John Brown's Holy War

Written by Ken Chowder

Prologue: Execution

Narration: On December 2nd, 1859, a tall, thin, 59 year—old man rode on a wooden box in an open wagon. The box was his coffin; he was going to his execution. He'd just handed his jailer a note.

John Brown Reading: I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with Blood. I had vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done.

Narration: For most of his life, John Brown had been an obscure shepherd and tanner. Now he was a national symbol.

Russell Banks, Author: Brown goes from being a very minor figure in the abolitionist war against slavery to the emblematic figure of that, the defining figure, in some ways.

Narration: To abolitionists, John Brown was a hero -- a saintly man who killed for his beliefs. But others saw him as the embodiment of evil: a murderer and lunatic.

Bruce Olds: Was he mad? He was obsessed, he was fanatical, he was monomaniacal, he was a zealot, and psychologically unbalanced.

Margaret Washington, Historian: John Brown was fighting for the American creed, putting into practice the words of Thomas Jefferson, that "the tree of liberty should be watered with the blood of tyrants."

Dennis Frye, Historian: Brown carved a canyon in public opinion that split North and South and no longer were there any ties. Brown had taken his sword and sliced the connections.

Narration: The South rejoiced in the execution. But throughout the North, church bells tolled for him.

Reading: Some 1800 years ago, Christ was crucified. This morning, Captain Brown was hung. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light. -- **Henry David Thoreau**.

Narration: "Let them hang me," John Brown had written. "I am worth inconceivably more to hang than for any other purpose."

His wish had come true. After a life of failure, John Brown was finally a success.

Narration: When John was just 12 years old, he drove a herd of cattle by himself through 100 miles of wilderness, from Ohio to Michigan. There he lodged with a man who owned a slave boy. His host treated John well; but the slave was beaten before his eyes with an iron shovel.

Narration: The memory would forever haunt John Brown.

Russell Banks: There was, driving him, a kind of rage, a deep psychological anger that allowed him to ally himself, as he did -- so thoroughly and so unusually, for a white man -- with the anger and resentment and sense of loss that African Americans had.

Narration: John Brown was born on May 9th, 1800, in Torrington, Connecticut. His father Owen had always hated slavery. To hold humans in bondage, Owen believed, was a sin against God.

When John was five, Owen and his wife Ruth moved their family west -- to Hudson, Ohio. They would soon carve a homestead out of what seemed to young John "a wilderness, filled with wild beasts & Indians."

His would be a short childhood. John was eight years old when his mother died.

This was the first of many losses John Brown would endure.

John Brown Reading: God has chastised us often, & sore. Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.

Narration: To John, all these losses were the work of the Lord. He was raised a Calvinist; for the Calvinist, life on earth was an ongoing trial, and the true believer had to adhere to a strict code of right and wrong -- or else answer to God.

Margaret Washington: Religion permeated American society in the 19th century in a way that it's difficult to imagine in contemporary times. But this was a nation that was founded, to a large extent, on religious principles. And religious principles guided the Brown family, certainly guided John Brown.

Narration: As a boy, he memorized every verse in the Bible. He also developed an encyclopedic knowledge of animals.

Russell Banks: He was a great, great shepherd and brought to it a tender-heartedness, an affection that he could really only rarely muster towards human beings.

Narration: His father ran a tannery; but John was too ambitious and too headstrong to take orders from anyone. At 17, he started a competing tannery of his own.

Edward Renehan, Author: Throughout his career we see John Brown insisting on taking the lead in all things. And when he is not permitted to do so, we see him rebelling and leaving.

Narration: One of his brothers described John as "a King against whom there is no rising up."

When he was 20, a young woman named Dianthe Lusk came to work in John's house. They soon married.

In the next 12 years, Dianthe would bear 7 children. Together they moved deep into the Pennsylvania wilderness. He built a tannery, and had fifteen men working for him. For a time, Brown prospered.

Russell Banks: He's a leader in the community, preaching on Sunday and teaching evenings. He's just out of adolescence and he's already carving out a founding fathers kind of role. Not that different from, an Old Testament chieftain going off into the wilderness and carving out a community.

Narration: As a father, John Brown was both respected and feared. He made his oldest child, John Jr., keep an account book of the punishment due him.

Narration: For disobeying his mother, the boy owed eight lashes; three lashes, for unfaithfulness at work; for telling a lie, eight lashes more.

Reading: One Sunday, Father invited me to accompany him to the tannery, saying it was time for a settlement. I paid about one third of the debt. Then, to my utter astonishment, Father stripped off his shirt, gave me the whip and bade me "lay it on" on his bare back. At first I did not strike hard. "Harder!" he said, "Harder, Harder!" Small drops of blood showed on his back. -- **John Brown, Jr.**

Bruce Olds, Author: You had the son in the role of sinful mankind, whipping the father, who was playing the Christ figure. His father was giving him a form of catechism, a religious lesson. It's still, for all of that, utterly odd.

