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# From Border Ruffian to Abolitionist Martyr: William Lloyd Garrison's Changing Ideologies on John Brown and Antislavery

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From Border Ruffian to Abolitionist Martyr: William Lloyd Garrison's Changing Ideologies on  
John Brown and Antislavery<sup>1</sup>

The years leading up to the Civil War saw an increase in rebellion against the institution of slavery. Men like Frederick Douglass and Ralph Waldo Emerson, both prominent members in the community, spoke out against the evils of slavery. Those who had the largest sway on the public were the abolitionists, although even they disagreed on the proper way to go about its removal. Major cities across the North provided a home for abolitionists, newspapers, and events, and the city of Boston was no exception. One of the most prominent abolitionists in the Boston area was William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of *The Liberator*. Garrison did not hesitate to voice his opinion in his popular abolitionist newspaper, and attempted to persuade the rest of the country to eliminate slavery. Garrison, a devout Christian, explained to the public how this moral problem could only be solved through a non-violent approach. Pacifism differentiated Garrison's ideology from other abolitionists during this era.

Another renowned abolitionist from the same time period took a very different approach than Garrison. John Brown garnered a great deal of attention from both pro-slavery and anti-slavery American citizens alike. Unlike Garrison, John Brown believed that violence and armed insurrection was a completely practical, and even the only, method of removing the institution of slavery from the country. His violent approach appeared to be much more radical than Garrison's passive (at least compared to Brown) approach, but the master narrative portrayed Brown as fanatic or a lunatic. These men did have a great deal in common as both used their religion as the reason for abolition. While the master narrative portrays Brown and Garrison as

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Herndon for not only commenting on my paper, but also helping to give me direction when I had initial troubles focusing my research. I would also like to thank the entire History 4800 class for their valuable advice and insight, especially Chris Lee who gave my paper an incredibly detailed review on multiple occasions.

two completely different types of abolitionists on opposite sides of the spectrum, in reality they agreed on certain ideals.

Letters written by William Lloyd Garrison made up the entirety of the primary sources I utilized for my research. Out of these letters, I looked at Garrison's reaction to the two major events that involved John Brown, Bleeding Kansas and Harper's Ferry. I wanted Garrison's immediate reactions to these events, so I restricted my focus to the six months following these incidents. Brown's killing of five pro-slavery men took place on May 24, 1856 so I gathered fourteen letters from the following six months. The raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia took place on October 16, 1859 so the ten letters that I collected came from the six months after the event. I used both a quantitative and qualitative approach to interpreting how Garrison responded to John Brown's actions. Not only did I study the specific language that Garrison used in these letters, but I also took note of how many letters in which he ignored John Brown, alluded to him, or offered his opinion on Brown. With that in mind, I came to the deduction that Garrison's viewpoints changed over this time period. After looking through these letters, I concluded that Garrison reprimanded and ignored John Brown's violence in the Kansas Territory, but totally supported Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry, thus displaying a change in Garrison's abolitionist beliefs.

In order to support the argument that I made in regards to my project, I looked at the research and opinions of other historians. These historical studies not only looked at William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, and the events that they were apart of, but also the abolition movement as a whole. Biographies were the first sources that I looked at, and historians had written numerous books on both Garrison and Brown. These not only gave me background on the lives of these two abolitionists, but also gave underlying arguments about both of them.

Brown's biography noted the respect that he garnered from the community as a result of his actions, while Garrison's biography portrayed him as dramatic writer. These sources supported my research as my letters gave insight into Garrison's personal thoughts of Brown. Reading through the letters I witnessed a fanatical writing style from Garrison, who praised John Brown. The image of these men that the biographies attempted to portray matched the image I received in my research. Not only did these sources give me a better understanding of the lives of these two men, but also led me right to other historians who had their own thoughts and arguments on the men.

James Brewer Stewart's *Holy Warriors*, a book looking at the abolition movement as a whole, revealed a major topic of debate among historians. He argues that abolitionists typically took the militant or pacifist approach to ending slavery, but some noticed a changing ideology over time.<sup>2</sup> A number of different journal articles made note of this, as other historians offered their own thoughts on this subject. In their articles, historians like Jason Matzke argue that Frederick Douglass believed solely in Brown's brand of militant abolitionism.<sup>3</sup> While some abolitionists might actually be able to be defined by a single term, my research articulates otherwise, and I have found other historians that draw similar conclusions. Michael Meyer and John McDonald look at abolitionists like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson and argue that while these men presented themselves as pacifists, they still supported and commended Brown's actions in kick-starting the abolitionist movement.<sup>4</sup> These historians seem to make note of ideas similar to my own research, only they chose to study other men. Garrison, along with

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<sup>2</sup> James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Jason P. Matzke. "The John Brown Way: Frederick Douglass and Henry David Thoreau on the Use of Violence." *The Massachusetts Review*, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Meyer. "Thoreau's Rescue of John Brown from History." *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1980.

John J. McDonald. "Emerson and John Brown." *The New England Quarterly*, 1971.

many other abolitionists, changed ideologies after witnessing the rise and fall of John Brown, describing how the entire careers of these abolitionists could not be defined by just one single term. These scholarly journals and biographies support my own research which witnesses William Lloyd Garrison go from a self-proclaimed pacifist, to a staunch supporter of John Brown.

