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**THE CONTESTABLE JOHN BROWN:
ABOLITIONISM AND THE CIVIL WAR IN U.S. PUBLIC MEMORY**

A Thesis in

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by

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ABSTRACT

Abolitionist John Brown is a divisive figure in United States history. He features prominently in our national historical narrative, but his radical politics, religious fanaticism, and violent methods have led to polarized memories of his contributions to the abolitionist cause and his role in the coming of the U.S. Civil War. Some consider Brown a hero or a martyr of abolitionism, while others view him as a violent extremist, even a madman. Over time, Americans from across the political spectrum have mobilized Brown's memory to advance particular political and social causes, sometimes on opposing sides of the same issue.

This thesis examines three instances of public controversy over the memory of John Brown. In each of these case studies, Brown's public memory has been *rhetorically constructed* and vigorously *contested*. First, I explore a controversy over regionalist painter John Steuart Curry's depiction of Brown in the Kansas Statehouse mural, *The Tragic Prelude*. Some Kansans praised the mural for highlighting their state's radical past, while others were offended that Curry would link Kansas history with the life of a murderous madman. I argue that *The Tragic Prelude* acted as a site for these Kansans to contest their state's identity and its place in the larger narrative of Civil War history. Second, I will examine Brown's first appearance on the silver screen in the 1940 Hollywood film, *Santa Fe Trail*. I argue that this film re-envisioned the coming of the Civil War, casting Brown as a stereotypical Western villain. In the process, *Santa Fe Trail* oversimplified the complex coming-of-the-Civil War narrative, blaming the war

almost entirely on Brown, and implying that it might have been avoided were it not for Brown's religious delusions and fanatical behaviors. Finally, I analyze a 1959 controversy over *if* and *how* the centennial of Brown's Harpers Ferry raid should be commemorated. Although Brown's raid was eventually remembered on its hundredth anniversary, the planners of the event took care to avoid *celebrating* the raid, especially in ways that might be taken as an endorsement of Brown's radicalism or of his violence. I argue that in the social and political context of the time, this rejection of Brown—and of the liberal, abolitionist principles for which he stood—functioned simultaneously as an expression of Cold War distaste for “radicalism” and as a repudiation of one of the historical memories underlying the civil rights movement.

Ultimately, these three case studies show how, when Brown's memory is invoked and contested, it typically has more to do with the politics of the moment than with discovering the “truth” of the past. John Brown serves as an ideal vehicle for articulating public memories because he embodies such important moral quandaries. Thus, a study of his public memories lends insights into how Americans confront issues such as the morality of slavery, the justifications for violence, and the “lessons” of the Civil War.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
Chapter 1. Introduction: John Brown in U.S. Public Memory	1
Rhetoric and Collective Memory	5
Public Memory Theory	6
Public Memory and the U.S. Civil War	8
The Contested Memory of John Brown	10
Thesis Organization and Scope	14
Notes	20
Chapter 2. <i>The Tragic Prelude</i> : John Brown's Public Memory and Kansas	
Identity	23
John Steuart Curry and the Origins of the Kansas Murals	25
Curry's Inspiration for the Kansas Murals	30
<i>The Tragic Prelude</i> : Remembering Kansas History	33
The Mural Controversy: A Contestation of Memory	38
Conclusion	44
Notes	46
Chapter 3. John Brown, Villain: <i>Santa Fe Trail's</i> Retelling of How the Civil War	
Began	54
<i>Santa Fe Trail</i> : The Plot	58
The Duel Narratives of <i>Santa Fe Trail</i>	59
Rewriting History and Reframing the Causes of War	66
Conclusion	72
Notes	76
Chapter 4. To Commemorate or Not to Commemorate?: Remembering the	
Centennial of John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry	79
Commemorating the U.S. Civil War Centennial	81
Harpers Ferry Raid: The Historical Account	87
Downplaying the Centennial of John Brown's Raid	91
Harpers Ferry Raid: The Centennial Commemoration	97
Commemoration Analysis	100
Conclusion	108
Notes	111

Chapter 5. Conclusion: How Should We Remember John Brown?	121
John Brown and the Politics of Civil War Memory	124
John Brown's Enduring Legacy	128
Notes	130
BIBLIOGRAPHY	132

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Chapter 1

Introduction: John Brown in U.S. Public Memory

I have been whipped as the saying is,
but I am sure I can recover all the lost
capital occasioned by the disaster by
only hanging a few moments by the neck.

John Brown
Charles Town, Virginia
November 11, 1859

Abolitionist John Brown hangs precariously in United States public memory.

Although he is a prominent figure in our national historical narrative, Brown's contributions to the abolitionist movement and his involvement in events leading to the U.S. Civil War are widely disputed, even to this day. Historian David Reynolds reflects on this contested memory in his biography on Brown, stating that some hold Brown "on the level of Christ" for his unwavering dedication to the antislavery cause, while others interpret his "violent excesses" as evidence that he was a madman or even a terrorist.¹

Brown is one of the most violent figures in the history of abolitionism. Because of this, his public memory is intertwined with issues much larger than just the legacy of one man. Historically, Brown's violent actions forced the nation to weigh the morality of slavery against that of violence. Today, when Brown's memory is invoked, members of the U.S. public are asked to take their own moral stand on these contentious issues. Historian Merrill D. Peterson reinforces this idea, contending that Brown's life is

wrapped up in some of the “most enduring moral quandaries and dilemmas of our national life.”²

Perhaps it is the very contentiousness of the issues embodied by Brown’s public memory that has made him the object of continued study, remembrance, and heated debates. Competing portraits of Brown—from the time of his death until the present—have appeared in literature, art, film, and various other mediums, collectively pointing to his historical and present-day importance. In multiple instances, these portraits have been mobilized and used for different—even opposing—political purposes. I intend to explore three instances of such political mobilization that have evolved into larger controversies. To conduct this project, I have selected three important historical moments in which Brown’s public memory has been *rhetorically constructed* and vigorously *contested*.

First, I will explore a controversy over regionalist painter John Steuart Curry’s depiction of Brown in the Kansas Statehouse mural, *The Tragic Prelude*.³ The mural, painted between 1938 and 1940, prominently features a larger-than-life portrayal of a wild-eyed Brown, striding forth out of a sea of Civil War Union and Confederate forces, arms outstretched, rifle and Bible in hand, with dramatic scenery—a prairie fire and tornado—in the background. Curry’s portrayal of Brown was controversial from its inception. Some Kansans praised the artist’s mural for highlighting Kansas’s radical past. Other Kansans were offended that Curry would call attention, in their Statehouse, to a person whom they considered a murderous madman responsible for starting the Civil War. This conflict over Brown’s memory will be the focus of my first case study. In the 1850s, Kansans were deeply divided over Brown’s role in Bleeding Kansas, the series of violent events that arose over the issue of slavery prior to the Civil War. An analysis of

the controversy over Curry's mural will demonstrate that nearly one hundred years later, these old divisions had endured.

Second, I will examine Brown's first appearance on the silver screen in the 1940 U.S. film, *Santa Fe Trail*. This Western film is based very loosely on events that immediately preceded the Civil War, focusing largely on Brown's violent actions in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry. The film's portrayal of Brown is unquestionably biased. As historian Merrill D. Peterson writes, *Santa Fe Trail* frames Brown as a man out "to trick the South into secession and to destroy the Union."⁴ A 1940 review from the *New York Times* echoes these sentiments, arguing that while "judgment of history upon John Brown is divided," he "deserves a better classification in the minds of impressionable moviegoers than just one peg above a marauding cattle rustler from Bloody Gulch."⁵ In this case study I will examine the portrayal of Brown that brought on these impassioned responses, looking specifically at how *Santa Fe Trail* depicts Brown as a religious fanatic set on destroying national unity and inciting war.

Third, I will turn to a 1959 controversy over *if* and *how* the centennial of Brown's Harpers Ferry raid should be commemorated. As the one-hundredth anniversary of the Civil War approached, the federal government established a national Civil War Centennial Commission (CWCC) to foster public interest in the centennial and to organize commemoration events. Brown's raid—widely considered to have helped start the Civil War—should have been a clear contender for remembrance. However, amid the turbulent social and political climate of the 1950s and 1960s, the federal government was more interested in protecting national unity than in drawing attention to Brown's divisive actions. Preferring to downplay the centennial of Brown's raid, the CWCC encouraged

the National Park Service and the Harpers Ferry National Monument to simply “soft-pedal” remembrance of the event. Although the CWCC and the NPS chose to forget the centennial of Brown’s raid, the local Harpers Ferry Area Foundation resisted these pressures to overlook an important historical event and instead organized a four-day commemoration that took place in October of 1959. In my final case study, I examine this 1959 controversy, analyzing the debates over commemorating Brown’s raid, as well as the various speeches, reenactments, and other activities of the stripped-down commemorative program that finally did take place.

Each of the three artifacts in this project—the mural, the film, and the commemoration event—comes from a different geographical region, which will help to shed light on how John Brown’s public memories are tied to regional and national identities. Curry’s mural is located in Kansas, a territory that, in Brown’s time, held allegiances to neither the North nor the South. Rather, Kansas territory was a battleground where Northern and Southern forces fought over the morality of slavery. *Santa Fe Trail* comes from Hollywood (the West), yet its plot spans geographical locations, taking place in Kansas territory, the South, and even New England. Finally, the Harpers Ferry Raid—and one hundred years later, its commemoration—took place in the South. I intentionally selected artifacts tied to these different geographic locations, in order to examine if and how rhetorical constructions of Brown’s public memories are influenced by a politics of regional and national identity.

Although my artifacts differ geographically, they do share important similarities. First, all three artifacts involved controversy over the rhetorical construction of Brown’s memory. Second, each controversy occurred in the mid-twentieth century, just after the

last of the Civil War veterans passed away. Examining how Brown's memory was mobilized in key instances over the course of three decades—the late 1930s through the early 1960s—will allow me to explore the components of Brown's memory that remained the same, how his memory evolved over time, and the ways in which Brown's memory reflected or deflected the politics of the time. This brings me to a third similarity—each controversy revolved around an artifact or an event intended for public consumption. Thus, they are representative of how *collective* memories of Brown have been rhetorically constructed and contested in public discourse.

These three case studies of the contested nature of Brown's memory will be the crux of this thesis project. In what follows, I will lay the foundation for my study of these collective memories of Brown by discussing the rationale for the study and my anticipated contributions. I will first discuss the scholarly literature relevant to this thesis project: public memory theory and literature on U.S. public memory of the Civil War. I will then provide historical context for the project, recounting key aspects of Brown's life that help to explain why his public memory is contested, including his connection with Bleeding Kansas, his failed slave rebellion at Harpers Ferry, and his other involvements in the abolitionist cause. Finally, I will pose my research questions and provide an overview of the organization and scope of this project.

Rhetoric and Collective Memory

This thesis will engage two interrelated bodies of scholarly literature—collective memory theory, and the literature pertaining to U.S. public memory of the Civil War. Broadly speaking, my project will draw on the works of key public memory scholars.

More specifically, however, controversy over John Brown's memory fits well within a subset of debates revolving around the Civil War in U.S. public memory. In this section, I will examine literature from these two areas to lay the foundation for my project.

Public Memory Theory

Understanding the importance of Brown's memory first hinges on the realization that public memories are *not* objective or complete representations of the past. Brown's memory is different each time that it is invoked. Additionally, these public memories frequently reflect socially constructed versions of the legendary abolitionist, not some objectively true representation of the historical figure. This can be explained when examining long-standing discussions of public memories as socially constructed versions of the past.

The concept of public memory has been recognized by civilizations as early as the ancient Egyptians and Greeks. However, the first systematic study of collective memory was not conducted until the 1920s.⁶ At this time, French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs defined public memory as "essentially a reconstruction of the past in light of the present."⁷ For Halbwachs, collective memories are social constructs. The notion that memories are *constructed* is an important one, as it indicates that they are frequently inaccurate or incomplete representations of the past. In fact, as Halbwachs states, "society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess."⁸ Essentially, a public memory consists of those

aspects of the past that a society *chooses* or *is told* to remember. Simultaneously, other events of the past will fall outside public memory as societies alter or even deflect aspects of the past through collective acts of remembering or forgetting.

In his edited volume, *Framing Public Memory*, Kendall R. Phillips asserts that Halbwachs' theory of collective memory was "largely underappreciated" until the 1980s and 1990s, when public memory studies gained increasing popularity in both the humanities and the social sciences.⁹ Today, public memories are typically conceived of as "fluid and dynamic" instead of as fixed, reflecting Halbwachs' initial formulation of the concept.¹⁰ Collective memories can always be contested, reassessed, revised, and even rejected. Phillips notes that this process of collective remembering is rhetorical in nature, when he states, "the ways memories attain meaning, compel others to accept them, and are themselves contested, subverted, and supplanted by other memories are essentially rhetorical."¹¹ Thus, public memory is of interest not only to historians, but also to rhetorical scholars.

A commonly-explored aspect of public memory is its inherent relationship with narrative and identity. In essence, all collective memories take the form of narratives. These narratives might tell the story of a prominent historical figure (e.g. John Brown), an important historical event (e.g. the U.S. Civil War), or even the history of a society (e.g. the founding of the U.S.). Such narratives of the past are highly political. As rhetorical critic Stephen H. Browne writes in his study of Crispus Attucks and the Boston Massacre, "tactical representations of the past" are "identifiably rhetorical," acting as "a means to recreate symbolically a history otherwise distant and mute."¹² These rearticulated stories of the past serve a key identity function. In the words of David

Lowenthal, “[t]he past is integral to our sense of identity; the sureness of ‘I was’ is a necessary component of the sureness of ‘I am.’”¹³ Likewise, “[a]wareness of history. . . enhances communal and national identity, legitimating a people in their own eyes.”¹⁴ Thus, public memories seldom go uncontested, as their ability to significantly shape national identity and politics frequently leads to struggles over who owns these memory narratives, and whose version is most accurate.

Public Memory and the U.S. Civil War

U.S. Civil War memory represents one specific context in which public memory narratives have shaped our national identity and politics. In his book, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, David W. Blight examines the prominent narratives that have emerged through collective remembrance of the Civil War. Noting that he is “primarily concerned with the ways that contending memories clashed or intermingled in public memory,” Blight approaches his project with an eye toward how Americans choose to remember and forget the causes, events, and aftermath of the Civil War.¹⁵

Blight explores how the war was remembered through speeches, poems, commemorative events and practices, Memorial Day rituals, and postwar literature. Three different versions of Civil War memory emerge from these artifacts. The “reconciliationist vision” focused on dealing with the death and destruction of the war through appeals to reuniting the North and South, thus burying past conflict. The “white supremacist vision” was held mostly by former Confederates, and led to a memory of the Civil War on “Southern terms.”¹⁶ This romanticized memory of the Civil War, Blight contends, glorifies the South’s role in the war, feeding racism, segregation, and violence

at the turn of the century. Finally, Blight argues that African Americans and former abolitionists held an “emancipationist vision” that remembered the war as the rebirth of the nation and as the event that allowed blacks access to citizenship and Constitutional equality.¹⁷ While different in their renderings of history, the three visions of the Civil War function for various groups within the U.S. public as ways of dealing with one of the most traumatic events of the nation’s past. In each case, Blight demonstrates how our public memories act as “prelude[s] to future reckonings.”¹⁸ He thus sheds light on the enduring consequences of the differing ways in which the U.S. public has chosen to remember the Civil War.

Each of the three versions of Civil War public memory creates a particular narrative of the events before, during, and after the national conflict. As a figure who features prominently in historical narratives of events leading to the Civil War, Brown’s public memory is inherently linked to the three public memories depicted by Blight. A study of Brown’s memory will therefore hold larger implications for the way that the U.S. public continues to remember the Civil War, and for the consequences of such memories. Thus, my thesis project will be situated within both larger discussions of public memory and more specific debates over how the Civil War has been remembered and continues to endure in public memory. As one of a handful of personalities at the center of the debate over the morality of slavery and the U.S. Civil War, Brown plays a key role in U.S. public memory. Before describing how I will examine this role, however, I will turn to an overview of Brown’s life history that will function to show how the abolitionist’s life, death, and legacy have contributed to his contested position in U.S. public memory.

The Contested Memory of John Brown

“Few successful people in history have failed so miserably in so many different pursuits as John Brown,” asserts historian David S. Reynolds.¹⁹ It is startling that Reynolds would make this claim about a man who plays such a prominent role in our national historical narrative. Brown may have achieved fame as a fiery abolitionist, but he experienced little success in most of his other endeavors. Namely, he was a terrible businessman. A man of many trades over the course of his life, he worked at various times as a merchant, a shepherd, a land speculator, a tanner, and a surveyor. Brown’s strong religious convictions and commitment to social equality, however, made him extremely distrustful of the capitalist system. He was the product of parents who were deeply committed to Calvinism, a background that led him to be one of the few “old-style Puritan[s]” of his time.²⁰ Brown was so strongly committed to his religious beliefs that he always prioritized aiding the poor over making a profit, thus undermining his business endeavors in the process.

While Brown’s religious beliefs were traditional, his political convictions were incredibly radical. What made Brown so unique for his time was his blending of “intense Calvinism and a republican belief in human rights,” writes Reynolds.²¹ Although Brown clung staunchly to his Puritan roots, he sought to break societal traditions through his radical goals for social reform. Reynolds highlights Brown’s “utter lack of racism” and his belief that “blacks and whites could live and work together on equal terms.”²² In fact, in 1850 Brown established a community in North Elba, New York, dedicated to fostering

interracial cooperation and an environment where whites and blacks lived together equally. This type of community was practically unheard of at that time.

Brown earned a national reputation for his abolitionist activities through his involvement in the conflict known as “Bleeding Kansas.” From roughly 1854 to 1858, settlers in the Kansas territory were subjected to repeated acts of violence and destruction, led by proslavery “border ruffians” from Missouri. At stake was the issue of slavery. The Kansas-Nebraska Bill, introduced in 1854 by Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820 by allowing settlers of the Kansas and Nebraska territories to determine for themselves whether slavery would be allowed within their borders. Nebraska territory was far enough north that the question of slavery was never at issue there. The location of Kansas territory, however, inspired a concerted effort by neighboring Missourians, with the help of proslavery Southerners, to extend slavery into the territory. With Kansas’ status as a free or a slave state in the hands of settlers, the region became a literal battleground over the question of slavery.

In October of 1855, Brown arrived in Osawatimie, Kansas in the thick of the fight over slavery. He traveled to Kansas to join his sons, already in the Midwest, to protect the territory from the attacks of Missouri border ruffians and other proslavery forces. In May of 1856, 800 proslavery Missourians waged an attack on the antislavery legislature of Kansas, desecrating the town of Lawrence, Kansas, destroying a local hotel, demolishing an antislavery printing press, and killing one man. In retribution for this attack (known as the “Sack of Lawrence”), Brown engaged in his most infamous act in Kansas—the Pottawatomie Massacre. On May 24, 1856, Brown traveled with four of his

sons and a fellow abolitionist to a proslavery settlement area near Pottawatomie, where he directed the brutal killing of five proslavery men. After the Pottawatomie Massacre, Missouri border ruffians and federal forces pursued Brown, but he evaded capture, a move that bolstered his mythic, heroic persona.

Returning to the East, Brown began plotting his infamous Harpers Ferry Raid. In 1857 he recruited and trained a number of antislavery soldiers who had remained in Lawrence after 1856. Brown also actively recruited African Americans for his rebellion, thus displaying his conviction—rare for the historical time—that African Americans were equally capable of participating in a plan to help free the slaves.²³ By 1858, laws such as the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Fugitive Slave Act, as well as critical Supreme Court decisions, made slavery legally supported.²⁴ In this legal climate, Brown finalized his plans for a large-scale revolt that would involve seizing the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry and igniting a slave rebellion that would ultimately force an end to slavery.