Russell Banks: On the one hand, yes, he was this authoritative, patriarchal figure in all his relations. On the other hand, he was also caring and custodial and gentle and sensitive and smart and funny in his dealings with them.

Reading: Father would sit in front of a lively fire, and take us children, one, two, or three at a time, and sing until bedtime. We all loved to hear him sing. -- **Jason Brown.**

John Brown Reading: Dear Sons & Daughters: It is a source of utmost comfort to me that I retain a warm place in the sympathies, affections, and confidence of my family. A man can hardly get into difficulties if he has a firm foothold at home. Remember that.

Narration: But sorrow again came to Brown when Dianthe contracted a fever and died.

He sat motionless for hours; for days, he could not leave the house.

A year later, Brown married again. Mary Day was half his age; she was buxom, black-haired, and stoic. She cared for his five children, and would bear thirteen of her own.

Burdened by his growing family, Brown soon had trouble making ends meet. He began to borrow heavily. Money was a problem that would plague John Brown all his life.

Outside the Pennsylvania woods, the country was changing. Slavery was expanding through the Deep South. King Cotton had become wildly profitable, thanks to the cotton gin and slave labor. Then in 1831, a brash young writer began to call for an end to slavery in his Boston newspaper. William Lloyd Garrison was the spearhead of a new movement called abolitionism.

Narration: It would develop into a powerful moral crusade. But at first the movement was just a handful of proper Bostonians. Abolitionists were well-educated, religious -- and as a matter of principle -- non-violent. But even in the North, the movement was controversial and dangerous. In Boston, a proslavery mob dragged Garrison through the streets and nearly lynched him.

Narration: Despite the dangers, abolitionism spread quickly to the West. In 1835, John Brown moved his family back to Hudson, Ohio. The remote village was already a center of anti-slavery activity.

James Horton: If you lived in Ohio, it was almost impossible not to have some feel for efforts to escape from slavery. After all, Ohio was right across the river, from slavery; and there were lots of fugitives that made that journey across the river Jordan, you know, across the Ohio River.

Narration: For many fugitives, the road to freedom ran through Hudson. Like his father, John Brown was a stationmaster on the Underground Railroad. He hid runaway slaves, then guided them in their flight North -- risking his life for the cause.

Russell Banks: This is action, this is a means by which he can do the Lord's work in a hands-on, active, meaningful way. It's not just simply standing around and stamping your feet in rage; he puts his rage to work.

Narration: But this was a time when even words could get a man killed. In Illinois, a clergyman named Elijah Lovejoy began to publish an antislavery newspaper. Three times a rioting mob destroyed his printing press. And then -- on November 7th, 1837 -- they shot Lovejoy to death. His murder sent a wave of shock through the North.

The town of Hudson held a memorial service. In the back of the church, an angular 37-year-old man rose from his seat, and raised his right hand as if taking a vow. He spoke a single sentence.

John Brown Reading: Here before God, in the presence of these witnesses, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery.

Narration: It was his first public statement on slavery. John Brown had made his commitment.

But for many years his private struggles would keep him from honoring the pledge.

Bruce Olds: He was, despite the rhetoric, more concerned with a making a life for himself and his family and just scraping by. I mean, these people rarely lived, his family I mean, more than a subsistence existence.

Dennis Frye: He was, I think, ripped inside by -- what road should I follow? If I care for my family, work for my family, then I will not be able to serve my God and answer His calling to free these people in bondage.

Narration: Like many Americans, John Brown wanted to be part of the great adventure that was transforming the nation in the 1830s. Inventions like the telegraph changed the world overnight. The country was booming -- moving on the wheels of the new steam-powered railroads, or churning up rivers on paddlewheel steamboats. Land speculation made people rich. And John Brown wanted his share.

Dennis Frye: Brown was obsessed with earning money, with taking care of his finances. And everything that Brown did in his business dealings was driven because John Brown was a driven man. He was an ambitious man.

Narration: Brown borrowed thousands to speculate in land -- just in time for the Panic of 1837.

James Stewart, Historian: The panic of 1837 was the largest bankruptcy that the United States had ever had. Brown was swept along in a current of default and collapse. Brown would be a typical story of someone who invested, as thousands did, and lost thousands, as thousands did as well.

Narration: When his land schemes fell apart, he tried breeding sheep. He started another tannery -- bought and sold cattle -- each time, a failure.