The gory period of political conflicts taking place in the Kansas Territory, over the subject of slavery, became known as Bleeding Kansas. The Kansas-Nebraska Act represented the formal date for the beginning of the event, in 1854, but violence did not escalate until a few years later. Both pro-slavery and anti-slavery Americans made their way out to the territory to fight amongst themselves over the future of slavery in not only Kansas, but also the United States as a whole. In May of 1856, John Brown and a group of his sons attacked a settlement in the Kansas territory and killed five pro-slavery men.<sup>5</sup> While not the first act of militant abolitionism, it began to rattle the government and escalated the conflicting ideologies of the country. Different people across the United States reacted differently to this bloody event, but William Lloyd Garrison's reaction, or rather lack of reaction, might have been the most unsurprising.

It might be a stretch to call William Lloyd Garrison's response a full-fledged reaction, as he had very little to say of John Brown or his killings. For this project I looked at the fourteen letters that Garrison sent to his friends and family from June to November of 1856. Based on the quantitative data behind these letters, it seemed like Garrison largely ignored the killings that took place in the Kansas Territory. Out of all fourteen of these letters, none of them specifically

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen B. Oates' biography of Brown gives a more in depth description of the violent events that took place in the Kansas Territory in the twelfth chapter.

Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge this Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 147-162.

mentioned John Brown by name, or any of his sons for that matter.<sup>6</sup> It could be argued that Garrison simply had no prior knowledge of John Brown during this time period, which some historians have actually noted. James Brewer Stewart's *Holy Warriors* looks at the different types of abolitionists, and how their ideologies related with one another. According to Stewart, these two abolitionists met for the first, and only, time in 1857 at Theodore Parker's house. Stewart argues that based on this meeting, Garrison never realized that John Brown, the man whom he held conversations with, perpetrated the 1856 event.<sup>7</sup> Garrison's excuse for failing to mention Brown by name may have been disproven by modern scholars, but that does not explain the apathetic view of these events as a whole, seen in the rest of his letters.

John Brown's name might not have specifically been stated in any of the letters, but it seemed as though Garrison avoided mentioning the events that occurred at all. Very few covered the topic as Garrison only discussed the events of Kansas in roughly 21 percent, or three out of fourteen, of the letters during this time period.<sup>8</sup> In these letters, Garrison merely touched on the actions initiated by this unknown, at least to Garrison, abolitionist. While Kansas is mentioned, it is not a fleshed out response that would be expected following the bloodshed that occurred. Only one out of the fourteen, a meager seven percent, of the letters sent during this time period focused on Brown's involvement in Bleeding Kansas.<sup>9</sup> Garrison appeared to have very little to say about this carnage, if he mentioned it at all. With such a small response from Garrison, it may have been difficult for his colleagues to assess his opinions on the event. Beyond the few

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Ruchames, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison Volume IV, From Disunionism to the Brink of War 1850-1860*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975, 392-414.

<sup>7</sup> James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 151.

<sup>8</sup> Louis Ruchames, 392-414.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

that mentioned Kansas, the letters forced the recipients to assume that Garrison thought very little of the event at hand.

While Garrison refused to talk extensively about the events that took place in the Kansas Territories, what he did have to say, he got off his chest as quickly as he could. Garrison sent no letters in the first few weeks following the death of the five pro-slavery men. On June 17<sup>th</sup>, Garrison broke the silence and made his first comments about the event in a letter to the editor of the Boston Evening Telegraph, an affordable Republican leaning newspaper out of the Boston area. Garrison's letter regarded an article and petition featured in the paper about the North attempting to break up the Union, coming well before the secession of the South. Garrison proclaimed, "The supporters of the border ruffianism are too well satisfied with the Union to circulate any petition for its dissolution".<sup>10</sup> Garrison used the term "ruffianism" to portray Brown's party as a rowdy group of criminals, who only wished to stir up trouble, rather than to make a political statement. He discussed that the men who supported these delinquents were far too content with their current class and social standings to split from the slavery driven states of the south. Garrison ended the letter by saying, "yours, to suppress 'border ruffianism,' and therefore for NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS."<sup>11</sup> The series of letters following the event captured Garrison's reaction quite well. His use of language seemed to support the idea that Garrison rejected Brown's method of militant abolitionism as a way to end the institution of slavery.

While William Lloyd Garrison never heard of John Brown prior to 1856, Brown was already familiar with the work of Garrison. In a biography of Brown's life, Stephen B. Oates

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<sup>10</sup> Garrison to Editor of the Boston Evening Telegraph, June 17, 1856, in Louis Ruchames, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison Volume IV, 1850-1860* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975), 393.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

claims that *The Liberator* introduced Brown to the momentous antislavery developments throughout out the Antebellum Era, including Garrison's own views.<sup>12</sup> Brown wanted to keep up to date on the abolitionist activities that occurred all across the country, even if he disagreed with their method of spreading the antislavery cause. Oates's argument focuses on Brown being a staunch supporter of the use of violence as means to carry out abolitionism, as opposed to Garrison's "milk-and-water" pacifism.<sup>13</sup> Brown and Garrison did not see eye to eye as Oates saw these men as having conflicting and unchanging ideologies. An early passage in the biography could exhibit a possibility of why Garrison ignored Bleeding Kansas. In 1831, several months after *The Liberator* had first been published, Nat Turner, a preacher from Virginia, led a slave rebellion. Although local authority quickly suppressed the rebellion, Oates claims that southern slaveholders blamed the uprising on antislavery newspapers like Garrison's.<sup>14</sup> Not knowing whether Brown, rather this unnamed instigator, attributed his inspiration to the words of *The Liberator*, Garrison might have wished to keep quiet on the subject for fear of being connected with this militant abolitionist.

