

John Brown, Slavery, and the Legacies of Revolutionary Violence in Our Own Time: A Conference Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of the Harpers Ferry Raid

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John Brown, Female Abolitionists, and Rights for Women: A Mixed Legacy

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Abstract

The contradictions in John Brown's life and work are nowhere more evident than in his relationships with women and his legacy for the women's rights movement. The clarity of his antislavery vision, and his willingness to martyr himself to it, impressed female abolitionists. John Brown also espoused rights for women, a cause that many antislavery women held equally dear. His daughter Annie recalled that he traveled considerable distances in order to hear speeches of Abby Kelley Foster and Lucretia Mott. Brown's "Provisional Constitution" advocated equality for women and specifically mentioned the rights to vote, hold office, and bear arms.

Brown's relationships with women in his family tell a different story. As a widower with six children, he met and issued a written proposal of marriage to a teenaged servant he barely knew. The second Mrs. Brown bore thirteen children and lived with them in extreme poverty. The children had little formal education and feared their father. Brown treated his wife with

condescension. Although Brown was hardly the first activist to espouse equality and yet to live his life in rigidly patriarchal fashion, his marriage stands in contrast to the egalitarian unions of some fellow activists, including Stephen and Abby Kelley Foster, James and Lucretia Mott, and Gerrit and Nancy Smith, all of whom he claimed to admire.

The antislavery community spun a narrative of the martyred Brown that included the notion that he was a dedicated family man, and they embraced Mrs. Brown as a widow who was worthy of his legacy. In 1864, Mrs. Brown moved to northern California with several of her adult children. There she lived the remaining twenty years of her life. Periodically, newspaper accounts noted her poverty, and activists of the Civil War era came out to raise money for her.

To the end of their lives, activist women celebrated John Brown, for they recognized the role that he played in triggering the Civil War and the subsequent liberation of the slaves. But the war's outcome was considerably less promising for women's rights. While activists struggled to launch a women's suffrage movement, opponents painted them as extremists determined to undermine women's traditional family role. After creation of the Illinois Woman Suffrage Association in 1869, one Chicago newspaper claimed that "[the women's movement] is evidently on the John Brown Trail." With women excluded from the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments, suffragists held out hope that debate in numerous state legislatures during the late 1860s and early 1870s might lead to their inclusion among the electorate, but their efforts repeatedly failed.

In 1904, Susan Anthony remembered where, when, and how she had celebrated Brown's martyrdom forty-five years earlier. Brown would always be a hero to her. However, the other struggle for which she fought—women's suffrage—would have to wait for another war, the Great War, World War I.