But John Brown stubbornly refused to accept failure. Although England exported its plentiful wool to America, Brown believed he could sell American wool there. He traveled to London -- and promptly lost $40,000.

Paul Finkelman, Historian: Much of his adult life he spent trying to settle debts and he's constantly in debt, he has to go into bankruptcy which is a terrible personal blow to him.

Russell Banks: His failure frustrated him and it must have been a very ongoing, nagging, painful conflict and it forced him into humiliating circumstances.

Narration: Lawsuits against him piled up in four states. His farm tools, furniture, and sheep were auctioned off. When his farm was taken away, Brown snapped.

Narration: Along with three sons, he barricaded himself inside a cabin. The sheriff got up a posse to evict them.

John Brown Reading: I felt myself to be deeply and sorely injured. I was making preparation for a distressing, wasting, and protracted war.

Narration: But after a few days, Brown surrendered, and was thrown into jail. His defiance had brought only humiliation and shame.

Narration: Then, in 1843, dysentery ravaged the Brown household. He wrote John Jr.:

John Brown Reading: Dear Son -- God has seen to visit us with the pestilence since you left, and Four of our number sleep in the dust. They were all children towards whom perhaps we might have felt a little partial but they all now lie in a little row together.

Russell Banks: He believed, to the bottom of his bones that his life on earth was meant to be lived as a test, a moral test.

Narration: In the midst of his losses, John Brown had a dream. He imagined a great event in which he, the small-time farmer who'd failed in everything he touched, would become the messenger of God.

Charles Joyner, Historian: He was a very orthodox Calvinist who believed he was predestined to free the slaves and end this terrible wickedness that the law had sanctioned all these years.

Narration: He began seeking out prominent African Americans -- people who could help make his dream a reality. Frederick Douglass, the brilliant writer and former slave, agreed to meet him.

Reading: Brown denounced slavery in language fierce and bitter, and thought that slaveholders had forfeited the right to live -- that the slaves had the right to gain their liberty in any way they could. Brown thought that he had no better use for his life than to lay it down in the cause of the slave. -- Frederick Douglass.

Narration: Douglass was deeply impressed by John Brown. Soon after, Douglass shocked an abolitionist meeting by declaring, "slavery can only be destroyed by bloodshed."

Narration: In the spring of 1848, Brown arrived at a white-columned mansion in Peterboro, New York, the home of Gerrit Smith.

Narration: Smith was a wealthy abolitionist, owning a million acres of land. In a wild part of the Adirondacks called North Elba, he had set aside a huge area for an experiment: he gave away pieces of farmland, hoping to establish a community of freed slaves.

Narration: John Brown was looking for a chance to start over. He could be, he said, "a kind of father" to the black farmers. He moved his family to North Elba. But it was a harsh, remote place -- too cold even to raise corn.

Russell Banks: I think for Brown, North Elba was almost paradisiacal, in some way. It brought all the different ambitions and fantasies of his life together in one place. He was able to be the patriarch in his family, the shepherd of his family. He was able to work in a very active way for the overthrow of slavery.

Narration: One day hikers emerged from the woods by Brown's house. The strangers were asked in to share the family meal. One was author and abolitionist Richard Henry Dana.

Reading: We were all ranged at a long table; two negroes had their places with us. Mr. Brown said a solemn grace. I observed that he called the negroes by their surnames, with the prefixes of Mr. and Mrs. It was plain that they had not been so treated or spoken to before. -- Richard Henry Dana.

James Horton, Historian: He is socializing and associating with Blacks in this community. This is something unheard of for a white man to be doing in the middle of the 19th century. Most abolitionists were lukewarm, at best, on the notion of racial equality. John Brown in this regard was, I think, remarkable.

Narration: But Brown's old debts forced him from North Elba. For years, he traveled from courtroom to courtroom, fending off creditors.

While his life was consumed by lawsuits, the national debate over slavery was heating up.

In Washington, proslavery advocates controlled the Senate, the Supreme Court, and even the White House. In 1850, Southerners pushed the Fugitive Slave Act through Congress. The Act gave bounty hunters the right to hunt down runaway slaves -- anywhere.

James Stewart: After 1850, it seemed to African Americans and to many, many whites, and especially to someone like John Brown, as if the interests of slavery truly did rule the nation.

Many people believed deeply that the United States had turned from its democratic heritage to something evil, corrupt, and despicable.

Narration: Still, the South kept pressuring Congress to open up new lands to slavery. For years, slavery had been barred from the territories of Kansas and Nebraska. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 now gave settlers the right to decide by vote whether their territories would be slave or free.

Narration: Like hundreds of others, five of Brown's sons decided to homestead in Kansas, to help defeat slavery with the ballot. John Jr., Jason, Salmon, Owen and Frederick started West. But John Brown did not go.