Although it might have seemed that Garrison had much to say of John Brown and his violence driven abolitionism, his subsequent letters quickly disproved this notion. Garrison had much more pertinent problems to discuss than Brown, such as the current state of his families summer wardrobe. On an undisclosed date in June, Garrison sent a letter to his son, William (or as his family referred to him, Willie) Lloyd Garrison Jr. In the letter, Garrison senior wrote, "your letter to Wendell, with the coat, has just been received. We regret the latter is too small for

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge this Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 27.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 186.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

you”.<sup>15</sup> While this letter gave the appearance of being unimportant and insignificant, Garrison seemed to want to avoid talking about the events at Kansas with his family. He continued by saying, “Mother declines getting you another [coat], without first knowing what you would like; and, accordingly, sends you the enclosed patterns to look at.”<sup>16</sup> In a biography of Garrison’s life, historian John L. Thomas claims that, having been born in 1838, Willie would have been around eighteen years old and close to being old enough to find his own job in business.<sup>17</sup> Willie would have been seemingly old enough discuss current events and national affairs with his father. Either Garrison believed that Brown’s involvement in Kansas was insignificant, or he simply wished to shield the news from his family.

While a month had passed from the date of John Brown’s killings, with only one, let alone one major, reaction from Garrison, it would not be the last time he did so. On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, Garrison sent a letter to abolitionist and Unitarian minister, Theodor Parker. The subject of this letter discussed the attendance of some of the areas most prominent abolitionist at the “annual Fourth of July meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.”<sup>18</sup> While local abolitionists, with likely differing personal ideologies, held this meeting, Garrison never disclosed the topic of the gathering. Instead, he spent the rest of letter alluding to current events other than Brown. In the opening line, Garrison wrote, “I have just received a letter from Mr. [Thomas Wentworth] Higginson, dated at Detroit. Stating that he is on his way to Chicago, in regard to Kansas matters, and, therefore, deeply to his regret, it will not be in his power to be at our Framingham

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<sup>15</sup> Garrison to William Lloyd Garrison Jr., June 1856, in Louis Ruchames, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison Volume IV, 1850-1860* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975), 394.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> John L. Thomas, *The Liberator: William Lloyd Garrison* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1963), 281, 438.

<sup>18</sup> Garrison to Theodore Parker, July 2, 1856, in Louis Ruchames, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison Volume IV, 1850-1860* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975), 397.

celebration on the 4<sup>th</sup>.”<sup>19</sup> While Higginson felt the need to discuss the events of the violence that occurred in Kansas at a Chicago meeting, Garrison did not mention that he would be joining Higginson. The letter never mentioned the discussion that occurred during the Fourth of July meeting, but since Garrison chose to forgo the gathering in Chicago regarding Kansas, it implied that the subject did not come up during the one in Massachusetts.

Throughout his subsequent letters, Garrison had very little to say about John Brown’s activities in Kansas, although the final letter sent during this time period did have some significance. Later that year, on November 20<sup>th</sup>, Garrison sent a letter to well-known transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Just like Garrison, Emerson harbored very strong feelings against slavery, although they might not have seen eye to eye on how to abolish the institution. In this letter, Garrison avoided talking about the abolitionist movement, but did mention some of the prominent abolitionists. Garrison spoke of having portraits done of popular figures from the Boston area. Specifically Garrison stated,

Mr. C. H. Brainard... intends publishing, very shortly, ‘a magnificent lithographic print, of the size and style of the champions of Freedom,’ in which will be presented the portrait... of Theodore Parker, Wendell Phillips, Joshua R. Giddings, Gerrit Smith, Samuel J. May, &c. He is very desirous that your portrait should be among the number designated.<sup>20</sup>

Not surprisingly, Garrison and Brainard left Brown off of the list of the "Champions of Freedom", but Emerson felt differently of the militant abolitionist. Historian John J. McDonald looks into this relationship between Brown and Emerson in his journal article, “Emerson and John Brown”. McDonald takes a quote from one of Emerson’s speeches, (“There is this

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Garrison to Ralph Waldo Emerson, July 2, 1856, in Louis Ruchames, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison Volume IV, 1850-1860* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975), 413.

peculiarity about the case of Kansas, that all the right is on one side”) and then weighs his opinion on it as he claims, “The side he means is that of the Free-Staters, whose most militant leader was John Brown.”<sup>21</sup> McDonald argues throughout his article that Emerson supported the militaristic approach of John Brown.<sup>22</sup> With Emerson being a supporter of Brown, this demonstrated a reason why Garrison chose to keep quiet on this subject throughout his letter.

Following the incident in the Kansas Territory, John Brown kept quiet for the following years. Brown seemed to be staying out of trouble, but little did the country know, he had more radical ideas up his sleeves. Gathering up another group of abolitionists, this time including some former slaves, Brown set forth to send a message to the South. Equipped with muskets, rifles, and pikes; John Brown led his militia down to Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. On October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1859 this small army took control of the local armory. Because of the lack of publicity, slaves in town did not join Brown as planned, and United States Marines took care of this problem before any major damage occurred. After being captured, the local courts determined Brown to be guilty of treason, and he was subsequently hung.<sup>23</sup> The raid on Harper’s Ferry shed less blood than Bleeding Kansas but caused a much larger reaction from the entire country, especially from certain abolitionists.

Surprisingly enough, William Lloyd Garrison had much more to say about Harper’s Ferry than he did Bleeding Kansas. Garrison sent out many letters in the six months following

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<sup>21</sup> John J. McDonald. “Emerson and John Brown.” *The New England Quarterly*, 1971: 377.