On Sunday, October 16, 1859, Brown and his army marched the six miles from his Maryland camp to Harpers Ferry. Along the way, they cut telegraph wires to prevent communication from soldiers at the arsenal to outside help. Upon arriving at Harpers Ferry, Brown's army split into teams assigned to various tasks. One team was to seize the engine house and arsenal; another would guard incoming roads and bridges. A third team was to travel to surrounding plantations to free enslaved blacks and capture slave-holding whites. Although his army successfully took over the arsenal, Brown's plan had several shortcomings that led to its ultimate failure. First, Brown mistakenly assumed that all blacks freed by his army would rise up and join in the slave revolt, but this did not occur. Second, although Brown's troops cut the telegraph lines, the conductor of an express

train heading to Baltimore transmitted news of the insurrection to Washington. On Monday night, General Robert E. Lee arrived at Harpers Ferry with 100 marines and proceeded to quash the rebellion and capture Brown.²⁵

Soon after the raid, Brown was tried and sentenced to death by hanging. Although he was hanged on December 2, 1859, his notoriety only increased after his death. As Reynolds notes, Brown did not “truly live until he had died.”²⁶ Indeed, Brown’s hanging made him a martyr of the abolitionist cause and solidified his lasting significance in U.S. history. Two lines from the notable U.S. Civil War marching anthem, “John Brown’s Body,” aptly summarize the abolitionist’s enduring legend: “*John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave; But his soul goes marching on.*” Written soon after his hanging in 1859, this song suggests that the abolitionist’s life story did not end with his death. Rather, Brown’s legend lives on.

Yet Brown’s place in U.S. history has never been stable. While Brown’s martyrdom guaranteed that he would be remembered in death, it also made the actions of his life more controversial. One important reason for the disputed nature of Brown’s enduring legacy is the fact that his Harpers Ferry raid and subsequent hanging are commonly counted among the factors that sparked the Civil War. Just one year after Brown’s hanging, South Carolina seceded from the Union, marking the beginning of the Civil War. Brown’s close association with the Civil War, combined with continuing debates over the violence of his raids in Kansas and Harpers Ferry, have made Brown one of the most controversial figures in U.S. history and a person whose public memory is continually contested.

Thesis Organization and Scope

As I described above, my thesis will be structured around the examination of three controversies over Brown's public memory. I will consider the conflict surrounding John Steuart Curry's depiction of Brown in *The Tragic Prelude* Kansas Statehouse mural, the portrayal of the abolitionist in the 1940 *Santa Fe Trail* film, and the 1959 dispute over remembering the centennial of Brown's Harpers Ferry raid. In each case study, my research will be guided by the following questions:

1. How has Brown's public memory been rhetorically constructed in each of these artifacts and in the controversies surrounding them?
2. How has each particular construction of Brown's memory functioned as a rhetorical tool for a political or social purpose?
3. Has Brown been remembered differently in different places?
4. What larger issues have been at stake when Brown's memory has been contested?
5. What does the study of John Brown's memory teach us about public memory generally and about public memory of the U.S. Civil War?

This set of questions will guide my analysis throughout this thesis project. I will examine each controversy over Brown's memory chronologically, in three separate chapters, and in a final chapter I will summarize my project, drawing out the key implications of this study. These chapters will unfold in the following manner:

Chapter 2 – The Tragic Prelude: John Brown's Public Memory and Kansas Identity

One of the most iconic representations of John Brown is John Steuart Curry's, *The Tragic Prelude*, an enormous mural that graces the walls directly across from the

Governor's office in the Kansas Statehouse. This mural features a larger-than-life depiction of Brown in the years directly preceding the U.S. Civil War. In the mural, Brown boldly stands his ground on Kansas soil amid a mass of Union and Confederate forces. With arms outstretched, the abolitionist is armed and ready to defend Kansas territory from the immorality of slavery; he clutches a Bible in one hand and a rifle in the other. The abolitionist bears a prophetic aura. Out of the tornadoes and fires of the Kansas prairie, Brown strides forth, face turned toward the North, fiery eyes looking upward at the tempestuous skies, with his flowing, grey locks swept turbulently to the side.

Curry began *The Tragic Prelude* in 1938, and before he had even finished, controversy erupted over John Brown's prominence in the painting. Arguably, this is because the mural acted as a site where Kansas identity was contested. Through his mural, Curry intertwined Brown's public memory with that of the state of Kansas. First, the mural undeniably depicts Brown as a key figure in the coming of the Civil War, and it suggests that he helped start that war on Kansas soil. Second, Curry's mural celebrates Brown as the archetypal Kansan, highlighting the abolitionist's wild and independent spirit, which the artist viewed as characteristic of the Kansan people. However, the disputed nature of Brown's public memory made Curry's depiction a point of contention for those who viewed the abolitionist's persona as inconsistent with Kansas identity. Despite Curry's intention of honoring the history of his beloved home state, *The Tragic Prelude* angered many Kansas citizens and offended the state legislature. Thus, in this chapter I argue that the controversy over Curry's mural was a direct result of Kansans'

inability to agree upon a version of Brown's public memory and whether that memory appropriately represented Kansas identity.

Chapter 3 – John Brown, Villain: Santa Fe Trail's Retelling of How the Civil War Began

In 1940, John Brown graced the silver screen for the first time as a leading character when Hollywood's Warner Brothers studio released *Santa Fe Trail*. The film was a Western, based loosely on the tumultuous period of U.S. history leading to the Civil War. Directed by Michael Curtiz (of *Casablanca* and *White Christmas* fame), *Santa Fe Trail* starred Ronald Regan, Raymond Massey, and the popular Hollywood pair, Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland. As the fifth highest grossing film of the year, *Santa Fe Trail* had mass appeal. It was thus a prime medium for creating and disseminating public memories of John Brown.

Santa Fe Trail's portrayal of Brown, however, was quite controversial. In the film, Brown is depicted as a wild-eyed, villainous fanatic, out to break apart the Union. It is this depiction that prompted American journalist and civil rights leader Oswald Garrison Villard to label *Santa Fe Trail* a "travesty of history" in a 1941 issue of the *Saturday Review*.²⁷ Others at the time echoed Villard's sentiments, criticizing the film for offering impressionable moviegoers such an inaccurate portrayal of Brown and Civil War history.²⁸ As historian Merrill D. Peterson asserts, the film "libeled" John Brown, even prompting the abolitionist's granddaughter Nell Brown Groves to bring suit for slander against Warner Brothers.²⁹

In chapter three of my study, I will attempt to account for these heated responses to *Santa Fe Trail* by showing how the film characterizes Brown as a delusional, religious

fanatic almost single-handedly responsible for triggering the Civil War. *Santa Fe Trail* frames Brown as such by weaving together two key narratives—a conventional Hollywood Western narrative, and a story of the coming of the Civil War—to articulate its own version of how the Civil War began. Ultimately, the Western narrative functions to restrict the real historical account, binding the time period to the years from 1854 to 1859, when John Brown was most active. The Western narrative also forces real historical characters into fictional roles, while featuring and omitting historical events based on what would best fit within the Western narrative frame. In the process, *Santa Fe Trail* distorted and oversimplified the complex story of the coming of the Civil War. This re-articulation of history, I argue, helped create a revisionist history of the Civil War, one that played into nostalgic Southern mythologies.

Chapter 4 – To Commemorate or Not to Commemorate?: Remembering the Centennial of John Brown’s Raid on Harpers Ferry

The year 1959 marked the centennial of John Brown’s infamous raid on Harpers Ferry. One hundred years earlier, in October of 1859, Brown led a raid on the Harpers Ferry federal arsenal, attempting to incite a slave rebellion. Although the attempt failed and Brown was eventually captured and hanged, the incident is commonly considered to be one of the events that raised the curtain on the nation’s most devastating national conflict. Thus, as the centennial of the Civil War approached, Brown’s Harpers Ferry raid was impossible to overlook. The question became: should the centennial of Brown’s raid be commemorated? And if so, how? The centennial also raised questions about who had the right or the responsibility to decide how Brown’s raid was to be remembered.

In the tumultuous era of the civil rights movement and the Cold War, few were eager to commemorate such a divisive moment in the nation's history. Plans for commemorating the centennial of Brown's Harpers Ferry raid were passed from the national Civil War Centennial Commission to the National Park Service, and ultimately to the local Harpers Ferry Area Foundation (HFAF) in West Virginia. Eventually, the HFAF did "commemorate" the raid, but as a 1959 *Newsweek* article pointedly noted, it was not "celebrated."³⁰

In my final case study, I will explore this controversy, examining the debates over the commemoration of Brown's raid, as well as the various speeches, reenactments, and other activities of the commemorative program that finally did take place. I will argue that although the HFAF did eventually commemorate Brown's raid, they did so in a way that systematically depoliticized the divisiveness of the historical moment. The event rejected the portrait of Brown as a martyr or hero, while simultaneously celebrating those who quashed the raid as exemplars of American patriotism.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion: How Should We Remember John Brown?

In this final chapter, I discuss how rhetorical constructions of John Brown's memory have served contemporary political needs. Because Brown is so closely tied to the Civil War, study of his memory can illuminate how Americans tend to remember the Civil War in the context of their national history and identity. Specifically, this study of John Brown's legacy will illuminate at least three competing public memories of the Civil War: one that frames the war as a necessary evil, another that blames fanaticism for

causing an unnecessary war, and a third that celebrates the heroism of those who fought on both sides of the Civil War.

Finally, I will discuss the enduring significance that Brown's public memory holds today. The sesquicentennial of the U.S. Civil War looms in the immediate future. Undoubtedly, John Brown will again rise to public attention, as Americans consider how this anniversary should be commemorated. The wounds of the Civil War endure, and we continue to witness the lasting social and political effects of this conflict. Thus, Brown continues to be a rhetorical tool for mobilizing claims about the "lessons" of the Civil War, the morality of violence, and even American national identity. Understanding how Brown's identity is mobilized can help rhetoricians interpret these claims and arguments and reveal their deeper meanings for American politics and culture.

Notes

¹ David Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2005), 7.

² Merrill D. Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 172.

³ Regionalism, popular in the 1930s, was the American realist modern art movement known for its focus on scenes of rural life. Well-known artists from this movement include Grant Wood of Iowa, Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, and John Steuart Curry of Kansas. These three painters, and others of the Regionalist movement turned away from city life in favor of depicting images of the American heartland in their work.

⁴ Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited*, 113.

⁵ Bosley Crowther, "Santa Fe Trail, Which Is Chiefly a Picture About Something Else, Opens at the Strand," *New York Times*, December 21, 1940.

⁶ Kendall R. Phillips, "Introduction" in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 1.

⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 34.

⁸ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 51.

⁹ Phillips, "Introduction" in *Framing Public Memory*, 1.

¹⁰ Phillips, "Introduction" in *Framing Public Memory*, 2.

¹¹ Phillips, "Introduction" in *Framing Public Memory*, 2-3.

¹² Stephen H. Browne, "Remembering Crispus Attucks: Race, Rhetoric, and the Politics of Commemoration," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85 (1999): 169.

¹³ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 41.

¹⁴ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 44.

¹⁵ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1.

¹⁶ Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, 2.

¹⁷ Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, 2.

¹⁸ Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, 397.

¹⁹ Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 66.

²⁰ Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 27.

²¹ Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 25.

²² Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 118, 127.

²³ Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 240.

²⁴ Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 250.

²⁵ W.E.B. DuBois, *John Brown*, ed. John David Smith (Armonk, New York: 1997), 168-170.

²⁶ Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 11.

²⁷ Oswald Garrison Villard, "History and the Movies," *Saturday Review* 23 (March 1, 1941): 9.

²⁸ Crowther, “Santa Fe Trail, Which Is Chiefly a Picture About Something Else, Opens at the Strand.”

²⁹ Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited*, 114.

³⁰ “John Brown—The Legend...The Man...The Raid...The Consequences,”
Newsweek, October 19, 1959.

Chapter 2

The Tragic Prelude: **John Brown's Public Memory and Kansas Identity**

By all that's high and holy,
By all that's great and small,
Why should folks be fighting
Over pictures on a wall?

It's cheaper, far, and better,
To hang wallpaper there.
Call in the vagrant spiders,
Or let the walls go bare!
Kansas City Star
June 9, 1941¹

Striding forth with one large, brown boot, a colossal ten-foot tall man emerges, dressed in earthy brown. His arms are rigidly outstretched; one oversized hand clutches a rifle, while the other grasps a Bible. Untamed locks of a long, wavy beard are swept turbulently across his chest. Framed by this wild mane, his mouth gapes open, as if to emit a terrifying roar. Above prominent, bushy eyebrows, his brow is severely furrowed. Disheveled hair blows skyward from his scalp. Deeply set into his leathery face, two fiery eyes beam upward toward an ominous sky. Faced with this image, one cannot help but wonder—are these the eyes of a prophet, or of a madman?

Much is at stake in this simple question. Whatever one's interpretation—prophet or madman—these are the eyes of abolitionist John Brown—at least as depicted by artist John Steuart Curry in *The Tragic Prelude*, a mural prominently featured on the wall directly across from the Governor's office in the Kansas Statehouse. Curry's portrayal of

Brown was controversial even in its nascent stage in 1938, reflecting how memory texts of this sort frequently “display tendencies toward the political or deliberative.”² On one side of the controversy, some Kansans were offended that Curry would call attention—in their Statehouse—to a person they remembered as a murderous madman. In the words of one outraged Kansan, “in no sense can the picture of a bearded maniac, with prairie fire and tornado as scenic embellishments, be conceived by any rational American-minded Kansan as an allegorical exhibition of Kansas. It is a violent libel on a great state.”³ On the other side of the controversy, some Kansans praised the mural for highlighting their state’s radical past. As one defender of Curry’s work asserted, “I think the criticisms are peurile [*sic*]. His paintings are typical of Kansas, which mounts to the stars thro [*sic*] difficulties. Her early history is full of violence. Shall violent men and scenes be cut out?”⁴ The controversy was polarizing; each side was deeply committed to its view of John Brown and how he fit into the state’s history.

In this chapter I argue that the debate over Curry’s mural was a direct result of Kansans’ inability to agree upon a version of Brown’s public memory and how that memory *ought* to fit into the narrative of Kansas history. To support this claim I first review the history of the mural’s origins, design, and creation. Next, I discuss the tumultuous moments in Kansas history that Curry drew from when designing his mural. From there I examine the reactions to Curry’s work in the Kansas Capitol Building to demonstrate how *The Tragic Prelude* acted as a site for Kansans to contest their state’s identity and its place in the larger narrative of Civil War history.

John Steuart Curry and the Origins of the Kansas Murals

The story of how *The Tragic Prelude* came to be foreshadows the resulting conflict over the finished mural. The artist, referred to by many as Kansas's "native son," spent his life painting his memories and the history of his home state. This career afforded him an identification with Kansas that "has become firmly entrenched in the folklore of American art history," argues art historian M. Sue Kendall.⁵ Yet, as this section of the chapter will show, Curry's relationship with Kansas was troubled by rejection, disappointment, and misunderstandings as well. In what follows I will offer an account of how the idea for the Statehouse murals came to be, why Curry might have hesitated to return to Kansas to share his talents, and what preparations went into bringing Curry home to create his infamous mural, *The Tragic Prelude*.

In 1937, a group of Kansas newspaper editors started a campaign to bring native Kansan John Steuart Curry back to the Midwest to share his artistic talents with his home state. Only two years earlier, Kansas's neighboring state Missouri had invited native Missourian and Regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton to paint murals representing the state in their Capitol building in Jefferson City. Not to be outdone by their longstanding rival, Kansas followed Missouri's lead. In June of 1937, members of the Kansas Editorial Association began a campaign to commission Curry to paint Kansas-themed murals in the state's Capitol building, located in Topeka. The effort was led by a number of high-profile newspapermen, including Jack Harris, publisher of the *Hutchinson News*, William Allen White of the *Emporia Gazette*, and Paul Jones of the *Lyons Daily News*.

The first step was to secure Curry's interest in returning to his home state. This task was somewhat sensitive in nature. Although the native Kansan had long dreamed of

such a project, just a few years earlier his work had been widely criticized by the people of Kansas. In 1931, a special exhibit in Kansas City featured a number of Curry's heartland-themed paintings, which appalled Kansans who believed the artist's work perpetuated negative stereotypes of their beloved state. These critical reactions from Kansans devastated Curry. Born and raised on a farm in Dunavant, Kansas, the artist had made a career for himself painting memories of his home state. In 1916, Curry moved away to study art, first at the Kansas City Art Institute, and later at the Art Institute of Chicago. He also studied art at Geneva College in Pennsylvania and in Paris, France. Even while distanced from his home state, however, Curry continued to paint Kansas during his years of study, and that theme solidified his identity as a Regionalist painter.

In the early 1930s, Curry had achieved status as one of a triumvirate of well-known regionalist painters. Grant Wood of Iowa, Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, and John Steuart Curry of Kansas had all earned reputations for turning away from city life in favor of depicting images of the American heartland in their artistic work. In 1931, William Allen White invited Curry to return from the East to the Midwest for an exhibition of his Kansas-themed paintings. White was enthusiastic about Curry's work, a fact which he expressed in a letter to the artist:

You are doing something that I long felt some artist would do – paint Kansas! Kansas is as beautiful as France, and lies not unlike France in its contour, but in western Kansas are wide expanses that remind one of the Steppes of Russia, a vast mystical terrain where sky and earth unite. There is color in the sky and in the land out here, and I am glad some painter has awakened to it.⁶

Not everyone shared White's sentiments, however. Instead of receiving a warm and grateful welcome when he returned to his native state, Curry was confronted by harsh

criticisms of his art. Those who attended the exhibit found his well-known paintings, such as *Baptism in Kansas*, to be “drab,” and his *Tornado over Kansas* was criticized as “uncivic.”⁷ Elsie J. Nuzman Allen, wife of Henry J. Allen, former Kansas Governor and editor of the *Wichita Beacon*, wrote a letter to White expressing many common public criticisms of Curry’s work:

[T]o say [Curry] portrays the “spirit” of Kansas is entirely wrong, I think. To be sure, we have cyclones, gospel trains, the medicine man, and the man hunt. . . . But why paint outstanding friekish [*sic*] subjects and call them the “spirit” of Kansas?. . . I wonder if this sort of work that Mr. Curry is doing is not just a phase through which he will pass, and will soon come to see something beautiful in life and particularly life in Kansas.⁸

Allen’s critiques reflected those made by Curry’s wider Kansas audience, many of whom complained that the artist’s work highlighted the negative aspects of Kansas culture. “Curry’s paintings seemed to ridicule [Kansans’] eccentricities in the same way that condescending New Yorkers had been doing for years,” argued art historian M. Sue Kendall.⁹ Heartbroken that his work was rejected by his beloved home state, Curry returned to the East Coast where his work was generally praised.