Russell Banks: Brown's reluctance to go down into Kansas has to be seen in the light of his age. He was 55 years old and by actuarial tables of the 1850s, that was an old man. And, so yeah, his reluctance, to me, seems perfectly natural under the circumstances, why would he go charging off, this is a young man's fight.

Narration: In the summer of 1855, Brown returned to North Elba. It had been almost 20 years since he'd publicly declared war on slavery. But his vow was still unfulfilled. He was exhausted, ground down. All he wanted, he said, was to "lay my bones to rest." But a thousand miles away, history was waiting for him, in Kansas.

Narration: On March 30th, 1855, proslavery forces invaded Kansas. A horde of 5000 heavily-armed Missourians -- known as the "Border Ruffians" -- rode into the territory. They seized the polling places and voted in their own legislature. From now on, prison awaited any man who spoke out against slavery. The abolitionists were outnumbered and outgunned.

Narration: John Brown Jr. sent an urgent letter to his father:

Reading: Despotism has secured to its cause thousands of the meanest and most desperate of men. The remedy we propose is that the Anti-Slavery inhabitants should immediately, thoroughly arm, and organize in military companies. Now we want you to get for us these arms. We need them more than we do bread.

Narration: The day after he got the letter, John Brown left North Elba, taking every weapon he could gather. "I'm going to Kansas," he said, "to make it a Free state."

Russell Banks: Brown went for a mix of motives. He certainly went spoiling for a fight, hoping to make this a significant act against slavery. But he also went to bail out his sons. He's a warrior, he's got his rifle, but he's also a shepherd and he's going down in the wagon to save his sons.

Bruce Olds: He was an utter failure, he was despairing, he was in debt. And I think it got to a point where he felt he had absolutely nothing to lose.

Narration: On Oct. 7th, 1855, the old man arrived at his sons' homestead in Kansas, a place called Brown's Station. He was dismayed at what he found: muddy tents and moldy hay, his boys starving, shivering with fever. In three weeks Brown built a sturdy log cabin. Then, another. He swiftly brought order to Brown's Station.

It was a snowy, Siberian winter in Kansas, driving both sides into their cabins. Then, in January, a free- man was hacked to death; the murderers tossed his mangled body onto his icy doorstep.

Paul Finkelman: Free-state settlers are being killed, they're being harassed, right near John Brown's settlement on the Pottawatomie Creek are some pro-slavery people, who brag about how they're going to kill all the free-state people, how they're going to push them away.

Narration: From all over the north, money and guns poured into Kansas. In Brooklyn, the famous abolitionist preacher Henry Ward Beecher proclaimed, "There are times when self-defense is a religious duty." Beecher's church sent dozens of the new Sharps rifles. The free-state settlers formed into military companies, but they were still no match for the proslavery forces.

Narration: On May 21st, hundreds of Border Ruffians marched on Lawrence, Kansas. Outnumbered, the free-state men of Lawrence did not fight back. The Ruffians sacked the town and not one abolitionist dared to fire a gun.

Narration: Within hours, Brown received another disturbing report, this time from Washington. Abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner was working on the

Senate floor when a Southern Congressman suddenly began smashing Sumner's head with a cane. Sumner was beaten to an inch of his life. This news reached Brown and his men, that May afternoon in Kansas.

Reading: At that... the men went crazy -- crazy. It seemed to be the finishing, decisive touch. -- **Salmon Brown**

Narration: Late that night, John Brown went into the woods to converse with God.

Bruce Olds: He did feel he was divinely inspired. He did feel he was an instrument of God. That he'd been placed on earth to be this avenging angel as it were.

Narration: When he emerged from the woods, he told his men to sharpen their swords. Then Brown stuck a revolver in his belt and led them toward the cabins by Pottawatomie Creek.

Paul Finkelman: He is going after particular men who have been involved in pro-slavery activities, who are dangerous to the very survival of the free-state settlers in the area.

Narration: On May 24th, 1856, Brown banged on the door of James Doyle's cabin. He ordered the men to come outside.

Reading: He said if a man stood between him and what he considered right, he would take his life as coolly as he would eat his breakfast. With an eye like a snake, he looks like a demon. -- Mahala Doyle.

Narration: Brown's men split open heads, cut off arms, executing three of the Doyles. Brown watched as if in a trance. When they were done, he put a bullet into the head of James Doyle.

Narration: Brown's party went to two more cabins, dragged out and killed two more men. Five, in all. It would be known as the Pottawatomie Massacre.

Dennis Frye: Pottawatomie is cold blooded murder. Killing people based on anger, and vengeance. That blood was all over the weapons and hands of John Brown and his men at Pottawatomie.

