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“JOHN BROWN, THE MARTYR FOR THE CAUSE OF THE BLACKS”:

JOHN BROWN, THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION, AND THE DEATH OF AMERICAN
SLAVERY

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of History
The University of Mississippi

by

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ABSTRACT

The Haitian Revolution changed John Brown to a degree not recognized by scholars. Brown lived in an America largely shaped by the revolt, and it is no surprise that it shaped him as well. While preoccupied with debt, Brown did not consider the Haitian Revolution at length. Released from debt in 1842, however, Brown began reflecting on the revolt and, consequently, on his pacifism. Brown could not reconcile the two. Less than five years after his insolvency Brown had abandoned pacifism, and, in 1847, he revealed to Frederick Douglass that he planned to employ the bloody lessons of the Haitian Revolution—guerrilla warfare and slave insurrection—in his crusade against American slavery. Brown, true to his word, used Haiti to attack human bondage in Kansas and Virginia, killing many people in the process. The degree to which Brown's actions recalled the Haitian Revolution—an event that had frightened white Americans for decades—terrified observers. And, because the contours of Haiti were visible in Brown, the vitality of American slavery was crippled; the Civil War loomed on the horizon during Brown's execution in December 1859.

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1850s Edmund Ruffin, a politician from Virginia, grew depressed. Powerful northern abolitionists, he said, wanted to unleash “the bloody horrors” of the Haitian Revolution—a slave revolt that devastated French Saint-Domingue from 1791 to 1804—on the American South. To avoid such a calamity, Ruffin argued, southerners had to separate themselves from the federal government of the United States and create political institutions favorable to their own interests. While understandably wary of a Haitian-style slave uprising, most southerners were not, by mid-1859, prepared to secede because of their fear. Ruffin did not take well to their apathy. Afraid he might never see an independent South, he contemplated suicide.¹

Ruffin’s will to live returned in October 1859 when John Brown led a multi-racial attack on Harpers Ferry, Virginia in an attempt to forcibly end slavery in America.² Southerners quickly noted similarities between Brown’s raid and the Haitian Revolution—armed black soldiers trained in guerrilla warfare, ready to kill whites in order to establish a primarily black-run government opposed to slavery, had invaded the Old Dominion under Brown’s leadership—and just as quickly southerners began calling for secession.³ A giddy Ruffin—whose prediction

¹ Betty Mitchell, *Edmund Ruffin, a Biography*, 72, 139.

² Stephen Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, 290-306, 356.

³ Robert De Witt, *The Life, Trial, and Execution of Captain John Brown*, 93; Alison Freehling, *Drift Towards Dissolution*, 390; John Townsend, *The South Alone*, 12-13; Albert Bledsoe, “Liberty and Slavery,” 404-405, 412-413.

about the motives of northern abolitionists now appeared quite sage—wrote in his diary that “[Brown’s] diabolical attempt...arouse[d] the southern people” to action.⁴

Ruffin’s reaction to Harpers Ferry, along with the reaction of many other southerners, points to an often overlooked dimension of Brown’s raid: the Civil War, and thus the emancipation of American slaves, happened in large part because people saw the Haitian Revolution in Brown’s brand of abolitionism. Haitians also noted that connection. Proud of how their revolutionary culture played out in other parts of the world, they memorialized Brown in 1860 for making use of their past.⁵

Indeed, in myriad ways, Brown interacted with the legacy of the Haitian Revolution, and, having contemplated the revolt’s causes and effects, drew conclusions that were vital to his fight against slavery in America. The Haitian Revolution, Brown argued, made clear that human bondage had to meet a violent end, and guerrilla warfare, ideally launched by black soldiers from a mountain range, offered the best way to do this. Brown employed these lessons—with varying degrees of success—at Pottawatomie in 1856 and Harpers Ferry in 1859.

Furthermore, the Haitian Revolution also transformed the physical landscape of the United States, which had a profound impact on Brown. Historians agree that Napoleon sold the Louisiana Territory to the United States in large part because he had lost Haiti to rebelling slaves.⁶ And some of the land gained in the Louisiana Purchase served as a battleground for slavery. It was here, in the trans-Missouri west, that Brown cut his teeth as a violent, Haiti-

⁴ Edmund Ruffin, *The Diary of Edmund Ruffin*, October 21, 1859, October 24, 1859, 349-350.

⁵ David Reynolds, *John Brown*, 408; Matthew Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War*, 53; John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd, *The Tribunal*, 400.

⁶ Clavin, 8-9; Alfred Hunt, *Haiti’s Influence on Antebellum America*, 35-36; W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade*, 50; Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black*, 377; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 304.

inspired abolitionist and gained fame and experience that proved invaluable to his raid of Harpers Ferry. The Haitian Revolution, then, had a remarkable impact on John Brown's life.

For reasons that are not altogether clear, however, scholars have largely ignored Brown's relationship to the Haitian Revolution. They note several factors that motivated Brown's crusade against slavery—his belief that he was the executor of God's will, his intense dedication to the egalitarian principles of the Declaration of Independence, and his desire to please his ailing father, Owen Brown—but downplay, if not dismiss, the powerful role Haiti played in the formation and success of Brown's violent abolitionism.⁷ My work corrects their oversights and positions Brown as a transnational figure, inspired and radicalized by the legacy of the Haitian Revolution.

⁷ For instance, in his six-hundred page biography of Brown, Frank Sanborn mentions Haiti's influence on Brown just once. Likewise, Robert McGlone devotes just one page to the energy Haiti injected into the abolitionist movement in America, and by extension into John Brown. "[Some abolitionists]," writes McGlone, "believed that American slaves were only awaiting the right moment to wipe out 'the wrongs of their oppressors' and 'reenact' the Haitian revolution in South Carolina and Louisiana. Among Brown's associates such thinking was increasingly appealing." Evan Carton could write that Brown read of the revolt—"Brown had read everything he could find on Toussaint"—but did not question how doing so might have helped craft Brown's violent approach to ending slavery. A more recent biographer of Brown, R. Blakeslee Gilpin, condenses Brown's relationship to Haiti to a clause of a sentence: "In Chatham, Brown expounded on his study of Roman warfare, the Spanish revolt against the Romans, the rule of Schamyl (the Circassian chief), and Toussaint's L'Ouverture's slave rebellion in Haiti"; In a more sophisticated interpretation than those previously listed, David S. Reynolds acknowledged that Brown clearly knew about the Haitian Revolution and was in some way influenced by it, as was much of America. "The names Haiti and Toussaint L'Ouverture," he writes, "resonated in pre-Civil War America, exacerbating tensions over slavery." Still, Reynolds fails to assign Haiti a prominent place in Brown's life, nor did he detail how Haiti helped John Brown succeed in ushering in the destruction of slavery in America. Moreover, Reynolds did not notice the link between Brown and Bleeding Kansas and the Haitian Revolution. Historian Matthew Clavin has perhaps the most thorough treatment of the matter. He dedicates a chapter of his book to the relationship between John Brown and Haiti, but it does not explore the relationship very closely. Brown, for instance, appears on just a few pages of the chapter, which runs for twenty-one pages. Brown serves mostly as a way for Clavin to highlight the memory of Toussaint Louverture in the United States. Throughout Clavin's work, Brown remains conspicuously inconspicuous. Frank Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown*, 122; Robert McGlone, *John Brown's War Against Slavery*, 242; Evan Carton, *Patriotic Treason*, 252; R. Blakeslee Gilpin, *John Brown Still Lives*, 35; Reynolds, 107-110, 171-178; Clavin, 33-54.

The Haitian Revolution began in 1791, when a group of slaves attacked a port city in Saint-Domingue, and lasted for more than a decade, ending in emancipation and the creation of the black Republic of Haiti in 1804. News of the revolt quickly reached the United States and horrified white Americans. They feared that Haiti could spread to slave-quarters in their country. American politicians, who shared these fears, enacted laws to protect American slavery from the Haitian Revolution. To protest these developments, which often added increased restrictions on slave behavior, many abolitionists in the United States called on what they believed was a terrifying truism of the Haitian Revolution: slaves in chains would beget blood and rebellion. Peaceful emancipation, not tighter control of those held in bondage, these abolitionists reasoned, could prevent Haiti from destroying the United States.

John Brown—an abolitionist of a different sort by the mid-1840s—could not have disagreed more. According to his reading of events, the Haitian Revolution showed that blood, not peace, broke the chains of slavery; only a Haitian-style rebellion could free American slaves and protect America from God’s wrath. From 1856 until his death in 1859, Brown’s behavior often reflected this belief, which significantly shortened the life of American slavery.

John Brown left no written records that explicitly connect him to the Haitian Revolution. In letter after letter and document after document—in every letter and every document, in fact—Brown refrained from mentioning the Haitian Revolution by name. To be sure, Brown could be careless when it came to masking his intentions for insurrection. After all, this was a man who left unprotected—probably for strategic reasons—some very sensitive documents concerning his plan to overthrow the federal government, documents that Robert E. Lee’s men found shortly

after apprehending Brown at Harpers Ferry.⁸ Yet Brown was no fool, and he clearly knew the consequences of writing about an event that terrified many Americans. As a close reading of events demonstrates, he understood and used lessons of the Haitian Revolution.

This thesis demonstrates the significance of the Haitian Revolution to Brown in three chapters. The Haitian Revolution and its broader implications for antebellum America will be the focus of chapter one. The uprising helped shape the United States physically and intellectually, and it occupied a large and violent place in the debate over slavery. Chapter two narrows the lens of analysis, exploring how the legacy of the Haitian Revolution in the United States inspired Brown's abolitionism. Born in 1800, Brown would have heard about the revolt often while growing up, though the contours of his interpretation of the Haitian Revolution, and consequently his ideology of violent abolition, did not approach maturity until the 1840s. Chapter three, then, examines how Brown put these ideas into action by focusing on two events in particular: the massacre at Pottawatomie and the raid on Harpers Ferry.

In 1855 John Brown traveled to the Kansas Territory. Less than a year after his arrival he orchestrated the murder of pro-slavery men in Pottawatomie, using and capitalizing on lessons he learned from Haiti. Brown's conduct in "Bleeding Kansas" made him famous in abolitionist circles—fame he used to gain material support for his 1859 attack on Harpers Ferry, where he planned to fully introduce his idea of the Haitian Revolution to the United States. That Brown was captured before carrying this plan to its ultimate conclusion did not blunt its impact. As Edmund Ruffin demonstrated, enough southerners saw Haiti in Harpers Ferry to elicit the hysterical response Brown needed to help destroy human bondage. Indeed, because of the

⁸ McGlone, 215-217, 310.

lessons he learned from the Haitian Revolution, John Brown was able to cast a long shadow over America and over the life of American slavery.

I. SPECTER OF HAITI

These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also.

Acts 17:6

The Haitian Revolution ended in 1804 after black slaves in St. Domingue overthrew their masters, defeated European armies, and founded their own republic. Late that year, Charles Brockden Brown discussed the uprising in *The Literary Magazine*. “When I first heard of the [revolt],” wrote the American abolitionist, “I could not help but smiling.” But then Brown’s mood changed. The revolt “turned out to be a specimen of that miserable and childish spirit of imitation, which some think characteristic of the Negro race.” Brown questioned his involvement in the abolitionist movement. What “will become...of the Negroes now residing in North...America” if emancipated? Would they “become what St. Domingo has already become” and turn white Americans into “persecuted” and “detested enemies?” He shuddered to think.¹

News of the uprising shocked Americans, not just Charles Brown. As one historian points out, given the existence of slavery in the United States, antebellum “Americans had no choice but to react” to events in St. Domingue.² Indeed, Americans, as this chapter will show, fashioned a discourse about the Haitian Revolution that permeated and directed life in antebellum America.

¹ Charles Brockden Brown, “St. Domingo,” 164-166.

² Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution*, 7.