Six years later, in 1937, the Kansas newspaper editors decided it was time to bring Curry back to Kansas for a mural project. They knew it might take a little prodding. Jack Harris of the *Hutchinson News* wrote to Curry:

[F]or a long while I have had the idea Kansas has a story that should be told in murals on the walls of the state house in Topeka. Obviously, you would be the person to do it. . . . there is no question about it on the artistic side. The fact that you are a native Kansan is an added reason. A third, if you don’t mind me saying so, is that the state owes you something for its past inappreciation.¹⁰

Despite the 1931 exhibition debacle, Curry told the editors that “he would like nothing better than to be given a free hand to paint the Kansas scene on the walls of some state institution.”¹¹ At that time, Curry held the position of artist in residence at the Agricultural College of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In an effort to lure him back to Kansas, the editors began publishing editorials to rally popular support for the artist’s return. They also approached Kansas Governor Walter A. Huxman to secure his backing of the project. On May 26, 1937, Governor Huxman composed an official letter to Curry, requesting that he make a visit to Kansas to discuss the Statehouse murals.¹² Less than a month later, at a banquet in Hutchinson honoring White, Harris proposed a twenty-thousand-dollar fund-raising drive to finance the Statehouse mural project. The proposal passed and also received the endorsement of Governor Huxman, who was in attendance.¹³

But how would these funds be raised? Harris laid out two possible options in a letter to Curry: by securing “a legislative appropriation” like Missouri had done, or by raising the funds “by private subscription.”¹⁴ The latter was deemed the more promising option. Harris argued that soliciting private donations would avoid “the political angles that otherwise might creep in.”¹⁵ This type of grassroots fund-raiser, Harris hoped, would prevent the legislature from imposing its political influence on the mural project. Curry’s murals, in essence, would be “a gift to the state from all the people of Kansas,” as Kendall put it in one of the few published accounts of the Curry mural controversy.¹⁶

Yet, despite the Kansas editors’ hopes of avoiding political influences, the mural project became embroiled in controversy from the start. Governor Huxman, nervous about the prospect of a citizen-funded mural project, appointed a committee of Kansas

publishers and publishers' wives to spearhead the fund-raising effort—the Kansas Murals Commission. Despite the editors' earlier correspondence with Curry, there was much debate about the selection of an artist for the project. Ultimately, the committee did choose Curry. They agreed, however, that his “appointment would remain tentative until he submitted sketches for the designs; these preliminary sketches would then be subject to final approval of the Commission.”¹⁷

Although the newspaper editors advertised their fundraising campaign as a grassroots effort, they actually ended up footing about seventy percent of the bill themselves.¹⁸ On top of this, the editors had to ask the State Legislature to contribute five thousand dollars for the project. The Kansas editors, however, still marketed the campaign as a grassroots effort, even publicizing the fundraiser as one for which schoolchildren all across the state were banding together to generously donate their pennies.¹⁹ This “populist brouhaha,” Kendall argues, was supposed to make Kansans feel as though they “owned” the murals that were to grace the walls of the Statehouse.²⁰ With the artist selected, money raised, and public support secured, Kansas was ready for their mural project to begin.

According to Harris, who was not only editor of the *Hutcheson News* but also a member of the Murals Commission, “the specific matter of the [Statehouse] murals” was to be left to the artist's discretion.²¹ In August of 1937, Curry arrived in Topeka to survey the walls of the Statehouse and to begin his mural sketches. Two months later, on November 12, 1937, the Kansas Murals Commission approved the artist's designs, and Curry began work on the murals that he hoped would be his legacy to his home state.

Instead, the work inspired a divisive controversy over how Kansans wished to remember their state's history and its role in the Civil War.

Curry's Inspiration for the Kansas Murals

With a second chance to gain the acceptance of his home state, Curry was “determined that his Kansas productions [would] be outstanding among the productions of his career,” reported the *Topeka State Journal*.²² A strong believer that art should be made for the audience that would most frequently view it, Curry stated at the time, “I desire that the murals in the statehouse be understood and appreciated by everyday Kansans, the people who are going to see them.”²³ He thus chose a theme for his murals that he thought would appeal to his fellow Kansans: the “true story of Kansas and her struggle thru adversity.”²⁴ To look for ways of depicting this theme on the walls of the Kansas Statehouse, Curry turned to Kansas's tumultuous past. He was inspired by the history of Kansas, “a state born amid a great conflict of social ideas, a state which became a great battleground for two ideologies, a state which, before it could forsake its swaddling clothes, had suddenly found itself in the spotlight of a nation.”²⁵ A man that plays an important yet controversial role in this turbulent history of Kansas is the abolitionist John Brown.

Brown moved to Kansas in October of 1855. At that time Kansas was not yet a state, but the territory was on the verge of entering the Union. The controversial Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854²⁶ allowed settlers in the territory to decide if Kansas would enter the Union as a free or slave state. This resulted in a significant influx of new residents, all eager to play a role in deciding the territory's stance on slavery. Although the population

of Kansas was only 800 in 1854, by 1855 between 8,000 and 9,000 newcomers had made the territory their home.²⁷ These new settlers held polarized views on the issue of slavery, and thus the territory became the battleground for a violent confrontation over slavery that came to be known as “Bleeding Kansas.”

Brown was one of the many antislavery vigilantes that traveled to Kansas from the East, armed and ready to defend the territory from proslavery settlers. His sons, who had arrived before him, had sent him letters describing how proslavery forces from the South and neighboring Missouri were ready to forcibly take over Kansas. As an ardent believer in the immorality of slavery, Brown felt he had no choice but to move to Kansas to join his sons in the fight to protect the territory. Not long after his arrival in Osawatomie, Kansas, he became actively involved in the “free state” vs. “slave state” conflict already raging in the territory. In fact, it was in Kansas that Brown “metamorphosed into the abolitionist warrior-prophet who has ever since maintained a tenacious hold on the nation’s imagination,” writes historian Jonathan Earle.²⁸

Most infamously, Brown is remembered for his involvement in the Pottawatomie Massacre. On May 20, 1856, 800 proslavery Missourians arrested the leaders of the antislavery legislature in Lawrence, Kansas.²⁹ The intruders wreaked havoc on the Kansas town in an attack referred to as the “Sack of Lawrence,” plundering houses, burning a local hotel, desecrating two antislavery printing presses, and even killing one man. Brown was “infuriated by the failure of the Free-Staters in Lawrence to defend themselves,” and he dedicated himself to exacting “violent retribution,” according to historian David Reynolds.³⁰ On May 24, 1856, Brown got his revenge. Along with his sons, he traveled to a proslavery settlement area near Pottawatomie, Kansas. Upon

arriving at the encampment, Brown and his sons pulled five proslavery men out of their houses, murdering them brutally with heavy swords. Although Brown did not actually murder any of the proslavery men, he was the mastermind behind the plan, and he directed his sons in the barbaric killing of each of the men. After the Pottawatomie Massacre, both border ruffians and federal forces tried to hunt down Brown, but he somehow eluded capture. This “stubborn resistance to capture in the aftermath of Pottawatomie” contributed to the growing legend of John Brown as a “superhuman” hero, according to Reynolds, and this myth “eventually gained wide currency in the North.”³¹

Later that same year, Brown again defended Kansas territory and the abolitionist cause. This time, however, his approach to vindication was less extreme and more strategic. When he heard that approximately 400 proslavery Missourians were on their way to attack Osawatimie, he quickly rallied as many Free-Staters as he could to defend the town. Despite the fact that the antislavery forces were greatly outnumbered by the proslavery Missourians, they hid strategically behind trees and other physical barriers to defend Osawatimie as the troops advanced toward them. Although Brown and his company ultimately lost the battle, the abolitionist was widely respected for his leadership of the effort.

Brown’s endeavors on behalf of the abolitionist cause in Kansas territory led him to be remembered in many different ways. To some, Brown was a violent madman who ruthlessly ordered the brutal killing of proslavery men in cold blood. To others, Brown was a hero of the abolitionist cause, one willing to risk his own life to defend a principle that was morally right. In either case, Brown was a significant figure in a battle that led

up to Kansas statehood and that portended the coming of the Civil War. Thus, when Curry reviewed Kansas history to select important moments to depict on the walls of the state's Capitol, John Brown and "Bleeding Kansas" were obvious choices. As William Allen White argued, "Kansas was the starting place for the war between the North and South. You can't paint Kansas history without painting that. And you can't paint that without including John Brown."³²

The Tragic Prelude: Remembering Kansas History

Curry's mural, *The Tragic Prelude*, is more than just a snapshot of Kansas history. The mural takes a stance on the history it depicts, interpreting events of the past for its viewers. The claims made by Curry through his artistic work are arguably two-fold. First, the mural undeniably depicts John Brown as a key figure in the coming of the Civil War, and it suggests that he helped start that war on Kansas soil. Second, Curry's mural features Brown as an archetypal Kansan, an exemplar of the strength and determination embodied by the Kansas pioneer. These two points emerge both through a close reading of the mural itself and through consideration of *The Tragic Prelude* in the context of Curry's other Kansas-themed Statehouse murals.

Although *The Tragic Prelude* does not literally depict the events of "Bleeding Kansas," in Curry's mural the blood from the Pottawatomie Massacre is still on Brown's hands. In one hand, Brown holds a Holy Bible. In the other, he clutches a "Beecher's Bible"—a quick-loading, rapid-fire rifle that earned its nickname when, in 1856, New England abolitionist minister Henry Ward Beecher sent a shipment of them to Kansas in crates marked "Bibles" to support the fight against slavery.³³ A narrative of Kansas's past

unfolds through the action surrounding Brown, which seems to move chronologically (pre-Civil war to post-conflict) from background to foreground. A tornado and prairie fire in the distance mark the impending turmoil and set a violent background, across which a line of settlers and Conestoga wagons move westward. Surrounding Brown, the forces of North and South stand in opposition to one another. On the left, Northerners stand upright, with an American flag waving in the background. Opposing this faction, the Southerners stand hunched forward, waving a Confederate flag, and visibly oppressing the slaves crouched below them.

Out of the center of this showdown steps Brown, almost twice as tall as the figures that surround him. Curry modeled his depiction of Brown after Michelangelo's *Moses* sculpture, appropriating features ranging from Moses' stature and long, flowing beard, to his stern face, deep-set eyes, and prominent brow. Two wild locks of Brown's hair even seem to bear resemblance to Michelangelo's depiction of Moses' horned head. In the mural, the prophetic abolitionist stands, arms stretched apart, splitting the country in two, just as Moses himself parted the Red Sea. At Brown's feet lie representatives of the eventual outcome of the war—two soldiers, one blue coat and one grey, lying prostrate in a pool of blood. Their hands are outstretched, almost touching. When the viewer's eyes land upon the fallen soldiers, the narrative is complete. Like the overture of a tragic opera, Curry's mural portrays Brown's actions in "Bleeding Kansas" as a prelude, setting the stage for the impending Civil War.

The depiction of John Brown in *The Tragic Prelude* has become iconic. However, the artist actually intended his representation of the abolitionist to be only one in a series of murals that he did for the Kansas Statehouse. Considered in context with these other

murals, it becomes clear that, in Brown, Curry saw the archetypal Kansan. Curry enacts this depiction, first, by establishing Brown as the central figure in all of his murals.

Although Curry's depiction of Brown has gained the greatest notoriety, it is only one piece of a larger mural, which wraps around the walls of the Statehouse's east corridor.

The Tragic Prelude in its entirety includes the depiction of John Brown on one plane, and a second plane featuring a plainsman with a herd of buffalo in the background; Coronado, the conquistador; and Padre Padilla, a Franciscan missionary. These three figures straddle an arched doorway, framed by the sky and the Kansas landscape receding into the distance. Tellingly, all three of the characters depicted in this mural stand with heads and eyes turned toward where Brown stands, ten feet tall, dominating the entire north wall of the Capitol's east corridor. As art historian M. Sue Kendall notes, "[h]ere Curry effects a modern application of baroque compositional formula, in which minor characters in the painting gesture toward the area in which the most important action is occurring."³⁴ The plainsman, Coronado, and Padilla look from the past to the future, where Brown stands, a symbol of the trailblazing, courageous, and righteous Kansas spirit.

Curry clearly marks Brown as the archetypal figure representing the strong, pioneering spirit of those who defended the territory against slavery before Kansas became a state. The artist also paints Brown as the archetypal Kansan by weaving the abolitionist's story into a larger narrative emphasizing the tenacity and ambition of the earliest Kansan settlers. "The John Brown panel in the east corridor represents the beginning" of Kansas's story, explained Curry.³⁵ Brown is the first personification of Kansas's state motto, "*Ad astra per aspera*," or "To the stars through difficulties," that

Curry took as the inspiration for his Statehouse murals.³⁶ *Kansas Pastoral*, the western corridor mural featuring a Kansas farm family and their farmhouse, represents the final stage of Curry's story. The mural depicts a sturdy farm couple. The man dons blue overalls and a white shirt, sleeves rolled up. He gazes out across his bountiful land, grazed by cattle and illuminated by a brilliant setting sun. On his left stands his wife, who looks lovingly into the eyes of the baby she cradles. Holding the edge of her white apron is a second child, who stands amid sheep and chickens. Behind the farm couple is their homestead, which Curry made a point of describing as "unmortgaged."

Kendall characterizes the imagery of *Kansas Pastoral* as rather "optimistic," especially considering that Curry conceived of the mural when "Kansas was in the grip of the Great Depression, and the state had been plagued by drought, dust storms, and a scourge of grasshoppers since 1932."³⁷ However, having grown up on a farm himself, Curry stated that he hoped to capture not just the beauty of the Kansas landscape, but also the courage and determination of the settlers: "It's the iron in these farmers such as my father and mother that I'd like to bring out in my paintings. If I can do that it'll be better, to me, than painting something pretty."³⁸ Curry's depiction of farm life in *Kansas Pastoral* emphasizes the success and happiness of the farm couple, with their healthy children, plentiful land, and unmortgaged house. Yet it also has undertones of struggle, casting the people of Kansas as iron-willed and capable of overcoming great obstacles—such as the Great Depression—to tame the land and achieve success.

While the figures in *Kansas Pastoral* do not directly interact with the image of John Brown, an understanding of its thematic relationship with *The Tragic Prelude* helps to flesh out the artist's portrayal of Brown as the archetypal Kansan. Curry was not

interested in offering Kansans a “soft, sappy presentation” of their state—“[t]he people would hate me for that, because it wouldn’t be true,” exclaimed Curry.³⁹ Thus, Brown became the first, and arguably the most important, representation of the theme that permeates both *The Tragic Prelude* and *Kansas Pastoral*—the unique and determined spirit of the pioneering Kansan. Brown came to Kansas in 1855, intent upon defending the territory from the immorality of slavery. Curry describes Brown’s determination as one of the primary reasons he chose to feature the abolitionist in his mural:

Traitor... Fanatic... Martyr... Thus has this man, one of the most dramatic of all times, been denounced and acclaimed. But regardless of the estimates of him, the outstanding fact about his life and death is that it was he who crystallized sentiment and which brought about the onslaught against the greatest curse which this nation has ever known, and its final eradication—human bondage.⁴⁰

While many criticized Brown for his actions (which helped to trigger the Civil War), Curry recognized the abolitionist’s underlying motives and saw in them a reason for celebration. To Curry, no figure could better display the qualities that he found to be so uniquely Kansan. Thus, he selected John Brown to grace the walls of the Statehouse. As the figure of central importance, Brown was also the first image to get a coat of paint—a primer made with Kansas eggs.⁴¹ Curry made Brown archetypally Kansan—both materially and in a larger, symbolic sense.

The Tragic Prelude thus made significant claims about the people of Kansas and about their state’s history. Curry recognized John Brown as a figure inseparable from the history and origins of the state, and—through his depiction of the man as wild, yet prophetic—he drew attention to Brown’s role in raising the curtain for the Civil War, amid the violence and destruction of “Bleeding Kansas.” Simultaneously, Curry argued

that this type of righteous and strong-willed ethos, embodied by Brown, was characteristically Kansan. With pride in his heart, Curry said of his murals, “I want to paint the things I feel as a native of Kansas. The series would be one that I could only do for my native state.”⁴² Ironically, these bold artistic decisions, driven by the artist’s love for his home state, would lead to a controversy so heated that it would ultimately be his undoing.

The Mural Controversy: A Contestation of Memory

Through *The Tragic Prelude*, John Steuart Curry intertwined John Brown’s public memory with that of the state of Kansas. As historian David Lowenthal asserts, “Remembering the past is crucial for our sense of identity. . . to know what we were confirms what we are.”⁴³ Bearing this in mind, Curry, when he chose to paint John Brown on the walls of the Kansas Statehouse, essentially asked the state to identify with this character from their history. In casting Brown in his mural’s lead role, however, Curry simultaneously inherited the burden of the abolitionist’s disputed public memory. What a burden this proved to be! Before Curry had even finished his mural, controversy erupted over Brown’s prominence in the painting. An examination of key themes of this controversy will demonstrate how *The Tragic Prelude* mural acted as a site where Kansas identity was contested. More specifically, I argue that the controversy over Curry’s mural was a direct result of Kansans’ inability to agree upon a version of Brown’s public memory and whether that memory appropriately represented Kansas identity.

In the process of determining what should be included in the Statehouse murals, Curry chose to highlight particular aspects of Kansas history while deflecting others.

Kendall aptly notes the problems inherent to this process of selection and deflection, stating, “[i]f history were a matter of undisputed truth as many assumed it was, there would be no problem. But the mere act of trying to reconstruct the past and condense 400 years of human events onto a limited amount of wall space required a highly selective vision that was, by necessity, subjective.”⁴⁴ The subjectivity of this process of selection points to the difficulty of finding themes for a mural that would adequately represent Kansans’ public memory of their own state’s past.

This difficulty ultimately split Kansans into two camps—those who viewed Curry’s depictions as representative of Kansas, and those who wished to selectively forget Kansas’s radical and sometimes violent past in favor of highlighting some of the more “positive” qualities of the state. A July, 1937 article in the *Kansas City Star* aptly described this division, stating:

On one side are those who think Kansas history should be “raw, rough, and true,” with adequate representation of some of the state’s unreconstructed individuals who figured in the early-day history; the other camp, “the Toners Down,” prefer milder subjects such as waving wheat fields, bright-faced sunflowers, and maybe a smokestack or two.⁴⁵

Essentially, those who approved of Curry’s *The Tragic Prelude* accepted the notion that their State’s history should be a story about politics and even the violent conflict over slavery. The opposition, in contrast, favored a more apolitical representation of the state that highlighted Kansas’s natural beauty and economic progress.

Those who celebrated Kansas’s political past viewed Curry’s choice of highlighting Brown to be the right one. For instance, Lloyd Garrison, the great-grandson of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, voiced his praise for *The Tragic Prelude*, writing in a letter to Curry:

I am sitting and looking at your magnificent John Brown with the delicate whirling tornado, the upraised beseeching face of the Negro, and the mighty crucifix figure of the hero himself. What a figure! What a face! Nothing since Michelangelo has equaled this in strength and force and daring and great human depth of feeling.⁴⁶

Like the Northerners who were sympathetic to Brown's cause at the time of the Civil War, Garrison regarded Brown as a national hero and a martyr for the abolitionist cause. Many Kansans shared this view because they believed that radicals like Brown were a significant part of Kansas's past, deserving of recognition in the Statehouse mural. What "would a history of Kansas be without saloon-smashing Carry Nation? Give us our bewhiskered John Brown, our Sockless Jerry Simpson, our he-men of the West—two-gun Wild Bill Hickok or a Bat Masterson," the supporters exclaimed.⁴⁷ Those who remembered Brown as a hero delighted in the prospect of a mural featuring the abolitionist in the Statehouse. Such a display in the heart of the State would symbolically position Brown as a figure central to the state's history and identity.