Russell Banks: It was in response to extraordinary frustration and despair, I really think he was like Samson trying to pull down the Temple. I don't mean to condone it, any more than I would condone a car bomb in, in Belfast or Jerusalem, but there is a context, there is a progression, and we have to take a leap, an imaginative leap into his time and see the world as he saw it.

Narration: A manhunt began. Proslavery forces burned Brown's Station to ashes. They smashed John Jr. with rifle butts until he began to rave. Jason Brown was beaten almost to death. Neither son had been involved in the killings.

Narration: John Brown's bloody massacre at Pottawatomie now ignited an all-out war in Kansas.

Narration: Three months later, some 250 Border Ruffians attacked the free-soil town of Osawatomie. Brown led 30 men, defending the town. He fought desperately; but Osawatomie burned to the ground. His son Frederick lay in the dirt, a bullet through his heart. Tears rolled down Brown's face.

John Brown Reading: I have only a short time to live, I will die fighting for this cause. There will be no more peace in this land until slavery is done for.

Russell Banks: Emotional intensity and moral ferocity was what set him apart. He didn't just walk through his days -- he boiled through his days.

Narration: Brown became a guerrilla fighter, hiding out in secret campsites with a small band of followers. One afternoon a visitor appeared in camp. He was James Redpath, a 23-year-old Scottish newspaper correspondent sympathetic to the abolitionist cause.

Reading: Old Brown himself stood near the fire. He was poorly clad, and his toes protruded from his boots... After every meal, the old man would retire to the densest solitudes. He would say that the Lord had directed him in visions; that, for himself, he did not love warfare, but peace.

Reading: I have spoken of the rumors of midnight murder in the Pottawatomie region. Captain Brown was accused of having done the deed-- the charge is false.

Dennis Frye: Brown was not truthful about Pottawatomie. We don't know if this is because he did feel guilt, or if it was something that he just simply explained away as when you fight and you're in war, you need to kill.

Paul Finkelman: Brown sees himself as always moving towards a greater truth and as long as he's headed towards the greater truth, he is less concerned about the lesser truths along the way.

Narration: The interview was John Brown's debut in the national press. Redpath's account of the battle of Osawatomie made Brown a hero in the North. When Brown rode into Lawrence, a crowd gathered to cheer -- "as if the President had come to town," one man said.

Paul Finkelman: Northerners had been pushed around by what seemed to be a violent South. Then Brown bursts upon the scene in Kansas and suddenly there's a Northerner who fights back.

Narration: Even in New York, John Brown was now famous. Less than two weeks after the battle, a drama called Ossawattomie Brown celebrated him on Broadway.

Narration: That fall, peace finally came to Kansas. But for John Brown, the battle would never be over.

Edward Renehan: Kansas is the birth of the Messianic Brown, it's the birth of the Moses-like Brown, it's the birth of the terrorist Brown, it's the birth of the murderer Brown.

Bruce Olds: He was really looking to make Kansas the platform from which a wider war might be fought. To make that violence proliferate, kind of like a prairie fire, until the whole country was engulfed.

Narration: For the next two and a half years, Brown travelled ceaselessly, from Akron to Boston, Chicago to Canada, beseeching abolitionists for guns and money, money and guns. He was ready to carry his war on slavery into the heart of the South. But he would need help.

Narration: As he stood in the plush, lace-lined parlors of the wealthy Easterners, he seemed to many like a latter-day Son of Liberty.

James Stewart: John Brown's skills are personal magnetism, locking his eyes on you and making you feel as if you're seeing into the depths of his soul. They're intimate skills. They're the skills of an insurgent, they're the skills of a man on fire.

Narration: In Kansas, John Brown was a wanted man; but in Massachusetts, he appeared before the legislature as one of their own. He spent the night at the home of writer Ralph Waldo Emerson. He lunched with philosopher Henry David Thoreau. To them, Brown seemed like a fantastic frontier hero, straight out of a romantic novel.

Narration: He never mentioned the Pottawatomie murders.

Paul Finkelman: His Northern supporters don't want to know what he's doing. They're just thrilled to have this charismatic guy in their drawing rooms and in their speaker's halls. They're willing to give him money and not ask too many questions.

Narration: At the Concord Town House, with the passionately nonviolent Thoreau listening, Brown said that he too hated violence, but accepted it as God's will.

John Brown Reading: The two most sacred documents in the world are the Bible and the Declaration of Independence. It is better that a whole generation of men, women and children pass away by a violent death than that a word of either should be violated.