The first settlers in what would become the Republic of Haiti moved to the Caribbean from mainland America sometime before the fifteenth-century, and named the island Hayti, meaning “Mountainous Land.”³ When Columbus arrived in the Caribbean in 1492, he renamed the island Hispaniola, claiming it and its resources—which included its inhabitants—for the Spanish crown.⁴ After the well of resources ran dry, however, the Spanish for the most part abandoned Hispaniola. Still, French buccaneers occasionally arrived in search of food. One buccaneer, Bertrand d’Ogeron, helped organize the western portion of the island for the French in the late seventeenth-century, calling it St. Domingue.⁵

The fertile land of St. Domingue invited the cultivation of coffee, first grown on the island in 1723. Sugar followed. And France—along with many other countries—sought both.⁶ To keep up with demand, planters in St. Domingue imported thousands of laborers from Africa. Brought over in droves, black slaves were expendable assets, literally worked to death for another’s gain.⁷ These grim and violent methods were lucrative. By 1791 the French colony of

³ Steeve Coupeau, *The History of Haiti*, 1, 15.

⁴ As Bartolome de Las Casas points out in *The Journal of Christopher Columbus*, Columbus actually called the island Espanola because the island possessed “plains, the loveliest in the world, and as fit for sowing as the lands of Castile.” Thus fertile lands represented one resource that Columbus claimed for the Spanish crown. Added to this list, notes Las Casas, were “fish...[and] much aloe.” Of course, as Columbus himself made clear, he claimed everything on the island for Ferdinand and Isabel, which included the inhabitants of the island, who were frequently worked to death by the Spanish. *The Journal of Christopher Columbus*, “Friday, December 7th,” and “Tuesday, December 11th”; *The Four Voyages of Columbus*, “First Voyage of Columbus; Letter of Columbus,” 6, 8, 10.

⁵ Bertrand d’Ogeron’s organization of St. Domingue in 1665 slightly preceded France’s official organization of the colony in 1695. In that year Spain legally ceded St. Domingue to France. That concession recognized that which had already been accepted, namely, that the western portion of Hispaniola was a French possession. Thomas Ott, *The Haitian Revolution: 1789-1804*, 3-5; Philippe Girard, *Haiti: The Tumultuous History*, 22.

⁶ Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 20-21; Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 23-26.

⁷ Of all scholars of the Haitian Revolution, C.L.R. James provides the most explicit list of abuses that slaves in St. Domingue experienced at the hands of their masters. “[S]laves,” he writes, “were not unfrequently whipped to death.... Mutilations were common, limbs, ears, and sometimes private parts, to deprive them of the pleasures which they could indulge in without expense. Their masters poured burning wax on their arms and hands and shoulders, emptied the boiling cane sugar over their heads, burned them alive, roasted them on slow fires, filled them with gunpowder and blew them up with a match; buried them up to the neck and smeared their hands with sugar that flies

St. Domingue led the world in coffee and sugar production and had become one of the largest importers of slaves in the western hemisphere.⁸

Black slaves constituted the bottom tier of society in St. Domingue, behind *gens de colour*, *petit blancs*, and *grand blancs*. *Gens de colour* occupied an ambiguous position in St. Domingue. They were free and able to engage in the local economy as skilled and unskilled workers and occasionally became wealthy landowners, but they were often denied social equality. The impetus to sustain such inequity came primarily from *petit blancs*. Angry at the free people of color's growing economic success, they pressured St. Dominguan authorities to create laws to protect their social position, sometimes to no avail. *Grand blancs* were at the top of the scale. Primarily absentee land owners, they often lived far away from the island, usually in France, and had their property overseen by an island deputy—often a *petit blanc* or a *gens de colour*. *Grand blancs* were also colonial administrators, responsible for enacting laws in St. Domingue.⁹

By the late eighteenth century, social relationships in St. Domingue were fraught with tension. *Gens de colour* were angry at *blancs* who denied them social justice; *petit blancs* were angry at *gens de colour* for encroaching on their place in society, an encroachment they believed *grand blancs* facilitated; and *grand blancs* were uneasy at the rising economic power of *gens de colour* and the complaints of *petit blancs*, not to mention the home government, which they felt denied them their due profits. And slaves, who represented roughly ninety percent of the colony's population, were resentful of all their social betters—for their money, their freedom,

might devour them; fastened them near to nests of ants or wasps; made them eat their excrement, drink their urine, and lick the saliva of other slaves.... [A]ll the evidence shows that these bestial practices were normal features of slave life." C.L.R. James, *Black Jacobins*, 12-13.

⁸ David Geggus, "Saint-Domingue on the Eve of the Haitian Revolution," 3-4.

⁹ John Garrius, "Saint-Domingue's Free People of Color and the Tools of Revolution," 50; Lester Langley, *The Americas in the Age of Revolution: 1750-1850*, 94, 104, 106.

and their participation in, or toleration of, the violent slave regime. Having evolved from obscurity into a highly lucrative colony deeply divided by race and class and dependant on slave labor, St. Domingue by 1791 had become a powder keg in search of a spark.¹⁰

The French Revolution helped provide the spark.¹¹ The Declaration of the Rights of Man outlined the social rights that *gens de colour* in St. Domingue had long sought;¹² initially denied full inclusion by the revolutionary government in France, however, they took up arms in St. Domingue in October 1790. Although rapidly and forcefully repressed by *petit blancs*, the uprising shocked the home government into granting French citizenship to some *gens de colour* in St. Domingue.¹³ This ruling enraged *blancs* in the island, specifically the *petit blancs*, who felt that their social position had been sacrificed to appease the *gens de colour*.¹⁴ While *gens de colour* and *blancs* fought, slaves in St. Domingue, largely ignored since the outbreak of the French Revolution, sensed that the time was ripe to overthrow slavery. In August 1791, led by a voodoo priest named Dutty Boukman, hundreds of slaves descended into Le Cap, St.

¹⁰ Langley, *The Americas in the Age of Revolution*, 94, 104, 106-107; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 19; David Byron Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 159; Garrigus, "Saint-Domingue's Free People of Color and the Tools of Revolution," 50.

¹¹ As Jeremy Popkin notes, however, the Haitian Revolution played a part in radicalizing the French Revolution. Jeremy Popkin, "The French Revolution's Other Island," 199-205.

¹² Ratified by the France's National Assembly in August 1789, the Declaration of the Rights of Man outlined the rights of French citizenship. Social rank no longer mattered. Article 1, for instance, states "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good." For an examination of how bourgeois concepts of freedom and liberty were transmitted from Europe to the Caribbean, see Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World*, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).

¹³ Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, 36; John Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 247-249.

¹⁴ On May 15, 1791, the National Assembly in France issued a decree that granted French citizenship to certain free people of color living in St. Domingue: "The National Assembly decrees that the legislature will never deliberate on the political status of people of color who were not born of free fathers or mothers without the previous, free, and unprompted request of the colonies; that the presently existing Colonial Assemblies will remain in place, but that the Parish Assemblies and future Colonial Assemblies will admit the people of color born of free fathers and mothers if they otherwise have the required status." "Law on the Colonies, with an Explanation of the Reasons That Have Determined Its Content."

Domingue's most prosperous port city, and killed *blancs* and *gens de colour*.¹⁵ Thus began the Haitian Revolution.¹⁶

Ex-slave Toussaint Louverture quickly emerged as a leader of the rebelling slaves, a development that did not escape the notice of French officials who wanted to maintain an economic presence in the Caribbean.¹⁷ In 1794 they employed Toussaint's services—and the services of his men—to restore peace in St. Domingue, which was, by then, under assault from France's European adversaries.¹⁸ As a general in the French army, Toussaint coordinated victories over the armies of Spain and Britain, and in 1798 he returned St. Domingue to French control.¹⁹ Yet Napoleon felt Toussaint, in stabilizing St. Domingue, had amassed too much power.²⁰ To reorient the black general to his duties to France, Napoleon sent a large naval fleet to St. Domingue in 1801. Upon arrival, Napoleon's men met military opposition from Toussaint and his supporters, who believed the French had arrived to re-enslave them.²¹

¹⁵ James, 24, 84, 88; H.P. Davis, *Black Democracy*, 34-35.

¹⁶ This is a blunt rendering of the causes of the Haitian Revolution. For more thorough and therefore more satisfying accounts, see Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, (Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990); Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment*, (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2008); John Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁷ Jeremy Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 44.

¹⁸ The French Revolution brought Britain and Spain into conflict with France. Both countries wanted to take control of St. Domingue and re-establish slavery. James, 133-137, 175; Fick, 159.

¹⁹ T.G. Steward, *The Haitian Revolution, 1791-1804*, 83-84; Ott, 83; David Byron Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 166; Langley, 122; James, 219.

²⁰ One cannot blame Napoleon for drawing such conclusions. In 1801 Toussaint, without consent of the First Consul, drew up a constitution for St. Domingue. In this document Toussaint granted himself "the reins [of government]...for the rest of his glorious life." Louverture, "Constitution of the French Colony of Saint-Domingue, Title 8: Of the Government, Article 28."

²¹ As the French fleet arrived off the coast of St. Domingue, Toussaint supposedly said, "Here come the enslavers of our race. All France is coming to Hayti, to try to put the chains on our limbs." In a *fait accompli* France had abolished slavery in the colony in 1794. Toussaint, however, might have misjudged Napoleon's intentions. In a letter of instruction to the officer overseeing the expedition to St. Domingue, Napoleon said that the "French nation will never place chains on men it has recognized as free. There all the blacks will live in Saint-Domingue." Yet in that same letter Napoleon did make clear what he wanted done with Toussaint: if all goes to plan, after the expedition "Toussaint...will no longer exist." William Welles Brown, *St. Domingo: Its Revolutions and its Patriots. A Lecture*, 22. Napoleon Bonaparte, "Notes to Serve as Instructions to Give to the Captain General Leclerc, Chapter I, Chapter II, & Chapter III"; Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History*, 36. For a detailed account of Napoleon's plan for St. Domingue, which initially did not appear to include a reinstatement of slavery, see Philippe

The leader of the French expedition, Charles-Victor-Emmanuel Leclerc, convinced Toussaint to surrender in 1802, and former slave Jean-Jacques Dessalines stepped into Toussaint's place.²² From the mountains of St. Domingue, Dessalines and black rebels launched devastating guerrilla raids on Napoleon's forces. "You have to have seen this land to have an idea of the difficulties you encounter each step," bemoaned Leclerc. "I haven't seen anything that compares to it in the Alps."²³ Ravaged and demoralized, the French returned home in defeat in November 1803; two months later, Dessalines proclaimed St. Domingue independent and forever free of human bondage. He renamed the country Haiti to honor the island's mountains and its original inhabitants, and he forbade most whites from living there.²⁴ After twelve years of bloodshed, the revolution was over and slavery was dead. The black rebels had turned the world upside-down.

It would be difficult to overstate how much the revolt shocked whites living in St. Domingue and abroad. Belief in the natural inferiority of blacks frequently justified their enslavement.²⁵ Yet in St. Domingue black slaves had proved anything but inferior. Led by Toussaint and Dessalines, they abolished slavery and defeated the most sophisticated white armies in the world. They also exhibited a capacity for self-governance. Haiti's constitution situated the country as the second republic in the western hemisphere.²⁶ In demonstrating statecraft and military prowess, black slaves accomplished feats supposedly reserved for white

R. Girard, "Napoleon Bonaparte and the Emancipation Issue in Saint-Domingue, 1799-1803," *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 4, (Fall 2009), 587-618.

²² Karin Schuller, "From Liberalism to Racism: German Historians, Journalists, and the Haitian Revolution from the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries," 24; James, 329.

²³ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 268-269.

²⁴ Article 12 of the 1805 Haitian Constitution says: "No white man, regardless of his nationality, may set foot in this territory as a master or landowner, nor will he ever be able to acquire any property." The Haitian Constitution 1805; Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 134, 136-138.

²⁵ Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black*, 91-98.

²⁶ The Haitian Constitution, for instance, promises Haitian citizens certain rights, including "equality before the law," which applies to "everyone, whether it punishes or protects"; the right to choose their leader, as the "crown is elective and nonhereditary"; and, because the "law does not recognize any dominant religion," the right to worship freely. "The Haitian Constitution," Article(s) 3, 4, 23, 50, and 51.

genius. The Haitian Revolution assaulted the natural order of things—at least in Haiti, black was now over white. Upon learning of the slaves’ success, whites, especially those living in slave societies, grew terrified.