<sup>22</sup> McDonald went even further to say that Emerson supported John Brown so much that he exaggerated historical facts in order to build him up as the “transcendental hero”. Emerson embellished details of Brown’s life in order to inflate the relationship of the two, when in reality they had never met.  
Ibid. 382.

<sup>23</sup> The eighteenth to twentieth chapter of Oates’ biography of give a detailed description of Brown’s trip to Harper’s Ferry, along with the raid, and his hanging.  
Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge this Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 27.274-336

this event, with many references to John Brown. During this time period, Garrison became enamored by John Brown's violent brand of abolition. For my research I looked at ten letters of correspondence, sent from Garrison, ranging from November 1859 to April 1860. Out of these letters, fifty percent mentioned John Brown specifically.<sup>24</sup> Just mentioning Brown's name displayed how much more relevant the raid on Harper's Ferry was, as Garrison did not even mention the names of any of the Bleeding Kansas culprits. Forty percent of these original ten letters offered strong opinionated responses to the events that occurred.<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that all of these responses came in a row within a three-month period. While Garrison's response to John Brown died out over the course of the year, he initially wrote fanatically about the incident. Rather than just ignoring the violence in Kansas, Garrison completely changed his viewpoint and did more than merely recognizing Brown and Harper's Ferry.

The first letter that Garrison sent following the Raid on Harper's Ferry displayed a sense of shock through his responses. About two weeks following the raid, on November 1<sup>st</sup>, Garrison sent a letter to fellow abolitionist and writer, Oliver Johnson. In Garrison's initial claim, he stated that, "what Capt. Brown expected to accomplish with only a score of abettors is to me... quite enigmatical."<sup>26</sup> Not only did Garrison seem to be confused by Brown's actions, but he seemed to suggest that he believed it to be extremely foolish. Later in the letter he wrote that Brown's:

Raid into Virginia looks utterly lacking in common sense – a desperate self-sacrifice for the purpose of giving an earthquake shock to the slave system... in Boston we have thought it would be a master-stroke of policy to urge the day of his execution as the day

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<sup>24</sup> Louis Ruchames, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison Volume IV, From Disunionism to the Brink of War 1850-1860*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975, 660-674.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Garrison to Oliver Johnson, November 1, 1859, in Louis Ruchames, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison Volume IV, 1850-1860* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975), 661.

for a general public expression of sentiment with reference to the guilt and danger of slavery.<sup>27</sup>

Garrison reaffirmed his feeling of confusion towards Brown's raid as he described it to be in bad judgment, but also the stimulus that the abolitionist movement needed. The rest of his letter mentioned the use of John Brown as a martyr for the evils of slavery.<sup>28</sup> Garrison, a man who ridiculed militant abolitionism just a few years prior, seemed to warm up to the ideology that Brown brought with him.

Touted as a pacifist, Garrison typically shrugged off most militant actions of abolitionists, although many historians noted that not all abolitionists felt this way. Jason P. Matzke argues that another popular abolitionist during this time period, Frederick Douglass, took less persuading to support Brown's effort. Douglass, who at one point had been a slave himself, used his speaking skills to try and sway the country towards abolition. While both Garrison and Douglass agreed on the use of words and language to prove their point, they did not share the same thoughts about the use of violence. Matzke writes that John Brown had actually invited Douglass to join the raid, but he declined due to his health.<sup>29</sup> The point that Matzke brings up is that Douglass would have joined this raid, as he believed violence was an acceptable way to protect the rights and liberties of slaves.<sup>30</sup> While Douglass never fought anyone himself, he condoned the use of violence for the greater good of the country, which made Garrison's reaction

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Jason P. Matzke. "The John Brown Way: Frederick Douglass and Henry David Thoreau on the Use of Violence." *The Massachusetts Review*, 2005: 64.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

all the more surprising.<sup>31</sup> Although Garrison largely ignored the violent uprising in Kansas just a few years prior, he now sympathized with the abolitionists that he had once loathed.

Garrison never reached the same level of intensity in his examination of John Brown in his following letters; but he still obsessively stated his opinions to who ever received his notes. On December 17<sup>th</sup> of that same year, 1859, Garrison sent a letter to W.H. Furness, the minister of the First Congregational Unitary Church in Philadelphia. Initially, it seemed Garrison's motivation for sending this letter was to recommend that Furness take one of his friend's son under his wing as an apprentice.<sup>32</sup> Seemingly a personal letter to a friend, the message took a sharp turn towards the current events of the day. The second half of the letter went into great detail about Harper's Ferry as he stated, "John Brown has raised up all the fierceness and diabolism of the pit at the South, and among a certain class at the North."<sup>33</sup> Garrison described Brown's Raid to be a "momentous" occasion, creating fervor throughout the nation. According to Garrison, Brown had not only displayed the intensity of the abolitionist movement to the southern slave owners, but also persuaded northerners to join the cause. Continuing on with his letter, Garrison excitedly wrote, "[Brown] inspired and strengthened millions to abhor slavery,

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<sup>31</sup> Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau became another surprising supporter of John Brown. Similarly to Garrison's initial non-violent approach to abolitionism, it seemed that Thoreau's most famous work, *Civil Disobedience*, might have turned him away from the actions of Brown. Michael Meyer argues that even based on the negative articles that Thoreau read about John Brown, he still supported his actions. Knowing that pro-slavery news exaggerated the amount of bloodshed that occurred during Brown's famous events, and despite the Democrats that attacked his aims, "Thoreau supported Brown with unqualified praise." Meyer notes that Thoreau viewed Brown as a man that acted out of principle rather than an insane fanatic. This idea goes against the strict pacifist versus militant abolitionist view that Stephen B. Oates supports. Michael Meyer. "Thoreau's Rescue of John Brown from History." *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1980: 309.