Narration: A rumor ran through Boston: a federal marshal was about to arrest John Brown. Brown hid out in the house of Judge Thomas Russell. He stayed upstairs for weeks, barricading furniture against his door, coming down only for meals. He told Mrs. Russell:

Reading: I shall never be taken alive, you know, and I should hate to spoil your carpet.

Narration: When he did come down, he liked to shock his hostess.

Reading: He drew from one boot a long, evil looking knife. Then he produced a big pistol. I sat stiff with fright. It amused him. "You haven't had this in your parlor before, have you?" he remarked.

Reading: At meals he persisted in gravely mentioning unspeakable articles upon which he had lived -- joints and toes of creatures that surely no human being had ever tasted.

Narration: One evening, the warrior from Kansas finally met the pacifist editor, William Lloyd Garrison. The two were perfect opposites. To Garrison, God was gentle and forgiving. To John Brown, God met sin with the sword. For Garrison, nonviolence was the single moral path. For Brown, milquetoast abolitionism had failed; the way to destroy slavery was with principled violence -- holy war. Garrison left that night believing Brown was a detriment to the cause; but it was Garrison who was now out of step.

Narration: In March 1858, Brown met secretly in Boston with a group of supporters. Gerrit Smith, Rev. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and four other pillars of Eastern society would risk imprisonment by funding John Brown's campaign to overthrow slavery. They called themselves the Secret Six.

Margaret Washington: "How was it that learned men, novelists, clergymen could support John Brown's ideas, could finance it, could provide the guns?" But the individuals who were supporting Brown were radical abolitionists, and they wanted something to happen, just like John Brown did.

Edward Renehan: They viewed such actions as part of a great tradition, a tradition that had spawned, among other things, the United States of America.

And they were ready for what many were already calling the second American revolution.

Narration: Before he left Boston, Brown paid one last visit to the Russells.

Reading: He brought a present to our little daughter Minnie, and held her in his outstretched arms. "Now," said he, "when you are a young lady and I am hanged, you can say that you stood on the hand of Old Brown." --Mrs. Thomas Russell

Narration: By the summer of 1859, Brown had made his plan. His target was the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia -- a town surrounded by mountains, tucked at the bottom of a ravine created by a pair of rivers. The arsenal was a huge complex of buildings that contained 100,000 muskets and rifles.

Narration: That July, Brown rented a farm just outside Harpers Ferry. For three months, this would be the headquarters of his revolution.

Narration: Brown had managed to recruit twenty-one men. The group was an assortment: fugitive slaves, college students, free blacks. Three were Brown's sons -- Oliver, Watson, Owen, and a neighbor from North Elba, William Thompson. A free black man, named Dangerfield Newby, had a personal reason to join.

James Horton: His wife was being held in that area -- his wife and his children -- and his wife had written him a letter saying that she was about to be sold South of that area. She was afraid that, if she had been sold South, that she and the children would never see Dangerfield again. When you think about why people go to war, ultimately, they go to war to protect the people they love.

Narration: One day in August, Brown traveled to a remote stone quarry to meet Frederick Douglass. He hoped to convince Douglass to join his mission.

They sat among the rocks and John Brown revealed his plan. He would raid Harpers Ferry; he would capture the guns at the arsenal. Emboldened by the news, a spontaneous army of slaves would rush to join him. Brown would then drive south, and the revolution would snowball.

Reading: I at once opposed the measure. It would be an attack upon the federal government, and would array the whole country against us. All his descriptions of the place convinced me that he was going into a perfect steel trap, and that once in he would never get out alive. -- **Frederick Douglass**.

Margaret Washington: Douglass had a profound respect for John Brown. Brown's influence certainly encouraged Douglass to want to go. But his own

practical sense made him know that he couldn't do this, that this was going to fail.

Narration: For months, Brown's men waited at the farm, hoping for more recruits.

Watson Brown wrote his wife, back home in North Elba:

Reading: I think of you all day, and dream of you at night. I would gladly stay with you always but for the cause which brought me here, -- a desire to do something for others, and not live wholly for my own happiness.

Narration: No more recruits would be coming.

On the evening of October 16th, 1859, John Brown gathered his 21 raiders together. "Men," he said, "get on your arms."

At first, the raid went like clockwork. The arsenal, with its huge stockpile of guns, was protected by just one guard. He quickly surrendered.

Brown's difficulties now began.

A train approached Harpers Ferry. A baggage master ran to warn the passengers. Brown's men shouted at him to halt.

The first victim of John Brown's war against slavery was a free black man.

The news from Harpers Ferry raced out straight to Richmond and Washington.

By midmorning, farmers, militiamen, and shopkeepers had climbed the heights behind town to take potshots down at Brown's men.