While there was some support for Curry's decision to feature Brown so prominently, the more vocal feedback came from the opposition. After Curry posted just his initial mural sketches for the public to view, he received hundreds of angry condemnations, and the criticism continued after he started painting.⁴⁸ The dissent came from diverse entities, including "women's clubs, patriotic groups and conservative lovers-of-the-status-quo," reported the *Topeka Capital*.⁴⁹ These groups voiced a variety of concerns ranging from general disdain for the idea of featuring Brown to more specific complaints about how Brown was portrayed. One vocal critic was the Topeka Woman's Club. In a letter to Kansas Governor Payne Ratner, the club's Corresponding Secretary Arlene D. Snyder expressed disapproval of the mural on behalf of her organization:

The members of the Topeka Woman's Club wish to protest against any appropriation for future murals in the State House, to be painted by John Steuart Curry. They feel that his work does not represent the feeling and spirit of the people of Kansas.⁵⁰

The Woman's Club was vague about *what* exactly they disliked about Curry's murals, but others were more specific. One Kansan, in a letter to the *El Dorado Times*, exclaimed: "For four score years Kansas has been a star on our flag. From tempestuous start Kansas has slowly been refining into a state of considerable culture and consequence. *Kansas is NOT John Brown*" (emphasis added).⁵¹ "A murderer shouldn't have such a prominent place in murals depicting the history of the state," chimed in another critic.⁵² These detractors remembered Brown as a murderous villain; they wanted to forget that Brown played a role in Kansas history. A letter-to-the-editor from H. J. Bishop, a Kansan of 70 years, went as far as to ask the Governor to remove the murals:

I do not know what the "John Steuart Curry" murals are like only by the description in this article, but if they tend to beswear [*sic*] or under-value our beloved State instead of portraying its value, beauty, the High ideals and standards our fore-fathers had in its early settlement and State-hood. Please throw them out, you are our Governor—our "Head Man" for Kansas, and can do it if any one [*sic*] can. My father worked to [*sic*] hard in the early beginnings of Kansas to help make of Kansas a State to be proud of, then have its Capitol building murals portrayed negatively.⁵³

The barrage of public criticism was a direct backlash against Curry's representation of John Brown as an archetypal Kansan and his argument that Brown started the Civil War on Kansas soil. Kansans that held this view wanted nothing to do with the rabble-rousing abolitionist, whom they believed to be a poor representative of their state's identity.

Even members of the State Legislature eventually got involved, echoing the complaints of their constituents. Kansas Senator Van De Mark of Concordia was quoted as saying:

I don't know how the rest of you feel about John Brown... but I think he was an erratic crazy old coot and a murderer. I don't see any reason to perpetuate his memory... I don't like those atrocities on that wall of horror... They look terrible to me.⁵⁴

In his colorful assertion, Senator Van De Mark highlighted the memory of Pottawatomie Brown—the man responsible for the cold-blooded murder of five proslavery men. In this view, Brown was a terrorist and a madman. Like the Kansas public, members of the legislature also wanted to remove John Brown from the state's public memory. Representative William Towers argued, "I don't believe that picture is true Kansas history and I think we ought to have it erased from the murals."⁵⁵ Towers made this claim when all but the finishing touches had been made to Curry's murals.

As rhetorical critic Stephen H. Browne argues, a "preoccupation with what ought to be remembered and how shapes our politics in significant ways,"⁵⁶ and that was certainly the case with the backlash against Curry's murals. It may have been too late to completely erase Brown's image from the Statehouse wall (although one member of the legislature did propose a bill calling for this to be done).⁵⁷ But the legislature could still make a statement that would express their disapproval of the memories Curry perpetuated through his murals. After finishing *The Tragic Prelude*, Curry was slated to return the following summer of 1941 to paint eight more panels in the Statehouse rotunda—a project that was approved along with the original plans for *The Tragic Prelude* in 1937. The eight rotunda panels would round out the narrative told in *The Tragic Prelude* and *Kansas Pastoral* by depicting life on the homestead, including such mundane activities as building barbed wire fences and cattle drives. The new panels were also to depict the impact of drought, soil erosion, and dust on the Kansas settlers, as well as the

significance of the Santa Fe Trail. Presumably these murals would have been less controversial than Curry's depiction of Brown. However, the legislature, upset over *The Tragic Prelude*, wanted to make a statement. Thus, they developed a plan to prevent Curry from tarnishing their state's image further with the addition of these eight panels.

In order for Curry to paint the murals for the Statehouse rotunda, marble panels originally imported from Italy would have to be removed and prepared for painting. The Kansas Executive Council, responsible for commissioning the murals, decided to prohibit removal of the marble, thereby preventing Curry from continuing his work. In March of 1941, Senator Toland, who vocally disapproved of Curry's murals, introduced Resolution 20, supporting the Executive Council's decision to ban removal of the rotunda marble.⁵⁸ Strategically, Toland introduced the resolution just after Senator Van De Mark protested an appropriation for maintenance of the John Brown Memorial Park in Osawatimie.⁵⁹ In the shadow of this anti-John Brown sentiment, the Kansas Senators "overwhelmingly approved" Resolution 20.⁶⁰ The resolution was, as the *Topeka State Journal* reported at the time, a "positive slap at the Curry paintings."⁶¹ By banning removal of the rotunda marble, the legislature effectively prevented Curry from finishing his Kansas Statehouse murals.

Curry was devastated and resigned from the project in 1941, refusing to return to Kansas to sign his finished murals. Of his unfinished work, Curry stated:

The work in the east and west wings stands as disjointed and un-united fragments. Because this project is uncompleted and does not represent my true idea, I am not signing these works. I sincerely believe that in the fragments, particularly in the panel of John Brown, I have accomplished the greatest paintings I have yet done, and that they will stand as historical monuments.⁶²

Only five years later, Curry passed away at the age of 48. Curry's wife admitted years later in an interview that she believed that the controversy over the murals had contributed to his premature death.⁶³

Conclusion

Although the State legislature did not go so far as to erase the image of Brown from their Statehouse walls, their resolution prohibiting the completion of Curry's murals still made a powerful statement about the type of public memory they desired for Kansas. The legislature's resolution, however, was itself controversial. After completing *The Tragic Prelude*, Curry returned to Wisconsin where he served as artist in residence at the Agricultural College of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. There, Curry was greeted by a much warmer welcome than he was in Kansas. Wisconsin even took Kansas to task for their poor treatment of their artist in resident. An article in the *Wisconsin State Journal* ridiculed the Kansas mural controversy, scoffing at the legislature's refusal to allow removal of the Statehouse marble for Curry's work. The Wisconsin article chided:

And what is Italian marble for? For statesmen. Not for people. . . It is to impress the little people who dare to walk into the buildings of the state that here is a marble hall and here are powerful and sacred people to whom you must not speak roughly and who you must not ever vote out of office. Italian marble is better for that than the soul of John Brown. Little people might get ideas from paintings like John Brown, with his flaming-red beard, his powerful arms, his wild hair, his wide, challenging mouth, the cyclone behind him, the beaten but hopeful-eyed slave rising at his feet.⁶⁴

Viewed from the outside, the mural controversy seemed more than a question of taste. It was a struggle for power, and John Brown's memory was the battlefield.

By choosing to prominently display the abolitionist in his Statehouse mural, Curry celebrated the wild and independent spirit of John Brown, which offended the state legislature and angered many Kansas citizens. The disputed nature of Brown's public memory caused Curry's depiction to become a point of contention for those who viewed Brown's persona as inconsistent with Kansas identity. Ultimately, when faced with Curry's image of John Brown, the question of whether the depiction celebrated a madman or a prophet may never be resolved. In public memory, John Brown was both a madman and a prophet, and even after the conflict over the Kansas mural, that duality would continue to be at the root of controversy over the memory of John Brown.

Notes

¹ “Why Is A Mural?,” *Kansas City Star*, June 9, 1941, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

² Carole Blair, Marsha S. Jeppeson, and Enrico Pucci, Jr. “Public Memorializing in Postmodernity: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial as Prototype,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77 (1991): 263.

³ “What is Kansas,” *El Dorado (KS) Times*, Governor Payne Ratner Files, Executive Council Correspondence Received 1941, Box 3 Folder 15, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁴ “Newsweek and the Curry Murals,” *Oskaloosa Independent*, July 17, 1941, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁵ M. Sue Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986), 21.

⁶ William Allen White to John Steuart Curry, 11 July 1930, John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, Correspondence and Project Files: White, W.A., 1930-1942, Box 3, Folder 38, Smithsonian Archives of American Art Online Collection.

⁷ Quoted in “Paintings By Kansan Honored,” *Kansas City Times*, May 13, 1933, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁸ Mrs. Henry J. Allen Harris to William Allen White, 16 December 1931, John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, Correspondence and Project Files: White, W.A., 1930-1942, Box 3, Folder 38, Smithsonian Archives of American Art Online Collection.

⁹ Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 35.

¹⁰ Jack Harris to John Steuart Curry, 4 May 1937, John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, Correspondence and Project Files: circa 1937-1943, Box 2, Folder 39, Smithsonian Archives of American Art Online Collection.

¹¹ “Kansas Heals Breach With A Native Son,” *Topeka (KS) Capital Journal*, February 10, 1932, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

¹² Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 39.

¹³ Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 39.

¹⁴ Jack Harris to John Steuart Curry, 4 May 1937, John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, Correspondence and Project Files: circa 1937-1943, Box 2, Folder 39, Smithsonian Archives of American Art Online Collection.

¹⁵ Harris to Curry, 4 May 1937.

¹⁶ Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 39.

¹⁷ Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 40.

¹⁸ Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 126.

¹⁹ Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 126.

²⁰ Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 126.

²¹ Harris to Curry, 4 May 1937.

²² A. L. Schultz, “John Steuart Curry Paints Things Which Are Burned Into Soul,” *Topeka (KS) State Journal*, January 6, 1938, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

²³ Quoted in James S. McDermott, “Critics May Muff Raves on Paintings,” *Topeka (KS) Journal*, June 27, 1939, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

²⁴ Quoted in “Artist Curry May Paint Series of Murals for Kansas State House Sponsored by State Editors,” *Topeka (KS) State Journal*, June 14, 1937, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

²⁵ “Art Magazine Features Curry’s Kansas Murals,” *Topeka (KS) Journal*, September 24, 1940, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

²⁶ The Kansas-Nebraska Act allowed settlers in the Kansas and Nebraska territories, both of which lay north of the parallel 36°30’ N, to determine whether or not they would allow slavery within their borders. After the House passed the bill by a close vote of 113 to 100, President Pierce signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act into law on May 30, 1854.

²⁷ S. Mintz, “The Impending Crisis,” Digital History, <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu>; and Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 29.

²⁸ Jonathan Earle, "John Brown of Osawatomie," in *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History*, ed. Virgil W. Dean (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 19.

²⁹ Mintz, "The Impending Crisis."

³⁰ David Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2005), 158.

³¹ Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 178.

³² Quoted in "Plaque Will Honor Artist, John S. Curry," *Topeka Capital*, April 30, 1953, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

³³ Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas*, 135.

³⁴ Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 68.

³⁵ Quoted in "Art Magazine Features Curry's Kansas Murals," *Topeka (KS) Journal*, September 24, 1940, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

³⁶ Leslie E. Edmonds, "Disappointed, Artist Curry Leaves Topeka," *Topeka Capital*, May 24, 1942, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

³⁷ Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 101.

³⁸ Quoted in Conwell Carlson, "Curry and Kansas – A story of Heroic Life: Homecoming of the Famous Painter Recalls Scenes, Struggles, Defeats and Achievements that go into the Making of an Epic of the Prairie Country," *Kansas City*

Star, August 22, 1937, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Stuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

³⁹ Quoted in “Iron in Kansas People Must Be Portrayed in Murals, Says Curry,” *Topeka (KS) Capital*, August 5, 1937, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Stuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁴⁰ Robert Townsend, “The John Stuart Curry Murals,” *Topeka Capital*, February 11, 1951, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Stuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁴¹ “Kansas Eggs Used to Paint John Brown Mural,” *Topeka Capital*, May 22, 1940, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Stuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁴² Laurence Schmeckebier, *John Stuart Curry's Pageant of America* (New York: American Artists Group, 1943), 62.

⁴³ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 197.

⁴⁴ Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 41.

⁴⁵ “Agog over the Murals,” *Kansas City Star*, July 17, 1937.

⁴⁶ Lloyd Garrison to John Stuart Curry, 22 May 1940, John Stuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, Correspondence and Project Files: Garrison, Lloyd, 1940-1946, Box 2, Folder 30, Smithsonian Archives of American Art Online Collection.

⁴⁷ “Agog over the Murals,” *Kansas City Star*, July 17, 1937.

⁴⁸ “Murals of Curry Stir: Sketches Shown in Kansas Capitol Raise Controversy,” *Kansas City Star*, April 13, 1939, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁴⁹ “Marble Blocks Artist Curry’s Kansas Murals,” *Topeka (KS) Capital*, June 29, 1941, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁵⁰ Topeka Woman’s Club Corresponding Secretary Arlene D. Snyder to Governor Payne Ratner, 24 May, 1942, Governor Payne Ratner Files, Executive Council Correspondence Received 1941, Box 3 Folder 15, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁵¹ “What is Kansas,” *El Dorado (KS) Times*, Governor Payne Ratner Files, Executive Council Correspondence Received 1941, Box 3 Folder 15, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁵² “Plaque Will Honor Artist John S. Curry,” *Topeka (KS) Capital*, April 30, 1953, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁵³ H. J. Bishop to Governor Payne Ratner, 13 August 1942, Governor Payne Ratner Files, Executive Council Correspondence Received 1941, Box 3 Folder 15, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁵⁴ Quoted in “Kansas Senators Take Potshots at Curry Murals in Statehouse,” *Kansas City Times*, April 1, 1941, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁵⁵ Quoted in “Demands Erasure John Brown Mural,” *Topeka (KS) Capital*, March 4, 1941, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁵⁶ Stephen H. Browne, “Remembering Crispus Attucks: Race, Rhetoric, and the Politics of Commemoration,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85, (1999): 169.

⁵⁷ “Plaque Will Honor Artist John S. Curry,” *Topeka (KS) Capital*, April 30, 1953, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁵⁸ Senate of the State of Kansas, 32nd Biennial Session, Resolution No. 20 (March 31, 1941), State Library of Kansas.

⁵⁹ “John Brown and John Curry Both in Bad With Legislature,” *Topeka (KS) State Journal*, March 31, 1941, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁶⁰ “John Brown and John Curry Both in Bad With Legislature,” *Topeka (KS) State Journal*, March 31, 1941, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁶¹ “John Brown and John Curry Both in Bad With Legislature,” *Topeka (KS) State Journal*, March 31, 1941, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

⁶² Quoted in “Curry Will Not Sign Kansas Murals,” *Topeka (KS) Capital*, March 4, 1943.

⁶³ Bret Waller, "An Interview With Mrs. John Steuart Curry," *Kansas Quarterly* 2 (Fall 1970): 10.

⁶⁴ Roy L. Matson, "Wisconsin Feels Hurt Over Way Kansas Officials Kicked Curry's Murals Around," *Wisconsin State Journal*, reprinted in *Topeka (KS) Capital*, May 31, 1942, microfilm roll 256, Clippings from the Vertical Files on John Steuart Curry, Kansas Historical Society Archives.

Chapter 3

John Brown, Villain: *Santa Fe Trail's* Retelling of How the Civil War Began

Although John Steuart Curry's *The Tragic Prelude* mural implies a direct relationship between John Brown and the Civil War, the causes of the war actually have long been contested in both scholarly and popular accounts. These competing sources draw upon a number of complex historical events to tell their different versions of the story, mostly centering on events in the 1850s when conflict over slavery began to escalate.¹ During this period, the nation was at odds over the controversial Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the violence of "Bleeding Kansas," Preston Brooks' 1856 beating of Senator Charles Sumner on the floor of the U.S. Senate, the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates, John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859, the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, and South Carolina's secession from the Union in 1860. Clearly, the Civil War did not have just one cause.

Nevertheless, narratives of how the Civil War began vary dramatically, depending on which events are emphasized and how they are portrayed. Much is at stake in these differing narratives, as how the story is told raises important and enduring questions: What brought about the Civil War? Who was responsible? Who is to blame? What was the war fought over? What role did slavery play? What does it mean to be "Southern" or "Northern?" Who won? Questions like these have led to an ongoing debate over who

“owns” the story of the Civil War and which version is correct. Still today, various interests “struggle to control the memory” of the Civil War.²

The U.S. film industry is one source of these competing narratives of the Civil War. Since the 1930s, Hollywood has produced many Civil War films with varying accounts of the national conflict. Over time, the Civil War has “failed to receive a definitive screen treatment,” argue film critics Linda Pepper and John Davis.³ Films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *So Red the Rose* (1935), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) center on action during and after the Civil War, but they merely allude in passing to events that triggered the war.⁴ Only a few films offer interpretations of events leading up to the Civil War. One such film is the 1940 Hollywood Western, *Santa Fe Trail*.

Santa Fe Trail focused on the tumultuous period of U.S. history between the years of 1854 and 1859, and it was the first film to prominently feature John Brown as a leading character. Released by Warner Brothers in 1940, *Santa Fe Trail* was the fifth highest grossing film of the year, demonstrating the movie’s mass appeal. From the start, however, it received mixed reviews. Philip Hartung of *Commonweal* praised the film in his December of 1940 review, stating, “[John] Brown, the slavery question, and abolitionists are treated with respect and intelligence.”⁵ *Time* magazine echoed these sentiments that same month, calling *Santa Fe Trail* “a brilliant and grim account of” events leading to the Civil War.⁶ In stark opposition to these complimentary reviews, Oswald Garrison Villard, a journalist and one of the co-founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, wrote a point-by-point rebuttal to the film in the March 1941 issue of *Saturday Review*. In his article, Villard deemed *Santa Fe Trail* a “travesty of history,” arguing that “it is the most complete misrepresentation of

John Brown and of his actions in Kansas and of the Harper's Ferry [*sic*] raid which could well be imagined."⁷ In direct contrast to Hartung's review in *Commonweal*, Villard also argued that *Santa Fe Trail* "takes sides and is distinctly pro-slavery and hostile to John Brown."⁸ Two years later, in 1943 Villard reiterated these accusations in the forward of his biography on Brown, claiming *Santa Fe Trail* was a "false, and historically entirely misleading, film relating to John Brown."⁹

Agreeing with Villard that *Santa Fe Trail* misrepresented John Brown, Nell Brown Groves, the granddaughter of the famous abolitionist, even sued Warner Brothers for more than one million dollars, accusing the film company of slander.¹⁰ Specifically, in the five-page hand-typed transcript to her lawyers, Groves wrote, I "demand that Warner Bros. Corp. withdraw from circulation the picture, *Santa Fe Trail*, on the grounds that it vilifies the character and name of my grandfather, John Brown."¹¹ The film, Groves argued, contained "exaggerations, misrepresentations, [and] gross and vicious untruths," portraying Brown as a "vengeful and ruthless killer... a renegade, a madman, a killer, a dirty windbag, and an enemy of the human race."¹² In terms of personal damages incurred, Groves claimed that *Santa Fe Trail* propagated a false memory of her grandfather, which constituted an invasion of her privacy: "Never in my life have I been so humiliated... Warner Bros. must and shall make reparation for the injustice they have done to my grandfather, [and] the resultant mental suffering I have endured..."¹³ The suit was finally settled out of court for only eight thousand dollars. Nevertheless, Groves considered the settlement a "moral victory."¹⁴

Clearly, opinions were mixed—even polarized—in reaction to *Santa Fe Trail*. This is arguably because the film became embroiled in an ongoing struggle over the

creation and propagation of public memories.¹⁵ Coining the term “memory vehicle,” Barbie Zelizer contends that images—such as those presented in films—provide “tangible proof” of the narratives they represent by “concretizing and externalizing events in an accessible and visible fashion.”¹⁶ The manner in which images allow us to remember is “powerfully different from how we might remember the same event were images not involved,” states Zelizer.¹⁷ Given this significant relationship between film and the creation of public memories, it is no wonder that some applauded *Santa Fe Trail* for how it remembered Brown and the coming of the Civil War, while others found the film objectionable. In this chapter, I seek to account for these varying reactions to *Santa Fe Trail* through a close reading of its images and the stories it tells.

In its visual narrative of pre-Civil War events, *Santa Fe Trail* framed Brown as the primary agent behind the coming of the war. It did this through two complementary narratives: a rather conventional Hollywood Western narrative, and a narrative about the coming of the Civil War. I will argue that the film’s Western narrative artificially restricted the historical narrative of the coming of the Civil War by binding the time period in which the narrative unfolded, by selecting particular events from this time period to represent in the film (while omitting and fabricating others), and by forcing real historical characters into fictional roles that fit within a Western narrative frame. Ultimately, I argue that this re-envisioning of the coming of the Civil War cast John Brown as a stereotypical Western villain. In the process, *Santa Fe Trail* simplified and artificially clarified the typically ambiguous and complex story of the coming of the Civil War by depicting Brown as the sole cause of this tragic event in U.S. history.

