two hundred state and local auxiliaries. For a time, Gerrit Smith was an active participant in the movement, although he changed his tune in the 1830s. Smith, like many other abolitionists who had once accepted colonization, came to see the inherent racism of the society's agenda.

**Immediatism and the Rise of Abolitionist Societies**

During the 1820s and 1830s, the abolitionist movement shifted away from colonization and the gradualist doctrine, adopting a new sense of urgency. This doctrine of immediatism embodied a directness and forcefulness uncharacteristic of gradualist techniques, which had failed to accomplish lasting change. Immediatist doctrine demanded that abolitionists **immediately** recognized slavery as a sinful institution and, in response, make an **immediate** personal commitment to work toward its downfall. An 1825 letter in the Boston Recorder and Telegraph described it this way: "The slaveholding system must be abolished... to the accomplishment of this end, immediate, determined measures must be adopted for the ultimate emancipation of every slave." This sense of urgency directly affected the development of militant abolitionism—if

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14 Sorin, 41.
15 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Cleveland, OH: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1969), 84.
17 Sorin, 38.
18 Sorin, 39.
gradualism had remained the reigning doctrine, there would have been no move toward violent techniques.

While the term immediatism could denote work for the immediate emancipation of slaves, it was also seen by many abolitionists as the manifestation of a fresh, uncompromising attitude toward the abolitionist crusade. Gradualists had assumed that progress was a given, but immediatists believed that a newfound sense of urgency and responsibility was the only way to jolt the North out of its complacency. Immediatist firebrands questioned the predominance of Northern anti-slavery principles by "denigrating as 'hollow sympathy' Northern opinion that acquiesced in slavery's vast expansion."¹⁹

According to historian David Brion Davis, immediatism "represented a shift in total outlook from a detached, rationalistic perspective on human history and progress to a personal commitment to make no compromise with sin."²⁰ Thanks to the religious revivals of the early nineteenth century, abolitionists became even more convinced that slavery was a violation of Christian principle and an affront to the teachings of Scripture. As Lawrence Friedman writes, abolitionists believed that "slaveholding was a spirit that caused one man to reign over another in defiance of God's laws, with chaos the inevitable result."²¹

In an 1835 speech, New York abolitionist Gerrit Smith, who had attended revival meetings in the Burned-Over District, argued that the warriors in the battle against

¹⁹ Goodman, 106.
²⁰ Davis, 228.
²¹ Lawrence J. Friedman, Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830-1870 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 64.
slavery must “stand on the rock of Christian principle” to promptly stamp out this sin.\textsuperscript{22} He also wrote a letter to Southern minister James Smylie in 1837, asserting that “slavery substitutes the will of a fallible fellow-man for that infallible rule of action—the will of God…. God cannot approve of a system of servitude, in which the master is guilty of assuming absolute power—of assuming God’s place and relation toward his fellow-men.”\textsuperscript{23} Although early abolitionists had made similar religious arguments against slavery, the rise of evangelicalism prompted more Northerners to refuse to compromise with sin, including Gerrit Smith, future member of the Secret Six.

Along with this fresh breath of immediatism flowed a deep-seated desire among many Northern abolitionists for racial equality in the United States. These reformers focused the fight for equality on two fronts. First, they attempted to demonstrate racial equality through the Bible and scientific theory. Second, they showed how the degraded environment of slavery had hampered black development, thus countering the widespread belief in African Americans’ genetic inferiority.\textsuperscript{24} According to Paul Goodman, most anti-slavery society constitutions placed racial equality as second only to abolition—opposition to slavery and opposition to racial intolerance were two sides of the same coin.\textsuperscript{25} Abolitionists in the 1830s were essentially the first to work toward racial equality, believing that “the abandonment of prejudice is required of us as a proof of our sincerity

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} [Gerrit Smith], “Gerrit Smith Defends the Right of Abolitionists to Discuss Slavery,” in \textit{The Abolitionists: A Collection of Their Writings}, ed. Louis Ruchames, 113-117 (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1963), 117.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Goodman, xix.
\end{itemize}
and consistency.”26 Sometimes white abolitionists did adopt a degree of paternalism, but when judged against other men and women of the nineteenth century, they were forward-thinking reformers.27

White abolitionists took their cue from their black colleagues, conquering some of their prejudices by working with black abolitionists who fought for their individual equality as well as that of their race. Northern blacks, whether fugitives or legally freed, took great interest in the abolitionist cause, and many became involved with existing anti-slavery societies, while others formed their own auxiliaries.28 Blacks supported abolitionist newspapers as well—in fact, three-fourths of those who subscribed to William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator* in 1834 were of African-American descent.29 Frederick Douglass encouraged black participation in the anti-slavery struggle, arguing that “the man who has suffered the wrong is the man to demand redress—that the man struck is the man to cry out—and that he who has endured the cruel pangs of slavery is the man to advocate liberty.”30 Blacks’ tireless efforts were birthed out of personal experiences with racism and bondage and, because of this perspective, militancy

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27 A concise discussion of abolitionists’ imperfections is William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, “Antislavery Ambivalence: Immediatism, Expediency, Race” *American Quarterly* 17 (Winter 1965): 682-695. I would argue that it is important to understand the weaknesses and prejudices of abolitionists, but that their downfall in these areas should not negate their positive attributes and their desire to help slaves realize their freedom. When seen in light of general sentiment toward blacks in the North, abolitionists did have a more enlightened view of African-Americans, albeit an imperfect one.
28 For further reading on black abolitionists’ role within the movement, see Leon F. Litwack, “The Emancipation of the Negro Abolitionist,” in *Blacks in the Abolitionist Movement*, ed. John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1971), 67-78. Litwack addresses the tensions between black and white abolitionists, as well as the ways in which black abolitionists stepped out and made the movement their own. This article can also be found in *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists*, ed. Martin Duberman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 137-155.
developed more quickly among black abolitionists. It was this dedication to violent means that “gave abolition its hard edge.” In fact, as Herbert Aptheker writes, “Without their illumination of the nature of slavery, [and] without their persistent struggle to be free, there would have been no national Abolitionist movement.” Abolitionists, including future members of the Secret Six, drew from their interactions with black abolitionists as they sought to gain a deeper understanding of the horrors of slavery.

White immediatists (unlike their black compatriots) did not, however, have a solid understanding of Northern sentiments toward slavery. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown writes, “These reformers so grossly overestimated Southern goodwill and underrated Northern racial prejudice that one must question their political wisdom while admiring their moral fortitude.” Inherent racial prejudice aside, immediatism did challenge the Northern value system and threatened to dampen national optimism by suggesting that American society had fundamental defects. In the 1830s, as abolitionists were getting their feet wet, many Northerners believed that a direct attack on slavery could lead to a frontal assault on private property and the sanctity of the Union. Immediatists had to counteract this public recoil against abolitionist “extremism.”

In the midst of this strategic reversal in favor of immediatism, the geographical center of the abolitionist movement also shifted. With the Pennsylvania Abolition Society’s gradualist techniques fading from view, new anti-slavery societies sprang up in

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32 Sorin, 105.
33 Aptheker, Abolitionism, xiii.
34 Wyatt-Brown, 83.
the Northeast. A major player in the Massachusetts abolitionist movement was William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison had first entered the scene as co-editor of the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, a weekly newspaper started by Benjamin Lundy. Like many other New England reformers, Garrison converted to immediatism in the late 1820s, laboring tirelessly to foster public awareness about the importance of immediatist techniques and to convince the North that the sinfulness of slavery could not be ignored.36

In 1831, Garrison and fifteen of his colleagues formed the New England Anti-Slavery Society in Boston. Garrison and his followers, who included Theodore Parker, determined that moral suasion and political action (without violence) could persuade Americans to fight slavery. They endorsed boycotts of slave-produced products and the dissemination of their message through churches and the press.37 At the inaugural conference of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, Garrison helped author a Declaration of Sentiments. This declaration called for “the destruction of error by the potency of truth,”38 demanding immediate emancipation and guaranteed civil rights for all free blacks. This national society became the preeminent anti-slavery institution, working in concert with the New England Anti-Slavery Society and other local auxiliaries. Many influential figures worked closely with Garrison in his endeavors, including Abby Kelley, Lydia Maria Child, Wendell Phillips, and Ellis Loring.

An additional anti-slavery group that gained prominence was based in New York and Ohio under the direction of Lewis Tappan. Unlike Garrison’s Boston circle, Tappan and his colleagues—who included his brother Arthur, Amos Phelps, Theodore Dwight

38 Ibid.
Weld, and Joshua Leavitt—were involved in other benevolent reforms besides abolition. Also, since many of them hailed from Congregationalist backgrounds and supported Charles Finney's evangelical revival, this group linked itself closely to the church. The religious awakenings of the 1820s had created a spirit of reform, stimulating men and women to express their Christian love through social action. The anti-slavery movement, particularly in New York's Burned-Over District, consequently gained a motivated, impassioned membership.

Another anti-slavery group in New York State, centered around Gerrit Smith, embraced a different tack by focusing on political avenues and cultural voluntarism, a philosophy proclaiming that all people were free to follow God's commands, but that the Christian community should encourage them to use this freedom voluntarily. To exert the societal pressure necessary for the penetration of abolitionist ideas, Smith and his associates—who included Beriah Green, William Goodell, and William Chaplin—determined that a broader base was needed. They found this base in politics. By the 1840s, Smith and his allies had parted with Garrison and joined the Liberty Party in the hopes that such an alliance would transform the major parties and make abolition a significant topic for debate. Samuel Howe, another future member of the Secret Six, subscribed to political abolitionism, running for office in 1846 as a Conscience Whig. Although he lost the election, Howe, like his colleague Gerrit Smith, continued to support political means as a weapon against slavery.

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39 Friedman, 69.
41 Friedman, 102.
42 Friedman, 111, 115.
Naturally, these abolitionists are grouped together loosely, and members of the Secret Six traveled amidst these fluid organizations. As a resident of Massachusetts, Theodore Parker did interact with Garrison and his followers, although his Congregationalist background also tied him to Tappan’s group of evangelicals. Similarly, Smith’s place at the head of the New York movement did not supersede his friendships and professional relationships with Boston abolitionists.44

**Radicals in the Making**

This geographic shift towards New England and the rise of immediatist anti-slavery agitation did not, however, come without consequence. In response to abolitionism’s renewed dedication to extinguishing slavery, the South attempted to counter abolitionist advances by protecting Southern interests more aggressively.45 Many historians, including Lawrence Friedman, have forwarded the push-shove interpretation of sectional conflict in the antebellum period, arguing that even though abolitionists were under-funded and numerically small, the South still perceived abolitionism as a large social movement fed by fanatical hatred of the Southern way of life, leading Southerners to adopt a defensive stance against the North. This defensive attitude led to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law and the battle over Kansas Territory, two profound events during the 1850s that altered the face of abolitionism once again by feeding the growing sectional divide and bringing converts to the abolitionist cause.

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44 The other members of the Secret Six—Samuel Howe, Franklin Sanborn, Thomas W. Higginson, and George Stearns—were mostly involved in the Kansas movement, not in abolition per se. As sister movements, Kansas aid workers did correspond frequently with New England abolitionists, expressing their anti-slavery views and catching up on newspaper headlines and local gossip. While these interactions with abolitionist colleagues may have influenced the abolitionist movement, the purpose of the Kansas movement was work for the cause in Kansas.