<sup>32</sup> Garrison to W.H. Furness, December 17, 1859, in Louis Ruchames, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison Volume IV, 1850-1860* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975), 663.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

and labor for its overthrow. God bless you and yours abundantly!”<sup>34</sup> Garrison not only spoke enthusiastically of Brown’s actions (the final sentence seemed to be a peak of his fervor), but also how the man had affected the entire abolitionist beliefs of the country.

The letters sent by Garrison following the Bleeding Kansas event seemed to be very run of the mill correspondences. On the other hand, the way Garrison wrote in his letters following Harper’s Ferry appeared to be of a completely different style. These letters captured the passionate way in which Garrison not only wrote in his own newspaper, but also how many abolitionists spoke out on the issue of slavery. In order to elicit a response like Garrison’s, the event or person involved would need to be an important one, and Brown’s Raid on Harper’s Ferry was exactly that. Historians have made note of the general consensus of American citizens on Brown’s raid. John Thomas agrees with this idea when he claims that, “Americans returned to the slavery problem, first as a question of what [Henry] Clay called ‘sentiment,’ but then, as the decade progressed, in the drama of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and John Brown’s raid.”<sup>35</sup> Based on the reaction of not only abolitionists, but also the American public, Garrison’s sudden excitement did not come off as a surprise to the Antebellum Era scholars. Based on Thomas’s findings, if the events in Kansas did not draw attention to issue slavery, then Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry did. With that being said, Thomas fails to uncover Garrison’s reasoning for suddenly praising the actions of an extremely violent man.

Garrison took no breaks from ranting and raving about the Raid on Harper’s Ferry as his next letter remained focused of the actions of John Brown. On the same day, December 17<sup>th</sup>, Garrison sent a letter to another minister and fellow abolitionist, James Miller McKim. Similarly to his letter to Furness, Garrison started out by mentioning helping out the son of another family

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> John L. Thomas, *The Liberator: William Lloyd Garrison* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1963), 361.

friend, this time introducing him to the anti-slavery movement.<sup>36</sup> The next topic of the letter, John Brown, solved Garrison's problem of introducing his friend to the anti-slavery movement. Garrison exclaimed, "How much I would like to say about the John Brown affair!"<sup>37</sup> An excited Garrison quickly changed the topic to his current fascination and discussed the death of Brown. McKim helped with the hanging and later burying of Brown, even helping some of his family members. Garrison proceeded to express his gratitude to McKim for his work at the funeral, even expressing regret for not being able to list McKim's "excellent remarks" in an issue of *The Liberator*.<sup>38</sup> Garrison now believed Brown to be noble enough to have a respectable funeral. Throughout the letter, Garrison displayed a sense of sympathy for John Brown that had not been mentioned before.

Although historians like Stephen B. Oates have argued that there is a definitive distinction between Brown's militant abolitionism and Garrison's non-violent abolitionism, not all scholarship holds the same to be true. One historian that disagrees with this notion is James Brewer Stewart, whose book, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery*, attempts to categorize the different types of abolitionists during the Antebellum Era. Stewart does note that conflicting views on how to spread the antislavery message prevented Brown and Garrison from getting along at their 1857 meeting, but he also claims that it does not tell the entire story. Stewart argues that based on his strong Christian faith, Brown justified his violence with the, "biblical theme of God's reigning bloody vengeance on his hard-hearted people."<sup>39</sup> Brown justified his actions through his religion, similarly to other abolitionists, although many drew

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<sup>36</sup> Garrison to J. Miller McKim, December 17, 1859, in Louis Ruchames, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison Volume IV, 1850-1860* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975), 663.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 664

<sup>39</sup> James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 156.

non-violent conclusions to their interpretation of the bible. The main distinction that Stewart makes is that while Brown stuck with his personal abolitionist views, many others did not. Some of these abolitionists, including Garrison, were known to, “twist their principles to justify bloody deeds.”<sup>40</sup> According to this interpretation, Garrison’s change in heart might have been a result of the abolitionist movement needing a kick-start. Historical scholarship such as this book suggest that abolitionists had much more intricate ideologies than could be defined in a single word. Stewart’s arguments connect with my own research as it offers evidence of other abolitionists changing their ideologies.

The letters that Garrison sent following his correspondence with McKim seemed to discuss John Brown less and less. The final time that he mentioned John Brown during this six-month period came in his final letter of 1859. On December 18<sup>th</sup>, Garrison sent a letter to an unknown correspondent regarding his scheduled speech in Concord. The only indication that Garrison gave on the topic of this speech appeared when he claimed he would speak, “on the great theme of the times.”<sup>41</sup> The letter gave no other context to the meaning of the “great theme” that Garrison mentioned. While it might be tempting to assume that Garrison wished to speak about John Brown, as he did not talk about much else during these months, the letter did not give enough information given to jump to that conclusion. Garrison specifically mentioned John Brown at the end of the letter as he stated, “John Brown executed will do more for our good cause, incomparably, than John Brown pardoned.”<sup>42</sup> After he spent an entire letter seemingly avoiding the topic of Brown, naturally Garrison added his thoughts on the recent execution.