Scattered among the armory buildings, the small band of raiders milled about in confusion. No spontaneous army of slaves had come to join them; instead, the enemy was gathering. As shots rang off the walls, John Brown quietly ordered breakfast from a hotel for his hostages.

Dennis Frye: Brown still controls his own destiny. He commands the approaches in and out of Harpers Ferry, the bridges belong to him. So the question is, why didn't John Brown attempt to leave? Why did he stay in Harpers Ferry?

Russell Banks: He stayed and he stayed and it seems to me a deliberate, resigned act of martyrdom.

Narration: At noon, a company of Virginia militiamen stormed into town. They charged over the bridge, and the only true escape route was gone. Then Dangerfield Newby was shot through the head.

Newby had come for love. He now became the first raider to die. In his pocket was a letter from the wife he'd hoped to set free.

The angry crowd dragged him into the gutter and sliced off his ears, for souvenirs. Then they beat his dead body with sticks.

Two of Brown's men were captured, and held under guard.

The crowd chanted: "Kill them, kill them."

Dennis Frye: The mob went wild. A throng broke in through the door, into the room, grabbed William Thompson and dragged him out on the railroad bridge. Shot him, and Thompson dropped down into the river itself, and to show their rage, they would continue to use his corpse for target practice.

Narration: John Brown's revolution was coming apart. Eight invaders were dead or dying. Five others were cut off, isolated. Two had escaped across the river. Brown gathered those who were left in a small brick building, the engine house.

Russell Banks: It must've been unbelievable chaos, weapons firing and men screaming in pain and shouting orders at each other. And yet he seemed to have a kind of clarity and focus that allowed him to totally control those last few hours before he was captured, and then to totally control how that event was perceived from there on out. He's a man at that moment in utter control of his own destiny, for perhaps the first and only time in his life.

Narration: It was a long, cold night. Watson and Oliver Brown lay on the floor, mortally wounded; Oliver curled up in agony, begged his father to kill him.

Dennis Frye: Oliver wanted to be put out of his pain and Brown would say to him, "You must be a man, you must die like a man." But he was focused, on something much bigger than himself, and something much bigger than his own family.

Narration: Before sunrise, Oliver died.

On the morning of October 18, five raiders gazed out on a chilling sight: the armory yard was lined with a company of U.S. Marines, under the command of Lt. Col. Robert E. Lee. Brown was completely surrounded.

A young lieutenant, J.E.B. Stuart, approached under a white flag. Stuart handed over a note: if the raiders surrendered, their lives would be spared. Brown refused. Marines stormed the building. The door was breeched. One Marine tried to run Brown through. But the blade struck the old man's belt buckle. Brown was then beaten unconscious.

Dennis Frye: If Brown had died on that brick floor in that engine house, I believe he would've been noted in history, but only with a few sentences. Maybe even only a footnote. Brown's real effect came in his failure at Harpers Ferry. His real meaning is in what happens after his capture.

Narration: For most of the day, Brown lay bound and bleeding, listening to a lynch mob howl outside.

In the afternoon Governor Henry Wise of Virginia arrived to interrogate the prize prisoner. With him came a group of men who would soon play a critical role in John Brown's story: reporters.

The old man answered their questions for hours, lying on the cold floor.

Bruce Olds: Finally, at that moment, he has achieved what he's wanted his whole life, the whole world is watching. The media has descended. And he has the ear of the nation.

Paul Finkelman: Brown transforms himself into a kind of instant celebrity. He understands, as almost no American does at the time, the value of the newspapers, the value of propaganda, the value of getting his ideas across through the reporters.

Russell Banks: It's an extraordinary transformation, this man -- who, up to this point, was not particularly known for his gift of speech, and his clarity of thought in public -- suddenly becomes absolutely memorably brilliant.

John Brown Reading: I wish to say that you had better -- all you people of the South -- prepare yourselves for a settlement of this question. You may dispose of me very easily -- I am nearly disposed of now; but this question is still to be settled -- this negro question I mean; the end of that is not yet.

Narration: Even as Brown spoke to reporters, troops were searching the farm where the raiders had lived. They found a large carpetbag crammed with letters from John Brown's prominent supporters. Clearly, important people had financed his raid. To the South, it seemed that the entire North had sanctioned the murderous attack.

Dennis Frye: The South was terrorized. Vigilante groups organized to patrol areas throughout the South. New militia companies were organized in county after county, and city after city.

Narration: A Richmond newspaper wrote:

Reading: "The Northern people must set their seal of eternal condemnation upon these bold, bad men. If they do not, -- the Harpers Ferry conspiracy will be the beginning of an 'irrepressible conflict,' between the North and South which can only end in oceans of fraternal blood."