Such was the case in the newly-formed United States. Accounts of the revolt began appearing in American newspapers shortly after the attack on Le Cap in 1791. These accounts—sometimes hyperbolic and unsophisticated, but compelling nonetheless—forced white Americans to face their worst nightmare. “[N]egroes” in St. Domingue, reported the *Philadelphia General Advertiser* on October 11, 1791, having been “inspired...with ideas of liberty...[and] revenge,” fought “under a bloody flag, having on it a motto, denouncing death to all whites!”²⁷ A report published in the *Maryland Journal* in 1793 struck a similar tone. The paper lamented the fate of St. Domingue’s white population, the “unfortunate citizens of St. Domingo,” who had been assaulted and killed by “black savages.”²⁸

Stories like these terrified white Americans. Bryan Edwards book about the slave uprising, which was published in 1797, compounded these fears. An English-born planter and slave-owner living in Jamaica, Edwards traveled to St. Domingue in 1791 to learn why slaves had revolted.²⁹ After consulting a “mass of evidence, and important documents,” he penned *An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo*.³⁰ Edwards argued that abolitionists had infected slaves in St. Domingue with thoughts of liberty. As a result, slaves revolted. Out of the mountains, Edwards wrote,

[u]pwards of one hundred thousand savage people, habituated to the barbarities of Africa, avail[ed] themselves on the silence and obscurity of the night, and [fell] on the peaceful and

²⁷ *Philadelphia General Advertiser*, “St. Domingo Disturbances,” 10-11-1791, No. 322, Page 1, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. To retrieve this information, I accessed the Early American Newspaper database through Indiana University’s library website: <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.lib.indiana.edu>. Unless otherwise noted, every newspaper referenced in this project came from this database.

²⁸ *Maryland Journal*, 8-20-1793, Vol. XX, Issue 67, Page 2, Baltimore, Maryland.

²⁹ Bryan Edwards, *An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of San Domingo*, ii-iii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, ii.

unsuspicious planters, like so many famished tygers thirsting for human blood. Revolt, conflagration and massacre, every where mark their progress; and death, in all its horrors, or cruelties and outrages, compared to which immediate death is mercy, await alike the old and the young, the matron, the virgin, and the helpless infant...[A]nd, in a few dismal hours, the most fertile and beautiful plains in the world are converted into one vast field of carnage:—a wilderness of desolation!³¹

An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo served as a warning to white people living in slave societies: their lives depended on supplanting the language of freedom.

Edward's book was popular among whites in the United States,³² and it reinforced the horrifying accounts of the revolt that appeared in American periodicals; but printed materials served as only one reminder of the slave uprising. Beginning in 1791, refugees fleeing St. Domingue, mostly *grand blancs*, poured into the United States. And they often brought their slaves, who had experienced the revolt firsthand. Initially, white Americans were not troubled by the potentially rebellious slaves in their midst, and thus sought to help the white refugees, as a 1793 petition from the United States House of Representatives shows: "Resolved. That the President of the United States [George Washington] be empowered to direct a sum not exceeding 10,000 dollars, to be paid for the relief of the indigent emigrants from the island of St. Domingo now residing in the United States."³³ Indeed, in city after city, fundraisers and charities solicited funds for the white exiles from St. Domingue.³⁴

³¹ Ibid., 63-64.

³² Edwards was a man of letters, a Fellow of the Royal Society of London, and his work was pored over by people on both sides of the Atlantic. Olwyn Blouet, "Bryan Edwards, F.R.S., 1743-1800," 215-222.

³³ Found in *The Weekly Register*, 02-18-1794, Vol. III, Issue 13, Page 1, Norwich, Connecticut.

³⁴ White, 61-63. American newspapers encouraged people to help the refugees. In 1793, for instance, the *General Advertiser*, published in Philadelphia, ran a story entitled "St. Domingo Sufferers." The author found "the humanity of the citizens of the United States...certainly very fortunate." They had assisted "the unhappy fugitives" from St. Domingue, "who [had been] reduced to the greatest want." The author hoped more Americans would help out so "something more permanent [can] be proposed and adopted" to assist the white émigrés. In that same year a newspaper in New York, the *Daily Advertiser*, printed the minutes of a meeting held to gather funds for "the distressed citizens from" St. Domingue who now stayed in the United States. "Resolved," read part of the report: "that the sum of one thousand dollars be paid to the order of Messrs. Vaughan, Le Maigre and Wachsmuth, the committee of distribution, by Mr. Smith the treasurer, in addition to the sum already ordered, and that they continue

As the 1790s progressed, however, and stories of the revolt circulated throughout the United States, white Americans began eyeing the human cargo of the St. Dominguan refugees suspiciously. Rebellion now appeared to reside in the United States, and white Americans panicked; confronted with the Haitian Revolution both in print and in flesh, many, even those who once identified as anti-slavery, grew indifferent or increasingly indifferent to the plight of blacks in bondage while others closed ranks behind a pro-slavery platform.³⁵ Self-preservation had trumped idealism.

Politics in the early republic reflected this development, as legislators worked to protect America and American slavery from the Haitian Revolution. President George Washington, for instance, promised to help the French squash “the alarming insur[rec]tion of the Negroes” in St. Domingue.³⁶ His successor, John Adams, chartered a similar course. Wanting to confine the revolt to St. Domingue, Adams temporarily restricted American trade with the rebelling colony.³⁷ Thomas Jefferson, the ambivalent anti-slavery advocate who became President of the United States during a particularly violent phase of the Haitian Revolution, took drastic measures to combat the seemingly contagious insurrection. Encouraged, writes a historian, by “the ideologically and racially based hostility of southern planters to the Republic of Blacks,” Jefferson severed diplomatic ties with Haiti.³⁸ What took place nationally also took hold locally, as officials in several southern states passed laws constraining slave movement, and often

to extend relief to the sufferers as they have heretofore done.” *General Advertiser*, “St. Domingo Sufferers,” 07-31-1793, Issue, 866, Page 2, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; *Daily Advertiser*, “St. Domingo Sufferers,” 08-07-1793, Volume IX, Issue 2645, Page 2, New York, New York.

³⁵ David Brion Davis, 173-174; Jordan, 378-379, 384-385.

³⁶ “Letter to Ternant,” 09-24-1791, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Vol. 9. Washington wrote relentlessly about the revolt during its early stages. As the president of a slave-holding nation, it scared him. See *The Papers*, Vol. 9, 43, 48, 50, 335, 339.

³⁷ Tim Matthewson, “Jefferson and Haiti,” 215.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 243; W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade*, 67.

refused to hear petitions on emancipation, feeling that black mobility and discussion of freedom had helped cause the conflagration in Haiti.³⁹

Yet legislation did not necessarily ensure peace—or peace of mind—and white Americans obsessed over the Haitian Revolution into the nineteenth century, especially when it appeared that the uprising inspired American slaves to rebellion. In 1802, President Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to Rufus King, United State Minister to Great Britain, which revealed this obsession. “The course of things” in St. Domingue, Jefferson said, “appears to have given a considerable impulse to the minds of the slaves in different parts of the U.S. A great disposition to insurgency has manifested itself among them, which, in one instance, in the state of Virginia, broke out into actual insurrection.”⁴⁰ Here Jefferson referred to Gabriel’s insurrection, which was stopped before it started. Though no direct evidence tied Gabriel to Haiti, notable circumstantial evidence suggests a link.⁴¹ Whatever the case, frightened white Americans perceived such a connection. Gabriel and dozens of his followers were executed and slaves in America were subjected to increased scrutiny and abuse; scared whites, as before, thought more slave restrictions would keep Haiti at bay.⁴²

These restrictions proved incapable of stifling the revolutionary spirit of slaves living in the Orleans Territory in early 1811. In January territorial-Governor W.C.C. Claiborne frantically reported that “Negroes in the County of German Coast...are in a state of Insurrection” and

³⁹ Virginia, Georgia, Maryland, Louisiana, and North Carolina passed such laws. *Digest of the Laws of Louisiana*, II, 383-384; *Digest of the Laws of the State of Georgia*, 442, 455-456; *Laws of the State of North Carolina*, 786-87; *The Laws of Virginia, 1792-1806*, 122-130; and, *Digest of the Laws of Louisiana*, II, 383-384; *The Laws of Maryland*, Vol. II, Chap. 75. For more on how southerners connected emancipation to the Haitian Revolution and slave insurrection see Bledsoe, 52-53; Freehling, 90-93, 121.

⁴⁰ Jefferson to King, July 13, 1802, found in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804*, 162.

⁴¹ Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 87, 97.

⁴² Herbert Aptheker, *American Slave Revolts*, 219-222; Michael Nicholls, *Whispers of Rebellion*, 38; Ibid, “‘Holy Insurrection’: Spinning Gabriel’s Conspiracy,” 55.

killing whites.⁴³ Survivors of the revolt claimed they had fled “the horrors of St. Domingo.”⁴⁴

That many rebels were recent immigrants from Haiti stripped this statement of hyperbole.

Facing a Haitian Revolution, Governor Claiborne sent a “detachment of U.S. Troops and two Companies of volunteer Militia” to execute the “Insurgents” and ordered “a strict police among slaves to [be] maintained.”⁴⁵ Claiborne’s measures helped bring the rebellion to an end a few days later. To prevent another Haitian-style uprising from occurring in Louisiana, Claiborne promised that “the measures I have ordered, with a view to the public safety and tranquility,” especially the increased policing of slave quarters, “will be continued.”⁴⁶

Commentary on and responses to insurrections planned by Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner followed a similar trajectory. Vesey, a slave who bought his freedom in South Carolina in 1799, had spent time in St. Domingue and spoke glowingly of its revolt.⁴⁷ Authorities in South Carolina took these aspects of Vesey’s life seriously, and they executed him after exposing his plan for slave rebellion in 1822. Vesey’s connections to the Haitian Revolution elicited reaction from lawmakers and planters across America. Wanting to inoculate the United States from a massive insurrection, like the one that struck St. Domingue, they further restricted slave behavior.⁴⁸ These measures failed. On August 21, 1831—the anniversary of the attack on Le Cap—Nat Turner led a slave rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia that claimed dozens of lives and sent America into hysterics.⁴⁹ Authorities saw Turner, like Gabriel, the Orleans rebels,

⁴³ W.C.C. Claiborne, “To the Secretary of State,” New Orleans, January 9, 1811, in *Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne*, Volume V, 95.

⁴⁴ Aptheker, 249.

⁴⁵ Claiborne, “To the Secretary of State,” New Orleans, January 9, 1811, and “To the Several Colonels of Regiments; and the several Parish Judges on the Coast,” New Orleans, January 10, 1811, in *Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne*, Volume V, 95-96.

⁴⁶ Ibid, “To the Secretary of State,” New Orleans, January 12, 1811, in *ibid*, 97.

⁴⁷ At Vesey’s trial, a slave who Vesey had failed to recruit said that Vesey promised “that a large army from St. Domingo...were coming to help us.” Edward Pearson, *Designs against Charleston*, 23, 171.

⁴⁸ Douglas Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 211-222.

⁴⁹ Aptheker, 298-303.

and Vesey before him, as having aspired to recreate Haiti, and they summarily executed him.⁵⁰ “The Turner Cataclysm”⁵¹ had delivered America to the precipice of St. Domingue. As a result, frightened defenders of slavery again expanded the machinery of control over American slaves.⁵² Ironically, the Haitian Revolution, the only successful slave revolt in history, justified strengthening America’s peculiar institution.