Garrison’s initial thoughts after the raid came true as the death of John Brown turned him into a

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Garrison to an unknown correspondent, December 17, 1859, in Louis Ruchames, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison Volume IV, 1850-1860* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975), 664.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 665.

martyr for the abolitionist cause. Although Garrison seemed to be excited over the death of a fellow American, he believed it to be a necessary one if the United States ever wanted to get rid of slavery.

The letters that followed, during the first few months of 1860, were completely devoid of any references or allusions to John Brown or the Raid on Harper's Ferry. Whether Garrison simply grew bored of John Brown or not, he never made another mention of Harper's Ferry. One of the only explanations to this occurrence could have been his health. According to the editor of the collection these letters, Louis Ruchames, "Illness of throat and lungs plagued Garrison during the early part of 1860 as well as its end."<sup>43</sup> Confined to his home, Garrison might not have been able to hear some aspects of the current state of abolitionism first hand. With John Brown executed in December, Garrison had very little to talk about. A more revealing interpretation of Garrison's thoughts at that point came from the title that Ruchames gives to this section of the book, "Illness, More Conventions, and Garrisonian Antislavery Redefined: 1860."<sup>44</sup> Ruchames takes precaution in his collection of letters, as he includes all of Garrison's correspondence from the time period as to avoid "cherry picking" letters that might indicate a bias. The rest of the book does not hold this true as the titles and introductions of the chapters display the interpretation of the editor. The phrase in the title, "Garrisonian Antislavery Redefined" gives the idea that Ruchames believes Garrison's ideology had drastically changed at the tail end of the decade. Whether or not John Brown is the reason for this is not mentioned, but the volume of letters that mention him can lead to that assumption.

Looking through the letters of William Lloyd Garrison, it is not difficult to see the differences between his reaction to John Brown in Kansas, and his reaction to John Brown in

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<sup>43</sup> Louis Ruchames, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison Volume IV, From Disunionism to the Brink of War 1850-1860*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975, 666.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Harper's Ferry. In 1856, Brown and his sons killed five pro-slavery men in the Kansas Territory, with little more than a peep from Garrison. On the other hand, in 1859 Brown led a failed insurrection in Harper's Ferry, Virginia, with considerably less casualties, and Garrison nearly exploded with excitement. The once pacifist Garrison had completely changed his ideologies and not only condoned Brown's militant abolitionism in Virginia, but believed it to be completely necessary to the anti-slavery cause. By the end of the 1850's "Garrisonian Antislavery" had become completely transformed because of the impact of one man, John Brown.

While today's scholarship on John Brown is split between praise and disgust in his actions, there have been some differences in the way that historians have defined the man. One of these historians, Gary Alan Fine, notes that because Brown's antislavery beliefs lead him to take charge of these events, they can be defined as political violence.<sup>45</sup> Fine argues that because Brown took part in this political violence, he can be deemed a terrorist.<sup>46</sup> If Bleeding Kansas can be described as a terrorist attack, then Garrison's lack of response is even more surprising, compared with his obsession with the Raid on Harper's Ferry. As one of the most prominent editors and abolitionists of his time, William Lloyd Garrison's apathy over the violence in Kansas could be similar to the fictional scenario of an editor of the *New York Times* ignoring all stories of terrorist attacks following September 11, 2001. After seeing Garrison's response to John Brown at Harper's Ferry, why did he choose to stay quiet after the events at Kansas? What made Brown's actions during the Harper's Ferry incident so different that it completely changed

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<sup>45</sup> Gary Allen Fine. "John Brown's Body: Elites, Heroic Embodiment, and the Legitimation of Political Violence." *Social Problems*, 1999: 225.

<sup>46</sup> Modern scholarship has been increasingly defining John Brown to be a terrorist, due to modern terrorists, like Florida's Paul Hill, claimed him to be an inspiration. Following the attacks on the World Trade Centers in 2001, terrorism was redefined to be a worldwide phenomenon, ending Brown's time as a historical terrorist. Paul Finkleman. "John Brown: America's First Terrorist?" *Prologue Magazine*, 2011.

the mindset of William Lloyd Garrison? Are there issues in current events that politicians and journalists have attempted to cover up?

## Bibliography

### *Primary Sources*

Ruchames, Louis. *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison Volume IV, From Disunionism to the Brink of War 1850-1860*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975.

A collection of all of the letters sent by William Lloyd Garrison from the years 1850 to 1860, complete with date and recipients. The letters cover a variety of Garrison's discussion including his newspaper, *The Liberator*, family issues, and current events occurring across the United States. The letters are placed in chronological order even featuring the current location for these letters. The book is broken up into multiple sections based on the current condition of Garrison and the country. These sections range from, "The Year of the Compromise – The Fugitive Slave Act and Its Aftermath: 1850-1851" to "Intensified Calls for Disunion: 1857" and ending with "Illness, More Conventions, and Garrisonian Antislavery redefined: 1860". At the beginning of each of the sections, editor Louis Ruchames includes a short introduction to the time period giving more context to the letters that follow. The letters themselves allow the reader to pick at the mind of William Lloyd Garrison and look at more of his personal thoughts that he might not include in his newspaper articles.

These letters create the bulk of my paper, as they are my only primary sources used in this research. Specifically I am using fourteen letters from the years 1856 to 1857 following John Brown's murders in the Kansas Territory, and ten letter from the years 1859 to 1860 following Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. My reading of the letters will allow me to interpret the thoughts of Garrison and see how his viewpoints changed of the course of this short time. The introductions will also be important to use as they can help give me more background on Garrison in order to see what point of his life he was at. It will almost be like an additional secondary source as it adds more historian commentary.