45 Friedman, 4.
As Jane Pease, William Pease, and John Demos have concluded, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 provided the impetus for a change of attitude toward slavery. This law, an amendment to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, had been passed as part of the Compromise of 1850, which attempted to satisfy both North and South by balancing their conflicting interests. In the end, California would be admitted as a free state, but New Mexico and Utah would enter the union under the doctrine of popular sovereignty. In addition, the slave trade in the District of Columbia was abolished, but a new fugitive slave law was passed to appease the South. This law took jurisdiction over fugitive cases away from Northern courts and placed this jurisdiction in the hands of newly appointed fugitive slave commissioners, who could issue warrants for the capture of runaway slaves and could even pursue these runaways onto Northern soil.\(^{46}\) Furthermore, Northern citizens, regardless of their beliefs about slavery, were now obligated to help apprehend fugitive slaves.\(^{47}\) According to Merton Dillon, “the new Fugitive Slave Law was... as much an assertion of Southern power and dominance within the nation as it was an effort to facilitate the recovery of valuable property.”\(^{48}\)

Architects of the compromise, including Stephen Douglas, believed that they had saved the Union by at least partially satisfying both North and South—and in the months shortly after the adoption of the compromise, this seemed to be the case. Many Northerners did not express distaste for the law because they wanted most of all to keep

\(^{46}\) Stanley W. Campbell, “Fugitive Slave Act (1850),” in *The Oxford Companion to United States History*, ed. Paul S. Boyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 294. From the Southern perspective, attempts to enforce the law often proved very costly, and highly publicized escape attempts convinced Southerners that the North was uniting against slavery. This news came at a time when slaveholders’ interests demanded slavery’s spread into the North—not the growth of sectional differences that would further polarize the nation.


the Union intact, fearing that an attack on the compromise would lead to dissolution. Thus, up until 1854, the most vehement opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law came from abolitionists.\textsuperscript{49}

However, after 1854, a backlash of Northern public opinion arose, turning Northern anti-slavery sentiment on its head. Most Northerners had initially looked past the injustice of the compromise, but with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 and the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, slavery could be extended almost indefinitely to the Pacific coast. Many in the North now believed that the Compromise of 1850 had accomplished nothing—not only had the Southern slave power crept past their doorstep (in the form of slave catchers), but the South had violated the tentative peace within the nation by seeking to expand slavery even further.

Before passage of the new law, several members of the Six had assisted fugitive slaves, an act that would now hold even greater consequences. In 1841, for instance, Gerrit Smith purchased the freedom of a family of seven, paying 3,500 dollars.\textsuperscript{50} In 1846, at the meeting which formed the Boston Vigilance Committee, Samuel Howe had made his first abolitionist speech in support of hiding fugitives, distraught by the fact that slavery “has at last spread abroad its murky wings, and has covered us with its benumbing shadow.... State Street is deaf to the cry of the oppressed slave;... the port of

\textsuperscript{49} Stanley W. Campbell, \textit{The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 55. Naturally, northern blacks were opposed to the law as well. With its passage, every Northern black, whether a free individual or a fugitive, could potentially be kidnapped and taken south. According to Campbell, an estimated 300 black citizens of Pittsburgh fled to Canada within the ten days after the bill became law. African-American churches in upstate New York also reported that large portions of their congregation had fled (62-3).

Boston has been opened to the slave-trader.”51 This aid for fugitives would now come under attack with the passage of the Compromise of 1850.

Abolitionists were naturally at the forefront of the Northern outburst against the Fugitive Slave Law. Lewis Tappan, who continued to abhor bloodshed, stated that this law was “a palpable violation of the Constitution...because it compels every citizen of the free States to be a ‘slave-catcher’.”52 Harriet Beecher Stowe, daughter of abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, was appalled by the law and published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852. Her portrait of a slave mother and child fleeing from a cruel master clearly referred to the injustice of the law and educated the public about the plight of Southern blacks.

Charles Beecher, looking at its passage from a religious point of view, said, “this law...is an unexampled climax of sin. It is the monster iniquity of the present age, and it will stand forever on the page of history, as the vilest monument of infamy of the nineteenth century.”53 John Brown, using a Biblical analogy, organized a League of Gileadites in Springfield, Ohio, to offer physical resistance to the act; the resolutions of the league were signed by 44 black citizens of Springfield. In a letter to his wife in

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51 Laura E. Richards, *Samuel Gridley Howe* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1935), 192-193. Although this biography is written by Howe's daughter, it appears to be accurate and comprehensive, with one exception: she makes no real mention of his involvement in the Harper's Ferry raid. However, events earlier in his life are less controversial and consequently her account of these events is more trustworthy. Her decision to leave out Harper's Ferry, and thus omit a discussion of her father's paranoid reaction to the raid, is understandable considering that she would seek to portray her father in a positive light.


November 1850, he wrote that he encouraged his black neighbors to “trust in God and keep their powder dry.”

Future members of the Secret Six joined with Beecher, Stowe, and others in condemning the law. In a letter to Thomas Higginson, firebrand Theodore Parker called the law “the formal federal endorsement of kidnapping.” In a sermon delivered shortly after the law’s enactment, Parker encouraged his parishioners to aid fugitives “peaceably if they can, forcibly if they must, but by all means to do it.” Upon hearing of the law’s passage, George Luther Steams obtained a pistol and pledged to harbor slaves under his own roof.

Expressing their outrage, Theodore Parker, Samuel Howe, Thomas Higginson, Gerrit Smith and a myriad of other key abolitionists became involved in vigilance committees that aided fugitives by providing shelter, helping them flee to Canada, and offering legal advice. In its resolutions of 1850, the Boston Vigilance Committee declared that “it shall be their duty to endeavor by all just means to secure the fugitives and colored inhabitants of Boston and any vicinity from any invasion of their rights by persons acting under this law [i.e. the Fugitive Slave Law].” Committee members were to keep watch and be ever aware.

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56 Renahan, 50.
58 Theodore Parker, Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker, Minister of the Twenty-Eighth Congregational Society, Boston, ed. John Weiss (New York: D. Appleton, 1864), 2:94.
Samuel Howe actively participated in the underground railroad and supported other endeavors of the Boston Vigilance Committee. Gerrit Smith financially supported the New York Vigilance Committee, and when the committee needed to cover food and transportation costs, Smith gave five hundred dollars to their cause. Similarly, Thomas Higginson acted to secure the freedom of fugitive slaves, and during the rendition of a former slave, Anthony Burns, he even led an abolitionist attack against the courthouse where Burns was being held.

In the case of William and Ellen Craft, which took place in 1850, Theodore Parker, Ellis Loring, and Lewis Hayden all helped conceal the couple until the vigilance committee could force the slave catchers out of Boston. Just before sending the Crafts to safety in England, Parker legally married them. Parker wrote that during the service he gave William Craft a sword, and “told him of his manly duty therewith, if need were, to defend the life and liberty of Ellen.... ‘With this sword I thee wed,’” suited the circumstances of that bridal. Although this vigilance committee had been organized prior to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, their work in Boston became more visible and assertive after this point.

Another event that radicalized many abolitionists occurred after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, which opened this Western territory for settlement under

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59 Harlow, Gerrit Smith, 289.
62 Theodore Parker, The Trial of Theodore Parker for the “Misdemeanor” of a Speech in Faneuil Hall against Kidnapping... (Boston: Published for the author, 1855), 187. Parker also wrote: “I gave them both a Bible, which I had bought for the purpose, to be a symbol of their spiritual culture and a help for their soul, as the sword was for their bodily life” (187).
63 Renahan, 51. Edward Renahan is convinced that, until after 1850, this committee had “no particular sense of urgency” to aid slaves (49). He also sees a direct link between the increasing radicalism of the vigilance committee and Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry.
the doctrine of popular sovereignty, making it fair game for slavery’s spread. Witnessing the influx of free-soil emigrants that entered Kansas, pro-slavery Missourians also flooded the territory, illegally stuffing ballot boxes to elect a pro-slavery territorial legislature in Lecompton. The free-staters quickly responded by forming their own legislature in Topeka which, although technically illegal in the eyes of the federal government, claimed to be legitimately elected. The battle for Kansas had begun.

By 1856 many Northerners, appalled by the Missouri border ruffians’ treatment of free-state settlers, had formed committees to send food, supplies, and sometimes even weapons to the beleaguered free-state Kansans. These men and women in the North adamantly believed that the doctrine of popular sovereignty was nothing more than a pro-slavery swindle engineered to bring more slave states into the Union. According to Gerrit Smith’s biographer, Ralph Volney Harlow, Bleeding Kansas proved to be the breaking point that radicalized the North. Harlow argues that abolitionists saw the violence in Kansas as another manifestation of “the illegal and violent acts of the pro-slavery party” and became persuaded that these pro-slavery actions deserved violence in return.64 Thus, Bleeding Kansas provided the Secret Six and other abolitionists with a forum for making good on their rhetoric—instead of simply speaking against slavery, they were acting against its spread into the West and becoming more confident in their radical approach to the war on slavery.

In 1854 the New England Emigrant Aid Company was established to provide reduced transportation rates and Sharp’s rifles to anti-slavery emigrants. Samuel Gridley Howe assisted in this fundraising effort and became involved in other committees which

sprang up within the next two years. On June 3, 1856, he attended a meeting in Faneuil Hall, Boston, which had been called to decide the best means for sending aid. Those in attendance set up the Faneuil Hall Committee to collect clothing and money, and within a month they had raised ten thousand dollars for the free-state cause. Later that year Howe attended a convention in Buffalo that founded another aid organization called the National Kansas Committee; Howe became a member of that committee as well, writing letters and raising funds.

George Luther Stearns, who had also attended the Faneuil Hall meeting in Boston, became an informal agent of that committee. While collecting donations, he formulated a plan to centralize the local aid committees under a single umbrella organization. On June 5, 1856, citizens from Massachusetts gathered to hear his proposal, and they decided to form the Massachusetts State Kansas Committee with Stearns as its chairman. He proved to be a conscientious coordinator and an inventive solicitor. He used his personal business contacts to create a fundraising network, and he traveled to various local branches to monitor their work and make suggestions. He also met with influential businessmen and politicians, emphasizing that "every dollar, every barrel of clothing and food was another blow struck for freedom." Stearns continued in this vein until 1858, when the Massachusetts State Kansas Committee perceived that aid was no longer necessary; Kansas was safely in Northern hands.

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66 [Howe], *Letters and Journals*, 2:416n.


68 Heller, 74-76.

69 Heller, 102.
Stearns’s right-hand man in this undertaking was Franklin Sanborn, a young Concord schoolteacher who would later become enamored with John Brown. As Sanborn recalled in later years, his interest was sparked when his brother moved to Kansas in 1856, the most brutal year of fighting. "Between May, 1856, and January, 1857, I passed through all the grades of these Kansas committees, beginning in June, 1856, as secretary of the Concord town committee;... accepting the post of secretary to the Massachusetts State Kansas Committee... and finally serving upon the national committee at its last meeting, in January, 1857." Sanborn canvassed various towns in the state, holding meetings, accepting contributions, and appointing local committees. He supervised the goods and money acquired, which he believed "was enough to carry our colonists in Kansas through their worst year." Sanborn also traveled west in August 1856 "on a tour of inspection and consultation" through Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska to examine the safety of the emigrants’ route.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson was also involved in the Massachusetts State Kansas Committee, procuring rifles and ammunition and traveling to Kansas in June 1856. While in the territory he wrote “Letters from Kanzas,” which were published in the St. Louis Democrat, New York Tribune, and Chicago Tribune under the pseudonym Worcester. He determined that Kansas needed more armed men and lamented the fact that only two thousand dollars and two emigrant parties had been raised.

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72 F. B. Sanborn, Recollections of Seventy Years (Boston: Gorham Press, 1909), 1:52.
73 Edelstein, 184-187. These letters were reprinted in Anti-Slavery Tracts: Series 1; Nos. 1-20, 1855-1856 under the name “A Ride Through Kanzas.” See footnote 75.
Higginson spoke with admiration about the settlers in the territory, especially those in Lawrence who were struggling to rebuild their town after the border ruffians' attack in 1856. He wrote that he "had never seen such courage, such patience, such mutual generosity, such perfect buoyancy of spirit." These letters from the front lines drummed up support for various aid committees by giving Northerners a glimpse of the daily struggles of free-state settlers in Kansas. With both their words and their actions, the Six supported those who were fighting slavery, and these settlers made the free-state presence a visible force in the territory thanks to the supplies and weapons procured from aid organizations in the East.