Santa Fe Trail: The Plot

The plot line of *Santa Fe Trail* begins at the West Point Military Academy in 1854. Cadets James “Jeb” Stuart (Errol Flynn) and George Custer (Ronald Reagan) are in their final days at the academy. After graduating from West Point the two are immediately stationed at a dangerous army outpost in Leavenworth, Kansas. Their mission is to protect the territory from the violence and destruction of abolitionist John Brown (Raymond Massey). Upon arriving at the army base in Leavenworth, the cadets find Kansas in a state of disarray. Brown’s bloody antislavery raids have ravaged the state, terrorizing Kansans and halting work on the Santa Fe Railroad. Stuart and Custer assume the duty of protecting the land from Brown and his villainous gang. During the cadets’ first assignment—transporting a load of supplies from Leavenworth to Santa Fe—Brown and his men attack their cavalry caravan. Although Brown evades capture, Stuart and Custer do seize his son Jason, who reveals that his father’s hiding place is in Palmyra, Kansas.

Stuart goes to Palmyra in disguise, but is discovered by Brown’s gang, which then takes him as a hostage to their camp. Trying to evade death by hanging, Stuart flees but finds himself trapped in a burning barn. Custer leads the cavalry to the rescue, saving Stuart and driving Brown and his followers out of the state. With Brown gone, Kansas is free at last from the abolitionist’s violence. Progress on the Santa Fe Railroad begins again, and Stuart and Custer return to Washington, D.C.

Meanwhile, Brown is planning another attack in the South—his infamous Harpers Ferry raid. Brown’s plan was to seize the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, to acquire weapons for a slave rebellion. However, on the night before the raid, an

informant travels to Washington, D.C. and reveals Brown's plan to Stuart. Just in time, Stuart, Custer, and their troops arrive in Harpers Ferry to squelch the rebellion and capture the abolitionist. The final scene of the film is a dramatic portrayal of Brown's hanging on the gallows.

The Duel Narratives of *Santa Fe Trail*

A close analysis of *Santa Fe Trail* demonstrates that, within the coherent plot summarized above, the film actually tells two separate stories, one a conventional Hollywood Western narrative, and the other a narrative about the coming of the Civil War. *Santa Fe Trail's* Western narrative is characteristic of the Hollywood Western genre. It tells a fast-paced, action-filled story about the fight for law-and-order on the U.S. frontier, complete with gunfights, open landscapes, cowboys, trains, and other key stylistic markers. In addition, the film's Western narrative revolves around conflicts of "good" vs. "evil" and "heroes" vs. "villains," and it possesses the classic ending in which the villain is conquered by the hero, and peace, order, and justice are restored to the land. *Santa Fe Trail's* Western narrative unfolds in a fashion similar to that of traditional Hollywood Western narratives, bearing many stylistic elements of the genre.

Alongside this Western narrative, however, *Santa Fe Trail* also offers its own account of the coming of the Civil War. Characters such as abolitionist John Brown, General Robert E. Lee, and James "Jeb" Stuart, and events like Bleeding Kansas and the Harpers Ferry raid, are drawn from pre-Civil War history. These bits of history are woven together along with other fictional elements of the plot in a way that allows *Santa Fe*

Trail to present its own version of the coming of the Civil War. Ultimately, however, this Civil War narrative is constantly in tension with the film's Western narrative.

Audiences for *Santa Fe Trail* are led to expect a Western narrative even before they watch the film. The very title—*Santa Fe Trail*—conjures ideas of pioneers, the frontier, and the taming of the West. Additionally, *Santa Fe Trail* was released only one year after *Dodge City*, a Western film that—like *Santa Fe Trail*—was written by Robert Buckner, directed by Michael Curtiz, and starred the same two leads, Olivia de Havilland and Errol Flynn. *Dodge City* takes place in the decade just after the Civil War. The film tells the story of a sheriff who came to Dodge City, Kansas to rid the cattle town of a villain and his gang. Eventually, of course, law and order were restored in the Western land. It is likely that moviegoers familiar with *Dodge City* would expect a similar Hollywood Western narrative from *Santa Fe Trail*. In the first few minutes of the film, that expectation is met, as the Western theme is reinforced visually and aurally through the opening credits, which are accompanied by scenes of covered wagons and cowboys, and a majestic fanfare (an indicator of upcoming adventure). The opening imagery and music establish the style of the film, promising the audience a movie complete with heroes, villains, gunfights, cowboys, and saloon brawls. Interestingly, *Santa Fe Trail* fulfills those expectations in a number of ways, but at times it also defies the particular stylistic components typical of Western movies.

Western narratives commonly are associated with settings and places that dictate particular plots. Traditionally, the plot of a Western film will unfold on the U.S. frontier or in a town located on the edge of civilization. In *Santa Fe Trail*, more than one hour of the two-hour film is set in Kansas territory, a location that conveniently fits both the

film's Western narrative and its coming-of-the-Civil War story. Set in "Bleeding Kansas," where historically pro- and antislavery settlers battled it out from 1854 to 1858, the film is located not only in a Western setting but in the middle of the political struggle over whether Kansas would enter the union a free or slave state. Kansas territory is thus an appropriate location for the film's coming-of-the-Civil War narrative, yet it also represents a quintessential Western setting—the frontier.

A key scene that unfolds on this frontier setting demonstrates how the film combines allusions to Civil War history with the conventional markers of a Western film. Cadets James "Jeb" Stuart and George Custer lead a wagon caravan from the army outpost in Leavenworth, Kansas to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Along the trail, the caravan encounters John Brown. Brown and his villainous gang stop the caravan to demand that they turn over a shipment of Bibles that the cavalry is carting. Unbeknownst to the cavalry, however, the crates of Bibles actually contain rifles. This twist of plot is an allusion to the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher's efforts to arm antislavery forces in Kansas with "Beecher's Bibles"—rifles disguised in crates marked as "Holy Bibles," sent by the New England Emigrant Aid Society to support the antislavery forces in Kansas. When the cavalry discovers that they were unknowingly transporting rifles to supply their enemy, John Brown, an intense chase scene ensues. Many stylistic markers of the Western genre are apparent in this scene. All ride on horseback, and many wear cowboy hats. Instead of using rifles, members of the cavalry pursue Brown, pistols in hand, swinging them about dramatically as they fire into the air. Although this scene alludes to elements of the coming of the Civil War, it ultimately functions more within the film's

Western narrative. However, the film does not remain centered on the Western frontier throughout; in the final scene, the location shifts to Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

This shift in location is noteworthy, because the action no longer takes place on the wild frontier, as is typical of a Western narrative. Instead, Harpers Ferry is a site drawn from the real historical narrative of the coming of the Civil War; it is the site of Brown's infamous raid on the U.S. arsenal in an attempt to inspire a slave revolt. Since Harpers Ferry is located in the South, not the West, one might expect that the action that unfolds in this location would possess entirely different stylistic characteristics. However, *Santa Fe Trail* depicts the Harpers Ferry raid in a very Western style. Many still wear cowboy hats. Pistols are still wielded, and a great number of the raid's participants ride on horseback (even though the physical distance between the combatants would not seem to warrant this). In addition, the Harpers Ferry raid brings closure to the film's Western narrative. It is at Harpers Ferry that Jeb Stuart at long last captures John Brown. This capture of Brown provides the audience with some relief that good will conquer evil and order will be restored. Thus, the film's Western narrative extends beyond the physical space of the frontier, carrying through to the end of the film, even though the closing scene is set in the Southeastern United States.

No matter where the action unfolds, the film draws attention to a conflict that is highly characteristic of the Western genre. *Santa Fe Trail* perpetually pits good against evil. Most commonly, this conflict is enacted through the interactions between Stuart and Brown. Yet neither character fills the role of the classic "hero" or "villain" typical of Western narratives. As with traditional Hollywood Western narratives, *Santa Fe Trail* tells the story of a hero who travels to the Western frontier with the purpose of restoring

order. Stuart fills this role, journeying from West Point academy upon his graduation in 1854 to an army outpost in Leavenworth, Kansas, to protect the territory from the villainous John Brown. Stuart, a tall, dashing, and jocular young man, possesses many of the characteristics typical of the Western hero; he is principled, courageous, and masculine, and he fits well within the film's Western narrative. However, Stuart's character also plays an important role in the film's coming-of-the-Civil War narrative, and in doing so he differs from the archetypal Western hero.

To begin, Stuart is from the South, not the West or East. Additionally, he is a member of the cavalry, not a cowboy. The film tries to mask some of these discrepancies by having him carry a pistol instead of a rifle, and by cocking his hat to the side. This contributes to a stylishly renegade look that sets him apart from the formality of others in military uniform. Although Stuart still fulfills the role of the Western hero, he also participates in the film's coming-of-the-Civil War story, which leads to some narrative inconsistencies.

Santa Fe Trail re-articulates Stuart's role in history, framing him as a Southern hero, almost solely responsible for protecting the nation from the fanatical Brown. Historically, Stuart's most notable role in events leading to the Civil War was, in fact, his participation in the capture of John Brown at Harpers Ferry. However, in *Santa Fe Trail*, he was not just one of the many who contributed to the capture of Brown at Harpers Ferry; rather, he pursues Brown heroically over the course of the entire film, traveling to Kansas territory to defend the land against Brown, battling Brown on the Santa Fe Trail, and participating in a shootout against Brown and his followers at the abolitionist's base in Kansas. At Harpers Ferry, he then captures Brown single-handedly, and he looks on

victoriously in the final scene as Brown is hanged on the gallows. Stuart's extended participation in both the coming-of-the-Civil War narrative and in the film's fictional Western narrative creates the illusion that the heroic Stuart played a much larger role in the historical events leading up to the Civil War than he actually did. Through *Santa Fe Trail's* Western narrative, Stuart—a Southerner—becomes the nation's hero, a force working for national unity in a time increasingly plagued by fanaticism.

Just as Stuart played the role of hero in *Santa Fe Trail*, Brown played the role of the villain in the film's Western narrative. A number of important stylistic cues establish Brown's rogue persona. When the viewer first encounters Brown at his camp in Palmyra, Kansas, the film's music takes a sudden turn toward the sour. Reminiscent of a funeral dirge and further dramatized by the slow beating of timpani, the music gives the sense that Brown and his comrades are plotting something at their Kansas camp. On top of this effect, the music moves into a variation of "John Brown's Body" (later, and more commonly, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"), and then transitions to a medley of war tunes, including "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," a well-known tune from the Civil War. This war-tune medley fosters a sense of uncertainty or uneasiness by subtly implying that a war is brewing. Additionally, Brown himself is depicted as extreme in every way. His attire is Puritan in style; he dons a black, rounded hat and a black suit that greatly contrasts with his stark, white-collared shirt. The abolitionist's attire stands out from the sea of plaid, denim, and cowboy hats donned by the others at his camp. These stylistic cues—the foreboding music and the dark, severe attire—function to frame Brown as a villain and to associate him with the coming of war.

Aside from the stylistic elements that define Brown's character, components of the film's Western narrative also construct Brown as a villain by highlighting his wild and violent persona. Like Stuart, Brown's character takes part in both the Hollywood Western and Civil War narratives. It is for this reason that Brown is not your typical Western villain; instead of a train robber or other such ruffian, Brown is a radical abolitionist from the North. The film's Western narrative presents dramatized versions of Brown's real-life actions. At Harpers Ferry, Brown holds several local men captive, refusing to surrender and demanding that his army remain in the arsenal to fight to the death for the antislavery cause. Even in this final scene, Brown is pictured as heartless and only interested in causing trouble, inflicting pain and suffering, and using violence to serve his own selfish purposes.

Santa Fe Trail's Civil War narrative also made implicit connections to familiar events that happened off screen, relying on audience knowledge of Civil War history to further emphasize Brown's miscreant lifestyle. The movie draws heavily upon memories of Brown's violence in Bleeding Kansas, even though the film itself depicts very little of this violence. Instead, characters make reference to Brown's actions in Kansas, building up an image of the abolitionist as murderous, blood-thirsty, and probably insane. For instance, before Stuart travels to Kansas to defend the territory against Brown, the cadets at West Point are shown talking about the abolitionist's ruthless ravaging of Kansas territory. When Stuart arrives in Kansas, Brown's son Jason confirms his father's criminal nature when he speaks about Brown's killings at Osawatimie, Kansas. Although this account is historically inaccurate—Brown and his followers actually did kill five men at *Pottawatomie*, Kansas—Jason's terrifying tale of these killings serves to fortify

Brown's ruffian persona by evoking vivid imagery of the brutality of these killings.

Without actually depicting these events, the film invokes memories of an incident that actually occurred in history, relying upon the audience to fill in the missing information with a combination of their own historical knowledge and their imagination.

Thus, *Santa Fe Trail* unfolds through the telling of two stories—a Western narrative and the story of how the Civil War began. John Brown and James “Jeb” Stuart are central characters in the plots of both narratives. Brown functions simultaneously as a Western-style villain, and as a prime mover in instigating civil war. Stuart, in contrast, is the embodiment of a Western hero, out to maintain order in the West, and, in the specific context of the film's Civil War narrative, to protect national unity. Over the course of *Santa Fe Trail*, Brown and Stuart are constantly in tension, creating a conflict that drives the plot in both the Civil War and Western narratives.

Rewriting History and Reframing the Causes of War

Although two narratives are present in *Santa Fe Trail*, the Western narrative ultimately takes on a more dominant role, restricting the scope of the film's coming-of-the-Civil War story. Historically, a number of events contributed to creating a climate for national conflict, dating back at least a decade prior to the start of the Civil War. However, I argue that *Santa Fe Trail* restricts this historical narrative in three distinct ways. First, *Santa Fe Trail's* Western narrative binds the coming-of-the-Civil War narrative temporally. By starting the narrative in 1854 (in the thick of Bleeding Kansas) and ending with the hanging of John Brown in 1859, the film truncates the explanation of the war's origins. Second, the film *selects* particular events from this time period,

depicting only the events that fit into the Western narrative. Simultaneously, the Western narrative omits other events commonly cited as contributing to the climate of national conflict. The film also fabricates certain occurrences to enhance the entertainment value of the Western narrative. Finally, *Santa Fe Trail*'s Western narrative forces real historical characters into fictional roles—including stereotypical heroes and villains—that fit within the Western frame. In each of these ways, the film's Western narrative restricts history to create a re-configured narrative of the coming of the U.S. Civil War.

There is no one “correct” way to narrate the story of events leading to the Civil War. No one cause or circumstance is cited consistently by historians as sparking the conflict; a multitude of factors are commonly considered to be causes of the war. Over time, these events have factored into Civil War narratives in different ways, and depending upon the sources consulted, they are portrayed in contrasting manners. Some sources cite one event as the most important factor in the coming of the Civil War, while others take a more nuanced stance, conceding that a large number of historical factors contributed to the climate of conflict. As a result, narratives of the coming of the Civil War are not consistent across sources, and examining the ways that particular events, people, and historical moments are incorporated into these accounts provides insight into the political motivations of the sources that construct these narratives.

In the case of *Santa Fe Trail*, the Civil War narrative begins in 1854 during Bleeding Kansas and ends with the hanging of John Brown in 1859. Arguably, the film's fictional Western narrative restricts the historical narrative to this timeframe, as this period in U.S. history offers elements that are useful for the creation of a fictional Hollywood Western narrative. Beginning the film during Bleeding Kansas—a tumultuous

and violent time in U.S. history—supplies a setting appropriate for the start of a Western film: a scene where law and order is absent. Within this setting, Brown fits the role of the Western villain, or the character responsible for the lack of law and order, because of his violence in Kansas territory.

Historically, it was around 1854 that Brown first began his violence in Kansas to defend the antislavery cause. Most infamously, Brown is remembered for his 1856 Pottawatomie Massacre, an act that helped shape his image—among some, at least—as a wild and reckless extremist. *Santa Fe Trail* capitalizes on this legacy. Although Brown’s Pottawatomie Massacre is not directly depicted in the film, the killings are frequently referenced as occurring in the immediate past. The film neglects to mention that Brown’s massacre was an act of retribution, however, saying nothing about the “Sacking of Lawrence” by proslavery forces. Nor does the film mention the attack on Senator Charles Sumner, who was nearly beaten to death on the floor of the Senate after delivering his famous antislavery speech, “The Crime Against Kansas.”¹⁸ “News of the vicious caning,” claims historian David Reynolds, only “added fuel to John Brown’s desire for retaliatory vengeance.”¹⁹ Because *Santa Fe Trail* does not discuss Brown’s possible motivations, the film portrays him as an irrational fanatic who inflicts violence for no apparent reason. The subsequent incidents of violence portrayed by *Santa Fe Trail* would seem typical of someone who was capable of such unreasoned brutality. Within the first half of the movie—situated in Kansas territory—Brown is depicted as attacking a wagon train, razing Delaware Crossing to the ground, attempting to hang Stuart, and engaging in a dramatic gunfight with Stuart after he tries to escape. Although *all* of these events are fictitious, they are situated within a real historical context—Bleeding Kansas—making it

believable that Brown's life was truly a rapid series of violent confrontations. Thus, Brown's character is essentialized as brutal and nefarious.

While Brown is consistently a villain, his fanatical personality actually escalates over the course of the film until he transcends what one would expect from a stereotypical Western ruffian. He becomes something larger than an ordinary Western villain: a morally repugnant super-villain, of sorts. As his character evolves, Brown engages in more and more disturbing actions, seemingly motivated by religious fanaticism. As the viewer watches Brown delude himself into thinking he is the embodiment of Judeo-Christian morality, it is increasingly clear that he has become quite the opposite of a stereotypically "good Christian."

At the start of *Santa Fe Trail*, Brown fills the role of the villain in a fairly standard way. One of his first acts of violence is his attack on the cavalry's caravan on the Santa Fe Trail. There is a brief discussion between Brown and his youngest son Jason that precedes this scene, wherein Jason attempts to convince his father that it is not right to attack the cavalry, even on behalf of a "righteous cause"—abolitionism. Although the dialogue functions to depict Brown's religious convictions as his motivation for violence, there is nothing particularly unsettling about the scene.

Over time, however, these references become more explicit, as Brown comes to think of himself as a Christ or Moses-like figure. As *Santa Fe Trail* progresses, Brown assumes multiple Biblical personas, sometimes viewing himself as Moses, at other times Christ, suggesting an unstable, even lunatic personality. Assuming this mixed Judeo-Christian persona of the Messiah-Liberator, he then consistently uses that persona as a license for his delusional and often violent actions. For instance, following the inspiration

of Moses, Brown actually “grants freedom” to a group of slaves hiding at his camp in Palmyra, Kansas, which the film describes as a site on the Underground Railroad. He addresses the African Americans that he frees, telling them that they are the “first of many” that would receive his gift of freedom.

Fully embracing this extreme, prophetic identity, later in the film Brown again adopts the persona of Moses when he flees Kansas territory. On his way out of Kansas, Brown pauses to stand on a hillside, with a terrifying look on his face as he watches a flaming structure in the distance. In a God-like voice, Brown invokes the Old Testament as he declares: “Yes! This is the sign for which I have waited, O Lord! This is your command – the burning bush!” In Biblical tradition, the burning bush was the site where God appointed Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and into Canaan. In the movie, Brown thus metaphorically takes on the role of God’s “liberator,” assuming responsibility for liberating the slaves. Brown’s Moses persona, however, is a delusional, power-hungry perversion of the Biblical character he claims to emulate. Likewise, Brown’s appropriation of Christ’s persona is delusional. In the same scene where Brown speaks of the “burning bush,” he bluntly asserts: “I shall be Thy right hand—I, John Brown, shall be the Sword of Jehovah!” Brown again rationalizes violence in the name of his righteous cause, this time in Harpers Ferry.