### *Secondary Sources*

Fine, Gary Alan. "John Brown's Body: Elites, Heroic Embodiment, and the Legitimation of Political Violence." *Social Problems*, 1999: 225-249.

Fine argues that abolitionists used the image of John Brown to create a champion for the abolitionist cause and legitimize his attacks on the government. Fine looks at the time following Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry and the way that other abolitionists looked at his actions. The myth created by the Americans displayed a crazed abolitionist who attacked his own government. The newspapers read by Americans after this event form one primary source used to display way that citizens actually felt about John Brown. The death of John Brown became completely necessary as it created a hero that the abolitionist cause used him as a martyr for the cause of freeing the slaves. A biography of Brown written by a journalist in 1860 looked at letters and events from John Brown that helped to create the image of a man who did not attack his government because he was crazy but because of his morals. Fine also touches upon Whittier's "Brown of Osawatomie" which displayed an array of primary sources that described the mindset

of the other abolitionists and American citizens. Newspapers such as the Boston Liberator legitimized Browns actions by claims of Southern tyranny.

This article is useful for my project because it looks at the legend of John Brown, some thing that I may tackle in my own work. The article talks in detail about the legacy that John Brown has left on the country and abolitionist movement and the varying beliefs. On one hand, Fine notices those who claim Brown to be a hero and model abolitionist. My research both supports and disproves this idea, as Garrison had two different views on Brown between the events. On the other hand, which can pertain to my project, it notices Brown to be an increasingly negative view of Brown in modern scholarship. It even goes as far to say that some historians have given John Brown the title of the first terrorist.

Finkleman, Paul. "John Brown: America's First Terrorist?" *Prologue Magazine*, 2011.

Matzke, Jason P. "The John Brown Way: Frederick Douglass and Henry David Thoreau on the Use of Violence." *The Massachusetts Review*, 2005: 62-75.

Matzke looks at the views that Henry David Thoreau and Frederick Douglass had on the violent actions of John Brown. Matzke argues that both Thoreau and Douglass supported John Brown's methods of using violence as a means of abolition. In regards to Thoreau, Matzke looks at the essays that he wrote such as "A Plea for Captain John Brown" and others. He uses these primary sources to explain how the Harpers Ferry incident is one of only two times that Thoreau supported means of violence through his writing. For Frederick Douglass, Matzke looks at the various speeches and essays that he had made about abolition and John Brown himself. His claims look at Douglass's views that everyone had certain rights and violence could be justifiable in cases such as abolition. The essays of Douglass saw Brown as a man using violence in order to protect the rights and liberties of the slaves. These primary sources show how even though Douglass and Thoreau mentioned each other very much; they both shared the support for the actions of John Brown.

The article will also help me look at differing viewpoints of John Brown from abolitionists, this article focusing on Thoreau and Frederick Douglass. Differing from Garrison's pacifist views, Douglass believed otherwise, and says John Brown's violence as a necessity as he makes his plea. Matzke even argues that Thoreau felt the same way, an idea that displays a progression of views over time. Using the writings of both of these abolitionists, I will be able to see exactly what points these people made in their support of John Brown. I will be able to compare what aspects of Brown these people saw in supporting the necessity of violence in order to free the slaves. I can use this to scrutinize my own research as I see why exactly Garrison thought the way that he did, in regards to Brown. It fits into my own work as it tackles the topic of political violence that made a huge mark on the leaders of this time period.

McDonald John J. "Emerson and John Brown." *The New England Quarterly*, 1971: 377-396.

McDonald argues that Ralph Waldo Emerson crafted and exaggerated his relationship with John Brown because Emerson supported his views and actions. McDonald notes that while the two did meet, and Emerson invited Brown to his house on many occasions, they had little contact or

correspondence. These two men had met before but McDonald notes that there are no letters or correspondences between them. Emerson's journal is looked at as he over exaggerated many accounts John Brown and claimed to have an intimate relationship with him. Another point that McDonald made displayed the praise that Emerson gave to John Brown especially in his journal after he died. Tasked with writing a biography for John Brown, Emerson wrote using his own memory and with the help of other fans of John Brown. Looking at speeches from Emerson, he ranks Brown amongst many other great heroes and idea that McDonald believed drew from Emerson's writings about the definition of a hero and heroism. These sources displayed the comments that other abolitionists had on John Brown and the events leading up to his death.

This article will be useful to my research because it compares the views of John Brown and another popular figure, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had his own disagreements over the institution of slavery. While it did not mention whether or not Emerson was specifically a pacifist, but he raved about his actions. Someone who completely supported the violent actions of John Brown can be a contrast to William Lloyd Garrison who took a while to warm up to Brown's ideology. Emerson was on board with Brown's violent actions as opposed to Garrison, who admonished the ruffian. The journal, which makes up the bulk of the sources, built up the reputation of Brown due to Emerson's infatuation with him.

Meyer, Michael. "Thoreau's Rescue of John Brown from History." *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1980: 301-316.

Meyer looks at the views of one abolitionist, Henry David Thoreau, and his views on the actions of John Brown. Meyer argues that Thoreau supported John Brown because of his commitment to principle despite his views of civil resistance. He uses support such as the articles of newspapers that Thoreau read that vilified John Brown. In such cases, such as democratic newspapers after the events of Kansas, Thoreau ignored these articles. While Thoreau eventually accepted the violent actions of Brown, he claimed to support him due to Brown's views against slavery. This article makes use of primary sources, especially both democratic and abolitionist newspapers of the north. Meyer looks at these as Thoreau read these newspapers and either listened to, or completely disregarded the contents of them. It also looks at the journals and essays (such as his essay, A Plea) of Thoreau that look at the view that he took after reading these newspapers. Meyer looks at these articles that Thoreau read in the newspapers and how he responded to them in his own writings to display why he supported Brown.