These repressive legal measures to secure slavery met resistance from American abolitionists, who had been unleashed by the reformist impulses of the Second Great Awakening. Unlike anti-slavery advocates in the early republic, they used the Haitian Revolution as a threat. William Lloyd Garrison’s anti-slavery newspaper, *The Liberator*, ran hundreds of stories about Haiti during the antebellum period. In 1831 the paper argued that if slavery was not abolished, “[St. Domingue] will soon be enacted on an American stage.”⁵³ Harriet Beecher Stowe echoed Garrison’s argument in the very popular *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.⁵⁴ Alfred, the novel’s southern aristocrat, defended using violence to maintain order on his plantation to his brother, Augustine. To counter Alfred, Augustine called on the Haitian Revolution: “We are breaking all humanizing ties, and making them brute beasts; and, if they get the upper hand, such we shall find them.... [A]nd [i]t makes a terrible slip when they get up...[like] in St. Domingo, for instance.”⁵⁵

Histories and speeches about the Haitian Revolution by American abolitionists often made similar claims. In his 1853 biography of Toussaint Louverture, Reverend John Beard

⁵⁰ Alfred Hunt, *Haiti’s Influence on Antebellum America*, 128.

⁵¹ Aptheker, 293.

⁵² Hunt, 117-118, 119-120, 121.

⁵³ *The Liberator*, 5-14-1831, Volume 1, Issue 20, Page 77.

⁵⁴ The demand for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* extended into Dixie. While traveling in the South in the early 1850s, Frederick Law Olmsted encountered peddlers discreetly selling copies of Stowe’s novel. “Among the peddlers there were two of ‘cheap literature,’ and among their yellow covers, each had two or three copies of the cheap edition (pamphlet) of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin.’ They did not cry it out as they did the other books they had, but held it forth among others, so its title could be seen.” The book’s attack on slavery and reference to Haiti made selling it in the South an awkward task. Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 269-270.

⁵⁵ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 297-298.

argued that St. Dominguan slaves revolted because they had endured “sufferings” and “punishments.”⁵⁶ Moved by Beard’s work, William Wells Brown gave detailed lectures on the Haitian Revolution during the 1850s. In 1854 he told an audience in Philadelphia that southerners should “tremble when they call to mind” how slaves had descended from “the mountains” of St. Domingue and killed their masters. Only peaceful emancipation could keep the feared “St. Domingo [away from] South Carolina and Louisiana.”⁵⁷

Others opposed to slavery, especially David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet, who tilted accounts of Haiti in an even more radical direction. In *Appeal To the Coloured Citizens of the World*—published in 1829—Walker told slaves in the United States to reenact “Hayti, the glory of the blacks and terror of the tyrants,” on American soil.⁵⁸ Walker’s *Appeal*, in turn, proved inspirational to Henry Highland Garnet.⁵⁹ In “An Address to the Slaves of America,” first delivered in 1843, Garnet begged his listeners to resemble the hero Toussiant and let your “motto be resistance!”⁶⁰ With respect to Haiti’s possible impact on America’s peculiar institution, Walker and Garnet differed from both abolitionists and pro-slavery ideologues. Indeed, the Haitian Revolution, in justifying competing positions on human bondage, had raised the rhetorical stakes in the debate over slavery in the United States.

If the Haitian Revolution raised the rhetorical stakes in the slavery debate, it also made it more violent. The French defeat at Haiti, wrote W.E.B. Du Bois, forced Napoleon to sell the Louisiana Territory to the United States “for a song.”⁶¹ More land brought more problems, however, as Americans fought over slavery in the trans-Missouri West in both political and

⁵⁶ Reverend John Beard, *The Life of Toussaint L’ouverture*, 318.

⁵⁷ William Wells Brown, *St. Domingo*, 25, 31, 32.

⁵⁸ David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, 21.

⁵⁹ For details on how Walker helped shape Garnet’s thinking regarding slavery in America see Joel Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet*, 51, 52-54.

⁶⁰ Henry Highland Garnet, “An Address to the Slaves of America,” 5-6.

⁶¹ Du Bois, 50.

paramilitary battles.⁶² The most infamous skirmish began in the Kansas territory in 1856. In this bitter and bloody fight, pro- and anti-slavery forces struggled relentlessly to make the territory over in their image.⁶³ “I tell you,” proclaimed a proslavery advocate involved in the fight, “to mark every scoundrel among you that is the least tainted with free-soilism, abolitionism, and exterminate him.”⁶⁴ The acquisition of land as a result of the Haitian Revolution helped bring the United States to the brink of civil war.

Born in 1800 and executed in 1859, John Brown lived in an America defined by the Haitian Revolution. It stands to reason, then, that the insurrection impacted John Brown, even if served as nothing more than a backdrop to his life. Yet it was more than that. The revolt excited Brown: he read and spoke about it often. More importantly, it led him to change his view of abolitionism in the 1840s. This ideological shift, which was marked Brown’s rejection of pacifism for violent abolitionism, was based on events in St. Domingue.

⁶² James McPherson, *Ordeal By Fire*, 96-99.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 104; Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas*, 1-8.

⁶⁴ Sara Robinson, *Kansas; Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 14.

II. A VIOLENT TRANSFORMATION

We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.

1 Corinthians 15:51

In November 1847, Frederick Douglass eagerly approached a residence in Springfield, Massachusetts. Rarely did one meet a white man ready to wage war on slavery. But there he stood in the doorway, austere in appearance, hand extended, welcoming the famed ex-slave to his home and dinner table. Such, wrote Douglass, “was Captain John Brown.”¹

Dinner passed without incident. Brown entertained his guest and family with small talk, which helped divert attention from the plainness of the meal. After dinner, however, Brown was all business. He discussed only how to kill slavery in America.² His eyes were “full of light and fire.” Slaveholders, he roared, “had forfeited their right to live,” and “slaves had the right to gain their liberty in any way they could.”³ He spoke incessantly about how mountains would help

¹ Douglass said: “His name had been mentioned to me by several prominent colored men, among whom were the Reverend Henry Highland Garnet and J.W. Loguen. In speaking of him their voices would drop to a whisper, and what they said of him made me very eager to see and know him. Fortunately I was invited to see him in his own house.... In person he was lean, strong, and sinewy, of the best New England mould, built for times of trouble, fitted to grapple with the flintiest hardships. Clad in plain American woolen, shod in boots of cowhide leather, and wearing a cravat of the same substantial material.” Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 259-260.

² “My first meal,” wrote Douglass, “passed under the misnomer of tea...and beef soup, cabbage, and potatoes.... [At the dinner table] his words commanded earnest attention.” After dinner Brown shifted topic of conversation. He “denounced slavery in look and language fierce and bitter.” *Ibid.*, 260-261.

³*Ibid.*, 261.

achieve this end. Pointing to the Alleghenies of Virginia on a large map of the United States, Brown told Douglass:

These mountains are the basis of my plan. God has given the strength of the hills to freedom, they were placed here for the emancipation of the Negro race; they are full of natural forts, where one man for defense will be equal to a hundred for attack; they are full also of good hiding places, where large numbers of brave men could be concealed, and baffle and elude pursuit for a long time. I know these mountains well.... My plan then is to take at first about twenty-five picked men, and begin on a small scale; supply them arms and ammunition, post them in squads of fives on a line of twenty-five miles, the most persuasive and judicious of whom shall go down to the fields from time to time, as opportunity offers, and induce the slaves to join them, seeking and selecting the most restless and daring [for revolt].⁴

Commentary on the Haitian Revolution often recalled how guerrilla attacks launched from mountains had helped black rebels in St. Domingue destroy slavery. Brown's conversation with Douglass reflected Brown's celebration of this type of revolutionary violence, a celebration that had been decades in the making. Heavily influenced by his father, Brown spent most of his life as a pacifist abolitionist. Brown's rejection of pacifism began shortly after his bankruptcy in 1842. With his massive debt wiped away, Brown reflected on his peaceful approach to emancipation and decided that ridding America of slavery required something more drastic. The Haitian Revolution presented an obvious example of how slavery could be forcibly removed from society. This chapter tracks how John Brown came to embrace the Haitian Revolution as his template for abolitionism around 1842—a template he revealed to Frederick Douglass five years later.

John Brown was born in 1800 to Owen and Ruth Brown in Torrington, Connecticut. When Brown was just five, however, Owen moved his family to Hudson, Ohio. Ruth died shortly after.⁵ John was devastated by the loss, though he still managed to enjoy childhood in

⁴ Ibid., 262.

⁵ Owen Brown, "Owen Brown's Autobiography," in F.B. Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown*, 7-8.

the Western Reserve. “[A]t [s]ix years old,” he would later report, “[I] began to be a rambler in the wild new country finding birds and squirrels and sometimes a wild Turkey’s nest.”⁶ While not searching the woods of Hudson, Brown was with his father, an anti-slavery advocate.⁷ More specifically, Owen was a pacifist anti-slavery advocate who never forwarded a violent solution to human bondage, and he instructed his offspring to share his perspective.⁸ A devoted son, Brown remained true to his father’s instruction for decades.⁹

John Brown left Hudson in 1816 to receive ministerial training at a Congregationalist seminary in Connecticut, but he did not stay long. Inflammation of the eyes forced him to return to Hudson in 1817.¹⁰ Back in Ohio, Brown worked as a tanner and a land surveyor and, after

⁶ “After getting to Ohio in 1805,” he recorded in his 1857 autobiography, I entered “the school of *adversity*...[and] pine[d] after my mother for years.” John Brown, “The Childhood of John Brown,” in *ibid.*, 13.

⁷ When possible, wrote Owen in his autobiography, “I kept my children mostly around me” after the death of Ruth. Owen Brown, “Owen Brown’s Autobiography,” in *ibid.*, 8-9.

⁸ There is little documentation about Owen Brown’s hatred of slavery. From what I can tell, he referenced it twice, in his autobiography and an untitled document written in 1850. In the former, Owen said he “denounced slavery as a great sin” in 1790—he probably meant 1791—after having read a sermon by Jonathan Edwards. The sermon which Owen referenced was almost certainly “The Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade, and of the Slavery of Africans.” Edwards delivered this sermon in 1791 in New Haven, Connecticut, not far from where Owen lived at the time. This sermon denounced slavery and the slave trade as unjust. “Africans,” Edwards pronounced, “are by nature equally entitled to freedom as we are; and therefore we have no more right to enslave, or to afford aid to enslave them, than they have to do the same to us.” But Edwards did not suggest that Americans violently overthrow the institution. It seems that Edwards’s pacifist message stayed with Owen for the rest of his life. In 1850, for instance, Owen, who had less than six years to live, authored an untitled statement that labeled slavery a sin but did not prescribe violence as a means of freeing American slaves. Owen Brown, “Owen Brown’s Autobiography,” in Sanborn, 8-9; Owen Brown, “Untitled Document,” in *ibid.*, 10-11; Stephen Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, 8; Jonathan Edwards, “The Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade, and of the Slavery of Africans.”

⁹ In his autobiography written in 1857, John Brown mentioned when he became a “determined abolitionist.” He was not yet a teenager, and he was alone on a cattle drive “more than one hundred miles from home” during the War of 1812. Tired from walking, he stopped at the house of a white man. The man owned a slave and, according to Brown, he treated his human property harshly: “[T]he *negro boy*...was badly clothed, poorly fed, & lodged in cold weather, & beaten...with Iron Shovels or any other thing that came first to hand.” Having seen this, Brown swore “*Eternal war with slavery*.” There are several problems with this story. Why would Owen Brown trust his young son with the family cattle during war? Moreover, Brown’s transformation, as he described it, appears too dramatic, too convenient, and too neat. This has to do with when Brown wrote his autobiography. In 1857 Brown was famous for his participation in “Bleeding Kansas.” He wanted to use his popularity to gain financial support for his attack on Harpers Ferry. Brown’s autobiography, therefore, served as propaganda for his own cause. To a possible investor, Brown, the radical, lifelong opponent of slavery, would appear more attractive than the truth: John Brown was relatively new to the idea of violent abolitionism. Thus if Brown entertained anti-slavery sentiments at a young age, he did so because of his contact with his father, not because of his experience while driving cattle. John Brown, “The Childhood of John Brown,” in Sanborn, 13.