**Contexts for Violence: Fugitive Slaves and Bleeding Kansas**

The Secret Six and other radical abolitionists, appalled at the ferocity of Southern sentiment that was expressed in debates over fugitive slaves and Kansas Territory, became convinced that their strategies must change to counter the renewed threat of Southern aggression. According to Merton Dillon, "for many, pacifism, even in its most earnestly proclaimed phase, had been only a chosen strategy designed to fit the times rather than a matter of deep conviction." Nonresistance, such as that preached by Garrisonians, was gradually moving to the wayside as abolitionists became more willing to advocate violence as a key implement in their reforming crusade—not only as a rhetorical device, but also as a practical reality.

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Some historians have maintained that abolitionists' tactics did not change after the 1840s, thus failing to take into account the development of practical means for implementing violence. Aileen Kraditor confined her study of abolition, entitled *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism*, to the period between 1834 and 1850, "because most of the major tactical problems that arose in the entire history of the movement were thrashed out within those seventeen years." Louis Ruchames agrees, arguing that the abolitionists' philosophies and strategies took form in the 1830s and 1840s, and "were not to undergo any significant change until the Civil War." Both Kraditor and Ruchames are convinced that abolitionists did not alter their strategies in the 1850s—an assertion which disregards the radical wing of the movement. In light of the uproar surrounding the Fugitive Slave Law and Bleeding Kansas, it becomes clear that the 1850s were in fact the formative period for the practice of militant abolitionism.

Thanks to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, the first context for the practical adoption of violent resistance was found in assisting fugitive slaves. Thomas Wentworth Higginson first spoke of violence in 1850 when William and Ellen Craft became susceptible to capture. He wrote that "they are terrible times when it becomes

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79 I would agree that the 1830s and 1840s were formative years in the movement as a whole; the growth of militant abolitionism at mid-century had certainly drawn from earlier developments. However, this is not to say that nothing of consequence occurred in the 1850s—since abolitionism was not stagnant these reformers, whether non-resistants or radicals, continued to adapt their techniques.
80 In *Slavery Attacked*, Dillon maintains that the growing number of fugitives demonstrated that blacks were eager to free themselves, and when abolitionists realized slaves' willingness to escape, they felt more inclined to abandon the doctrine of non-resistance (206-7).
necessary to speak of bloodshed; yet when it comes to the actual case, it is hard to say where a man must stop in defending his inalienable rights.”81

In the heated meeting called to protest the 1855 rendition of another former slave, Anthony Burns, Theodore Parker loudly proclaimed: “I love peace. But there is a means, and there is an end; Liberty is the end, and sometimes peace is not the means toward it.”82 During the Burns rendition, Samuel Howe wrote Parker, saying that instead of a public meeting they needed “but a band of fifty, to say the man shall not go out into slavery, but over our bodies.”83 Thomas Higginson encouraged similar action, arguing that bloodshed cannot be avoided when defending one’s personal liberty.84

There were other contexts that encouraged the Six and their radical abolitionist colleagues to implement violence, such as the bloody battle for Kansas Territory, which came to a head in 1856. According to Ralph Harlow, Gerrit Smith’s biographer, Bleeding Kansas had “filled Northern philanthropists and reformers with intense and bitter wrath.”85 In 1856, as affairs in Kansas were heating up, Smith sent 250 dollars to free-state advocate Amos Lawrence, writing that “much as I abhor war, I nevertheless believe, that there are instances in which the shedding of blood is unavoidable.”86 This was a radical departure from his earlier statements about peaceful means of resistance.

Furthermore, in an 1856 speech in Buffalo, New York, Smith presented his resolution that “armed men must be sent to Kansas to conquer the armed men, who come

81 Union, November 20, 1850, quoted in Edelstein, 106.
82 Parker, The Trial of Theodore Parker, 203.
83 [Howe], Letters and Journals, 2:269.
84 Union, November 20, 1850, quoted in Edelstein, 105-106.
86 Gerrit Smith to Amos Lawrence, February 3, 1854, Amos A. Lawrence Letters, Massachusetts Historical Society, quoted in Harlow, Gerrit Smith, 345.
against her.”87 Although political means could still make it a free state, “if our brethren in Kansas can be protected only by the shedding of blood, then blood must be shed.”88 Smith blamed the American people for slavery’s continued existence, stating that “there was not virtue enough in the American people to bring slavery to a bloodless termination:—and all that now remains for them is to bring it to a bloody one.”89

Theodore Parker made similar statements in a letter to Charles Sumner written in 1856. The war against the slave power in Kansas “is not by ballots but bullets. Just now the Border ruffians are driven back. It is only for a moment. They will return.”90 A few months later he recorded in his journal the departure of emigrants for Kansas. “What a comment were the weapons of that company on the boasted democracy of America! These rifles and pistols were to defend their soil from the American government, which wishes to plant slavery in Kansas!”91 While visiting Kansas, Thomas Higginson applauded free-state General James Lane and his men, who “had driven out the Missourians in all directions,” and he was immensely pleased when Lane gave him a commission in the free-state army.92 Higginson and Parker clearly supported these men’s efforts at forceful resistance.

These six men, along with other abolitionists, shifted from a pacifist abolitionist stance to one of radical violence against the slave power, expressing these beliefs with actions—such as work for the Kansas cause—as well as through rhetorical channels. This shift was largely due to their first-hand experiences and personal contact with

88 “Gerrit Smith in the Kansas Convention,” 2.
89 “Gerrit Smith in the Kansas Convention,” 1.
90 Parker, Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker, 2:159.
91 Parker, Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker, 2:160.
92 [Higginson], Letters and Journals, 143-144. Although this commission was most likely for ceremonial purposes only, it does demonstrate Higginson’s desire to become actively involved in the Kansas struggle.
fugitive slaves and struggling Northern emigrants, experiences which came out of their involvement with vigilance committees and emigrant aid societies. These experiences gave a personal face to the abolitionist cause, a face which inspired and encouraged them to wage war in behalf of the enslaved.

This growing belief in righteous violence appealed to abolitionists' understanding of higher law, demonstrating that "strong peace men could become receptive to force when that force appeared compatible with their missionary sense of righteousness."93 According to historian Lawrence Friedman, these first-generation immediatists felt strongly compelled to reconcile the seemingly disparate doctrines of Christian peace and righteous warfare against a sinful institution.94 One instance of "righteous" rhetoric can be found in an 1852 letter Samuel Howe wrote to his friend Charles Sumner concerning one of Sumner's Senate speeches. It reads: "you will use all moral means, but you will never use force—you will have no wars. Against this, again, all the instincts of my nature revolt. God gives us power, force, and the instinct to use it, and though it is better never to use it in war, yet it may be the only means in our power to save the perishing."95

Religious undertones aside, the Secret Six and other abolitionist reformers embraced every opportunity to use their oratorical and literary skills, recognizing that violent rhetoric and violent actions must work in concert to change American attitudes toward slavery. Theodore Parker employed violent rhetoric in 1856, saying "I am more than ever of the opinion that we must settle this question in the old Anglo-Saxon way—with the sword."96 From the 1830s to the 1850s, Parker published various lectures and

93 Friedman, 203.
94 Friedman, 208.
95 Richards, Samuel Gridley Howe, 205.
96 Parker, Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker, 2:191.
sermons on the evils of slavery, its status in the Constitution, and its immoral treatment of blacks. Even earlier in the 1830s, Gerrit Smith had begun publishing a series of essays on slavery, which were structured as printed letters to an individual or group.\textsuperscript{97} Samuel Howe took a somewhat different approach by organizing and editing \textit{The Commonwealth}, a vitriolic abolitionist paper which began circulation in 1851.\textsuperscript{98} The world of print provided ample opportunity for the Six to expound upon their radical abolitionist beliefs and convert others to their cause.

Similarly, several of the Secret Six were frequently in the public eye during the 1840s and 1850s, giving speeches or lectures at rallies and abolitionist meetings. Parker was well acquainted with prominent individuals, receiving materials and papers which he appropriated for lectures and his sermons at the Congregational Society of Boston.\textsuperscript{99} Likewise, Gerrit Smith contributed regularly to meetings of various local societies, gaining a reputation as a public speaker.\textsuperscript{100} Frederick Douglass, who was his close friend, often mentioned Smith's assistance in organizing abolitionist events.\textsuperscript{101} Furthermore, after his election to the House of Representatives in 1854, Smith was able to use the House floor as an abolitionist soapbox. In his speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, a spectacular 101 pages, he painstakingly outlined why he opposed its passage, arguing that "the Constitution, the only law of the territories, is not in favor of slavery, and that slavery cannot be set up under it."\textsuperscript{102} By publicly discussing the role of violence

\textsuperscript{97} Harlow, \textit{Gerrit Smith}, 132.
\textsuperscript{98} Richards, \textit{Samuel Gridley Howe}, 199.
\textsuperscript{99} Parker, \textit{Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker}, 2:68.
\textsuperscript{100} Harlow, \textit{Gerrit Smith}, 284.
\textsuperscript{101} [Frederick Douglass], \textit{The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass}, vol. 2, \textit{Pre-Civil War Decade, 1850-1860}, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1950). This volume includes numerous letters from Douglass to Smith, thanking him for his financial support, his attendance at abolitionist meetings, etc.... Clearly Smith was involved extensively.
\textsuperscript{102} [Gerrit Smith], \textit{Speeches of Gerrit Smith in Congress} (New York: Mason Brothers, 1856), 121.
in abolitionism, these men fostered a greater awareness of violent tactics and implored other abolitionists to consider the limitations of non-violent resistance to slavery.

After the Fugitive Slave Law, Bleeding Kansas, and similar events (like the caning of Charles Sumner in 1856), these men were prepared to fight; as Julia Ward Howe wrote in 1856, “New England spunk seems to be pretty well up.” Gerrit Smith agreed, stating that when slavery “begins to march its conquering bands into the Free States, I and ten thousand other peace men are not only ready to have it repulsed with violence, but pursued even unto death, with violence.” The Six had all been involved in the anti-slavery movement prior to their relationship with John Brown. This practical experience, in addition to their contact with the violence they saw as inherent in the slave system, had primed them for an alliance with Brown. The Six agreed to finance his raid on Harper’s Ferry (and other abolitionist ventures) to express their moral outrage, drawing generously on their newly developed attitudes toward violent means. These men were willing to condone Brown’s raid, which was considered by the state of Virginia a treasonous act, for the cause of liberty. In an eerily prophetic letter to Thomas Higginson, written in February 1858, Franklin Sanborn stated confidently that “treason will not be treason much longer, but patriotism.” The Secret Six were indeed “treasonous patriots.”

104 Harlow, Gerrit Smith, 350.
105 Rossbach, 268.
106 Franklin Sanborn to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, February 11, 1858, Higginson-Brown Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, quoted in Edelstein, 209.
CHAPTER II
INSURRECTION: HARPER’S FERRY AND ITS AFTERMATH

“John Brown has died, but the life of Freedom, from his death, shall flow forth to this nation.”
J. Sella Martin, 1859

The Plan Develops

“Rail Road business on a somewhat extended scale; is the identical object for which I am trying to get means,” wrote John Brown to his abolitionist ally and future member of the Secret Six, Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Brown had a past history with the underground railroad, stating that “I have been connected with that business as commonly conducted from my boyhood: & never let an opportunity slip.” It was 1858; violence in Kansas had settled down to a slight murmur, the territory was securely in anti-slavery hands, and John Brown now looked southward to continue his assault on slavery. The raid on Harper’s Ferry would be the culmination of his life’s work and, due to assistance from prominent Northerners such as the Secret Six, it would also be remembered as the largest practical expression of militant abolitionism.