In *Santa Fe Trail*, Brown is visually depicted in ways that reinforce the portrait of a man who has convinced himself that he is Moses or Jesus Christ. Much like John Steuart Curry’s portrait of the abolitionist in *The Tragic Prelude*, Brown, as portrayed by Raymond Massey in *Santa Fe Trail*, had the same flowing gray beard, wild eyes, and gaping mouth. Curry’s depiction of Brown features the abolitionist in earthy-brown

clothes, to give him the look of a Kansas pioneer. *Santa Fe Trail*, in contrast, features Brown in a stark black and white suit and rounded Puritan-style hat—clothing that, to the viewer, serves as a constant reminder of Brown’s hyper-religious persona.

By the end of the film, Brown clearly believes he is the embodiment of Christ himself. After he is captured at Harpers Ferry, Brown is hanged on the gallows. In his last words, he appropriates Jesus, imploring, “I let them hang me. I forgive them, and may God forgive them, for they know not what they do.” In this instance, Brown claimed the mantle of Christ. After his real-life hanging, many of his supporters embraced that image. For example, Lydia Maria Child, a nineteenth-century U.S. abolitionist and women’s rights advocate, stated that the abolitionist’s death would “make the gallows as glorious as the cross.”²⁰ In the *Santa Fe Trail*, however, Brown’s embodiment of a Christ-Moses persona served to cast him as a delusional fanatic rather than a Christ-like hero. The moment of Brown’s hanging in the film is not a sympathetic one. Rather, Brown’s decision to appropriate the persona of Christ appears presumptuous and perverse. Throughout *Santa Fe Trail*, Brown is depicted only as a religious zealot that uses his faith as a justification for irrational violence. Thus, when he speaks the words Christ himself uttered in his last moments on the cross, Brown solidifies his persona as insane and morally repulsive.

Depicting Brown as the film’s villain allows for the Western narrative to unfold. As with any Western film, the narrative was not complete until the villain was defeated. Thus, the hanging of Brown functioned as a suitable climax to the film’s Western narrative—the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Once Brown was hanged, the land was free of his terror, and law and order were restored to the West—at least in theory. Ending

on this note was problematic for the film's Civil War narrative, however, as Brown's hanging was made to seem like the event that sparked the Civil War. Immediately following the hanging, the Union marching tune, "John Brown's Body," is loudly played, foreshadowing the war that is soon to come. There is no talk of Lincoln's election or of South Carolina's succession from the Union, even though both events occurred the very next year. Rather, the viewer is left to conclude that Brown and his violence were the final causes of the war.

There is a danger in restricting the historical narrative of the coming of the Civil War in this way. Audience members who were familiar with the more complete historical narrative may have recognized that *Santa Fe Trail's* narrative was limited and contained a number of historical misrepresentations. These viewers may well have been offended by manipulation of historical fact; at best, they might have written the inaccuracies off to the filmmakers' "poetic license." Other moviegoers, however, may have known less about the history of the Civil War. It is likely that these viewers would be more persuaded by the film's tidy yet inaccurate narrative of the coming of the Civil War. Presented with a concise narrative of events prior to the Civil War, they may have left the theater convinced that America's great historical tragedy was the result of the actions of one violent and delusional man, a man motivated by his own fanatical perversions of the biblical story.

Conclusion

Beginning *Santa Fe Trail* amid the violence of "Bleeding Kansas" and concluding with the hanging of John Brown made for a tidy and entertaining Hollywood Western

narrative. However, restricting the film's coming-of-the-Civil War narrative in this way had more serious implications. Because the film focuses so exclusively on Brown's life, it suggests that he alone was to blame for the Civil War, and that his motivations for sparking the war were rooted in psychological delusions and religious fanaticism. By highlighting Brown's Northern origins, the film also suggested that Northern tolerance for abolitionist fanaticism was more to blame for the war than was Southern slavery. Ultimately, then, *Santa Fe Trail* re-articulates the coming-of-the Civil-War narrative in a way that lays blame on the North, while casting the South as the protector of national unity.

The notion that Brown alone was responsible for the Civil War allows for a revisionist history, one that plays into nostalgic Southern mythologies. Historically, the war devastated the South. The land was destroyed, plantations were ruined, and the region's economy was thrown into disarray. On top of this destruction, the war destroyed the Southerner's "view of himself," argues rhetorical scholar Waldo Braden. According to Braden, this was "[f]ar more catastrophic than any physical losses" suffered during the war, as shattered "dreams, ideals, sentiments, beliefs, and life-styles" are not "easily recovered or replaced."²¹

Southern mythologies emerged out of the effort to cope with this psychological and emotional devastation. Nostalgically re-envisioning the South's history and its role in the coming of the Civil War, Southern mythologies have glorified the Confederacy's political and military leaders, restoring Southern pride and assuaging any guilt the South might have felt for causing the war. By blaming John Brown, *Santa Fe Trail* participates in this mythologizing of the South's past. Ignoring the various ways that the South

contributed to starting the Civil War (slavery, succession, etc.), the film instead blames a single fanatic—and a *Yankee* fanatic at that. In the film, Brown is shown to have a strong relationship with the abolitionists of Boston, receiving their shipments of guns and meeting with them to ask for financial support. By tying Brown to the North and by depicting Bostonians as fully supportive of his violent actions, *Santa Fe Trail* locates the fanaticism that started the Civil War in the Northeast. According to this narrative, the North is more to blame than the South for the Civil War.

In this way, Brown's character in *Santa Fe Trail* also puts an interesting spin on the Southern narrative trope of the "carpetbagger." According to post-Civil War Southern lore, "carpetbaggers" were Yankees who came from the North to exploit the devastated South for their own economic gain. These carpetbaggers, according to historian David Blight, were depicted as traveling to the South, "seizing everything moveable," plundering the region, and oppressing the already devastated Southerners.²² This "carpetbagger" trope typically portrays Northerners as motivated by their own economic interests. Brown, too, is motivated by his own interest—religious fervor—at the expense of the nation. In the film, Brown is asked, prior to Harpers Ferry, "Is it your wish, then, to destroy the Union?" He emphatically answers: "My answer to that is—Yes! To the Devil with the Union! We've got to fight sometime, and it might as well be now!" Fueled by his belief that he has been called by God to free the slaves, Brown exhibits little concern for the fate of the Union.

The depiction of Brown as a fanatic would have been especially poignant at the time that *Santa Fe Trail* was released. In 1940, the United States had yet to enter World War II, which had already begun in Europe. However, there was a growing fear of

fanatical and violent figures such as Hitler and Mussolini, individuals who were causing war to break out across the globe. *Santa Fe Trail's* portrayal of Brown as a fanatic would easily have called to mind these fanatics and their violent behaviors on the world stage. In this context, audiences would have been more likely to react with fear, anger, and distrust toward the portrait of Brown, thus fortifying the notion that it was a single fanatic—not the South—who started the Civil War.

Jeb Stuart—juxtaposed against Brown—could have undermined this narrative if the film had emphasized how he came from the North to help restore order in the West. While Stuart did come to Kansas from West Point, the film repeatedly emphasizes his Southern roots. As the film's hero—and the embodiment of the “Southern gentleman”—Stuart's chivalrous, civil, and upstanding character stands in stark opposition to that of Brown, further contributing to the film's message that the South is not to blame for the Civil War. The heroic Stuart constantly strives to protect the nation from Brown's fanaticism, thus enabling a re-articulation of the South's role in events leading to the war.

Within *Santa Fe Trail's* Western and coming-of-the-Civil War narratives, the South is never a real threat to national unity. Indeed, slavery—when it is mentioned—is not the problem. Stuart tells Brown that the South, like the North, “senses that slavery is a moral wrong.” Additionally, there is no mention at all of Southern succession within the film's narratives. Thus, according to *Santa Fe Trail*, the South is, in both narratives, the defender of union. Stuart heroically protects the nation from Brown's fanatical violence, and the South is symbolically cast as the champion of unity. In both of the film's narratives, the only threat to national unity comes from the North—and, more specifically, from a lone religious fanatic named John Brown.

Notes

- ¹ Karin Coddon, ed., *Slavery* (San Diego, California: Greenhaven Press, 2002), 17.
- ² David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 122.
- ³ Linda Pepper and John Davis, “John Brown’s Body Lies A’Rolling in His Grave,” *Velvet Light Trap* (Spring 1973): 14.
- ⁴ Larry J. Easley, “The Santa Fe Trail, John Brown, and the Coming of the Civil War,” *Film & History* 13 (May 1983): 29-30.
- ⁵ Philip Hartung, “Santa Fe Trail,” *Commonweal* 33 (December 27, 1940): 257.
- ⁶ “Santa Fe Trail,” *Time* (December 23, 1940): 45.
- ⁷ Oswald Garrison Villard, “History and the Movies,” *Saturday Review* 23 (March 1, 1941): 9.
- ⁸ Villard, “History and the Movies,” 9.
- ⁹ Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800-1859* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943).
- ¹⁰ Merrill D. Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 114.
- ¹¹ Transcript of Nell Brown Groves’ statement provided by Alice Keesey Mecoy, “Brown Descendant Sues Over Santa Fe Trail Movie,” *John Brown Kin* (blog), January

16, 2010, accessed on August 5, 2011,

<http://johnbrownkin.blogspot.com/2010/01/brown-descendant-sues-over-santa-fe.html>.

¹² “Brown Descendant Sues Over Santa Fe Trail Movie,” *John Brown Kin*.

¹³ “Brown Descendant Sues Over Santa Fe Trail Movie,” *John Brown Kin*.

¹⁴ Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited*, 114.

¹⁵ Richard Godfrey and Simon Lilley, “Visual consumption, collective memory and the representation of war,” *Consumption Markets & Culture* 12 (December 2009): 295.

¹⁶ Barbie Zelizer, “The Voice of the Visual in Memory,” in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 160.

¹⁷ Zelizer, “The Voice of the Visual in Memory,” 158.

¹⁸ In May of 1856, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner vehemently protested the expansion of slavery into the Kansas territory through his “The Crime Against Kansas” speech, delivered on the floor of the Senate. His address spanned two days, and included three major sections: the Crime Against Kansas, the Apologies for the Crime, and the True Remedy. An unexpected answer to Sumner’s speech came two days after he finished his oration. Insults within the speech, directed both at South Carolina and its own Senator Andrew Butler, had greatly angered Butler’s nephew, Preston Brooks. Brooks elected to avenge his uncle and his home state by brutally attacking Sumner with his cane, rendering him unable to fill his Senate seat for three and a half years.

¹⁹ David Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2005), 155.

²⁰ Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited*, 23.

²¹ Waldo W. Braden, “Repining over an Irrevocable Past: The Ceremonial Orator in a Defeated Society, 1865-1900,” in *Oratory in the New South*, ed. Waldo W. Braden (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1979), 10.

²² Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, 122.

Chapter 4

To Commemorate or Not to Commemorate?: Remembering the Centennial of John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry

It goes without saying that where fables and legends have obscured the real truth, the truth must be made clear. We are not preparing to commemorate a romantic myth; we are making ready to look closer at a chapter of our own history, and the chapter must be accurate.

Civil War Centennial Committee
January, 1958¹

Nat Turner has come again –
Nat Turner's spirit, all smoky from hell,
has come again to arouse the slaves
to another Southampton massacre.

Boyd B. Stutler
(on public reaction to John Brown's Raid)
John Brown Centennial Commemoration
October 16, 1959²

In 1959, John Brown's memory once again ignited controversy. This time, however, rather than Brown's body being pulled from its grave to serve political ends, the abolitionist's ghost appeared of its own volition—and America was forced to deal with him. The centennial of the Civil War was approaching, and commemoration was at the forefront of the nation's mind. In that light, Brown's infamous raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry was hard to ignore. One hundred years had passed since the raid, which led to Brown's undoing and hastened the coming of the Civil War. Thus, the question became "how should the centennial of Brown's raid be commemorated?" Should it be

treated as an integral part of the larger story of the Civil War? And, if so, *who* should be charged with the duty of remembrance, and *how* should the commemoration be enacted?

These questions proved to be quite contentious. Amid concerns about if and how Brown's raid should be commemorated, the duty of centennial remembrance was passed from one entity to the next. The federal government established the National Civil War Centennial Commission (CWCC) to foster public interest in the centennial. When this agency caught wind of the National Park Service's (NPS) plans to commemorate Brown's raid as a significant moment in Civil War memory, they encouraged the NPS to "soft-pedal" the event. "The Raid came at a bad time in 1859 and. . . conditions today are such that it would be a bad time to celebrate it in 1959," proclaimed Karl S. Betts, one of the leaders of the CWCC.³ Caving in to the pressures of the CWCC, the NPS divorced themselves from the centennial commemoration, passing the task of remembrance off to the local Harpers Ferry Area Foundation (HFAF). Eventually, the centennial of Brown's raid was "commemorated," but the HFAF was adamant that Brown and his violent actions would not be "celebrated."⁴

In this chapter, I explore the controversy over commemorating John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. Before delving into the intricacies of the debate, I will begin with an account of the Civil War Centennial Commission's founding and a discussion of its initial plans to commemorate the war centennial. I argue that, faced with the challenge of commemorating a divisive war in the volatile social and political climate of the 1950s and 1960s, the CWCC established a master narrative of the centennial centered on patriotism, heroism, and national unity. As an event that helped trigger the Civil War, Brown's raid was a clear contender for centennial remembrance. However, due to

differing attitudes toward his violent and controversial actions, the CWCC recognized that the event would not fit well into their master narrative. Thus, they initially opted to avoid recognizing the raid at all. Subsequently, the local Harpers Ferry Area Foundation took up the task of remembering John Brown's raid.

Ultimately, however, the HFAF's attempt to *remember* John Brown's raid through a centennial event was not much different from the CWCC's attempt to *forget*. The HFAF, as it turned out, used the centennial of Brown's raid as an opportunity to repudiate the portrait of John Brown as a hero or martyr. In the social and political context of the time, this rejection of Brown—and the liberal, abolitionist principles for which he stood—functioned simultaneously as an expression of Cold War-inspired distaste for “radicals,” and as a rejection of some of the historical moments forerunning the civil rights movement. Thus, in 1959 the struggle over commemorating Brown's Harpers Ferry raid ultimately had more to do with politics of the present than with remembering events of the past.

Commemorating the U.S. Civil War Centennial

Commemorating the Civil War is a tricky business. There is, and has always been, little agreement over the great “lessons” of the war and “who should determine them,” argues historian David Blight.⁵ How the nation dealt with the centennial of the Civil War is a great case in point. In this section I will argue that the Civil War Centennial Commission (CWCC), the federal agency tasked with the duty of national remembrance, propagated a patriotic narrative of heroism to foster a memory of the war that would promote national unity. I will begin by describing the origins of the CWCC and the

political and social difficulties this commission faced when determining how to remember the Civil War. Then I will discuss the master narrative of the Civil War story created by the commission, explaining how this narrative functioned rhetorically to frame the war as a manifestation of patriotism and heroism.

In the early to mid-1900s, national interest in remembering the Civil War was already strong. When the last of the Civil War veterans passed away in the 1930s and 1940s, the threat of losing the memories carried by these men created an exigence for finding other ways to remember the war.⁶ Thus, the “modern Civil War industry” was born.⁷ The Civil War became the subject of many important works of literature, as well as classic films like *Gone With the Wind* and *So Red the Rose*. By the 1950s, a huge influx of American tourists had begun visiting the nation’s Civil War battlefields, “to immerse themselves in the scenic grandeur and authentic representations of their past.”⁸ Meanwhile, Civil War “buffs” attended meetings at local Civil War Roundtables. The first roundtable chapter was established in Chicago in 1940, but by 1958, forty such groups were thriving nation-wide.⁹ These organizations functioned as amateur lecture and discussion groups for those interested in expanding their knowledge and sustaining their interest in the Civil War.

As the one-hundredth anniversary of the war approached, a group of professionals and historians founded the Civil War Centennial Association (CWCA) in New York City. In contrast to the lay citizen-based membership of the roundtables, the CWCA attracted a more select, academic crowd, including prominent historians like Allan Nevins, Bruce Catton, and Bell Irvin.¹⁰ Recognizing the need for some form of national commemoration, the historians sought to “act as ‘a general forum’ for coordination” of

the “proper” celebration of the Civil War centennial.¹¹ However, commemorating the four-year conflict was no small task. The CWCA thus advocated the creation of a federal agency responsible for overseeing Civil War centennial commemoration.

The CWCA was not the only entity lobbying for such a federal organization. A Civil War Roundtable based in the District of Columbia also had a vested interest in the endeavor, as did the National Park Service. Each organization—the CWCA, the D.C. Roundtable, and the NPS—had its own set of goals for the commemoration. A “more sober, scholarly approach” to commemoration was hoped for by the CWCA, whereas the D.C. Roundtable petitioned for “a democratic and commercialized observance that would entertain as well as educate,” states Cook.¹² Simultaneously, the NPS was working on a plan to request federal support for their “Mission 66” program, a vast and expensive plan to renovate and enlarge a number of the nation’s historic sites, including several important Civil War battlefields that had recently experienced increased tourism.¹³ Upon learning of the CWCA and the D.C. Roundtable’s efforts to establish a federal agency for war commemoration, the NPS threw their support behind these organizations, hoping that the creation of such an agency could help the Park Service coordinate centennial observances at these battlefields.¹⁴ With the increased interest in Civil War commemoration, the NPS was able to garner enough federal support to receive funding for their Mission 66 project in the spring of 1957. Then, on September 7, 1957, the efforts of the CWCA, the D.C. Roundtable, and the NPS paid off when President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into law a congressional joint resolution establishing the Civil War Centennial Commission (CWCC).

The commission was quite diverse. Appointees included professional historians, representatives of local roundtables, politicians, and businessmen. Leaders of the group were Major General Ulysses S. Grant III, grandson of the Union commander, and Karl S. Betts, a founding member of the D.C. Civil War Roundtable and a vocal proponent of establishing a federal commemoration agency. As stated in the Public Law signed by President Eisenhower, the committee recognized that “the years 1961 -1965 will mark the centennial of the American Civil War, the supreme experience in our history as a nation,” and thus the law declared it “incumbent upon us as a nation to provide for the proper observances of the centennial of this great and continuing force in our history.”¹⁵

The CWCC faced a difficult challenge, however. Not only was the organization responsible for commemorating one of the darkest periods of U.S. history, but they also had to decide *how* best to remember that period. Racial issues arising out of the civil rights movement, as well as public anxieties stemming from the Cold War, complicated the political climate of the day. How could the CWCC foster remembrance of the Civil War—the nation’s greatest sectional conflict—without stirring up sectional hostilities that might threaten national unity?