This article will be extremely useful for my project because it looks at John Brown's actions, and how Henry David Thoreau viewed them. Thoreau had a pacifist view of abolitionism, similarly to Garrison, which could be used as a comparison when looking at how these two men's views evolved over the course of the 1850's. Thoreau portrays another abolitionist that claimed to be a pacifist who supported Harper's Ferry, much like William Lloyd Garrison. The article looks at more some of the thoughts of Thoreau, with journals and essays, making it easier to compare the internal thoughts of these two abolitionists rather than the ideas that they told to the masses. The newspapers included in the article could offer insight into the ways that the country as a whole (especially the differing pro/anti slave) viewed the actions of John Brown.

Nudelman, Franny. “‘The Blood of Millions’: John Brown's Body, Public Violence, and Political Community.” *American Literary History*, 2001: 639-670.

Nudelman argues that the sympathetic feelings surrounding the death of John Brown became a cause to further the political violence of the Civil War. Nudelman looks specifically at “John Brown’s Body”, a song that became a popular for Union soldiers, and how it portrayed him as a martyr for the Civil War. The article looks at other causes of sympathy for the slaves of the south, such as Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but focuses on the affect that Brown had.

Abolitionists looked to create compassion for the slaves and the physical and emotional torment that the slaves went through in order to garner more support for violence against slavery.

Nudelman also looks at letters and diary entries of people affected by the death of John Brown such as Lidia Maria Child. Examples like Child displayed the personal feelings that made people feel invested in the causes that John Brown fought for. These letters delve into the personal mindsets that these people felt after Brown’s death, and the actions that they took in response to it.

I will use this journal article for my own research because it looks at the effects that violence had on the bodies and minds of people throughout the country, the tactic that John Brown used.

Public violence had varying effects on people, which show up in the letters of Garrison, where he has conflicting responses. According to the article, abolitionists like Brown looked to fight fire with fire and enact violence against the south. While Garrison looked to solve the crisis through his words and pacifism, the sources that Nudelman uses try to show how some people supported Brown’s violence right off the bat. These abolitionists connect with my own research by offering a comparison to the thoughts that Garrison had over the course of the decade.

Oates, Stephan B. *To Purge this Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970.

Stephan B. Oates writes a comprehensive biography of the life of John Brown, along with the many events that made him the historical figure that he is. Oates looks to dispel the “madman” myth of the master narrative as he argues that Brown had a more thoughtful reasoning for his violence. Oates looked to describe a much deeper character in Brown than initially thought. Contained in the book are a number of photographs that capture the image and also the depiction of John Brown. He explains the support that John Brown had help from local Boston elite, how his ideas were more revered than his actions as he was seen as a martyr. While the elites dropped their support of Brown after he failed, the rest of the country rose behind him. He became not only a militant abolitionist, but a radical one as well.

This book will be perfect for my project because it gives me a good base of knowledge of John Brown to use. I can use the depictions of the events of John Brown to examine the time leading up to, during, and following the events of Bleeding Kansas and Harper’s Ferry. I can look at the reasoning that John Brown had for partaking in these events. In that sense, my research supports the fact that these two men had very little contact with one another. The book also looks at the very limited relationship that Brown and Garrison had. I can look at the limited time that these two people had and how Brown felt and reacted to the language that Garrison used in his newspaper articles.

Stewart, James Brewer. *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1996.

This book, from James Brewer Stewart, looks to give a history of the abolition movement in the United States, starting as early as the Revolutionary Era up to Civil War and Reconstruction. Stewart argues that abolitionists typically fell under the militant or pacifist approach, but the popularity of these two changed of the course of the time period covered. He covers a broad range of abolitionists from Frederick Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison. The book attempts to categorize these men into groups and classify the prominent mindset of the abolitionists in different time frames. Stewart aims to try defining the people and events that helped build the abolitionist movement in the years leading up to the Civil War.

A comprehensive abolitionist history will be good for my project because it gives good commentary to compare with my own research. Not only will I be able to use the information that Stewart supplies about Garrison and Brown, but also his information about pacifist and militant abolitionism. The fact that I am looking at Garrison's changing notions over time, Stewart's scholarship supports the ideas that I have brought up through my own research.

Thomas, John L. *The Liberator: William Lloyd Garrison A Biography*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1963.

John L. Thomas compiles a biography of the life of William Lloyd Garrison, focusing on his abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*. He argues that Garrison was a perfectionist in the sense of abolition. What Thomas means by this is that Garrison was that his poor upbringing, such as his father, lead to him wanting to work to obtain his goal. The goal in this case was to get rid of the moral evils of slavery and obtain the perfect society that followed the words of the founding fathers. Garrison looked to accomplish this through his abolitionist writings, which according to Thomas verbally attacked those who felt otherwise. The biography portrays Garrison as a dramatic character and that is not surprising considering the religious roots behind it.

This will be useful for my research in the similar way to Brown's biography as it will give me a foundation of knowledge about Garrison. I can look at the way that Garrison reacted to, and partook in, Bleeding Kansas and Harper's Ferry according to Thomas. This biography will also look at the relationship that Garrison had with Brown, but from a different perspective. The focus of my research is on the letters from Garrison, so I can compare and contrast with Thomas. My research happens to contrast with this biography as it makes note of a much more complex individual in Garrison.