Narration: In the North, Brown's supporters were terrified. Three of the Secret Six fled the country; Gerrit Smith placed himself in an insane asylum. Only Thomas Wentworth Higginson refused to panic. He hatched a plan to free the prisoner. But John Brown did not want to be rescued.

John Brown Reading: I doubt I ought to encourage any attempt to save my life. My great object will be nearer its accomplishment by my death than by my life.

Narration: Just seven days after the raid, the wounded John Brown had to be helped into the courthouse in nearby Charlestown. Though Brown had attacked a federal arsenal,Virginia would do the honors. The trial would take less than a week. Brown's lawyer tried to have him declared insane. Brown rose up on his cot to denounce the idea that he was mad.

Charles Joyner: Brown was terribly angry at this, partly because he considered himself sane, and partly because he knew that he could accomplish what he wanted to accomplish by being convicted, by being a martyr.

Bruce Olds: Was he mad? It's an idea that seems to cling to him,like a barnacle to the hull of a ship. He was obsessed, he was fanatical, he was monomaniacal, he was a zealot, and psychologically unbalanced. Does all of that add up to madness?

James Horton: We should be very careful about assuming that a white man who is willing to put his life on the line for Black people is, of necessity, crazy.

Paul Finkelman: He's a bad tactician, he's a bad strategist, he's a bad planner, he's not a very good general, but he's not crazy.

Narration: The judge rejected the plea of insanity, and Virginia rushed toward judgment.

On November 2nd, the jury, after deliberating for just 45 minutes, reached its verdict. Guilty of murder. Guilty of treason. Guilty of inciting slave insurrection.

Slowly, John Brown rose to address the court.

John Brown Reading: Had I interfered in behalf of the rich every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward. I see a book kissed here, the Bible, that teaches me to "remember them that are in bonds." I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I believe that to have interfered in behalf of His despised poor was not wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country -- I say let it be done!

Narration: The judge calmly sentenced Brown to execution, by hanging.

From prison he wrote hundreds of letters. The Charlestown jail cell became his pulpit; his words reprinted in scores of newspapers.

John Brown Reading: You know that Christ once armed Peter. So also in my case I think he put a sword into my hand, and there continued it so long as he saw best, and then kindly took it from me.

Narration: In Massachusetts, Henry David Thoreau could not sleep, as he wrestled with the question of violence.

Reading: I do not wish to kill or be killed but I can foresee circumstances in which both of these things would be unavoidable.

Narration: The revolutionary had changed the philosopher's mind.

Narration: The execution was set for December 2nd, 1859.

John Brown Reading: I have no doubt that our seeming disaster: will ultimately result in the most glorious success. I have been whipped; but I am sure I can recover all the lost capital by only hanging a few moments by the neck...

Narration: The day before the hanging, Mary Brown came to see her husband. They talked, had supper together. When it was time for her to go, John Brown lost control of himself; he sobbed.

Narration: The next morning, rumors of a desperate rescue attempt swirled around Charlestown. Some 1500 soldiers massed in the open field, guns at the ready. No civilians were allowed, but an actor from Virginia borrowed a uniform so he could watch John Brown die. "I looked at the traitor," said John Wilkes Booth, "with unlimited, undeniable contempt."

Narration: But John Brown had reached the place where he wanted to go.

Charles Joyner: He believed that God had led him to this moment, and that this was, his death and his resurrection and the fulfillment of God's purpose for him on this earth.

Narration: "Old Brown has just been executed," said Abraham Lincoln. "We cannot object even though he agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong. That cannot excuse violence, bloodshed, and treason."

Narration: On December 9th, John Brown was buried in North Elba. But his words would not be forgotten.

John Brown Reading: I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with Blood. I had vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done.

Narration: Less than a year and a half later, the Civil War broke out.

Narration: By the summer of 1861, as Northern troops marched into Harpers Ferry, John Brown had already been immortalized in song: his soul was marching on.

Reading: Did John Brown fail? John Brown began the war that ended American slavery and made this a free Republic. His zeal in the cause of my race was far greater than mine. I could live for the slave, but he could die for him... -- **Frederick Douglass**.

Narration: The legend of John Brown soon took on different meanings. To some, he was a bloodthirsty madman; to others, a hero who had killed for a just cause.

Russell Banks: His life raises very basic and ongoing questions about political violence, violence in the service of an ideal, of a principled cause... And that, to me, makes him so tragically revealing and emblematic of our history and of our culture and our nature today.

Narration: John Brown had waged holy war. But he had always found comfort in the peacefulness of God's universe.

John Brown Reading: Everything moves in sublime harmony in the government of God. Not so with us poor creatures. If one star is more brilliant than the others, it is continually shooting in some erratic way into space.