Brown set his sights for his “railroad business” on the “Great Black Way,” a section of the Allegheny Mountains that Harriet Tubman and other underground railroad conductors frequently used as a secure route to freedom. His target would be Harper’s

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Ferry, a small town at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers on the border between Virginia and Maryland. Nestled in a valley, Harper’s Ferry was the home of a federal arsenal with enough weapons to supply Brown’s anti-slavery force.\(^2\)

Furthermore, Brown had researched census returns in Jefferson County, where Harper’s Ferry was located, discovering that the free black population equaled the slave population; Brown believed these free blacks could be integral to his plan. Through his conversations with Harriet Tubman, he also learned that slave escapes were common in the area, since Jefferson County lay directly on the Maryland border, only thirty miles south of Pennsylvania.\(^3\)

Taking these factors into consideration, Brown determined the details of his plan. He had been drumming up support from sympathetic Northerners during 1857 and 1858, for a time leaving a small contingent of his men under the supervision of Colonel Hugh Forbes who, at the pay rate of one hundred dollars a month, was hired to turn these recruits into a well-organized fighting force. Brown intended to take this select group into the Allegheny Mountains to establish a fort that could serve as a base of operations. They would load this base with the weapons taken from the Harper’s Ferry arsenal. Then, squads of five would spread out from this central location, bringing in slaves and

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\(^2\) W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *John Brown*, new ed. (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs, 1909; repr., New York: International Publishers, 1974), 153-154. After the reorganization of the military in 1821, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, in response to growing fears of slave uprisings, deployed one artillery company to each arsenal in the slave states. Merton Dillon discusses this issue in *Slavery Attacked: Southern Slaves and Their Allies, 1619-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 130-132. By guarding arsenals, slave revolts would be almost impossible, since these weapons would remain in white hands only. This decision had a direct bearing on Brown’s plans for Harper’s Ferry—he knew that he would not be able to foment a slave uprising if he had no way to provide these slaves with weapons. Brown and his men already had accumulated enough weapons for themselves; they attacked the armory to procure weapons for expected black recruits.

local free blacks to serve as freedom fighters. These militiamen would augment the underground railroad by helping large groups of slaves escape to the North. Besides aiding slaves, Brown also wanted to destabilize the South and shake the core of the slave system. Ideally, his supporters in the North would fund this enterprise and aid these refugees on their journey to Canada. One of his primary objectives was also to involve free blacks in the North and in Canada; after the first raid, he could look to these black communities for monetary aid and recruits for his militia.

In early 1858, Brown went to Frederick Douglass’s home, taking this time to write his *Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States* and to consult with his respected colleague. In order to fairly govern his fort in the Alleghenies, Brown took great care with this constitution, believing that strict organization would keep order and avoid anarchy; consequently, he included a declaration of loyalty to the U.S. government and the flag, and he instituted a strong moral code prohibiting profanity, drunkenness and fornication.

After an initial meeting between Franklin Sanborn and John Brown in February 1858, Sanborn consulted Gerrit Smith and informed Samuel Howe, Theodore Parker, 

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4 According to David Potter, this is where Brown made a major miscalculation. Potter writes that “the paradox lay in the fact that the white abolitionists believed that the Negroes were all on the brink of a massive insurrection, yet they seldom consulted any Negro for corroboration” (“Paradox of Leadership,” 151). Brown, as well as other radical abolitionists, simply assumed that slaves were eager to rise up, thus failing to consider that slaves were more discerning in their acceptance of rebellion. Slaves had seen the repercussions of similar uprisings and were not always willing to take such a risk. For more on this discussion, see David Potter, “John Brown and the Paradox of Leadership Among American Negroes” in *Blacks in the Abolitionist Movement*, ed. John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, 149-159 (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1971). Also see Dillon, *Slavery Attacked*, 231-232. Dillon believes that most slaves were more inclined to attempt escape than to fight for their freedom.


6 Du Bois, 185. Du Bois notes that this technique for running off slaves demonstrates Brown’s knowledge of the maroon communities that already existed in the South, although Brown augmented the maroon idea by using these secret bases as a headquarters for the underground railroad.

7 DeCaro, 245.
Thomas Higginson, and George Stearns of Brown’s plan. All except Smith, who had already committed himself to Brown’s cause, met on March 4, 1858, in the American House in Boston so Brown could speak in greater detail and answer any possible objections. Although they did not know the site of the attack, this Secret Committee of Six, as Sanborn called it, agreed to support Brown, electing George Stearns as their chairman and pledging to raise five hundred to one thousand dollars. They further agreed that no one else should know of this undertaking.8

John Brown also divulged his plan to the free black population in Chatham, Ontario in 1858 during his first visit to Canada. Chatham was a major terminus on the underground railroad, boasting a large free black population—in fact, one third of Chatham’s population were fugitives from U.S. authorities. After returning to the United States to gather his men, Brown traveled back to Chatham for a convention on May 8 and 10, 1858. About 35 black men attended and were very supportive of Brown’s plan for Harper’s Ferry.9

In May 1858, Hugh Forbes, the now-disgruntled associate of Brown, threatened to expose Brown’s plan before the first stages had been implemented. He had contacted members of the Six, asking for more money and alleging that Brown had not paid him enough to support his family still living in Europe. None of the Six had heard of Forbes.

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8 Jeffery Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators: John Brown, The Secret Six, and a Theory of Slave Violence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 144-146. While he gave most of his supporters little explanation of his plans, Brown had divulged specifics to select individuals outside of the Six. According to Richard Realf, a former colleague of Brown who testified before the Senate Select Committee in 1860, “John Brown was a man who would never state more than it was absolutely necessary for him to do.” Consequently, while sparse details of the raid circulated in the months prior to its implementation, few had knowledge of specifics.

9 DeCaro, 248, 250. Initially, this convention was supposed to meet just before the raid would be carried out, so Brown could immediately call on these men for support. However, the Hugh Forbes affair led to the raid’s postponement until over a year later which, according to DeCaro, “interrupted the rhythm of cooperation that Brown had attained among black expatriates in 1858” (251).
Franklin Sanborn did, however, conclude that "he is either a madman or a villain, and in either capacity can, and is inclined to, do great mischief." Although Higginson was appalled at the idea of delaying the raid, regarding "any postponement as simply abandoning the project," the Six convened without him and agreed to postpone the attack until the next year, 1859.

The secret committee sent Brown to Kansas as a temporary distraction, telling him to attract attention so Forbes' disclosure would appear unfounded if it ever reached the wrong hands. They also agreed to raise another two or three thousand dollars during this waiting period, and they gave Brown five hundred dollars and weapons to carry back to Kansas. In addition, they asked Brown to avoid telling them any further details so they could claim plausible deniability in the event of complications.

After freeing some Missouri slaves and guiding these twelve fugitives through Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, and Illinois toward safety in Canada, Brown returned to the east to finish planning the raid. Throughout the next few months, the Six continued to support Brown, even amid some doubts. At times the Six questioned the strategic feasibility of the mission, insofar as they were aware of details, and they were anxious to see results after making frequent donations to Brown's work. Theodore Parker was not certain of Brown's success, writing earlier that he doubted "whether things of the kind will succeed. But we shall make a great many failures before we discover the right way of getting at it.

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11 Thomas W. Higginson to Theodore Parker, May 9, 1858, Theodore Parker Papers, Boston Public Library, quoted in Renahan, 152.
12 Oates, 248-251. Forbes had threatened to sell the story to the New York Herald, but ultimately settled on contacting several Northern congressmen about the matter, including Henry Wilson, William Seward, and Charles Sumner, who all quietly informed the Six of this unwanted publicity.
13 Renahan, 163.
This may as well be one of them."\(^{14}\) Thomas Higginson, like Parker, had some initial reservations and was somewhat skeptical of Brown, referring to him as the "sly old veteran."\(^{15}\)

Still, the Secret Six admired Brown, respecting him as a man of character, and they continued to place their confidence in this Kansas soldier. Only a few months before the raid, Higginson reassured Brown, writing: "I have perfect confidence in you. All you do will be well done."\(^{16}\) Clearly Higginson had overcome his earlier doubts.

Likewise, in a letter to John Murray Forbes, Samuel Howe vouched for Brown's character, saying that "under his natural and unaffected simplicity and modesty there is an irresistible propensity to war upon injustice and wrong.... So far as one man can answer for another whom he has not known very long and intimately, I can answer for Brown's honesty of purpose."\(^{17}\) Stearns also had faith in Brown, according to his testimony after the raid, as he praised Brown's "courage, prudence, and good judgment."\(^{18}\)

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16 Thomas W. Higginson to John Brown, May 1, 1859, Higginson-Brown Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, quoted in Edelstein, 218.
18 Testimony of George Luther Stearns, *Report of the Select Committee of the Senate Appointed to Inquire into the Late Invasion and Seizure of the Public Property at Harper's Ferry*, 36th Congress, 1st Session, no. 278. Because so many of the Six destroyed all incriminating documents in their possession that could link them to John Brown, it is difficult to uncover evidence of their confidence in him. Higginson, Smith, Howe, and Sanborn clearly expressed their admiration, but Parker and Stearns in particular are harder to track down. Nevertheless, even if statements about their faith in Brown before the raid are difficult to pinpoint, their willingness to continue providing funds proves that they ultimately trusted Brown's judgment and his character. If they had had serious doubts, they would have discontinued their financial support.
FIGURE 2

JOHN BROWN

(Reprinted from Merrill D. Peterson, John Brown: The Legend Revisited [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002])
Franklin Sanborn, with his propensity for idolizing larger-than-life characters, had immediately taken a liking to Brown when they first met in 1857. After this initial encounter, Sanborn wrote his friend Thomas Higginson and said: “I like the man from what I have seen and his deeds ought to bear witness for him.”19 In another letter to Higginson later that year, Sanborn declared that Brown “is as ready for a revolution as any other man...[with] a good plan...and a radical purpose.”20 Gerrit Smith’s perception of Brown echoes that of Sanborn. Smith wrote to Sanborn in 1858, claiming to have “great faith in the wisdom, integrity, and bravery of Captain Brown.... Whenever he shall embark in another of these contests I shall again stand ready to help him.”21 The Six were willing to underwrite a violent assault against the slave system because of their faith in Brown’s judgment, particularly considering his previous work to make Kansas a free state. Their involvement in abolition and the Kansas aid movement prepared them to endorse this practical application of militant abolition, and they believed Brown was the right man for the job.

*A Fateful Foray into the South*

With the support of the Six boosting his spirits, Brown commenced preliminary reconnaissance of the area surrounding Harper’s Ferry. To familiarize his men with the

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19 Franklin Sanborn to Thomas W. Higginson, January 5, 1857, Thomas W. Higginson Papers, Boston Public Library, quoted in Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After*, rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), 271. The Six were not certain of Brown’s involvement in the Pottawatomie massacre, which took place in 1856 shortly after border ruffians burned the free-state stronghold of Lawrence, Kansas. Although news of the massacre had appeared in Northern newspapers, Brown had always sidestepped questions about his involvement. Thus, they formed their image of Brown’s role in Bleeding Kansas from more positive examples of his work, such as his service in the free-state militia.

20 Franklin Sanborn to Thomas W. Higginson, September 11, 1857, Thomas W. Higginson Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

territory, Brown and his followers moved into a farmhouse across the border in Maryland, rented to them by the Kennedy family. Under the assumed name of Isaac Smith, Brown mingled freely with the people of Jefferson County, Virginia, and neighboring Maryland. He also brought his daughter Anne and his daughter-in-law Martha to keep house, hoping to divert suspicions which might be aroused by the number of white and black men present on the Kennedy property. Anne and Martha kept up the appearance of normalcy by chatting with neighbors who came calling and keeping the black recruits hidden from sight.\(^2^2\) Of the twenty-two who participated in the raid, five were black men and seven had served in Kansas. They spent their free time at the Kennedy farm discussing religion and politics while waiting for the final raiders to straggle in.