¹⁰ Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown: A Biography Fifty Years After*, 17.

earning a little money, he married Dianthe Lusk.¹¹ By 1825 John and Dianthe had three children and a home in Hudson.¹² The cost of supporting a family in Hudson, however, did not comport with Brown's meager income, and, in pursuit of more money, he moved his family to Randolph, Pennsylvania in 1826.¹³

Because it was still a developing community, Brown figured he could make a fortune in Randolph. He was right. As a tanner, surveyor, and postmaster in the town, Brown grew quite wealthy, but misfortune followed.¹⁴ "We are again smarting under the rod of our Heavenly Father," Brown wrote his father from Pennsylvania in 1832 after Dianthe had passed away.¹⁵ Just six years after their move, Brown lost his wife, and his children—who now numbered seven—lost their mother. Heartbroken, Brown thought he might never recover.¹⁶ Determined that his children would have a mother and that he would have a wife, however, Brown pulled himself together and married Mary Ann Day a year later. Together they had several children and remained together until Brown died.¹⁷

In November 1834 Brown wrote about emancipation for the first time. His comments came in a letter to his brother Frederick:

¹¹ Dianthe's brother, Milton Lusk, provided a fairly detailed account of Brown's courtship with and marriage to Dianthe. Dianthe had kept house for "John Brown at the old log-cabin where he had his tannery." The two started dating almost immediately, which bothered Milton. "When Dianthe was married, I would not go to the wedding. I did not get along very well with [John]." Milton Lusk, "Untitled Document," in Sanborn, 33; John Brown, "The Childhood of John Brown," in *ibid.*, 16, 17.

¹² *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹³ W.E.B. Du Bois, *John Brown*, 17; Robert Penn Warren, *John Brown*, 25.

¹⁴ Oates, 19.

¹⁵ John Brown, "Dear Father," Randolph, Pennsylvania, 1832, in *A John Brown Reader*, 41.

¹⁶ After Dianthe's passing, Brown told his father that: "My own health is so poor that I have barely the strength to give you a short history of what passed since I wrote you last." John Brown, "Dear Father," Randolph, Pennsylvania, August 11, 1832, in *A John Brown Reader*, 41.

¹⁷ Mary Ann Day was a resident of Troy, Pennsylvania, which was adjacent to Randolph. When she met Brown she was only sixteen. The widowed Brown took a liking to her almost immediately and wrote her a letter proposing marriage. Mary consented to his advances. Villard, 24-25.

I have been trying to devise some means whereby I might do something in a practical way for my fellow-men who are in bondage, and having fully consulted the feelings of my wife and my three boys, we have agreed to get at least one negro boy or youth, and bring him up as we do our own,—viz., give him a good English education, learn him what we can about the history of the world, about business, about general subjects, and, above all, try to teach him the fear of God.... If the young blacks of our country could once become enlightened, it would almost assuredly operate on slavery like firing powder confined in rock, and all slaveholders know it well. Witness their heaven-daring laws against teaching blacks. If once the Christians in the free states set to work in earnest in teaching the blacks, the people of the slaveholding States would find themselves constitutionally driven to set about the work of emancipation immediately.¹⁸

Clearly, the Brown who would meet Frederick Douglass in 1847 had not arrived. As his father had instructed him to be, Brown was a pacifist anti-slavery advocate who argued that moral instruction, not violent revolution, offered the best way to free slaves. Thus Brown resembled most persons opposed to slavery in the 1830s. As one historian points out, abolitionists and anti-slavery proponents of this era, in addition to advocating passive resistance, frequently told slaves or newly freed slaves to, when possible, “regularly [attend] public worship services..., abjure drinking and... ‘frolicking and amusements’ that ‘beget habits of dissipation and vice.’” This was John Brown’s message in 1834 and would be for almost another decade.¹⁹

Brown’s shifting fortunes, however, kept him from carrying out his plan to create a slave school. An economic bust that hit Randolph in the early 1830s destroyed Brown’s credit. This development meant that Brown could no longer pay debts. It also meant that he had to close his tannery and abandon his plan to finance slave education.²⁰ His situation was so bad, in fact, that in 1835 he debated turning “everything I could into shingles as one way to realize cash.”²¹ Brown faced the real possibility of not being able to feed his ever-growing family. But luck

¹⁸ John Brown, “Dear Brother,” Randolph, Pennsylvania, Nov. 21, 1834, *A John Brown Reader*, 42-43.

¹⁹ This quotation belongs to historian Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 121-122. For a similar take on abolitionist ideology, see Michael Bernath, *Confederate Minds*, 36-38, 52.

²⁰ Oates, 33.

²¹ A letter Brown wrote to a friend in 1835 further highlights his tough times in Randolph: “I know of no possible way to get along without [money]. I had borrowed it for a few days to settle up a number of honorary debts which I could not leave unpaid and come away. It is utterly impossible to sell anything for ready cash or to collect debts.” Letter found in Villard, 26

came Brown's way. An Ohio businessman, Zenas Kent, contacted Brown about starting a tannery in Franklin Mills, Ohio, and, given his dire situation, Brown could not say no.²²

The Browns arrived in Franklin Mills in May 1835, though a tannery no longer interested Brown; land speculation financed by credit, he argued, would solve his financial woes.²³ The Panic of 1837, however, stripped Brown's investments of their worth, and he spent many hours in Ohio courts trying to fend off angry creditors.²⁴ Again, Brown feared—with good reason—that his family would starve. So he misappropriated funds he had been lent for a cattle-drive and for the purchase of large amounts of wool. This move helped keep the Browns alive, but Brown's lenders quickly found him out and requested immediate repayment. Their requests went unheeded. Brown was broke; he could only apologize. "I have found it hard," he wrote a man he had cheated, "to take up my pen to record, & to publish my own shame, & abuse of the confidence of those whom I esteem, & who have treated me as a friend, & as a brother."²⁵ For most of the 1830s, debt ordered Brown's life.

While his financial troubles loomed, Brown's views on slavery did not evolve. In the immediate years after arriving in Franklin Hills in 1835, Brown still argued that peaceful protest remained the best approach to combating slavery and its supporters. In 1837, for instance, Brown attended an anti-slavery meeting in Cleveland, Ohio, where he railed against the state's

²² Ibid., *ibid.*; Boyer, *The Legend of John Brown*, 233.

²³ Oates, 34-37.

²⁴ "On the records of the Portage County Court of Common Pleas at Ravenna, Ohio," writes Oswald Garrison Villard, "are no less than twenty-one lawsuits in which John Brown figured as defendant during the years from 1820 to 1845. Of these, thirteen were actions brought to recover money loaned on promissory notes either to Brown singly or in company with others." Villard, 36-37. For a more detailed examination of how the panic affected Ohio, see Reginald McGrane, *The Panic of 1837: Some Financial Problems of the Jacksonian Era*, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965); Charles Huntington, *A History of Banking and Currency in Ohio Before the Civil War*, (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio Archaeological and Historical Publications, 1915).

²⁵ John Brown, "George Kellogg, Esqr., Dear Sir," Franklin Mills, Ohio, August, 27, 1839, *A John Brown Reader*, 46.

black laws.²⁶ As before, Brown posited that slavery was a sin worthy of peaceful resistance; violence was not yet part of his platform.

In 1842 Brown's fragile economic standing finally collapsed when an Ohio judge granted him bankruptcy.²⁷ Except for a few personal effects, Brown was stripped of his property. While bankruptcy wounded Brown's pride, it also relieved a heavy burden. Being in debt had proved exhausting: when not in court, Brown was crisscrossing state lines in search of money for pursuant creditors. Because bankruptcy terminated most of his past financial obligations, those days were largely over.²⁸ For the first time in a long while, Brown was not preoccupied with debt.²⁹

Released from his debts, Brown focused on abolitionism; and, for Brown, that included reflecting on the Haitian Revolution. As an antebellum American, Brown knew of the revolt. His anti-slavery father, Owen, likely discussed the insurrection with him. Owen found slavery a sin because of the violence needed to maintain it. As a pacifist who lived while the Haitian Revolution took place, Owen would have found the violent upheaval a disturbing but predictable result of the brutalizing effect of human bondage. Haiti, Owen would argue, therefore testified

²⁶ Robert McGlone, *John Brown's War Against Slavery*, 67; Oates, 52-53, 41.

²⁷ Brown announced his bankruptcy to George Kellogg, one of his lenders, in an 1842 letter: "I have just received information of my final discharge as a bankrupt in the District Court." John Brown, "Dear Sir," Richfield, Summit County, Ohio, October 17, 1842, *A John Brown Reader*, 49; Villard, 28, 34.

²⁸ After being declared bankrupt, Brown expressed gratitude that "no one of my creditors has made any opposition to such discharge being given." John Brown, "George Kellogg, Esp.," Richfield, Summit Country, Ohio, Oct. 17, 1842, *A John Brown Reader*, 49.

²⁹ Brown continued to work and support his family, of course. In 1844 he entered a partnership with Simon Perkins, which would last ten years. Here is an excerpt of their contract, drawn up on January 9, 1844: "The undersigned, Simon Perkins, Jr. and John Brown have this day agreed as follows viz. They agree to place the flocks of sheep which they each now have in a joint concern at their value, and to share equally the gain or loss yearly, commencing on the 15th day of April of each year." "Agreement—John Brown & Simon Perkins," in *ibid.*, 51. Brown's employment with Simon Perkins was the most stable employment of his life, which allowed him to actively pursue a solution to the slavery problem in America. Villard, 57.

brilliantly to the necessity for peaceful emancipation—a message he would have relayed to his son.³⁰

Apart from his father, Brown would have heard of the Haitian Revolution a number of other sources. While he lived in Litchfield, Connecticut and Hudson, Ohio, local newspapers ran many stories about the uprising.³¹ That Brown read any of these newspapers cannot be proven, a dialogue on Haiti, both verbal and in print, existed in Connecticut and Ohio—and in every antebellum state and territory, for that matter. And Brown, regardless of where he lived or traveled, could not have escaped a narrative that terrified so many Americans, especially given his interest in the slavery question.

Brown's interest in slavery led him to subscribe to Garrison's *Liberator*. Brown admitted to reading the paper voraciously, which meant, from the time he took his subscription in the early 1830s, he frequently encountered the Haitian Revolution. *The Liberator* called on fear of the revolt to convince southerners to support emancipation. On February 18, 1832, for instance, Garrison argued that the South must “be *just*” and free its slaves to “prevent the scenes of St. Domingo from being acted here.”³² This type of message corresponded to Garrison's preference

³⁰ According to Owen's autobiography, he was born “at West Sansbury (now Canton), Connecticut, Feb. 16, 1771.” Provided Owen was correct about his date of birth, and there exists no reason to suggest that he was not, he would have been twenty years old when the Haitian Revolution began and about thirty-one when it concluded. Owen Brown, in Sanborn, 4.

³¹ Between 1810 and the time of Brown's departure from Connecticut in 1817, for example, the *Connecticut Gazette* ran twenty-eight stories about Haiti.³¹ To retrieve this information, I accessed the Early American Newspaper database through Indiana University's library website: <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.lib.indiana.edu>. I used the keywords “St. Domingo” and “Hayti.” The stories of record covered the current state of Haiti, and the lasting effects of the revolt. Here is one example from 1815, which referred to how the leaders of Haiti would react if France tried to retake possession of the former slave colony: “The chiefs of Hayti have agreed, in case France persist in the invasion of their dominions, to burn, lay waste, and destroy every city, town and fortification and place, they by force of arms, may be able to retreat from, and finally take refuge in the mountains.” *Connecticut Gazette*, “News From St. Domingo,” 01-04-1815, Vol. LIII, Issue 2669, page 3. While Brown lived in Ohio from 1817-1826, forty stories on Haiti were run in local newspapers. Early American Newspaper database.

³² 02-18-1832, Volume II, Issue 7, Page 25.

for a peaceful end to slavery, and it is hardly surprising that Garrison usually cast the Haitian Revolution in this light.³³

On occasion, however, *The Liberator* presented a more radical interpretation of the revolt for Brown to read. In 1840 the paper ran a poem about how guerilla warfare and mountain strongholds had helped rebels destroy slavery in St. Domingue:

And Hayti, from her mountain land,
Shall send the sons of those who hurled,
Defiance from her blazing strand.³⁴

The poem's celebration of violent emancipation in Haiti was echoed in David Walker's *Appeal*, which argued that American slaves should reenact the Haitian Revolution in the United States. Sometime after its publication in 1829, Brown read Walker's work.³⁵

Reflecting on information about the revolt, Brown thus encountered two narratives that appealed to his anti-slavery sensibilities. The first, shared by his father and many others, presented the revolt as a lesson to southerners: peacefully emancipate or face a Haitian Revolution in America. The second, a far more radical narrative, asserted that the Haitian Revolution demonstrated that only violence could end slavery.

