



Foundations of U.S. History

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Primary Source Activity: "John Brown's Body" Song

- [Download Version 1](#)
(<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/activities/pdf/version1.pdf>)
- [Download Version 2](#)
(<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/activities/pdf/version2.pdf>)

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(<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/activities/pdf/JohnBrownSong.pdf>)

1. Overview

In this activity, teachers examine the lyrics from two versions of the song "John Brown's Body" or "The John Brown Song." Throughout the course of the Civil War, versions of this song with different lyrics were created and published.

First, teachers read two versions of the song, one published early in the war and one published several years later, and answer the following questions:

- What do you notice about the song lyrics?
- What questions do you want to ask about the song lyrics?

After discussing these questions, teachers learn more about the historical context of the Civil War and draw conclusions about how Northern views of the Civil War changed in the time between the two versions. After completing the activity, teachers discuss classroom applications.

2. Source Analysis

- Distribute individual copies of Version 1 lyrics (transcribed and original).
- Ask teachers to work in pairs and read the lyrics, writing down things that they notice and questions they have.
- Distribute individual copies of Version 2 lyrics (transcribed and original).
- Ask teachers to work in pairs and read the lyrics, writing down things that they notice and questions they have.

- Ask teachers to spend an additional 5 minutes comparing the two versions, focusing on different portrayals of John Brown, the Union, and the Civil War.

3. Group Discussion

Write three columns onto the whiteboard: Notice, Questions, and Historical Background.

Use the following questions to guide discussion:

- What did you notice about Version 1?
- What did you notice about Version 2?
- What feelings do the song lyrics evoke?
- What do the lyrics say about John Brown? About the Union Army? About views of the Civil War?
- What is missing from these lyrics? What can the lyrics tell us and what can they not tell us about this time period?
- What questions do you want to ask about the lyrics, the context, or the historical time period?
- What do you already know about this song?

4. Historical Background

Present this historical background to enhance the group's knowledge of the time period, and as a basis for drawing conclusions about changing Northern views of the Civil War in Step 5. Write the words in bold on the whiteboard, and use the rest of the text for guidance.

- **Civil War-era Songs:**

Both versions were sung to a tune called "Glory, Hallelujah" or "Say Brothers will you meet us" which is generally attributed to William Steffe, but may be a traditional Methodist hymn. In the mid-19th century, sheet music and pocket songsters were the primary means of circulating songs since many Americans played and sang music and created new lyrics and versions of songs in their homes.

Soldiers first created the lyrics to John Brown on the spur of the moment while marching. Others created new lyrics and the song was published as sheet music with different versions of lyrics, by several publishing companies, throughout the Civil War.

The song was so popular that it inspired Julia Ward Howe, after hearing troops sing the song while parading near Washington, D.C., to write new lyrics. Her version was published in the Atlantic Monthly under the name "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in February 1862. The song is sung today by a range of musicians. Twenty-first-century recordings generally draw from several of the versions created throughout the Civil War.

- **The Original Version:**

The song began as a way of teasing a soldier in the Massachusetts 12th Regiment Volunteers named John Brown because he had the same name as John Brown, the famed abolitionist. The latter Brown was hanged for treason in 1859 after his raid on the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. The song soon spread to become the most popular marching tune of Union soldiers during the Civil War. The soldier John Brown accidentally drowned in the Shenandoah River and out of respect, his regiment stopped singing the song. Other forces in the Union Army, however, continued singing the song, probably without knowing the story of the soldier, John Brown.

- **John Brown in Northern and Southern Popular Thought:**

When John Brown, the abolitionist, first staged the raid on the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, he was considered a terrorist. Brown, put to death in 1859 without due process, gave an eloquent last speech. As sectional tension continued to grow throughout the country, people in the North began to revise their attitude. Over the next few years, Brown's image as a hero grew in the North--especially as it became apparent that President Lincoln would emancipate the slaves if the Union won the Civil War.

- **Role of Slavery in the Civil War:**

Historians agree that the Union did not enter the war with the explicit purpose of ending slavery in the United States. The official purpose of the Civil War was to keep the country intact, but as the war progressed, the desire to end slavery grew, especially after Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 and the official proclamation in 1863. Many northerners were not initially supportive of the Emancipation Proclamation, but Union soldiers wrote letters home advocating emancipation, and helped turn general white northern sentiment in favor of abolishing slavery. Political and popular sentiment to end slavery grew with the experience of the war and the rising conviction that ending slavery was the only path to preventing future civil war.