Finally, on Sunday night, October 16, 1859, Brown and his twenty-one recruits marched from the farm in Maryland to Harper's Ferry, Virginia, across the Potomac River. To keep from arousing any suspicion of an attack, Brown took Lewis Washington (great-grand nephew of George Washington) and several other white men captive without firing a shot. As Brown's force entered the town, two of his men cut the telegraph lines as the rest took the arsenal and armory buildings.\(^2^3\) Brown took the prisoners with him to the arsenal and then sent John E. Cook, C.P. Tidd, William H. Leeman and several recruited slaves back to the Kennedy farm to collect the rest of their arms and take them to a nearby school building. If all went well at the armory, Brown and his men would take the arms from this schoolhouse and fall back to a fortified place in the Alleghenies. However, Cook and Leeman procrastinated, taking eleven hours to move two wagon

\(^2^2\) DeCaro, 257.
\(^2^3\) DeCaro, 265-266.
FIGURE 3

MAP OF HARPER’S FERRY, VIRGINIA

loads the less than three miles from the Kennedy farm to the schoolhouse, which sat at the junction of the Kennedy farm road and the Potomac River. This left Brown and a small force to maintain a hold on the town. Brown’s men did, however, drum up support from neighboring slaves. Some slaves that Brown’s men met along the road expressed their interest, saying that “they had been long waiting for an opportunity of the kind.”

To complicate matters, the eastbound Baltimore-Ohio train came through town at one in the morning and its passengers noticed the commotion. After some of Brown’s men fired on the train, the neighborhood woke up and sounded the alarm. The train was delayed for several hours but was set free by sunrise the next day. The train’s passengers spread the alarm, throwing warnings written on pieces of paper out the train windows as they rode by. The entire surrounding area was thrown into confusion. Osborne Anderson, one of the white raiders, described it this way: “Men, women and children could be seen leaving their homes in every direction; some seeking refuge among residents, and in quarters further away; others climbing up the hillsides, and hurrying off in various directions.”

By the next morning, Virginia militiamen had forced Brown to barricade his contingent in the engine house of the armory complex. In the evening, when Colonel Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart arrived with United States Marines, Brown

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24 Du Bois, 237. According to Du Bois, the raid failed because Brown’s men did not follow his commands quickly. Their tardiness led to a siege of the arsenal while Brown waited for their return, rather than a quick “grab-and-go” maneuver. Also, DeCaro argues that their reconnaissance had been faulty, since Brown was surprised when the local militia gathered to defend the town—he had not been informed of their existence (264).


26 Du Bois, 240.

27 Anderson, 36-37, quoted in Du Bois, 236.
and six of his men remained alive in the armory—the other raiders had escaped, been killed, or had been captured.\(^{28}\) Although Brown tried to negotiate terms of surrender, even sending out his own son Watson as an emissary, on October 18, the troops stormed the engine house within the armory, slashing the raiders with bayonets and beating Brown unconscious.\(^{29}\)

When Brown came back to consciousness, he was lying in shackles outside the engine house. After being carried into the armory office, he was peppered with questions by the press, militiamen, curious onlookers, and officials such as Virginia’s governor Henry Wise and Colonel Robert E. Lee. On October 21, Brown and the surviving raiders were transported to nearby Charlestown, Virginia. During his stay in prison, Brown responded to the outpouring of correspondence he received, understanding that his actions had providentially placed him on a nationwide soapbox to promote discussion about abolishing slavery through violent means. Throughout his incarceration he diligently maintained that his only goal was to help slaves escape to the North, and that he had wanted to avoid shedding white blood at all costs. His conduct while imprisoned led many, including Governor Wise and William Fellows (a young prison guard), to admire his honesty and courage.\(^{30}\)

On October 25, Brown was indicted for conspiring to foment insurrection, for treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia, and for murder. Brown and his remaining men would be tried in a Virginia court, and on November 2, 1859, John “Osawatomie” Brown was sentenced to death for committing treason and murder. His hanging was scheduled for exactly one month later. In the last statement he wrote before

\(^{28}\) Oates, 290-297.
\(^{29}\) Renahan, 202-203.
\(^{30}\) DeCaro, 270-271.
his death, he summed up his convictions, writing, "I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood." He advocated violence to the end.

The Public Speaks: Northern and Southern Responses

Public responses to the raid, from both Northerners and Southerners, ranged from horror and disgust to profound admiration for Brown's selflessness and heroism. The fall and winter of 1859-1860 proved to be a turbulent season—sectional tensions that had been smoldering under the surface gained momentum as both sections of the country reaffirmed their position on the slavery question. And, because newspaper accounts often presented the most radical positions on either side of the issue, any middle ground shared by the American people seemed to be slipping away. Up until this point, the nation had looked to compromises to stabilize the delicate balance of power between free and slave states. But according to historian Peter Knupfer, by 1859 and 1860, "growing numbers of Americans were less interested in cultivating fraternal feeling through gentle language and the toleration of dissent than they were in quieting the noise of partisan warfare by forcing the other side to shut up."32

John Brown's raid contributed to this contentious atmosphere by encouraging many Americans to wonder whether violent means might indeed be the best defensive (or even offensive) strategy in this ongoing, sectional feud. Thus, both immediate and long-term reactions to Brown's assault demonstrate how the American public responded to the

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practical expression of militant abolitionism—they had not only heard militant rhetoric, but now they had seen militancy in action. These responses demonstrate the true impact of the raid by illuminating whether or not militancy was considered acceptable behavior by American society.

Immediately after the raid, white Southerners predictably responded in a state of panic. According to the Baltimore *American and Commercial Advertiser*, the raid “created an excitement in our community and throughout the whole length and breadth of the country that has scarcely been equaled by any preceding occurrence in the present century.” Southerners viewed strangers with suspicion and detained them until they could prove their allegiance to the South. As historian and biographer Stephen Oates writes, “Southern leaders were virtually united in damning the raid as ‘an act of war’ perpetrated by ‘murderers, traitors, robbers, [and] insurrectionists’.... The raid was indisputably an abolitionist-Republican plot.” Fearing slave revolts, Southern states called up their militias and began drilling while hysterical white women holed up in their houses for fear of being accosted by rebellious slaves. Both slaveholders and non-slaveholding whites vowed to resist the subjugation of the South to blood-thirsty Northerners who sanctioned murder and treason. As for John Brown, the white South characterized him as a monomaniac who had lost his grasp of reality.

Black Southerners, in contrast, appear to have supported Brown’s actions at Harper’s Ferry. During the raid, neighboring slaves had assisted Brown and his compatriots. One of the raiders, Osborne Anderson, recalled that “there were at least one

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35 Oates, 320.
36 Oates, 322-323.
hundred and fifty actively informed slaves," clearly demonstrating that free blacks and slaves were aware of what was happening. According to local accounts, slaves in the area began burning their master’s property upon hearing of Brown’s capture. To contain this unrest, Governor Wise sent five hundred more troops to Jefferson County.

At first, Northerners responded with mixed emotions to Brown’s attack on the arsenal and to these widespread reports of slave unrest. The Harper’s Ferry raid was front-page news in every major newspaper in the country—according to Mary Miller of Ohio, “John Brown’s name has become a household word.” Most Northerners reacted with feelings of dismay, seeing the attack as a setback in the struggle for peace between North and South, while more radical men and women applauded Brown’s actions.

Some men and women in the North agreed with Southerners, arguing that Brown was a madman who deserved whatever fate Virginia had in store for him. The October 21st edition of the *New York Herald* included a statement from Henry Ward Beecher, who believed that “unless his (Brown’s) movement was part of a widespread scheme of insurrection, now frustrated by a premature outbreak, it was in every point of view the height of madness.” Beecher not only called him a madman, but also believed that he deserved to be punished for his actions.

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37 Stauffer, 256.
38 Stauffer, 257.
39 Mary Miller to Aaron Stevens, February 3, 1860, Richard J. Hinton Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.
Republican Presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln reportedly told an audience in Troy, Kansas, that “Old John Brown has been executed for treason against a State. We cannot object, even though he agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong. That cannot excuse violence, bloodshed, and treason.”\footnote{Report by Dr. Wilder, \textit{Topeka Capital}, October 25, 1908, quoted in Villard, 564.} Samuel J. Kirkwood, governor of Iowa, concurred, writing: “I cannot wonder at the most unfortunate and bloody occurrence at Harper’s Ferry. But while we may not wonder at it, we must condemn it. It was an act of war—of war against brothers.”\footnote{Benjamin F. Shambaugh, \textit{Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Iowa} (Iowa City, IA: 1903), 2:240-241, quoted in Villard, 567.} These individuals, like others in the North, did not believe that violence was the answer.

Thanks to the carpetbag full of correspondence that Brown left at the Kennedy farm, complete with incriminating letters from the Secret Six, Northerners also asked who was responsible. Once it became clear that Brown had assistance from prominent Northerners, the public drew the connection between violent rhetoric, such as that endorsed by radical abolitionists, and violent behavior. This heated discussion of violent means allowed abolitionists to evaluate the repercussions of militant abolitionism, including its effect on public opinion.\footnote{Knupfer, 140-141.}

An early article in the \textit{New York Herald} singled out Frederick Douglass and Gerrit Smith as friends and contributors of John Brown. The same article placed blame on black Republicans and Senator William H. Seward, who had spoken of the “irrepressible conflict” between North and South.\footnote{“The Outbreak at Harper’s Ferry—Complicity of Leading Abolitionists and Black Republicans,” \textit{New York Herald}, October 20, 1859.} Two days later, the \textit{Herald} ran another article, encouraging the laboring man to “examine into the bitter results that may...
come home to him if these treasonable preachings and these traitorous practices are not nipped in the bud and rooted out forever." In contrast, the *New-York Daily Tribune* placed blame on the South, arguing that “if we were to look beyond the immediate actors in that affair, we should say those were responsible who first set on foot and afterward encouraged and sustained the Border-Ruffian Pro-Slavery war against the Free-Labor settlers of Kansas.”

Above all, Northerners realized there would be political implications. *Harper’s Weekly* wrote that “it is hardly necessary to add that the event will possess marked political significance at the present time. The admitted affiliations between Gerrit Smith and old Brown, and the peculiar sympathy expressed for him and his friends by certain organs of the Republican party, are likely to increase the vote against the Republican candidates this fall.” Both Northern and Southern Democrats placed culpability on Republican heads, while Republican moderates worked to maintain a relationship with Southerners who labeled Brown a crazed lunatic.

After the raid’s failure, the Secret Six reacted strongly to the possibility that they might be implicated in the insurrection. Franklin Sanborn responded by burning incriminating correspondence and, along with George Stearns, he consulted John A. Andrew, a lawyer, about the best course of action. Although Andrew expressed doubts about the possibility of their arrest, he did suggest that Sanborn leave the country. Sanborn left immediately for Canada; he claimed in a letter to his mother that he had gone “to prevent the obtaining of information,” but he most likely was avoiding arrest.

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49 Oates, 310.
He returned four days later. In early December, Senator James Mason of Virginia, chairman of a Senate committee investigating the raid, summoned Sanborn to testify. Although the committee only intended to determine whether new legislation should be drafted to prevent further insurrection, Sanborn again fled the country.

Samuel Howe, after an initial moment of panic, attempted to provide for Brown’s defense and for an appeal to the court’s ruling, but after Andrew informed the Six of an obscure law that could increase their chances of arrest, Howe panicked once again. Exactly one month after the raid’s failure, he publicly denied his involvement in a statement published in the *New York Tribune*. He wrote that “the outbreak at Harper’s Ferry was unforeseen and unexpected by me,” and called any attempt to link him to Brown an absurdity. Like Sanborn, he also fled to Canada, taking George Stearns with him, but he returned to the United States feeling remorseful. He would later accept the summons of the Senate committee, against Sanborn’s advice, to “rectify some mistakes or missteps I have made.”