As the overseer of all Civil War commemoration events, the nascent CWCC was convinced of the importance of establishing a narrative that would support unity rather than division. To avoid inciting sectional conflict, the CWCC adopted a mission of promoting commemoration events that supported a patriotic narrative of national heroism. Historian John Bodnar, in *Remaking America*, argues that the CWCC’s “goal was to reinforce loyalty to the nation in an era when it was ostensibly threatened internally and externally by foreign ideologies. They, therefore, needed symbolic

language that would allow both the North and South to find common ground in the centennial.”¹⁶ The CWCC first established this narrative, centered on finding “common ground,” in January of 1958 in one of their founding documents, which acted as a declaration “of the character and scope [the Commission] believes the observance of the Centennial should have.”¹⁷ The document recognized the importance of finding a commemoration narrative that would resonate with the nation as a whole. The CWCC offered this narrative account through a version of Civil War history that highlighted common war experiences, while deemphasizing those aspects of the war’s history that might cause controversy:

The Civil War was the greatest test our country ever faced. Built on the *heroism* and endurance that were drawn from men and women of both sections by devotion to principles valued more than life itself, it was our most profound and tragic emotional experience. What was lost in it was lost by *all of us*; what was finally gained, affecting our national character and our national destiny itself—the *preservation of the American Union* as an instrumentality of freedom for all the people of the world—was gained by *all of us* (emphasis added).¹⁸

Essentially, the CWCC adopted what historian David W. Blight would call a “reconciliationist” public memory of the war—“a core master narrative that led inexorably to reunion of the sections.”¹⁹

Establishing this narrative was key for the CWCC. As the federal overseer of Civil War memory for the centennial, the Commission used their narrative to take control of *how* the war would be remembered. The Commission would—in their words—bring “to the attention of the American people the fullest understanding of the heroism and sacrifice displayed by the people on both sides of the war, to the end that a deeper awareness of the depth and breadth of the war’s full meaning may become possible.”²⁰

By selectively highlighting the common experiences of war, the CWCC hoped to promote national unity and to foster a sense of patriotism.

The CWCC's Civil War narrative thus actively remembered experiences that the nation as a whole shared, while selectively forgetting those that might cause controversy and division. As the CWCC stated, "[t]he loss, the gain and the experience itself are a common national possession."²¹ The Commission argued that these common experiences should be the focus of commemoration and remembrance, instead of "reviving here the exultation of victory and there the sadness of defeat."²² In recognizing only shared experiences, the CWCC encouraged unity rather than division. In the words of the CWCC:

Our ancestors fought to the limit of endurance for four years; when the fighting ended they closed ranks, saw in the *unity* of their land something that over-shadowed the bitterness of the fight, and ever since have *stood firmly together*, fighting side by side, when occasion has demanded, to defend the values which both sections had stood for while the Civil War lasted (emphasis added).²³

Notably, the common values that the CWCC identified are those of heroism and patriotism. Thus, the CWCC's Civil War narrative also framed the war as a manifestation of patriotism—on the part of *both* sides. In doing so, the narrative reinforced the need for patriotism and loyalty to the nation at a time when the U.S. faced tremendous political and social challenges.

It is not surprising that the CWCC would champion a patriotic platform for Civil War remembrance. Patriotism is a common theme of memory narratives propagated by official organizations. "Normally official culture promotes a nationalistic, patriotic culture of the whole that mediates an assortment of vernacular interests," argues historian

John Bodnar.²⁴ More specifically, Bodnar claims that the CWCC “wanted to interpret the past in ways that would reinforce citizen loyalty” to the nation-state.²⁵ If there were any doubt that this was the case, one would need look no further than the CWCC’s planning goals, which explicitly stated:

So the centennial observance must be a new study of American patriotism—a study which should give us a deeper understanding of the immense reserves of bravery, of sacrifice and of idealism which lie in the American character.²⁶

As Bodnar argues, “heroism” thus became “an explanation for the fighting that took place on both sides.”²⁷ Bodnar continues: “The complexity of all combatants and of the past itself was reduced to one symbol that would best serve the interests of those who promoted the power of the state in the present.”²⁸ Acting as the official federal overseer of Civil War commemoration events, the CWCC established a narrative that promoted remembrance of common experiences, national unity, and a strong sense of patriotism. This narrative would be used to determine *what* pieces of Civil War history would be remembered, and *how* these events should be interpreted.

Harpers Ferry Raid: The Historical Account

As the Civil War Centennial Commission began planning commemoration events, one historical incident clearly complicated plans for a narrative emphasizing national unity, patriotism, and heroism: John Brown’s Harpers Ferry raid. Often referred to as a key event that triggered the Civil War, Brown’s raid could simply not be ignored. Just years after the raid, Frederick Douglass famously stated, “[i]f John Brown did not end the war that ended slavery, he did, at least, begin the war that ended slavery.”²⁹ Echoing

these sentiments, Virginian Republican Samuel Vanderslip Leech, in an eyewitness account of the raid, argued that it “beyond question hastened the Civil War.”³⁰ As Ralph Waldo Emerson aptly noted in his journal, it is virtually “impossible to keep the name & fame of John Brown out of the war from the first to the last.”³¹ Even years after the war, historians emphasized the relationship between Brown, his Harpers Ferry raid, and the Civil War. “Historians agree that John Brown was a catalyst of the Civil War,” argues David Reynolds, who himself claims that Brown’s “antislavery battles” sparked “the bloodiest war in American history.”³² Others, such as Merrill D. Peterson have argued that Brown’s “martyrdom at Harpers Ferry” made the Civil War “truly ‘irrepressible.’”³³ Clearly, Brown’s raid and hanging contributed significantly to the coming of the war. But what about these events made them so pivotal in the coming of the war? To answer this question, we must return to 1859.

Brown and his band of twenty-one abolitionists descended on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, as dusk fell on October 16, 1859. After years of plotting and training, the insurrection had finally begun. It was a Sunday. Symbolically, Brown had selected the holiest of days for his antislavery sting. Through the chilly, damp air of that autumn night, Brown and his army marched six miles to the Harpers Ferry Federal Armory. There, the revolutionaries planned to seize a large cache of weapons in order to arm a slave rebellion. Brown meticulously planned every detail of the raid. On the way to Harpers Ferry, the abolitionists cut telegraph wires to prevent communication from soldiers at the arsenal to potential reinforcements. Upon reaching the town, the men were instructed to split into teams with designated tasks. One team would seize the engine house and arsenal, first established by President George Washington in 1794.³⁴ Another

team would guard incoming roads and bridges. A third group was to travel to surrounding plantations, liberating slaves and capturing their masters. Brown gave strict orders that his men should “resort to violence only when necessary,” but that part of the plan would quickly be abandoned.³⁵

Brown began the raid confident in his plan, but almost immediately he was thwarted by a series of unforeseen events. The abolitionist’s scheme hinged on the assumption that plantation slaves, freed by his raiders, would rise up and join the revolt. Brown had a vision of slaves “violently cast[ing] off their shackles,” causing the institution of slavery to “shake from its foundations,” writes historian David Reynolds.³⁶ This—not surprisingly—did not happen. And so, not knowing what to do, Brown hesitated. While he balked, a Baltimore & Ohio train passed through Harpers Ferry, and Brown made another key mistake: he decided to allow the passenger train to continue on its way to Baltimore. Reasoning that he had “no quarrel” with the people on the train and thinking that “letting it go would signal that he had not come to ‘burn and pillage,’”³⁷ he undermined his own efforts to cut off outside communication by allowing the train’s conductor to transmit news of the insurrection to Washington.

By 7:00 a.m. on Monday, October 17, townspeople from Harpers Ferry started to fight back against Brown and his men. According to the National Park Service account of the raid, the raiders still might have escaped to safety in the mountains “despite the erratic fire from the townspeople.”³⁸ However, “slowness doomed [Brown’s] project,” Reynolds writes, and before they could escape, the Charles Town militia arrived by train to confront Brown and his men, now holed up in the Harpers Ferry engine house (today nicknamed the “John Brown fort”).³⁹ As the militia descended on the engine house, they

exchanged fire with the abolitionists hidden inside. When evening approached, the firing dwindled. Inside the Engine House, only Brown and five of his raiders had escaped bullet wounds and were still able to use a rifle.⁴⁰ Outside, the organized militia attack would soon give way to a drunken celebration:

Hundreds of militiamen and townspeople jammed the streets, which echoed with whoops and yells... The bars in the Wager House and Gault House Saloon were enjoying an unprecedented business. Many men were intoxicated, and they fired their guns wildly into the air and occasionally at the engine house. All semblance of order was gone, and the “wildest excitement” prevailed throughout the night.⁴¹

Amid this evening mayhem, General Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart arrived at Harpers Ferry to assume command over the ninety U.S. Marines who had arrived a bit earlier under the immediate command of Lieutenant Israel Greene.⁴² When the sun rose on Monday, October 18, Stuart offered Brown one last opportunity to surrender. Upon his refusal, the Marines attacked, quashing the rebellion and capturing a wounded Brown. The abolitionist’s long-planned raid was over in only thirty-six hours.

Ultimately, Brown and his men did not fare well. Ten raiders were killed during the raid or immediately after, including two of Brown’s own sons (Oliver and Watson). Six surviving raiders were captured, tried, and executed. Only four escaped and were never captured. Brown himself was wounded by Lieutenant Green near the end of the fight. He survived, however, to be captured, held in the nearby Charles Town county jail, and ultimately tried and found guilty of treason. He was hanged—along with the other four captured raiders—on Friday, December 2, 1859.

Brown’s Harpers Ferry raid may not have toppled the institution of slavery, as he had hoped. However, his insurrection and subsequent hanging prompted a polarized

public reaction that many claim raised the curtain on the Civil War. Immediately following the raid, most Americans viewed Brown's raid as a "terrible failure," dismissing it "as the act of a madman," states Peterson.⁴³ Dismissal, however, soon gave way to a more bifurcated response, as Brown became a "resonant symbol" in both the South and the North.⁴⁴ Fear mounted in the South, where Reynolds argues that the "John Brown pike epitomized the twin horrors of Northern aggression and slave revolts," reminding Southerners of their "vulnerability" in the Union.⁴⁵ Abolitionists and "moderate and liberal Northerners," by contrast, were "profoundly disturbed" when Brown was hanged, states historian Stephen B. Oates.⁴⁶ In the eyes of Northerners, the moment Brown was executed he became a Christ-like martyr, and he was subsequently "enshrined... in an almost endless procession of poems, songs, letters, essays, and public addresses."⁴⁷ In short, John Brown came to be remembered as both a madman and a heroic martyr. This national tension over Brown and his actions at Harpers Ferry heightened sectional conflict that only escalated in the coming years, ultimately erupting in the Civil War.

Downplaying the Centennial of John Brown's Raid

Public conflict over John Brown and his Harpers Ferry raid did not end with the Civil War. As Blight argues, each instance of public remembering acts as "a prelude to future reckonings."⁴⁸ Collective memories of John Brown are a testament to this insight. Brown's actions were controversial in the immediate aftermath of the raid; then, one hundred years later, they sparked debate again as the event's centennial approached. In 1959, the question became: should the centennial of Brown's raid be commemorated?

And, if so, *who* should be charged with the duty of remembrance, and *how* should the commemoration take place? As the official organization tasked with the duty of Civil War remembrance, the Civil War Centennial Commission (CWCC) initially took charge of the Harpers Ferry raid remembrance. However, because John Brown's insurrection violated the Commission's narrative for remembering the Civil War in terms of national patriotism and heroism, the CWCC opted to downplay the raid, selectively forgetting Brown's role in the coming of the Civil War.

Before the CWCC had the opportunity to extend its bureaucratic arm into the issue, however, the NPS administration at the Harpers Ferry National Monument had already begun preparations for a commemoration event. When the Monument was first established in 1944, the NPS recognized that Brown's raid "was chosen as a basic theme of development for Harpers Ferry National Monument, since it is so universally known and has such potential visitor interest."⁴⁹ It was only fitting, then, that when the centennial of the Harpers Ferry raid came upon them, the NPS should commemorate the event. Since the raid was one of the key events credited with triggering the Civil War, the NPS knew that their manner of commemoration could set a precedent for future commemorations. As Regional Director Daniel J. Tobin stated at the time, "this will be our first observance of a Centennial anniversary associated with the Civil War and it will undoubtedly suggest patterns and procedures for subsequent ones."⁵⁰

Thus, the NPS went to great lengths to ensure that Brown's raid was properly commemorated. In September of 1959, Harpers Ferry Superintendent Frank H. Anderson announced "a 'face-lifting' program" at Harpers Ferry National Monument in preparation for the John Brown Centennial Observance that was scheduled for mid-October.⁵¹ As part

of the larger Mission 66 program, the NPS performed a “‘crash program’ of research and restoration” aimed at returning the town to how it appeared in 1859.⁵² To restore the park to a state that John Brown himself would have recognized, NPS historians used “maps and photographs, diaries, letters and newspapers” to piece together a view of the town that could be used for the restorations.⁵³

Another major component of their plan was acquiring the historic John Brown fort. After Brown’s raid, the fort “took on a life of its own,” write Teresa S. Moyer and Paul A. Schakel in their history of the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.⁵⁴ The iconic fort traveled the country, and was dismantled and rebuilt multiple times to be displayed at events such as the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. By the time the NPS developed an interest in moving the fort back to its original location, the building was owned by and located on the grounds of nearby Storer College. Additionally, the B&O Railroad still owned the land where the fort originally resided in Harpers Ferry. Thus, the NPS made preliminary inquiries to the B&O Railroad and Storer College, asking about the possibility of acquiring the John Brown fort and moving it back to its original site. In a letter explaining the need to move the fort for the Harpers Ferry raid centennial, the NPS stated, “this would make readily available to visitors the one structure at Harpers Ferry most closely associated with John Brown and it, together with the building across the street which is to be devoted to displays for the special occasion, will provide a more realistic setting.”⁵⁵ The NPS knew that a commemoration event could draw a great number of tourists to the area, so they wanted to restore the town as closely as possible to how it appeared back in the 1850s.

Members of the public, too, expressed an interest in the NPS's centennial preparations. "I have had a bee in my bonnet for sometime [*sic*]," wrote townspeople Charles E. Lane, Jr. in a letter to a local Harpers Ferry paper, "that something should be done to have a pageant in Harpers Ferry based on the John Brown Raid."⁵⁶ Lane further explained, "I feel very strongly that this significant event in our history should be commemorated properly and I feel sure that thousands of our countrymen would want to see it and would want their children to see it."⁵⁷ Other locals supported a commemorative event as well, sometimes noting that their own relatives were involved in the actual raid events. Conveying such sentiments, one local woman, Lillian Evanti, wrote in a letter to the Director of the NPS Conrad Wirth:

Have you noted that in 1959 it will be 100 years since John Brown was captured in Harper's Ferry [*sic*]. What do you think of a big celebration on the campus of Storer College with a beautiful Pageant? Congressmen and governors of all states where Brown lived might be invited to speak, as well as other prominent Americans. I had two relatives who joined Brown from Oberlin Ohio and gave their lives that America might be free. Louis Sheridan Leary---and John Copeland. Your opinion on this celebration will be appreciated. John Brown was thought to be a mad man, but to day [*sic*] we know his spirit was dedicated to Freedom and Democracy for all people.⁵⁸

A year prior to the centennial observance, NPS plans for a commemoration event were well underway, and it appeared that their ideas had considerable public support.

It was at this time, however, that the CWCC caught wind of the NPS's preparations for the upcoming commemoration. Uncomfortable with the idea of celebrating the centennial of Brown's raid, the CWCC quickly worked to put a stop to the NPS plans. On October 6, 1958, Karl S. Betts phoned NPS Acting Chief Historian Charles W. Porter to "make known serious misgivings of the members of the

Commission growing out of the proposed observance of the John Brown Raid.”⁵⁹ He objected to the notion of “celebrating” Brown’s raid, arguing that, “such a celebration might have the effect of antagonizing the entire South to the great damage of the proposed Civil War Centennial observances.”⁶⁰ The solution Betts offered was a suggestion that the NPS “soft-pedal” the event.⁶¹ Essentially, Betts asked the NPS to promote the selective *forgetting* of Brown’s raid.

To increase support for downplaying the commemoration of Brown’s raid, the CWCC dragged the B&O Railroad on board. When Betts phoned the NPS on October 6, he also stated:

[T]he B.&O. Railroad hoped there will be no big ceremony in 1959. The point of view of the B.&O. Railroad seems to be that if the National Park Service pushes the matter, the railroad will have to make a big thing of it. However, their private opinion is that they would rather not have to do so. They would prefer to observe the later Civil War history of Harpers Ferry as the anniversary years occur during the Civil War Centennial period.⁶²

Historically, the B&O Railroad had been a key player in the Harpers Ferry raid. It was a conductor on one of their express trains that took the initiative to alert Washington of Brown’s presence in Harpers Ferry. This allowed for U.S. Marines to arrive in time to squelch the raid. When it came to commemorating the event, however, the B&O Railroad sided with the CWCC. Instead of kicking off a remembrance of the Civil War with a commemoration of Brown’s raid, the CWCC and the B&O Railroad preferred to ignore that event, focusing instead on the later years of the Civil War.

The CWCC, worried about antagonizing the South, hoped to forego commemorating John Brown’s raid in an effort to protect their narrative of patriotism, unity, and heroism. Taking control of the Civil War story, the Commission wanted the

war to be remembered, but only in terms that celebrated the heroism of all involved, the lasting Union that came from the war, and the patriotic spirit that the war embodied. The CWCC's narrative was one that made it possible for North and South alike to celebrate the centennial of the war, and the enduring unity of the nation.

When the CWCC found out that the NPS planned to commemorate Brown's raid, this threw a wrench into their plans. How could they possibly commemorate the Harpers Ferry raid, when everything Brown stood for defied their official memory of the war? Brown's raid prompted division, not national unity. His raid was the act of a violent radical who put the abolition of slavery ahead of the preservation of the Union. Regardless of Brown's motives, his renegade acts of violence were not the type of thing that the CWCC wanted to remind the nation of at a time when they believed national loyalty was so desperately needed. So, instead of endorsing the event, the CWCC hoped to simply ignore this widely recognized trigger of the Civil War. The Commission seemed to understand, as rhetorical critic Bradford Vivian has noted, that forgetting can sometimes be as important as remembering: "Strategically excising aspects of the collectively remembered past may prove essential to adapting collective remembrances in light of emerging social, political, and ethical dilemmas."⁶³

This desire to skip over Brown's raid and remember only later historical events at Harpers Ferry stood in direct opposition to the goals laid out when the Harpers Ferry National Monument was originally established. John Brown's raid was to be the primary focus of the Monument, while "The Civil War story...was considered to be of secondary interest."⁶⁴ Despite these original goals, however, the NPS caved in to the pressure from the CWCC and the B&O Railroad. Responding to Betts' suggestion of downplaying the

raid, the NPS wrote, “[w]e share their apprehension that the John Brown episode may be a disturbing element in engendering a bipartisan feeling.”⁶⁵ Following the lead of the CWCC, the NPS also distanced itself from the controversial commemoration of Brown’s raid, deciding that they would “not take an active part in the organization of the centennial celebration,” but would instead “cooperate” with other organizations that might choose to arrange some sort of commemorative event.⁶⁶

Harpers Ferry Raid: The Centennial Commemoration

The Civil War Centennial Commission, the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, and the National Park Service all divorced themselves from commemorating Brown’s raid, engaging in a collective act of forgetting. However, the local Harpers Ferry Area Foundation (HFAF) resisted these pressures to overlook an important historical event. Picking up where the National Park Service left off, the Foundation planned and executed a four-day commemoration event, held on the anniversary of the raid, October 15-18, 1959. Nearly 65,000 visitors flooded the tiny town of Harpers Ferry for the weekend to remember Brown’s infamous raid. The commemoration opened on Thursday, October 15—historically, the “day of final preparation for the Raid by John Brown and his men.”⁶⁷ The public toured special exhibits, such as an original 1830 Tom Thumb engine and passenger car supplied by the B&O Railroad, the Charles Town Court House where Brown was tried, and the National Monument area, where Brown’s raid actually took place. Tourists could also make a stop at the historic engine house (“John Brown’s fort”), which was open to the public on the Storer College Campus (the fort was not relocated to Harpers Ferry as the NPS had originally hoped). Thursday evening also marked the

opening of *The Prophet*, a play which would run every day of the centennial commemoration and which the Centennial Program described as a “Three Act Historical Drama on the life of John Brown.”⁶⁸ While Timothy Rice, a student from American University in Washington, D.C. played the role of Brown, Harpers Ferry residents filled most of the other approximately fifty parts.