5. Conclusions

How do the two versions differ? Did Northern views about the Civil War change between the first and second versions of the John Brown song? If so, how?

Possible Answers:

- **Repetition:** Many of the lyrics in the first version were probably created as soldiers marched--they are simple and repetitive. These lyrics tell us about the conditions of being a soldier in the Union Army. The lyrics in the second version are more elaborate and there is less repetition. They were probably written and edited, and tell a more complex story.

- **Soldiers' Lives:** Specific verses of the first version say a lot about soldiers' lives in the Union Army. In Version 1, John Brown is just another Union soldier. The song begins by referring to John Brown's body decaying in his grave, which evokes both the image of the realities of a soldier's life and of John Brown, the abolitionist, who was hanged. The rest of the verses focus specifically on events in soldiers' lives that John Brown, the soldier, might have experienced.

One of the next verses is "John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back." That verse speaks directly to the daily life of Union soldiers, many of whom had never been away from home before. In that knapsack, a soldier might have carried a blanket, two pairs of socks, his uniform, and perhaps a pack of cards, but there would not have been room for him to carry much else. The knapsack indicates the bareness of a soldier's life, and suggests that he and his fellow soldiers might have used this song to pass the time.

- **About John Brown:** The first verse mentions John Brown only twice, the first time ("mouldering in the grave") connects to the abolitionist Brown; the second (with a knapsack strapped upon his back) addresses the daily experience of being a soldier. Though the soldiers who sung the song undoubtedly knew of John Brown, the abolitionist, they did not connect their experiences as soldiers with the fight to free slaves as later versions did.

The lyrics in the second version are more explicit about the life of John Brown, the abolitionist. The lyrics include specific details about his raid at Harpers Ferry, and cast him as a hero and a martyr from the outset. Though John Brown was viewed negatively by many just after his raid, public opinion began to shift after John Brown's death. Northern support for John Brown grew as the war progressed. This version clearly identifies John Brown as a hero--emblematic of the freedom of the slave. This shift in popular opinion about John Brown reflects the shift in Union thinking about the purpose of the war more generally.

- **Slavery:** None of the verses in the Version 1 refer to slavery specifically. This omission suggests that these lyrics were created at the beginning of the Civil War, before slavery was identified as a touchstone issue. Soldiers who would have marched to this tune first entered the Union Army for many different reasons. Some intended to fight to free slaves, but many others entered the Army to preserve the United States, or because they thought it would be an adventure. Or they entered because other young men from their town were entering. The experience of being in the Union Army, however, began to make many soldiers think about and experience slavery in new ways. Soon after joining the Union Army, many soldiers came to the conclusion that slavery would have to be abolished to end the war and prevent it from recurring.
- **John Brown, the abolitionist:** The Version 2 lyrics explicitly link

John Brown, the abolitionist, the Union army, and the fight to free slaves. In the first verse, John Brown is presented as a hero and a martyr. Those that hung John Brown are the “traitor crew.” Later in the song, John Brown is compared to John the Baptist and is called “the Liberator.” The soldiers in this version, called “soldiers of freedom” in the last verse, are clearly fighting to end slavery. This version, written while President Lincoln was first considering the Emancipation Proclamation, suggests that many people in the Union changed their minds about the purpose of the war as it continued. Rather than a fight to preserve the United States, the Civil War became a war to end the institution of slavery.

6. Classroom Applications

- Do you think this activity would work with your students?
- Could you use this strategy with other resources?
- Would you do anything differently in your classroom?

The John Brown Song
Version #1

John Brown's Body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
John Brown's Body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
John Brown's Body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
His soul is marching on.

CHORUS:

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!
His soul is marching on!

He's gone to be a soldier in the Army of the Lord,
He's gone to be a soldier in the Army of the Lord,
He's gone to be a soldier in the Army of the Lord,
His soul is marching on! CHORUS

John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,
John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,
John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,
His soul is marching on! CHORUS

His pet lambs will meet him on the way,
His pet lambs will meet him on the way,
His pet lambs will meet him on the way,
As they go marching on! CHORUS

They will hang Jeff Davis to a sour apple tree,
They will hang Jeff Davis to a sour apple tree,
They will hang Jeff Davis to a sour apple tree,
As they go marching on! CHORUS

Now, three rousing cheers for the Union!
Now, three rousing cheers for the Union!
Now, three rousing cheers for the Union!
As we go marching on!