George Stearns, who had also consulted with John A. Andrew, fled to Canada alongside Howe. After his return in January, however, he visited John Brown’s wife in North Elba, New York, to assure her of continued financial care and support. Also, he had not yet received a summons from the Senate committee and therefore intended to

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50 Sanborn, *Recollections*, 1:188.
51 Oates, 314.
52 Harold Schwartz, *Samuel Gridley Howe: Social Reformer, 1801-1876* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), 236. At first, Andrew was confident that the Six could not be arrested for their involvement with Brown. However, in mid-November 1859, Andrews came upon a law from 1846 which declared, in the words of Franklin Sanborn, that “a witness whose evidence is decreed material by any U.S. judge, may be arrested by a warrant from a judge, without any previous summons and taken before that judge.... This leaves no room for a writ of *Habeas Corpus*, unless the state judges are willing to take the ground that the statute is unconstitutional” (Franklin Sanborn to Thomas W. Higginson, November 13, 1859, Thomas W. Higginson Papers, Boston Public Library, quoted in Renahan, 225).
54 [Howe], *Letters and Journals*, 2:442.
remain near the Canadian border. Yet, like Howe, he did eventually testify before the Senate committee, speaking mostly of his involvement in the Massachusetts State Kansas Committee.

Gerrit Smith remained in the country, although he suffered a mental breakdown shortly after the raid. The New York Herald had printed an article that linked the raid on Harper’s Ferry to a letter Smith had written “in which he speaks of the folly of attempting to strike the shackles off the slaves by the force of moral suasion or legal agitation, and predicts that the next movement made in the direction of negro emancipation would be an insurrection in the South.”

Upon reading this article, the weight of Smith’s actions fell upon him heavily. Smith’s self-critical, sensitive tendencies intensified as he realized that he had played a part in the deaths of seventeen men plus the likely deaths of Brown and his fellow prisoners. As a reporter for the New York Herald wrote, the recent event “has not only impaired his [Smith’s] health but is likely to seriously affect his excitable and illy-balanced mind.... His calm, dignified, impressive bearing has given way to a hasty, nervous agitation.”

He had, however, exhibited the presence of mind to destroy any evidence linking him to the raid. On November 7, 1859, five days after Brown’s sentencing, Smith was taken to the New York State Asylum at Utica.

While in the asylum, Smith, who had been cut off from news about Brown, nevertheless remembered the date of Brown’s execution. Without explicitly linking himself to the raid, Smith wrote in a letter to his close friend Edwin Morton that “the

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great and the good go to the noose... only the mean and the treacherous avoid it." This
telling statement illuminates how, in the midst of his mental collapse and moral
wavering, Smith still believed that Brown’s actions had been right.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, unlike some of the others, showed no signs of
leaving the country. Instead of panicking, Higginson helped to plan both Brown’s appeal
and two escape plans to rescue the prisoners, none of which materialized. He
responded negatively to the perceived cowardice of his associates. After Howe published
his denial, Higginson declared that it would be “the extreme of baseness in us to deny
complicity with Capt. Brown’s general scheme—while we were not, of course, called
upon to say anything to criminate [sic] ourselves.” Sanborn reacted strongly to
Higginson’s frustration, writing on November 17, “I can’t see why it is any worse to
conceal the facts now than before the outbreak, provided that Brown and his men do not
suffer by such concealment. What has been prudence is prudence still.” Nevertheless,
Higginson had difficulty forgiving the cowardice and selfishness he saw in his fellow
conspirators.

Theodore Parker’s reaction was much different, since he was living in Italy during
the events of the raid and its aftermath. His distance from these events gave him a unique
sense of perspective about Brown’s actions and about the likelihood of slave
insurrections. He had read accounts of the raid, and although he did not admit his prior
knowledge, he approved of Brown’s tactics and lamented the death of such a noble hero.

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58 Gerrit Smith to Edwin Morton, December 2, 1859, Gerrit Smith Papers, Syracuse University Library,
   quoted in Renahan, 235.
59 Renahan, 218.
60 Thomas Higginson to Samuel Howe, November 15, 1859, Thomas W. Higginson Papers, Boston Public
   Library, quoted in Harlow, “Gerrit Smith,” 47.
61 Franklin Sanborn to Thomas Higginson, November 17, 1859, Thomas W. Higginson Papers, Boston
   Public Library, quoted in Renahan, 228.
He declared that “such insurrections will continue as long as slavery lasts, and will increase, both in frequency and in power, just as the people become intelligent and moral. Virginia may hang John Brown and all that family, but she cannot hang the Human Race.”\textsuperscript{62} He applauded Brown’s actions and firmly believed that “Brown will die, I think, like a martyr, and also like a saint.”\textsuperscript{63}

These positive statements made by Higginson and Parker were soon echoed by many in the North as Brown’s incarceration and trial progressed. This old, weathered man from Kansas had such composure, and had uttered such profound words of compassion for the downtrodden, that many Northerners could not help admiring his courage, faith, and ideals. During his trial, Brown had disclosed his willingness to die for the cause: “If it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions of this Slave-country, whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say let it be done.”\textsuperscript{64}

The most hardened Northern heart that felt little sympathy for slaves was moved at the very least by Brown’s passion and conviction for a cause he believed in so deeply. His conduct while imprisoned had impressed even Governor Wise, who called Brown “a man of clear head, of courage, fortitude and simple ingenuousness.”\textsuperscript{65} Brown’s statements during the trial and the letters he wrote while imprisoned (which were published in Northern newspapers) led to a shift in Northern sentiment. As Merrill Peterson writes, “Such words and feelings helped to change the mind of the North about


\textsuperscript{63} \textit{John Brown’s Expedition Reviewed}, 18.

\textsuperscript{64} Peterson, 14.

\textsuperscript{65} Speech by Gov. Henry Wise, October 21, 1859, quoted in Villard, 246.
John Brown. Lunatic! Fanatic! Incompetent! Traitor! The language of disparagement and dishonor that had rained upon Brown immediately after the ill-starred invasion gave way to a chorus of respect, admiration, and praise. Many Northerners were recognizing the same traits that had first drawn the Secret Six toward an alliance with this man, and by praising Brown’s good intentions, they also implicitly condoned the violent outcome of his well-meaning empathy for the enslaved.

Consequently, a chorus of approval now rang out from the North. According to Frederick Douglass, immediately after the raid “a thrill of horror ran through all the country, and the feeling was that he [Brown] had committed a very rash, and in the opinion of some, a wicked deed; but when John Brown had had a few days in which to explain his plans and purposes...a reaction occurred at once. It was found that John Brown was not mad—that he was not even wicked—but that he was a noble, heroic, and Christian martyr.

Those who had feared to speak in Brown’s favor now felt comfortable expressing their true opinion of the raid, and many who had previously sneered in derision became converts to his cause. James Redpath, a Northern journalist and colleague of Brown’s from his Kansas days, continued to steadfastly support his dear friend: “Living bravely, dying, he will teach us courage. A Samson in his life, he will be a Samson in his death. Let cowards ridicule and denounce him; let snake-like journalists hiss at his holy

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66 Peterson, 17.
failure—for one, I do not hesitate to say that I love him, admire him, and defend him.

God Bless Him!”

Thaddeus Hyatt, president of the National Kansas Committee, wrote to Brown, saying “Your courage, my brother, challenges the admiration of men—your faith, the admiration of angels!—Be steadfast to the end!” Hyatt would later serve time in jail for refusing the summons of the Senate committee called to investigate the raid. During a lecture, Ralph Waldo Emerson likened Brown to the Messiah, saying his death “will make the gallows glorious like the Cross.” A fellow transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, said that “it was his [Brown’s] peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder, in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him.”

Hannah Maxson’s eloquent letter to Aaron Stevens, one of the incarcerated raiders, described how at least one Northerner believed that these followers of Brown were “the noblest of the noble.” Maxson wrote:

Death will have no sting, neither can the grave claim a victory. Oh! Tis a glorious thought to us, to know that tyrants cannot crush you by their barbarism...the great law of progression will soon thunder forth the edict—“Thus far shalt thou go, but no further;”...and when in your bright spirit home you shall look down and behold the work which your efforts ushered into life, you will thank God that you lived and died.

Clearly Maxson believed that the actions of Stevens, Brown, and the other raiders would have far-reaching consequences for the progress of emancipation.

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68 Boston Atlas & Daily Bee, October, 24, 1859, quoted in Edelstein, 226.
69 Thaddeus Hyatt to John Brown, November 14, 1859, Richard J. Hinton Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.
70 James E. Cabot, A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston: 1887), 2:597, quoted in Gilman M. Ostrander, “Emerson, Thoreau, and John Brown” Mississippi Valley Historical Review 4 (1953), 723. Ostrander’s article argues that Emerson and Thoreau “took a vigorous part in the defense of Brown, and by their eloquent assertions of his saintliness undoubtedly contributed much to the making of the Brown legend” (713).
71 Peterson, 16.
72 Hannah Maxson to Aaron Stevens, January 30, 1860, Richard J. Hinton Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.
Maxson's conviction certainly rang true with many Northerners. A free black woman from Indiana drafted a letter to Brown, saying, "I thank you, that you have been brave enough to reach out your hands to the crushed and blighted of my race.... We may earnestly hope that your fate will not be a vain lesson, that it will intensify our hatred of Slavery and love of freedom." In a letter to Aaron Stevens, one of the incarcerated raiders, Mary Miller of Ohio wrote: "Sir you have shamed us into action—henceforth (God helping us) we will do with all our might what our heart and hands find to do in liberating, and elevating oppressed millions." These women were encouraged to stand against slavery, and by applauding the efforts of Brown and his men, many Northerners tacitly accepted that violence could bring the nation one step closer to emancipation.

While this realization was new to many in the North, it was not new to the Secret Six. Abolitionists, like their fellow Northerners, applauded the work of Brown and his associates at Harper's Ferry, recognizing the long-term benefits of the raid. Prominent anti-slavery individuals embraced this opportunity to establish Brown as a martyr for their cause, sensing that the growth of anti-slavery sentiment required the inspirational heroism of a man like John Brown. One such abolitionist was Henry Ward Beecher, who clearly disapproved of Brown's tactics but still took advantage of this opportunity to promote abolitionist ideas. In a sermon, Beecher proclaimed, "Let no man pray that Brown be spared. Let Virginia make him a martyr. His soul was noble, his work miserable. But a cord and gibbet will redeem all that and round up Brown's failure with

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74 Mary Miller to Aaron Stevens, February 3, 1860, Richard J. Hinton Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.
a heroic success."\textsuperscript{75} Henry David Thoreau concurred, stating eloquently, "I almost fear that I may yet hear of his deliverance, doubting if a prolonged life, if \textit{any} life, can do as much good as his death."\textsuperscript{76}

Men and women across the North mourned Brown’s death on December 2, 1859. Buildings in Cleveland, Ohio, were draped in black, and in Boston, where all black businesses were closed for the day, free blacks wore black armbands.\textsuperscript{77} In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, black public school teachers did not hold classes.\textsuperscript{78} Newspapers and magazines published poems and elegies dedicated to the old warrior, and numerous cities across the North called prayer meetings. In Concord, Massachusetts, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Bronson Alcott held a ceremony with poetry readings and a dirge written by Franklin Sanborn.\textsuperscript{79}

Stunned by the outpouring of support for Brown, which had been dramatically portrayed in the media, men and women in the South felt they had been betrayed by their fellow countrymen. Southerners could not understand how a white man could kill other whites on behalf of the black race, and they were especially dumbfounded by the idea that other white men could support such violent action against the South. Fearing that the North was usurping federal power and turning it against the South, many white Southerners believed that the North was "teeming with ‘mad John Browns’" who preached a doctrine of hate that would lead to an invasion of the South and slave insurrection. To prevent slave uprisings that might be encouraged by Brown’s attack,

\textsuperscript{76} Peterson, 17.
\textsuperscript{79} Scott, 310-311.
they began placing further restrictions on their slaves' movements, censoring mail, and driving Northerners out of their communities.80

Furthermore, the South began to keep a tight reign on their free black population. In one instance, according to an article in the National Era, "Judge Crain, together with the concurrence of the grand jury of Charles county [Maryland], [is] withdrawing all licenses granting to the free colored persons the use of fire-arms, and also authorizing the sheriff and constables to search for and seize upon such arms."81 The intense wave of Northern support for Brown had inundated the press to such a degree that Southerners became certain that all Northerners and Southern free blacks were out for blood.