Because John Brown had identified as a pacifist since a young age, the first option should have appeared more attractive to him in 1842, but it did not, as Brown's reaction to hearing Henry Highland Garnet deliver his "Address to the Slaves of America" in 1843 suggests. Garnet argued that American slaves who desired freedom should be like Toussaint Louverture and let your "motto be resistance." Brown enjoyed Garnet's "Address" so much that he gave Garnet money to have it circulated. Brown also helped fund Garnet's publication of David Walker's

³³ For more examples of Garrison spinning the Haitian Revolution to fit his pacifist worldview, see Appendix.

³⁴ Ibid, 01-10-1840, Volume X, Issue 2, page 8.

³⁵ David Walker, *Appeal To the Coloured Citizens of the World*, 21; Henry Highland Garnet, *A Memorial Discourse*, 52.

Appeal, which posited that a reenactment of the Haitian Revolution, “the glory of the blacks and the terror of the tyrans,” would liberate slaves in the United States.³⁶ Less than a year after bankruptcy, then, Brown was shifting from pacifism towards violent abolitionism inspired by the Haitian Revolution.

By the time Frederick Douglass arrived in Springfield in 1847 that transformation was complete.³⁷ Like the Haitian rebels before him, Brown intended to stock mountains with an army trained in guerrilla warfare that would attack slavery. Gone were the days, Brown argued, when a Christian education or peaceful protest could free slaves—American slavery had grown as strong as slavery in eighteenth-century St. Domingue. Only a re-enactment of the Haitian Revolution could destroy the robust institution. All Brown needed was an opportunity.

³⁶ Ibid., *ibid.* Walker, 21; Garnet, “An Address to the Slaves of America,” 5-6.

³⁷ Brown’s partnership with Simon Perkins took him to Springfield, where they housed much of their wool. See footnote twenty-nine.

III. THEORY INTO PRACTICE

And though your beginning was small, your latter days will be very great.

Job 8:7

Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas helped provide Brown with his first opportunity to bring the Haitian Revolution to America. Douglas introduced a bill to Congress that would allow popular sovereignty to decide the fate of slavery in Kansas and Nebraska, territories which America gained through the Louisiana Purchase. Though the bill did not explicitly say so, most observers assumed that Kansas would allow slavery while Nebraska would not. With respect to Kansas, this assumption did not extend to free-soilers and anti-slavery advocates who, after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, flooded the Kansas territory and clashed with supporters of slavery.¹

John Brown arrived in Kansas to fight slavery in 1855. Tensions in the territory exploded in May 1856 when a group of pro-slavery men sacked Lawrence, killing several opponents of slavery. Brown vowed revenge against the assailants. On May 24, 1856, Brown and his men emerged from the woods of Pottawatomie and murdered five men they thought were responsible for attacking Lawrence. Guerrilla warfare against slavery: the Haitian Revolution had come to Kansas, and its bloody lessons played out on the battleground it had helped create by forcing Napoleon to sell the Louisiana Territory to the United States.

¹ James McPherson, *Ordeal By Fire*, 96-98.

Brown's second attempt to bring Haiti to America owed much to Kansas. As Brown desired, the Pottawatomie murders terrified slavery defenders in Kansas. Consequently, abolitionists who had once eschewed violence granted Brown material support for another attack. On October 16, 1859, Brown used their support to invade Harpers Ferry, Virginia, where he planned to eradicate slavery through a re-enactment of his Haitian Revolution. This chapter will discuss in greater detail how Brown incorporated or attempted to incorporate parts of the Haitian Revolution—which, in this case, included guerrilla warfare, slave insurrection, and the strategic use of mountainous or hilly terrain—into his attacks at Pottawatomie and Harpers Ferry. This chapter will also examine the impact of Brown's efforts in Kansas and Virginia on American slavery.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act elicited a swift reaction from six of Brown's sons. Shortly after its ratification, they left New York, where Brown and his family lived, and headed to Kansas without their father to fight slavery.² John Brown could not decide whether to "help defeat Satan" in Kansas or someplace else.³ Torn about his next course of action, Brown wrote his daughter Ruth and abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Gerritt Smith for "*advice & feeling[s]* in the matter."⁴ Given the stakes, they suggested he join his sons in Kansas.

² The sons in question were: John Jr., Owen, Frederick, Salmon, Jason, and Oliver. In addition to fighting slavery, they hoped to make money in Kansas. Part of letter John Jr., wrote to his father in October 1855 from Kansas stated: "We arrived here Two Weeks ago.... We reached in time to be at the *Free State* election & hearing that trouble was expected [with slavery supporters] we turned out powerfully armed.... I think there is no doubt that stock growing & dairy business will do well here for those who take hold of them right in connection with corn growing." "Dear Father," Brownsville Kansas Territory, October 19, 1855, in *A John Brown Reader*, 87-88.

³ "Untitled Letter to John Brown Jr.," Akron, Ohio, August 21, 1854, in *ibid*, 86.

⁴ "Dear Children," Akron, Ohio, September 30, 1854, in *A John Brown Reader*, 86.

After making a brief stop in Chicago in 1855 to purchase weapons for his war against slavery, Brown settled in Kansas.⁵ His arrival in the territory coincided with a huge victory for the perpetuation of the peculiar institution. In July of that year the Pawnee Legislature, the pro-slavery wing of government in Kansas, outlawed abolitionism in the territory. Even speaking against slavery carried a heavy penalty:

Sec. 12: If any free person, by speaking or writing, assert or maintain that persons have not the right to hold slaves in this Territory, print, publish, write, circulate, or cause to be introduced into the Territory, any book, paper, magazine, pamphlet or circular, containing any denial of the right of persons to hold slaves in this Territory, such persons shall be deemed guilty of felony, and punished by imprisonment at hard labor for a term of not less than five years.⁶

Brown abhorred such laws, but he was not intimidated by them. Indeed, he prepared to confront any person who attempted to enforce the will of the Pawnee Legislature. Confrontation, however, was delayed by a horrible winter. Brown's sons, whose home in north-central Kansas proved ineffective against the extreme cold, had grown very sick. As a consequence, wrote Brown in December 1855, the "care of my friends has prevented my being as active...as I intended."⁷ The Browns, however, would survive the winter to kill in the spring.

By then legal victories had emboldened pro-slavery supporters in Kansas to physically attack their ideological adversaries. On May 21, 1856, dozens laid siege to Lawrence, Kansas and killed several free-soilers and abolitionists. Many defenders of slavery celebrated the assault. Benjamin Stringfellow, for instance, noted with enthusiasm how the rivers of Kansas had been "covered with the blood...and the carcasses of Abolitionists."⁸ Brown, however, was furious, viewing Lawrence as yet another victory for the forces of slavery. "Something is going

⁵ John Brown, "[Letter to the] Editor of Summit Beacon," Osawatomie, Kansas Territory, December 20, 1855, in *ibid*, 89.

⁶ *Statutes of the Territory of Kansas*, in Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown: A Biography Fifty-Years After*, 92.

⁷ John Brown, "[Letter to the] Editor of Summit Beacon," in *A John Brown Reader*, 89.

⁸ David Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 162.

to be done now,” he shouted.⁹ A man who heard Brown’s outburst encouraged him to remain calm and exercise caution.¹⁰ The suggestion produced the opposite effect. “Caution, caution, sir,” Brown thundered, “I am eternally tired of hearing that word caution. It is nothing but the word of cowardice.” Slavery and its supporters, Brown made plain, had to be destroyed.¹¹

At two in the afternoon on May 23, 1856, Brown led his men—which, in addition to four of his sons, included Henry Thomson, James Townsley, and Theodore Wiener—towards a settlement in east-central Kansas, just north of Pottawatomie Creek, called Dutch Henry’s Crossing.¹² The Crossing was rumored to house some of those responsible for attacking Lawrence.¹³ According to the testimony of Townsley, Brown and his army arrived “within two or three miles of the Pottawatomie creek” in the evening and then set up camp on the “edge of the timber between two deep ravines.” They “remained in camp that night and all day the next day.”¹⁴

Late in the evening of May 24 Brown and his men climbed out of the ravines surrounding their camp and descended silently into Dutch Henry’s Crossing.¹⁵ Five men whom Brown associated with the attack on Lawrence were pulled from their homes, led into the darkness, and butchered with broad swords. One victim, William Sherman, had his skull “split open in two places...., and his left hand was cut off except a little piece of skin on one side,” his mutilated body left “lying in [a] creek. Sherman’s neighbor, Allen Wilkinson, met a similar fate. After he was “marched some distance south of his house,” one of Brown’s party killed him and dumped

⁹ Villard, 151.

¹⁰ Ibid, 153.

¹¹ Bruce Catton, *This Hallowed Ground*, 8.

¹² The four sons were: Frederick, Owen, Salmon, and Oliver. Stephen Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, 133-137.

¹³ Salmon Brown, “John Brown and Sons in Kansas Territory,” in *A John Brown Reader*, 193.

¹⁴ James Townsley, “The Potawatomie Tragedy, John Brown’s Connection With It: Statement of James Townsley, An Eye-Witness,” in *ibid*, 199.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, *ibid*.

“his body” on the side of a road. In a macabre gesture, John Brown shot one bullet into the dead body of James Doyle, who, along with two of his sons, had been taken “out of the house” and “slain with broad swords.” Not even animals were granted reprieve. While watching the murder of the Doyles, Townsley “struck” a dog “on the head with [a] sabre,” spilling its brains onto the ground. The killings complete, Brown and his followers receded into the night.¹⁶

Brown’s belief that the Haitian Revolution represented the best means for destroying slavery took shape in the 1840s. According to Richard Hinton, Brown’s contemporary in Kansas, this belief accompanied Brown into the Trans-Missouri West where he often told the history of the Haitian Revolution to his men. As one of his followers would later note, “he knew the story of Hayti...by heart.”¹⁷ Indeed, a closer examination of Pottawatomie reveals the ways in which of the Haitian Revolution structured Brown’s assault.

Brown killed in Kansas for two reasons. First, he wanted revenge for the attack on Lawrence. Second, and more importantly, he wanted to “strike terror in the hearts of proslavery people” and thus disrupt their efforts to make Kansas a slave state.¹⁸ To accomplish both objectives, Brown employed his understanding of the Haitian Revolution, which included the strategic use of terrain and guerrilla warfare.

Though Kansas had no mountains, it possessed a landscape suited for guerrilla fighting—a landscape Brown considered when deciding who to attack. In early spring 1856, Brown posed as a land surveyor and gathered intelligence on pro-slavery camps around Pottawatomie, which

¹⁶ Salmon Brown, in *A John Brown Reader*, 194-195; Townsley, in *ibid.*, 199-202; Villard, 155-164.

¹⁷ Richard Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 66.

¹⁸ Townsley’s account of Pottawatomie records a similar motivation: “I desire also to say that I did not then approve of the killing of those men, but Brown said it must be done for the protection of the Free State settlers; that the pro-slavery party must be terrified, and that it was better that a score of bad men should die than that one man who came here to make Kansas a free state should be driven out.” *A John Brown Reader*, 200; Stephen Oates, *Purge This Land With Blood*, 133.

included Dutch Henry's Crossing.¹⁹ He must have considered it good fortune, then, when he learned that some men who lived there had helped attack Lawrence: they lived close to dense woods, surrounded by hills, and were thus perfectly susceptible to a guerrilla-style attack, like the ones launched in Haiti. Brown had his setting; now he needed a weapon that would complement his plan.