CHORUS

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!
Hip, hip, hip, hip, hurrah.

JOHN BROWN'S SONG.

SOLO OR DUETT.

MUSIC ARR'D BY A. CULL.



I. John Brown's body lies a mould'ring in the grave, John Brown's body lies a mould'ring in the grave,
 II. He's gone to be a sol-dier in the ar-my of the Lord, He's gone to be a sol-dier in the army of the Lord, He's



John Brown's body lies a mould'ring in the grave,] His soul is march-ing on!
 gone to be a sol-dier in the ar-my of the Lord,]



3

John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,
 John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,
 John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,
 His soul is marching on! CHORUS.

5

They will hang Jeff Davis to a tree!
 They will hang Jeff Davis to a tree!
 They will hang Jeff Davis to a tree!
 As they go marching on! CHORUS.

4

His pet lambs will meet him on the way,
 His pet lambs will meet him on the way,
 His pet lambs will meet him on the way,
 As they go marching on! CHORUS.

6

Now, three rousing cheers for the Union!
 Now, three rousing cheers for the Union!
 Now, three rousing cheers for the Union!
 As we go marching on!*

* CHORUS.

Glory, Glory Hallelujah!
 Glory, Glory Hallelujah!
 Glory, Glory Hallelujah!
 Hip, hip, hip, hip, hurrah,

The John Brown Song
Version 2

John Brown's body lies a mouldering in the grave,
While weep the sons of bondage, whom he ventured all to save,
But tho' he lost his life in struggling for the slave,
His soul is marching on.

CHORUS:

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!
His soul is marching on.

John Brown was a hero undaunted, true, and brave,
And Kansas knew his valor, when he fought her rights to save;
And now though the grass grows green above his grave,
His soul is marching on. CHORUS

He captured Harpers Ferry with his nineteen men so true,
They frighten'd old Virginy till she trembled through and through,
They hung him for a traitor : themselves a traitor crew,
But his soul goes marching on. CHORUS

John Brown was John the Baptist, of Christ we are to see,
Christ who of the bondman shall the Liberator be,
And soon throughout the sunny South, the slaves shall all be free,
For his soul is marching on. CHORUS

The conflict that he heralded, he looks from heaven to view,
On the army of the Union, with his flag red, white and blue,
And heaven shall ring with anthems, o'er the deed they mean to do.
For his soul is marching on. CHORUS

Ye soldiers of Freedom, then strike, while strike ye may,
The death-blow of oppression, in a better time and way,
For the dawn of old John Brown, has brightened into day,
And his soul is marching on. CHORUS

NEW JOHN BROWN SONG.

John Brown's body lies a mouldering in the grave,
While weep the sons of bondage, whom he ventured all to save,
But tho' he lost his life in struggling for the slave,
His soul is marching on.

CHORUS—Glory, Glory Hallelujah !
Glory, Glory Hallelujah !
Glory, Glory Hallelujah !
His soul is marching on.

John Brown was a hero undaunted, true, and brave,
And Kansas knew his valor, when he fought her rights to save;
And now though the grass grows green above his grave,
His soul is marching on : Glory &c.

He captured Harper's Ferry with his nineteen men so true,
And he frighten'd old Virginnny till she trembled through and through
They hung him for a traitor : themselves a traitor crew,
But his soul is marching on ; Glory &c.

John Brown was John the Baptist, of Christ we are to see,
Christ who of the bondman shall the Liberator be,
And soon throughout the sunny South, the slaves shall all be free,
For his soul is marching on. Glory &c.

The conflict that he heralded, he looks from heaven to view, *
On the army of the Union, with his flag red, white and blue,
And heaven shall ring with anthems, oe'r the deed they mean to do.
For his soul is marching on. Glory &c.

Ye soldiers of Freedom, then strike, while strike ye may,
The death-blow of oppression, in a better time and way,
For the dawn of old John Brown, has brightened into day,
And his soul is marching on. Glory &c.