Nathaniel Cabell, a Virginian from Nelson County, expressed this sense of betrayal in a letter to Henry S. Randall, a friend from New York. He wrote, "they [Northerners] have remained, in a degree, passive, while the immense tide of calumny against the Institutions and People of the South have been flowing apace."82 Similar sentiments were uttered by other Southerners. According to a New York Tribune reporter writing from Petersburg, Virginia, a leading lawyer from the community exclaimed, "I would be glad to see the whole North sink to the deepest depth of the bottomless pit! Damn her!"83

The anti-abolitionist feeling in Kentucky provides another example of this Southern attitude. According to an article in the National Era, thirty-six Kentuckians from Madison County were asked to leave the state after expressing their abolitionist leanings. The article attributes this directly to John Brown, stating that "it appears there

80 Scott, 309.
has been much excitement in the county since John Brown’s Harper’s Ferry raid, and that the parties above referred to left in consequence of resolutions passed by a large county meeting, giving them ten days to depart the state, or abide the consequences.\textsuperscript{84}

Unlike their white neighbors, it appears that Southern blacks admired John Brown and fully supported the raid on Harper’s Ferry, even if their appreciation was not publicized by the press. Blacks continued to destroy their owners’ property, and one group of slaves in Maryland rioted, forcing a westbound train to stop at their behest. On the day of Brown’s execution, slaves burned the farm of a notoriously vicious slaveholder (who had died in the raid) and poisoned his family’s livestock. The raid also inspired slaves in the area around Harper’s Ferry to make an escape—the 1860 census of Jefferson County, Virginia, listed a record number of fugitives.\textsuperscript{85}

Free blacks in the North were no different. Charles Langston, a free black from Cleveland, Ohio, believed that “Capt. Brown was engaged in no vile, base, sordid, malicious or selfish enterprise. His aims and ends were lofty, noble, generous, benevolent, humane and Godlike. His actions were in perfect harmony with, and resulted from the teaching of the Bible.”\textsuperscript{86} Elsewhere, in New York, a group of black women wrote to Brown’s widow, Mary, saying, “We wanted to tell you how we have met again and again in prayer for you, and those who are still in bonds, and how, in offering this word of sympathy to you now we desire to express our deep, undying gratitude to him who has given his life so freely to obtain for us our defrauded rights.”\textsuperscript{87} Besides these

\textsuperscript{84} “Abolitionists Ordered to Leave Kentucky,” \textit{National Era}, January 5, 1860.
\textsuperscript{85} DeCaro, 275.
\textsuperscript{86} Charles Langston, letter to the editor, Cleveland \textit{Plain Dealer}, November 18, 1859, in \textit{Blacks on John Brown}, 12.
two instances, blacks throughout the North held prayer meetings and rallies to express their admiration and support for their abolitionist heroes.

By all estimations, the Harper’s Ferry raid had implications that reached far past Brown’s expectations. Senator Henry Seward had spoken of an “irrepressible conflict” that would tear apart North and South, a concept which some radical abolitionists embraced, but no one had expected Old John Brown to play such an integral role in the Union’s demise. Although Seward’s “irrepressible conflict” was a phrase well known to many by 1859, Brown’s raid convinced the nation that this conflict was not far off. While conservative politicians tried to broker a rapprochement between the two sides, many, particularly blacks, felt this was impossible. An editorial in *Douglass’ Monthly* likened such a compromise to putting “new wine to old bottles, new cloth to old garments…. To attempt them as a means of peace between freedom and slavery is as to attempt to reverse irreversible law.”

Southerners also saw the future of relations between North and South. General James Kemper of the Virginia General Assembly urged his state to “stand forth as one man and say to fanaticism, in her own language, whenever you advance a hostile foot upon our soil, we will welcome you with bloody hands and hospitable graves.”

According to the Richmond *Enquirer*, “the Harper’s Ferry invasion has advanced the cause of Disunion more than any other event that has happened since the formation of the Government.”

Northernners responded to this firm Southern posture by recognizing the disparities between their worldview and that of their Southern neighbors. Brown’s raid had forced

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89 Oates, 323-324.
90 Richmond *Enquirer*, October 25, 1859, quoted in Oates, 323.
neutral observers to choose—there could be no more sitting on the fence. One instance of a newfound unity among Northerners was found in Peterboro, New York, Gerrit Smith’s hometown. After the raid, there were rumors about Smith’s impending arrest as an accomplice. When a New York reporter traveled to Peterboro for the story, he found that the town’s residents were overwhelmingly protective of Smith. Even though some disagreed with his abolitionist and temperance beliefs, they respected Smith and remained loyal to him throughout the raid’s aftermath. One Mr. Farrell, an anti-abolitionist who ran the Oneida depot hotel, said Smith was “every man’s friend, and when that’s so, it is difficult to make people consent to let such a man be arrested and taken off to another State.”91 Sam Russell, a former slave and current employee of the Smith family, felt assured that the local black community would “lose their lives before their benefactor should be taken from his home.”92 Already, Peterboro’s inhabitants had united against a common foe who threatened their neighbor and friend.

Beyond helping to unite the North in a common cause, the raid on Harper’s Ferry unified abolitionists and gave the movement renewed strength and confidence. Abolitionists who had previously adopted a pacifist stance became aware that violence was a powerful weapon against slavery. More important, they came to understand how violent actions and violent rhetoric were seen in the public eye. Because violent means were becoming more acceptable in many Northern circles, and because Harper’s Ferry had polarized the nation, abolitionists realized that new techniques (some of them violent) might become necessary. In many ways, the public’s move toward violent means mirrors the radical abolitionists’ shift toward violent abolitionism—many

91 *New York Herald*, November 2, 1859, quoted in Stauffer, 239.
92 Ibid.
abolitionists converted to militancy because of the injustices they found in the Fugitive Slave Law and Bleeding Kansas, just as many in the North were ready to accept violence after the Harper’s Ferry affair.

Even William Lloyd Garrison, famed pacifist and leader of the Boston abolitionist movement, had to recognize Brown’s status as a hero for abolition. In the *Liberator*, Garrison wrote that Brown “is as deserving of high-wrought eulogy as any who ever wielded sword or battle-axe in the cause of liberty; but we do not and cannot approve any indulgence in the war spirit.”93 Garrison was willing to recognize Brown’s success as an anti-slavery agitator, and to acknowledge that violent means attributed to that success, even as he felt compelled to disapprove of violence as an anti-slavery tool.

Moreover, a speech given by J. Sella Martin at the Martyr’s Day celebration in Boston demonstrated that free blacks “approve the means that John Brown has used... in America, means have been used for white men and... John Brown has used his means for black men.”94 At a meeting in Detroit on that same day, December 2, 1859, free blacks resolved “to concentrate our efforts in keeping the Old Brown liberty-ball in motion and thereby continue to kindle the fires of liberty upon the altar of every determined heart among men.”95 As in the case of white abolitionists, Brown’s raid promoted more talk of violence within black abolitionist circles and encouraged these reformers to work steadfastly for emancipation.

93 Renahan, 112.
Continuing in the Cause

Clearly, the Secret Six occupied a unique position during the precarious peace that existed after the raid, having to respond to accusations about their complicity. All of them, with the exception of Thomas Higginson and Theodore Parker, lost face and sought to distance themselves from John Brown. However, even as they denied their prior knowledge of the raid, they did not necessarily deny the usefulness of violent means or their previous relationship with Brown.

Theodore Parker died in early 1860 of tuberculosis, and thus had few opportunities to comment extensively on insurrection and violent abolitionist tactics. However, in a letter written November 24, 1859, Parker reaffirmed his belief in violence and outlined the main points of his abolitionist creed. First, “a man held against his will as a slave has a natural right to kill everyone who seeks to prevent his enjoyment of liberty.”96 In addition, “the freeman has a natural right to help the slaves recover their liberty, and in that enterprise to do for them all which they have a right to do for themselves.”97 Parker continued to support violent means, writing, “a few years ago it did not seem difficult first to check Slavery, and then to end it without any bloodshed. I think this cannot be done now, nor ever in the future. All the great charters of HUMANITY have been writ in blood.”98

Thomas Higginson also remained a constant advocate of violent abolitionist techniques. In 1861, just as the Civil War began, Higginson wrote two articles for the Atlantic Monthly, one focusing on the Denmark Vesey slave revolt and the other on Nat Turner’s rebellion; both disparaged the “Uncle Tom” stereotype in favor of more militant

96 John Brown’s Expedition Reviewed, 4.
97 John Brown’s Expedition Reviewed, 5.
98 Theodore Parker to Francis Jackson, November 24, 1859, in Echoes, 77.
figures like Turner. Higginson acknowledged that war would be terrible, but "the rising of slaves in case of continued war, is a mere destiny."\(^9\) In his typical swashbuckling style, Higginson was ready for a good fight. He found his chance while serving as commander of a black army regiment during the Civil War.

Although Samuel Gridley Howe was less enthusiastic about violence after the raid, he still admired Brown's actions at Harper's Ferry. He did vacillate, however, between outright terror of arrest and pride in his relationship with Brown. Howe agreed to testify before the Senate committee, but he still tried to walk the fine line between supporting violence in theory and acknowledging that he funded an attack on the South. In his testimony, Howe did reaffirm his beliefs about free-state resistance in Kansas. "If the polls for instance, at an election were surrounded by armed men from other States, and the freemen of Kansas were prevented by fear from voting, I should call the man who attempted to repel those invaders a defender of freedom."\(^{10}\) Samuel Howe still agreed with the physical resistance employed by free-state Kansans, acknowledging the necessity of violence in that context.

While Howe was not entirely comfortable with his decision to embrace violent tactics, it is clear that he still advocated these techniques to a certain degree. He wrote to Theodore Parker in March 1860, saying, "You, who study human nature, will expect that Brown's example will inspire others with the thought and the purpose of trying again what he died in attempting, and you will not be disappointed. The next blow will be felt where least apprehended, and will probably have a result even greater than that of the


\(^{10}\) Testimony of Samuel Howe, Report of the Select Committee of the Senate Appointed to Inquire into the Late Invasion and Seizure of the Public Property at Harper's Ferry, 36\(^{th}\) Congress, 1\(^{st}\) Session, no. 278.
first.”101 In a letter to Charles Sumner in 1861, Howe wrote that “we have entered upon a struggle which ought not to be allowed to end until the slave power is completely subjugated, and emancipation made certain.”102 Although these statements do not blatantly condone violence, they do imply that Howe believed slavery would not die a peaceful death.