Brown used swords to add terror to the attack—a staple of guerrilla fighting used in the Haitian Revolution. A mutually agreed upon gun battle, while frightening, does not compare to what happened at Dutch Henry's Crossing, where Brown combined the fear of darkness and unforeseen attack with the terror of murder by the sword. The Pottawatomie massacres do not, therefore, belong to any category of conventional, chivalrous warfare. Brown did not send his enemies a document signifying an unwillingness to settle discrepancies through negotiations; nor did he meet them in a field of battle. Like the guerrilla fighters of Haiti who had inspired him—like Dutty Boukman and Jean-Jacques Dessalines—Brown used nature's rolling terrain to conceal his preparations for attack, and, when his foes were vulnerable, he had them brutally hacked to death. The fingerprints of the Haitian Revolution resided on the bodies of those slain at Dutch Henry's Crossing.

The Haitian-inspired attack Brown used in Kansas proved advantageous. In the first place, it allowed Brown to exact revenge for Lawrence without having to face an army of pro-slavery men. Moreover, and more significantly, Brown's Pottawatomie murders horrified and demoralized slavery supporters in Kansas. A follower of Brown noted, for instance, that after Pottawatomie “pro slavery men *were dreadfully* terrified, and large numbers of them soon left

¹⁹ This is according to one of Brown's sons, Salmon Brown. Before Lawrence was sacked, wrote Salmon, his father “took his surveying instruments and flagman and chainmen and ran a line right into” pro-slavery camps around “the Pottawatomie crossing.” Salmon Brown, *A John Brown Reader*, 190-191.

the Territory.”²⁰ Likewise, George Henry Grant, who lived in close proximity to Pottawatomie Creek in 1856, reported that “John Brown [, as] leader of the party...alarmed...[t]he pro-slavery settlers [who] almost entirely left [Pottawatomie] at once.”²¹ Also in a position to judge the effectiveness of Pottawatomie, Charles Robinson, a Kansas politician from 1854 until 1863, argued that Brown gave “an immediate check to the armed aggression of the Missourians” who wanted to spread slavery into Kansas.²²

The terror produced by Brown’s killings was immediately reported by American periodicals. In June 1856 an Indiana newspaper, the *New Albany Daily Ledger*, published a frantic plea for help from a pro-slavery man in Kansas. On May 24 “an organized company of Abolitionists,” it read, committed “dreadful outrages of the most savage character” near Pottawatomie Creek, attacking “the houses of pro-slavery men and [tearing] them from their families and murder[ing] them in cold blood.... This [report] is to inform you that it is now high time to send troops without delay.”²³ Likewise, the *Charleston Courier* reported in May 1856 that the murder of “eight pro-slavery [men] at Potawatomie Creek” led pro-slavery settlers in Kansas to request protection from William Shannon, the territorial governor.²⁴

In using the Haitian Revolution as a template for his attack against slavery in Kansas, Brown emerged as new kind of American abolitionist. Unlike William Lloyd Garrison and many other pacifists, Brown shunned debate, killed without remorse, and terrorized his enemies. Pro-slavery forces in Kansas clearly took notice of the murderous resolve of their new foe. In 1856, they were scared and on the run.

²⁰ Townsley, in *A John Brown Reader*, 201.

²¹ George Grant, “The Potawatomie Tragedy: New and Important Testimony... What George and Henry Grant Say About It,” in *ibid*, 208.

²² Found in, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Cheerful Yesterdays*, 208.

²³ “Still Later from Kansas: Eight Men Brutally Murdered by the Abolitionists,” *New Albany Daily Ledger*, New Albany, Indiana, 06-06-1856, Volume VII, Issue 2084, Page 2.

²⁴ “The Latest News.... Further from Kansas,” *Charleston Courier*, Charleston, South Carolina, 05-31-1856, Volume LIV, Issue 17354, Page 1.

If Pottawatomie proved a defeat for the pro-slavery cause, it represented a victory for American abolitionists, who, in 1856, had suffered two major setbacks in the preceding years: the Compromise of 1850, which included a provision that strengthened America's fugitive slave law, and the early political advances of slavery in Kansas. Brown's success at terrorizing the pro-slavery community in Kansas, however, helped energize the anti-slavery movement. Famed crusader for emancipation, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, recalled that: "In regard to the most extreme act of John Brown's Kansas career, the so-called 'Pottawatomie massacre of May 24, 1856,' I can testify that...I heard of no [abolitionist] who did not approve of the act, and its beneficial effects were universally asserted."²⁵

The hero's reception Brown received when he visited the east coast in late 1856 perhaps best demonstrates the degree to which abolitionists had come to admire his efforts in Kansas.²⁶ In Massachusetts, pacifist abolitionists, like William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Theodore Parker, Samuel Howe, and George Stearns, rushed to congratulate Brown for his bloody work in Kansas. Despite their past reservations, which likely concealed their fear of killing, these men clearly understood the growing utility of violence to their cause.²⁷ Cognizant of their financial connections and admiration of his bravery, Brown pushed them for money. Although Brown failed to secure his desired sum of thirty-thousand dollars, he did manage to solicit enough

²⁵ Higginson, 208.

²⁶ Several months lapsed between the Pottawatomie massacre and Brown's leaving Kansas. During that time Brown fought in two battles. The Battle of Black Jack, which took place in east-central Kansas in June 1856, pitted Brown and his men against a territorial militia headed by H.C. Pate. The militia was investigating the murders at Dutch Henry's Crossing. Fighting broke out when Brown, who knew that authorities were looking for him, attacked Pate and his troops at Black Jack Creek. Brown's men proved victorious, taking Pate and his men captive. Brown turned the prisoners over to territorial authorities shortly after. The second battle happened at Osawatomie in late August 1856. As one historian notes, the "Battle of Osawatomie" was "no battle at all." Brown and his men fled in the face of an overwhelming pro-slavery army. Shortly after Osawatomie Brown headed to the east coast. Samuel A. Johnson, *The Battle Cry of Freedom*, 185-187, 203; Alice Nichols, *Bleeding Kansas*, 120-124; Oates, 151-155.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 181-193, 214-216.

money for another attack on slavery.²⁸ Brown had convinced American abolitionists to accept and finance violence.

Through homicide modeled on revolutionary violence in Haiti, Brown accomplished a great deal: he entered influential abolitionist circles, changed the battle over slavery in Kansas, and gained valuable experience in guerrilla warfare and the use of terror. More important, he had procured the funds necessary to enact the Haitian Revolution on a larger scale. The question was where.

To be sure, Brown's situation in Kansas had been less than desirable. While the territory had allowed for some measure of guerrilla warfare, it did not have components of the Haitian Revolution that Brown sought: mountainous terrain and a large number of potentially rebellious slaves. But in Kansas, Brown's hand had been forced. The persuasive council of friends and family had convinced him to join his sons in the Trans-Missouri West. In other words, Kansas, while ultimately beneficial to Brown, was not the ideal setting for the Haitian Revolution. Now, however, Brown could decide where to go. Brown, according to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, recalled his younger days and, by extension, to the Haitian Revolution and his conversation with Douglass:

His belief that an all-seeing God had created the Alleghany Mountains from all eternity as the predestined refuge for a body of fugitive slaves. He had traversed those mountains in his youth, as a surveyor, and knew points which could be held by a hundred men against a thousand; he showed me rough charts of some of those localities and plans of connected mountain fortresses which he had devised.²⁹

²⁸ The exact figure is difficult to determine because Brown, for various reasons, did not receive some of the money promised to him. In the broadest sense, he received significantly less than thirty-thousand dollars but enough to afford an assault on Harpers Ferry. Villard and Oates, Brown's best biographers, deal with this phase of Brown's career at length; anyone interested in Brown's fluid financial situation after Pottawatomie should consult their work. Villard, 267-309; Oates, 181-228.

²⁹ Higginson, 220.

Residing at the base of these “connected mountain fortresses” in the Alleghenies was a town with a federal armory and numerous slaves in the surrounding area. Brown would take Haiti to Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

In July 1859, a man who called himself Isaac Smith arrived in a Maryland town just across the Potomac River from Harpers Ferry, Virginia. He needed a nice sized house to rent, preferably on a farm. A local directed him to the Kennedy family. The Kennedy’s found him honest and allowed him to rent their farmhouse. Though not apparent at the time, Isaac Smith did not travel lightly. He quickly moved more than twenty people—most of them men, some of whom were black—into the house, though he took great care to hide them from his neighbors. His name weighed heavily upon him inasmuch as it was not his own. John Brown needed secrecy.³⁰

Secluded in the attic of the Kennedy farmhouse, Brown discussed his plan with his men. They would seize the weapons stored in the armory at Harpers Ferry and send couriers to nearby plantations to announce Brown’s plan to overthrow slavery. Surely, Brown believed, supporters of his cause would flock to Harpers Ferry in droves. With an army behind him he would head to the Alleghenies. From there he and his followers would launch numerous guerrilla raids into Virginia, crippling the state’s reliance on human bondage. Having rendered slavery impotent in the Old Dominion, Brown and his men would move south, staying close to the mountains when possible: there existed, he reminded his men, a “great possibility of effecting a successful insurrection in the mountains.” Upon the rubble of America’s slaveocracy, Brown would form a

³⁰ Tony Horwitz, *Midnight Rising*, 97-98.

government that would recognize blacks as legally equal to whites. He had already drawn up the constitution.³¹

On October 16, 1859, Brown prayed with his men in the Kennedy farmhouse. God, he said, would smile on them for attacking such an institution as slavery. Satisfied in his address to his Lord, Brown told his men to gather their arms. They would head “to the Ferry.”³² As intended, Brown’s men took control of the armory and news of the insurrection spread quickly. Things seemed to be going as planned. Then Brown froze.³³ Brown’s delay allowed federal troops time to mount a forceful counter-attack, and, under the leadership of Robert E. Lee, the United States Marines arrested Brown and his men on October 18, 1859, just outside the armory.³⁴ Brown had failed—sort of.

White observers of the botched rebellion reacted with horror and calls for southern secession. Brown’s contingent of armed black soldiers, his plan to launch a government dedicated to black equality and, to a large degree, black self-rule, convinced many that another Haiti was afoot.³⁵ Brown, wrote a terrified southerner, had wanted “to take possession of the Commonwealth and make it another Hayti.”³⁶ Likewise, both South Carolina state senator John Townsend and University of Virginia professor Albert Taylor Bledsoe warned that Brown’s attempt to bring about a second Haitian Revolution in Virginia was part of a larger Republican

³¹ Osborne Perry Anderson, *A Voice from Harpers Ferry*, 29-31; Oates, 288, 221-223; W.E.B. Du Bois, *John Brown*, 154, 163, 164-165; Evan Carton, *Patriotic Treason*, 242. The text of Brown’s constitution can be found in, John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd, *The Tribunal*, 26-37.

³² Osborne Anderson, who attacked Harpers Ferry with Brown, wrote this: “On Sunday morning, October 16th, Captain Brown rose earlier than usual, and called his men down to worship. He read a chapter from the Bible, applicable to the conditions of the slaves, and our duties as their brethren, and then offered up a fervent prayer to God to assist in the liberation of the bondmen in that slaveholding land.... At eight o’clock on Sunday evening, Captain Brown said: ‘Men, get your arms; we will proceed to the Ferry.’” Anderson, 28, 31.

³³ Oates, 293.

³⁴ Carton, 309-313.

³⁵ When arrested at Harpers Ferry, Brown’s captors found several copies of his “Provisional Constitution,” which was to serve as the legal frame work of the new government, in his pocket. It denounced slavery, racial prejudice, and suggested that blacks would hold positions of power in Brown’s new America. Its contents shocked southerners. Robert McGlone, *John Brown’s War Against Slavery*, 215-217, 310.

³⁶ Robert De Witt, *The Life, Trial, and Execution of Captain John Brown*, 93.

plot to destroy the South. Better, they felt, to sever ties with the North and “take government into [our] own hands” than be “governed by another and a hostile people.”³⁷ Writers at the

Richmond *Enquirer* agreed:

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.... The, heretofore, most determined friend of the Union may now be heard saying, “if under the form of a Confederacy, our peace is disturbed, our State invaded, its peaceful citizens cruelly murdered, and all the horrors of servile war forced upon us, by those who should be our warmest friends; if the form of a Confederacy is observed, but the spirit violated, *and the people of the North sustain the outrage*, then let disunion come.”³⁸

The South was ready for secession. Slavery, thanks to Brown and the Haitian Revolution, had but a short time left in America.

Southerners were right to see the Haitian Revolution in Brown’s raid. His knowledge of the revolt, his repeated interaction and fascination with its legacy, culminated—quite clumsily—in his attack on Harpers Ferry. The Senate’s inquiry into Brown after his foray into Virginia revealed as much. Richard Realf, one of Brown’s closest confidants, told Senate investigators that Brown “had become thoroughly acquainted with the wars in Hayti.... From [this] he had drawn the conclusion” that violent rebellion alone could destroy slavery.³⁹ Brown, it was later learned, had said something similar just before his attack on Harpers Ferry. In 1858 at an anti-slavery conference in Chatham, Canada he told a captive audience that a slave revolt in America would succeed because slaves in America were no “different from those of the West India island of San Domingo.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Alison Freehling, *Drift Towards Dissolution*, 390; John Townsend, *The South Alone*, 12-13; Albert Bledsoe, “Liberty and Slavery,” 404-405, 412-413.

³⁸ The story from which the excerpt comes ran in the *Enquirer* on October 25, 1859. Found in Villard, 475-476.

³⁹ *Report of the Select Committee of the Senate Appointed to Inquire into the Late Invasion and Seizure of the Public Property at Harpers Ferry*, 96.

⁴⁰ James Cleveland Hamilton, *John Brown in Canada*, 14.

John Brown went to the gallows with Haiti on his mind. As he awaited execution, he talked to his jailer about the insurrection and how he “had read and reread all the literature he could find about L’Ouverture” before heading into Virginia. Brown spent his last days on earth discussing the role Haiti played in his abolitionism. At his execution on December, 2, 1859, Brown was certain about Haiti and its bloody message of freedom.⁴¹

And Haiti was certain about him. On January 20, 1860, a banner that read *John Brown, Martyr De La Cause Des Noirs* hung from the Port-au-Prince Cathedral in Haiti’s capital. The city mourned and all flags flew at half-mast. The people of Haiti showed up at the church to honor the death of John Brown, a friend they had never met.⁴² Brown’s actions spoke to the revolutionary tradition of Haiti and its people. The Haitians who mourned Brown in 1860 knew he fit their national narrative; he fit their revolution. In the fight for freedom he walked with Toussaint and Dessalines. He belonged to Haiti, he belonged to its mountains, he belonged to its people.

John Brown brought the Haitian Revolution to America, and for that he was hanged. Brown knew Haiti and believed its revolution a weapon capable of destroying American slavery. In many ways he was correct. Marching with Brown to Kansas and Virginia was a story that had been with America for decades. Haiti, wrote one southerner, was “a narrative which frightened our childhood and still curdles the blood.”⁴³ Brown harnessed parts of that narrative and curdled southern blood.

Perhaps, then, the Haitian Revolution ended more than once. Haitians celebrated independence and the final rending of their chains in 1804. Yet a generation of Haitians, too

⁴¹ William Fellows, “Saw John Brown Hanged,” *New York Sun*, 2-13-1898.

⁴² Reynolds, 408; Matthew Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War*, 53.

⁴³ Alfred Hunt, *Haiti’s Influence on Antebellum America*, 124.

young to have fought in the rebellion, needed closure of their own. Celebrating Brown gave them that. On January 20, 1860, when they honored Brown for doing what their parents and grandparents had, they recognized Brown's violent, transnational abolitionism. Brown finalized one revolution only to help begin another: the Civil War, a war that ended slavery in America and transformed a nation.⁴⁴ If Brown stands out in the crowd of antebellum Americans, he does so because he stands on the mountains of Haiti.

⁴⁴ Union soldiers often marched into battle singing "John Brown's soul is marching on." Reynolds, 473.

CONCLUSION

The Haitian Revolution changed John Brown to a degree not recognized by scholars. Brown lived in an America largely shaped by the revolt, and it is no surprise that it shaped him as well. While preoccupied with debt, Brown did not consider the Haitian Revolution at length. Released from debt in 1842, however, Brown began reflecting on the revolt and, consequently, on his pacifism. Brown could not reconcile the two. Less than five years after his insolvency Brown had abandoned pacifism, and, in 1847, he revealed to Frederick Douglass that he planned to employ the bloody lessons of the Haitian Revolution—guerrilla warfare and slave insurrection—in his crusade against American slavery.

Brown, true to his word, used Haiti to attack human bondage in Kansas and Virginia, killing many people in the process. The degree to which Brown's actions recalled the Haitian Revolution—an event that had frightened white Americans for decades—terrified observers. And, because the contours of Haiti were visible in Brown, the vitality of American slavery was crippled; the Civil War loomed on the horizon during Brown's execution in December 1859. To the detriment of their own work, then, academics have repeatedly ignored or downplayed the strong connection between John Brown and the Haitian Revolution.

Of course, Haiti alone did not steer events at Pottawatomie and Harpers Ferry. As historians have rightly argued, Brown's belief that he was God's instrument helped fuel his war against slavery. That Brown ordered, without remorse, the murder of several people to satisfy God's hatred of slavery demonstrates as much. Moreover, scholars justifiably associate Brown's assault on American slavery with his appreciation of the Declaration of Independence. The preamble to Brown's political constitution—a constitution that would have governed life in America had Brown succeeded at Harpers Ferry—reads, for instance: that because “slavery [represents an] utter disregard and violation of those eternal and self-evident truths set forth in our Declaration of Independence,” it must be destroyed.¹ But the importance of God and the Declaration to Brown's war does not justify overlooking Brown's obvious use of the Haitian Revolution.

Likewise, more than Haiti explained Brown's attraction to guerrilla warfare. Because Brown read about the guerrilla warfare used by Jamaican maroons and Giuseppe Gariabaldi, both certainly figured into his physical assault on slavery.² But neither Jamaica nor Gariabaldi had as large an impact as Haiti. While waiting to be executed for his raid of Harpers Ferry, Brown talked about how the Haitian Revolution had determined his war strategy but said nothing of maroons or Italian revolutionaries. Nor did observers to Brown's violent actions during the late 1850s. With great justification, people argued that Brown wanted to bring the Haitian Revolution to America. Italy and Jamaica were noticeably absent in America's reactions to John Brown.

Haiti, indeed, represented a major motivating factor in Brown's shift away from pacifism. The Haitian Revolution went beyond mere motivation, however. It allowed Brown to help

¹ John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd, *The Tribunal*, 26.

² Richard Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 66; Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown: A Biography Fifty-Years After*, 53.

destroy an institution that he felt represented a plague to America and a sin against God. John Brown, largely because of Haiti, became a transnational figure in an age of revolution.

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Appendix A

This appendix seeks to demonstrate further that the paper to which Brown subscribed (*The Liberator*) frequently carried stories about the Haitian Revolution. The findings of this appendix will be arraigned chronologically. This examination of *The Liberator* is far from comprehensive.

- On February 18, 1832, *The Liberator* asked its readers to heed the violent lessons of Haiti and reject slavery in America. “To prevent the scenes of St. Domingo from being acted here, we call upon the nation to be *just*.... [W]e appeal to every citizen who depreciates the horrors of St. Domingo.”¹
- On March 1, 1834, the paper recalled how the Haitian Revolution had scared southerners. “The fate of oppressors, in a neighboring island, was a dreadful warning to those of the South: they lived in a state of perpetual alarms: the raging of fires, the fiend-like yell, and the gory screams of St. Domingo were constantly in their ears, and before their eyes.” Though they need not be. Emancipation, the article continued on, would absolve all fears of slave revolt. “How were these dire calamities to be averted? Either by setting their captives free, or by colonizing their free blacks.”²
- On September 1, 1837, the paper used Haiti to attack the justification for slavery in the United States:

The New Orleans American says: “The inimitable laws of Nature must have ordained that the wild Red Man and African should fall before the intellectual European. Indeed are the works of Providence inscrutable.” This is the kind of argument by which tyrants always justify themselves. It is the miserable plea of might against right. The same “inimitable laws of Nature,” we suppose, ordained the Frenchmen of St. Domingo should fall before the intellectual negro.³

¹ 02-18-1832, Volume II, Issue 7, Page 25.

² 03-01-1834, Volume IV, Issue 9, Page 34.

³ 09-01-1837, Volume VII, Issue 36, Page 144.

- On February 4, 1842, a lengthy and celebratory history of the revolt in Haiti appeared in *The Liberator*, which began like this:

This second American republic has a history that would fill volumes; and, as the past is the parent of the present, some knowledge of that history is necessary to a just estimate of the position of Haiti as a nation, and a true understanding of the character of its people. Its history is a warning – a rebuke – a proud, triumphal peal of warlike jubilee – oppression’s funeral knell.⁴

- On January 3, 1845, Garrison fired back against John Calhoun’s assertion that abolition in the United States would turn the South into another Haiti. Mr. Calhoun, read the article, must know that “perfect peace and quiet for years followed the abolition of slavery in St. Domingo by the French Directory, and that the sole cause of the dreadful massacre to which he refers, was the attempt of Napoleon to re-establish slavery.”⁵

- *The Liberator*, on May 16, 1851, again warned southerners that a failure to emancipate their slaves would result in a Haitian-like slave rebellion in the United States:

On this head read the lesson of St. Domingo.... The whites were driven from the country with horrible cruelties, the natural revenge of a servile and oppressed race.... A similar fate awaits the Southern extremity of the United States unless the whites are wise.⁶

- The paper published another history of the revolt on January 7, 1853:

[T]he French Government, with characteristic caprice, attempted to reenslave the islanders. What are called the “Horrors of St. Domingo” followed. The people would not be reenslaved; a war of extermination sprung up; the planters were destroyed; the freedmen established at once their own freedom and the independence of the island.⁷

⁴ 02-04-1842, Volume XII, Issue 5, Page 17.

⁵ 01-03-1845, Volume XV, Issue 1, Page 2.

⁶ 05-16-1851, Volume XXI, Issue 20, Page 78.

⁷ 01-07-1853, Volume XXIII, Issue 1, Page 2.

- *The Liberator* ran this piece by Theodore Parker on May 23, 1856:

Shall the 350,000 slaveholders own all the 1,400,000 square miles of territory not yet made States, and drive all Northern men away from it...? This is the immediate question. Think we shall put Slavery down? I have small doubt of that. Shall we do it now and without tumult, or by and by with a dreadful revolution, St. Domingo massacres, and the ghastly work of war!⁸

- Reverend S. L. Pomeroy delivered a sermon before the New England Anti-Slavery Convention on May 23, 1834. Garrison had the speech reprinted in his paper on August 11, 1857, because it “is as pertinent now, as it was at the time of its delivery.” A portion of the address dealt with the Haitian Revolution:

But we are told to look at St. Domingo, with its horrible massacres and terrible devastation, - and they say, it is a true picture of immediate emancipation. It is not so, and those who assert that it is are either ignorant of history, or willfully misrepresent it. The massacres of St. Domingo had nothing to do with the emancipation.⁹

- Brown’s good friend, Thomas Wentworth Higginson gave a speech in 1858 to the New York Anti-Slavery Society, the text of which appeared in the paper on May 28, 1858. Mr. Higginson urged his listeners to “not forget the heroes of St. Domingo.”¹⁰
- On July 8, 1859, *The Liberator* published a speech delivered by Wendell Phillips that referenced the Haitian Revolution: “I do not think there can be a more important

⁸ 05-23-1856, Volume XXVI, Issue 21, Page 81.

⁹ 09-11-1857, Volume XXVII, Issue 37, Page 145.

¹⁰ 05-28-1858, Volume XXVIII, Issue 22, Page 86.

chapter of history to the Abolitionism than that which relates to the independence of St. Domingo.”¹¹

¹¹ 07-08-1859, Volume XXIX, Issue 27, Page 106.

VITA

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