Samuel Howe, like some other members of the Secret Six, remained active in the abolitionist cause, participating in the emancipation movement and working for the Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, the precursor to the Freedmen’s Bureau.103 In 1863, as an agent of this commission, Howe traveled to free black settlements in Canada to investigate the character and condition of emancipated slaves. In their preliminary report, Howe and his colleagues determined that these men and women “lack[ed] no essential aptitude for civilization,” and asked that “all colored refugees be treated with justice and humanity.”104 Howe made similar statements in a letter to naturalist Louis Agassiz, writing that “I would not only advocate entire freedom, equal rights and privileges [but also] open competition for social distinction.”105

Likewise, George Stearns did not directly express support for hostile abolitionist tactics, although he continued in his anti-slavery work. In his testimony before the Senate committee, Stearns hesitated to acknowledge whether he approved of its use of force, fearing the wrath of pro-slavery members of the committee, stating instead that “I should have disapproved of it if I had known of it.” However, immediately after his

101 [Howe], Letters and Journals, 2:448.
102 Schwartz, 252.
103 [Howe], Letters and Journals, 2:502-504.
104 American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, Preliminary Report Touching the Condition and Management of Emancipated Refugees... (New York: John F. Trow, 1863), 34, 18.
testimony, and once the committee had left, he asked the court stenographer to add a sentence to this statement, saying, "I have since changed my opinion; I believe John Brown to be the representative man of this century." In this way he would not be implicated in the raid, but he could nevertheless express his respect and admiration for his Kansas friend.

After the raid, Stearns continued to work for emancipation and civil rights, spearheading the organization of free black regiments, including the 54th Massachusetts. In 1863, when Secretary of War Edwin Stanton approached Stearns about overseeing black recruiting, Stearns insisted that he would only oblige if black soldiers "enter the service of the government on the same terms as the white soldiers, the same pay; same rations, [and] same equipment." Stanton agreed to these stipulations. Stearns would accept nothing less than complete equality for all his soldiers—black or white.

Furthermore, during the early years of Reconstruction, Stearns and other abolitionists, including Wendell Phillips, believed that the American Anti-Slavery Society should continue to work in behalf of blacks by ensuring that newly freed slaves were granted civil rights. Abolitionists were divided over this issue, as Garrison and some of his colleagues believed that free blacks, not Northern abolitionists, should bear this responsibility. Clearly Stearns had a deep commitment to civil rights, as he continued in the cause until his death in 1867.

107 Sketch of George Luther Stearns, Robert A. Bell Post Record Book, Richard J. Hinton Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.
109 Stearns, The Life and Public Services, 353.
Franklin Sanborn, whose duties as a schoolteacher were becoming more time-consuming, did not continue to support violence publicly. But privately, at least, he was proud of his involvement with Brown’s raid. On December 1, the day before Brown’s execution, Sanborn admitted that “I have never for a moment regretted my connection with the affair. If my name is to be remembered at all in it, it will be in an honorable way.” He did help to organize an “Impartial Suffrage League” in 1865, along with Samuel Howe. Sanborn also actively sought to perpetuate the story of Brown, editing the *Life and Letters of John Brown* and writing various articles and reminiscences of the raid. By expressing admiration for his friend and mentor, he subtly demonstrated his faith in Brown’s actions at Harper’s Ferry.

Gerrit Smith continuously denied any previous knowledge of the raid and removed himself from the abolitionist movement. He claimed that he had occasionally given Brown money, but that he had not known the plans for Harper’s Ferry. He refused to even discuss the matter, claiming his bout with insanity had blurred his memory and led to extreme agitation whenever the topic was introduced into conversation. He virtually retired from public life, spending his time at home with family. Out of all the Six, he was the most adamant in his denunciation. Ralph Harlow, one of Smith’s biographers, maintains that although there is no proof against his insanity, “it is significant that he forgot apparently nothing else of consequence during that period, and that he was still destroying evidence as late as June, 1860, a procedure suggestive of neither ignorance nor innocence.”

110 Sanborn, *Recollections*, 1:221.
112 Harlow, “Gerrit Smith,” 55.
113 Harlow, “Gerrit Smith,” 60.
The Harper’s Ferry raid certainly exacerbated the tensions that had already existed between North and South, but what is even more telling is its effect on the abolitionist movement. Public opinion in the North had moved closer toward an acceptance of anti-slavery ideas, particularly after Brown’s eloquent pleas for black emancipation, but by no means was the North of one mind on the slavery issue. However, abolitionists had smoothed out some of their own differences—virtually everyone, including those who did not believe in violent means, applauded Brown’s intentions at Harper’s Ferry. At the very least, abolitionists became more intimately acquainted with the idea of militancy, grudgingly recognizing its ability to create a widespread sentiment against slavery. Inspired by Brown’s actions at Harper’s Ferry, and spurred onward by the altered nature of the sectional conflict, abolitionists continued to work toward emancipation and civil rights for the enslaved.
CONCLUSION

"The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle…. If there is no struggle there is no progress." Frederick Douglass, 1857

The tentative balancing act of sectional relations in the United States toppled as Northerners and Southerners planted their feet firmly against each other through their responses to the Harper’s Ferry raid. Although many Northerners had initially deplored the assault on Harper’s Ferry, John Brown’s statements during his trial and his conduct on the gallows led many to sound a chorus of approval for his selflessness, courage, and heroism in behalf of his enslaved brethren. Witnessing the changing tide of public opinion that washed over the North, Southerners felt betrayed by their fellow citizens who had shown more sympathy for a man the white South viewed as a crazed fanatic than they had shown for their Southern countrymen. To many, a peaceful union between these two sections of the country now seemed impossible.

Naturally, the raid’s outcome and American society’s increased polarization deeply affected those who had been closest to Brown. The Secret Six had played a vital role within the abolitionist movement prior to the raid. Before 1859, all of the Six had tirelessly labored for emancipation—harboring fugitive slaves, preaching sermons, aiding free Northern blacks, and making speeches to further the abolitionist cause.
They also realized that Kansas was in the midst of its own civil war, and Samuel Howe, Thomas Higginson, Franklin Sanborn, and George Stearns in particular were involved in sending arms to free-state settlers in the territory.

Due to their contact with fugitive slaves and their interactions with free-state settlers, it becomes clear that the Six had embraced violent abolitionism before they met Brown in 1857, concluding that political and moral suasion had to be supplemented by more aggressive tactics. Their anti-slavery work prior to the raid had primed them for the violent action Brown took in Virginia. In contrast to Jeffery Rossbach’s conclusions, the Six were not “ambivalent conspirators.” They did have certain doubts about this particular mission, especially after Hugh Forbes’s betrayal, but they were not wary of violent means before the raid; some hesitated to use violence only after the dramatic events of 1859. The Six condoned violence because they had seen how slavery treated blacks—they heard it in the words of fugitives and saw it through their scars. For the Six, as well as many other abolitionists, non-resistance had lost its authority—although these lofty principles were honored in theory, few accomplishments could be attributed to moral persuasion.¹

Since the raid obviously did not alter the institution of slavery, the Six’s understanding of its evil nature lived on regardless of Brown’s death. Consequently, their attitudes toward violence did not change because the nature of slavery remained the same. Most of the Six (excluding Gerrit Smith) still spoke favorably of the raid and its violent methods, or at least admired Brown’s role in the insurrection. Granted, some

¹ Merton L. Dillon, *Slavery Attacked: Southern Slaves and Their Allies, 1619-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 225. Dillon goes on to say: “Moral suasion remained useful for creating a public opinion favorable to reform, but after minds had been changed, an entrenched old order still must be overthrown before the new order could take its place” (226).
of them were not as forthcoming and supportive as Thomas Higginson would have liked, caring more for their personal lives and reputations than the abolitionist cause. The raid certainly forced them to be less comfortable with violence—now that they had seen its far-reaching effect on the nation, they struggled to reconcile their faith in violent means with the reality of its consequences. After Harper’s Ferry, the Six shied away from entering into public debates over violent means, astutely avoiding the topic. In this way their attitudes toward violence did fluctuate—violent means were no longer something to broadcast publicly. They may have still advocated violence, but now they sought to keep a low profile, partly as a response to anti-abolition sentiment that had appeared in the North. Furthermore, as the secession crisis garnered national attention, militant abolitionism receded into the background and the Six’s silence on the subject of violent means may have simply reflected this shift.

Historians such as Edward Renahan and Jeffery Rossbach agree that the Six pulled away from violent means after the raid, but neither of them distinguishes between the Six’s actions (pulling away from violent tactics in self-defense), and the Six’s beliefs (continuing to support violence). This, I would argue, is a pivotal distinction. In the case of the Six, it appears that their beliefs remained constant, even though their actions were sometimes unfaithful to those convictions. Thomas Higginson and Theodore Parker (who died in early 1860) publicly maintained their acceptance of violence and demonstrated the greatest consistency. Gerrit Smith

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2 While the raid did rally the North, some Northerners feared the consequences of a large free black population and opposed abolitionism because of perceived social and economic problems that might result. However, these same anti-abolitionists were not necessarily pro-South.

3 With civil war hovering on the horizon, the plight of the slave was only one of several reasons to attack Southern interests. The national presidential election of 1860 had created quite a stir, and Southerners declared that they would not support Lincoln’s presidency. Thus, the North’s attention had turned to threats of secession and armed conflict, so emancipation had to share the spotlight with other issues.
suffered a nervous breakdown and denied all accusations that he helped fund the raid. His adamant denunciation of Brown’s actions sets him apart from the rest. The last three members of the Six, Franklin Sanborn, Samuel Howe, and George Stearns, tried to walk a fine line by denying direct involvement in the raid but continuing to laud Brown as a hero. Furthermore, all three of them fled to Canada to avoid any punitive action that might result from their involvement. Since each of these men felt guilty later about his reactions to the raid, it would seem that they recognized their inconsistency. By showing support for John Brown and his raid on Harper’s Ferry, even while denying complicity, five members of the Six (not including Smith) demonstrated their conviction that slavery would fall by the sword.

In general, the Secret Six did not believe the raid was a failure. Even if Brown did not free slaves, his violent attack fostered a state of panic throughout the South. Higginson quickly saw the benefits that would come from the raid’s apparent failure, believing it would “frighten and weaken the slave power everywhere.” 4 Sanborn also believed that “the fruits of Brown’s acts are to be a great good, I have no doubt.” 5

Out of all the Six, Theodore Parker made the most profound statements about the far-reaching implications of the raid. He believed that “it shows the weakness of the greatest Slave State in America, the worthlessness of her soldiery, and the utter fear which Slavery genders in the bosoms of the masters.” 6 These men clearly saw the benefits of violence. But while their attitudes toward violence did not change

dramatically, how did their understanding of their role in the abolitionist cause develop and mature after the failure of the Harper’s Ferry raid?

I argue that their understanding of their role in abolition was modified because the very nature of abolitionism was in flux. The Six still realized that they could make a difference in the fight against slavery, but the rules of the game had changed. The mentality of the nation was not the same as it had been in the years and months before the raid—Harper’s Ferry was a watershed in the nation’s history. Thus, most of the Six believed that they still had a role to play in abolitionism, even if that role was not yet defined.

Even though the North was becoming a more favorable environment for abolitionism to thrive, this did not mean that radical violence was overwhelmingly supported; Northerners who lauded Brown as a hero did not necessarily endorse his means of attacking the South. As a result, radicals like the Six often became more marginalized after the raid. For instance, George Stearns was ostracized by his former business associates because of his alliance with Brown. The Secret Six still found support from other radicals and from transcendentalists like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, but the tensions in American society, which were being expressed on both sides of the slavery question, forced them to be cautious about openly expressing militant abolitionist beliefs.

Because they remained aware of slavery’s debilitating effects on the Southern black population, most of the Six continued to support emancipation and civil rights even after an apparent failure at Harper’s Ferry. Brown may have become a martyr (and catalyst for civil conflict) but in practical terms no slaves were directly freed. This
unshakable commitment reveals how radical abolitionists adapted their views and techniques after a failed attempt at emancipating slaves; they continued laboring, despite failures, until emancipation was finally realized. Although the historiography of the early twentieth century painted a very negative portrait of abolitionists—speaking of them as unstable fanatics with no real understanding of slavery—the Six are proof against such an assertion. Regardless of their imperfections, abolitionists believed in a degree of racial equality that raises them up as an example of men with forward-thinking convictions that was virtually unparalleled during the antebellum period.
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