Friday of the commemorative weekend, officially titled “Historians’ Day,” marked the “day, 100 years ago, [that] Brown and his small band wound through the Maryland Hills to seize the Government Armory and Arsenal and Hall’s Rifle Works,” notes the Centennial Program.⁶⁹ The day opened with morning tours of the same exhibits open to the public on Thursday. Over the noon hour, the HFAF held a “Historians’ Luncheon” in honor of Mr. Boyd B. Stutler, prominent John Brown Historian from Charleston, West Virginia. The luncheon featured speeches by Stutler and U.S. Senator Jennings Randolph, along with a debate among historians about John Brown. The debate centered on a number of key issues involving Brown—his motives for raiding Harpers Ferry, his sanity, how he was able to gain public support for his violence, etc. As an article from the *Hagerstown Morning Herald* noted, “[a]n impressive array of knowledge about the strange man who captured Harpers Ferry a century ago yesterday was available among the panel of experts who answered the questions.”⁷⁰ Later in the afternoon, the public could attend events ranging from a concert of patriotic tunes by the Shepherd College Band to a “Styles of 1859” fashion show and contest, in which members of the Charles Town Junior Women’s Club joined with local residents to show off their best fashions from the 1850s. There was even a “Beards of 1859” contest for gentlemen. Local men worked for months to grow whiskers reminiscent of those donned by Brown

in famous portraits, like John Steuart Curry's *The Tragic Prelude* mural. Dinner on Friday featured the reading of a paper by J. E. B. Stuart III, grandson of the famed Confederate General who assisted in the capture of Brown at Harpers Ferry. Stuart "had proud things to say about his ancestor who, he observed, had been unduly belittled by some," noted John W. Stepp of the Washington, D.C. newspaper *The Evening Star*.⁷¹ The day concluded with a ceremonial drill performed by the Sharpsburg Rifles, a lowering of the flag at the local Harpers Ferry High School, and a second performance of *The Prophet*.

Saturday, October 17 marked the one hundredth anniversary of the day Brown barricaded himself in the engine house and fought against both local troops and the U.S. Marines under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart. In 1959, October 17 was dubbed "Governor's Day" in honor of these noteworthy historical events. At noon, a Governor's Luncheon was held; West Virginia Governor Cecil Underwood was the guest of honor. With much pomp and circumstance, a reenactment of the taking of the fort and the capture of John Brown filled Saturday afternoon. Later that day, visitors could watch a parade that included a motorcade with the Governor's party and other distinguished guests.

The Harpers Ferry raid ended with the capture of Brown on October 18, and the centennial commemoration concluded on the same day. Designated "Homecoming Day," Sunday centered on church services, a barbecue in the Harpers Ferry Park, a band concert by students from Charles Town High School, and a motorcade of the Senior Citizens or "Old Timers" through Harpers Ferry. Over the noon hour, actor Raymond Massey, who played Brown in *Santa Fe Trail*, performed a dramatic reading of Stephen Vincent

Benét's epic poem, *John Brown's Body*. In front of a crowd of nearly 400 people, Massey was, according to a local news report, "[s]triking in build and manner with a voice used movingly to interpret in mood the words he read, adding gestures sufficient to accentuate the climaxes of the story and with a manner anything but 'stagey.'" ⁷² The report concluded that he "gripped his audience for the entire time it took to give the reading." ⁷³ The main event of the afternoon was a battle reenactment, featuring the Confederate Unit of Big Pool and Hagerstown, Md. versus the Sharpsburg Rifles. A final performance of *The Prophet* closed the four days of spectacles, commemoration, and remembrance.

Commemoration Analysis

It is astounding that the Harpers Ferry Area Foundation was able to pull off such a large-scale commemoration event in the shadow of the Civil War Centennial Commission's strong objections to remembering John Brown's raid. Not only did they commemorate the raid, they also did so in a manner that was widely applauded. Historian Boyd B. Stutler stated that the planners executed "a very successful four-day observance" that "could well be taken as a model for communities planning Civil War events." ⁷⁴ Echoing these sentiments, an article in the local *Jefferson Advocate* commented: "The civic minded men and women who have played such a prominent part in making the commemoration... deserve a resounding vote of thanks." ⁷⁵ Even the NPS expressed their approval of the events. "It was a pleasure to be present at the Centennial Observance of the John Brown raid. I was particularly impressed with the dignity and restraint of the program," stated NPS Director Conrad L. Wirth in a letter to June H. Newcomer, President of the HFAF. ⁷⁶

An examination of how the commemoration events unfolded during the raid centennial holds the key to understanding how the HFAP was able to commemorate Brown's raid in a way that apparently offended no one. I argue that by stressing the authenticity, objectivity, and historical accuracy of their centennial events, the HFAP fashioned a weekend of remembrance that systematically depoliticized the controversial John Brown raid, usurping the abolitionist's radical views and highlighting the role of those who squelched the invasion. The centennial planners were able to accomplish this in three key ways: by stressing that the centennial was a commemoration or observance, *not* a celebration; by relying on the authority of so-called "experts" and other "official" disseminators of memory; and by framing much of the commemoration as a "reliving" of past events.

The HFAP depoliticized the event, first, by stressing that while they were *commemorating* or *observing* the Harpers Ferry raid, they were not *celebrating* the event.⁷⁷ This allowed the HFAP to frame the centennial as strictly an historical remembrance, not a tribute to John Brown and his violent actions. "The centennial is to *commemorate* an event—not to immortalize John Brown," reported the *Martinsburg Journal*.⁷⁸ Chiming in on the same subject, Carl Irving of *The Evening Star* reported that local citizens were planning "a centennial observance (not a celebration, they make clear) about the raid, trial and hanging, which were to stir debates that still go on."⁷⁹ These articles reflected the HFAP's success at rhetorically constructing their commemoration event as a historical observance, not a celebration. With Karl S. Betts' objection to celebrating the raid in the back of their minds, the foundation made sure to select terms like "commemoration" and "observance" to describe their centennial. Even the official

program for the four-day event seemed neutral in its title: “Centennial Observance Historical Booklet.”⁸⁰ With all this care taken in the language chosen to describe the event, it is little wonder that an article in the *National Park Courier* described visitors as being “favorably impressed by the ‘neutral’ treatment of a very controversial subject.”⁸¹ The difference between a commemoration and a celebration might be subtle or even nonexistent. Nevertheless, this strategic rhetorical framing allowed the HFAF to “walk a middle ground,” effectively depoliticizing an intrinsically political event.⁸²

The HFAF’s preoccupation with objectivity extended beyond the language they used to describe the event. So-called “experts” were also summoned both to attest to the historical accuracy of the stories told at the commemoration events and to themselves act as mouthpieces for “real” history. First, the experts were called upon to attest to the historical accuracy of particular portrayals of the Harpers Ferry raid. This was decidedly the case with *The Prophet*, the three-act play, performed each night of the four-day centennial. Written especially for the commemoration by Professor Edwin Wallace Dace of Sweet Briar College, the play was billed as a *historical drama* depicting Brown’s life. One of the play’s most advertised attributes was that it had been “read and approved by Harpers Ferry Monument historians” and by Stutler, a renowned John Brown expert who was reportedly “impressed with the historical accuracy it relates.”⁸³ According to a newspaper report at the time, *The Prophet* also “won much praise from the large audience for the care with which historic events were reproduced.”⁸⁴

Despite all these claims of historical accuracy, the play was in fact a historical *drama*. Helen M. Cavalier, chairperson of the centennial, attested to this when she spoke to certain edits made to the original plot. Cavalier noted that originally the last few lines

of the play were to be delivered by John Brown himself, as he stood waiting to be hanged on the gallows. However, these lines were scrapped and replaced with the proclamation of a Virginia militia commander: “So perish all such enemies of Virginia! All such enemies of the Union! All such foes of the human race!”⁸⁵ This was then followed by the song, “John Brown’s Body.” “We didn’t want the play to end with a sermon by John Brown,” stated Cavalier, who insisted that the play still allowed audience members to “decide what to think” on their own.⁸⁶

In addition to attesting to the historical accuracy of particular commemoration events, the expert historians served as active purveyors of historical memories. One major example of this is the question-and-answer roundtable event held during the luncheon on Historians’ Day. Debate participants included Stutler; J.C. Furnas of Lebanon, N. J.; Dr. Walter Coleman, a historian for the National Civil War Centennial Commission; Herbert Kahler, an NPS historian; and Charles Snell, the NPS historian stationed at the Harpers Ferry National Monument.⁸⁷ With the panel composed of historical authorities, the goal of this event was supposedly to provide a true and accurate account of Brown’s life and, more specifically, of his actions at Harpers Ferry. NPS Staff Historian J. Walter Coleman composed a number of questions to help facilitate the debate. Despite the seeming objectivity of the event—a panel of *historians* engaging in an intellectual *debate*—many of the questions actually framed the debate in a less-than-impartial manner:

1. Why did *presumably sensible men* follow John Brown on such a *reckless scheme* with *so little promise of results*?
2. Should Brown have been declared *insane*?
3. Why did the *very respectable New Englanders* support his venue? (emphasis added)⁸⁸

Coleman's leading questions reflected the NPS's preoccupation with avoiding any commemoration activities that could be conceived as celebrating Brown. The questions encouraged the panelists to contrast the "insane" abolitionist's "reckless scheme" with "presumably sensible men" and "very respectable New Englanders."⁸⁹ Clearly, before the debate even began the NPS had decided what conclusions the debaters should draw from their conversation about Brown. It is no wonder, then, that at the end of the day, the debaters agreed that Brown was a madman. "Historians View John Brown As Mentally-Unbalanced Man," exclaimed the headline of an article in the local *Martinsburg Journal*.⁹⁰ Four out of the five roundtable historians agreed that John Brown was crazy, reported another newspaper story.⁹¹ Even Stutler, the only dissenter, argued that while Brown was probably "legally sane" he was "undoubtedly. . . fanatical to a degree that approached mental unbalance."⁹²

Brown's mental stability has, in fact, been hotly debated since his trial and hanging in 1859. However, he was never deemed legally insane, and many historians today, such as David Reynolds, argue that "Brown was not insane; instead, he was a deeply religious, flawed, yet ultimately noble reformer."⁹³ Labeling him "mad," as the historians at the centennial did, conjures up images of the wild-eyed, bushy-bearded Brown—the Brown that many felt John Steuart Curry painted in his statehouse mural. It attaches to Brown a label that, according to rhetorical critic Charles Griffin, is "wildly imprecise, easily abused, and freighted with centuries of prejudice."⁹⁴ The term "madness" has "formidable rhetorical power in popular usage," Griffin points out; it "evokes images of dark, chaotic, and often violent behavior" and constitutes a "grave accusation, usually applied only to individuals or groups whose behaviors are perceived

to be both irrational and threatening to the public good.”⁹⁵ By deeming Brown “mad” without any substantial clinical evidence, the roundtable historians deprived Brown of his own voice in the matter; his actions had nothing to do with moral or religious convictions, and they certainly were not worth “celebrating.”

Brown as “crazy” was a key theme that ran throughout the centennial of the Harpers Ferry raid—a theme that was clearly evident in media reports of the event. Accusations of madness abounded in newspaper accounts. “Whether he was ever normal no ones [*sic*] knows,” one paper reported, while another added that Brown’s “attempt to take over the government of the United States was foolhardy and could not have been conceived by a normal mind.”⁹⁶ Still another reflected back on the “sheer madness of the raid,” calling it a “futile, insane act.”⁹⁷ These newspaper reports reflected the success of efforts to design a centennial that recalled Brown’s raid without “celebrating” it.

Historians and the media were not the only ones to strip Brown of his agency and convictions by portraying him as insane. The speeches of government officials, such as Senator Jennings Randolph and West Virginia Governor Cecil H. Underwood, also reinforced the notion that Brown was a madman, not worthy of celebration. Randolph’s speech focused primarily on paying tribute to Henry T. MacDonald, founder of the Harpers Ferry National Monument. Interestingly, Randolph portrayed MacDonald as a saint, contrasting his righteous personality with Brown’s fanatical persona. The Senator had nothing but effusive praise for MacDonald, stating that he was “privileged to know him” and describing “his kindness, his compassion, his inherent goodness, his humility, and his abiding love for all that God had created.”⁹⁸ Contrasting MacDonald’s saintly demeanor with Brown’s turbulent life, Randolph stated that MacDonald:

[B]elieved in justice and mercy, he was the implacable foe of intolerance and the staunch defender of the dignity of Man. But he did not choose the sword for his weapon. He chose the book and fortified that choice by so living his own life, in humility, in love, in mercy and in kindness that others, witnessing his example, were prompted to say as we now say, “Here, indeed, was a man!”⁹⁹

While MacDonald “walked humbly with God,” Randolph described Brown as a fanatic who fought slavery “with a sword,” insisting that “before his self-appointed mission was over the gulf between North and South had widened to such a point that only a terrible war could close it.”¹⁰⁰ In effect blaming Brown for the war, Randolph reinforced the idea that he was a crazy man who ought to be forgotten. The real heroes of the centennial were men like MacDonald.

Brown’s insanity was also a theme in Governor Underwood’s centennial address. Underwood crafted a story of the abolitionist’s madness to warn citizens in the mid-twentieth century of the dangers fanatics still posed to American society. In the words of Underwood, “the world is still filled with people like him, and massive destruction—not just an isolated raid—could be touched off by just such a fanatic as John Brown.”¹⁰¹ According to one reporter, Underwood urged “‘faith in our government, faith in the American way of life and faith in our churches and organizations’ as the best means of combating any such fanatical outbursts that could plunge the world into a devastating war of complete destruction.”¹⁰² In other words, Brown’s fanaticism was un-American and, in the nuclear age, potentially destructive to the entire world. The real heroes in history, according to Underwood, were those average citizens who worked within the system, expressing their “faith in the American system” and engaging in “peaceful pursuits.”¹⁰³

Governor Underwood's speech served as the prelude to the final component of the centennial observance: a reenactment of Brown's raid. By its very nature, a reenactment professes to offer the viewer with an accurate portrayal of a past event. "Living history," as a reenactment is often called, is intended to leave spectators with the feeling that they actually witnessed the historical event itself. For the twentieth century viewers who were not alive at the time of the actual Harpers Ferry raid, the reenactment would allow them not only to witness the event but also to better understand its meaning and significance. As an article in *The Martinsburg Journal* observed, the reenactment of Brown's raid was intended to "re-create the atmosphere and meaning of the event."¹⁰⁴

Adding to this realism was the fact that the reenactment would occur in almost precisely the same location as the original raid. The places where memories are stored or enacted, argue Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, "are frequently understood as offering a unique access to the past," inducing "a sense of authenticity" for viewers.¹⁰⁵ The reenactment of Brown's raid was about as authentic as they come—one hundred years to the day of Brown's raid, the event would be reenacted in exactly the same space that it had occurred historically.

Held on Saturday afternoon, the highpoint of the reenactment was the actual capture of Brown. As the *Hagerstown Morning Herald* reported:

The climactic showpiece will come Saturday, when marines will storm a replica of the fire engine house where Brown was finally captured. They'll haul out an actor dressed like the fiery abolitionist who was wounded in the brief but bloody skirmishing at the fort.¹⁰⁶

Timothy Rice, who played the role of Brown in *The Prophet*, donned the long grey beard and revolutionary clothing to once again perform Brown's part. Marines of Forney's

Battalion, a North-South Skirmish Association group, stormed the grassy slopes of the Storer campus. When the marines finally captured Brown, there was no mistaking which side the spectators were on. “Throngs, at least half of them children, *cheered* as Lt. Israel Green at the head of his white-belted, blue-coated Marines assaulted the doors with bayonets, sledge hammers and finally a ladder which did the trick” (emphasis added), reported *The Evening Star*.¹⁰⁷ Thus, the historical reenactment of the John Brown raid and capture had a happy ending: Brown, the madman, was captured and dragged off by the heroes of the story, the U.S. Marines.

Conclusion

The saga of the John Brown centennial, as part of the contest over the larger public memory of the Civil War, sheds light on how public *remembering* and public *forgetting* complement one another. In the context of the civil rights movement and the political tensions of the Cold War, the Civil War Centennial Commission felt the need to craft a narrative that would downplay divisive memories of the Civil War and promote national unity. They thus created their own master narrative of the Civil War, centering on themes that promoted unity—patriotism and heroism. This narrative, however, proved difficult to maintain while telling a complete and accurate story about one of the most polarizing conflicts in U.S. history. The CWCC faced an especially difficult commemoration decision on the one hundredth anniversary of an event that arguably raised the curtain on the story of the Civil War: John Brown’s raid at Harpers Ferry. Because Brown and his actions at Harpers Ferry were so controversial, the CWCC struggled with how to handle an event that did not fit well into their tidy master narrative

of heroism and patriotism. So, they advocated a “soft-pedaling” of the raid’s centennial. Despite their initial enthusiasm for remembering the raid, the National Park Service, at the prodding of the CWCC, followed suit. Thus, for a short while the CWCC was safely in control of the Civil War story.

Resisting the CWCC’s desire to selectively “forget” the John Brown raid, the local Harpers Ferry Area Foundation took up the task of remembrance. Yet they, too, ultimately went along with the CWCC’s tightly spun master narrative. Although the HFAF was enthusiastic about commemorating Brown’s raid, they finally conformed to the CWCC’s master narrative by portraying Brown as a madman and the federal troops who captured him as the heroes of the story. As Barry Schwartz and Howard Schuman have argued, the “job of the commemorative agent is to designate moral significance by lifting from the historical records the events that best exemplify contemporary values.”¹⁰⁸ This the HFAF did by framing their commemoration of the John Brown raid as a story adhering to CWCC’s narrative of national unity and patriotism. Framing their four-day observance as a commemoration of the raid and not as a celebration of a radical and violent abolitionist, they used historical experts and government officials to verify Brown’s insanity, casting Brown as anti-American and using the abolitionist as a warning against fanaticism. Even the final reenactment reinforced this narrative, casting the U.S. Marines who captured and dragged Brown away as the real heroes of the story.

Ultimately, the HFAF’s remembrance of the John Brown raid was not much different from the CWCC’s forgetting of the event. Both rhetorical acts rejected some of the historical moments that acted as preludes to the civil rights movement. Both reflected the Cold War-inspired distaste for fanaticism. Both attempted to deflect the moral

quandaries wrapped up in the John Brown raid. Both placed value on national unity, reinscribing patriotic values. And, in the end, both functioned in the service of a powerful master narrative that was really more about the present than it was about articulating an accurate account of the past.

Notes

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⁶ Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 16.

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¹⁰ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 20.

¹¹ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 20.

¹² Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 23.

¹³ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 24.

¹⁴ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 29.

¹⁵ 85th Congress, 1st Session, Public Law 85-305 (H.J. Res. 253), 7 September 1957.

¹⁶ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 209.

¹⁷ “Suggestions for Civil War Centennial Commemorations,” Civil War Centennial Commission, Major General Ulysses S. Grant III, Chairman, 15 January 1958.

¹⁸ “Suggestions for Civil War Centennial Commemorations,” 15 January 1958.

¹⁹ Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, 397.

²⁰ “Suggestions for Civil War Centennial Commemorations,” 15 January 1958.

²¹ “Suggestions for Civil War Centennial Commemorations,” 15 January 1958.

²² “Suggestions for Civil War Centennial Commemorations,” 15 January 1958.

²³ “Suggestions for Civil War Centennial Commemorations,” 15 January 1958.

²⁴ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 14.

²⁵ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 243.

²⁶ “Suggestions for Civil War Centennial Commemorations,” 15 January 1958.

²⁷ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 209.

²⁸ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 209.

²⁹ Quoted in David Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2005), ix.

³⁰ Samuel Vanderslip Leech, *The Raid of John Brown at Harpers Ferry as I saw it* (Washington D.C.: Published by the author, 1909), 1.

³¹ Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 11.

³² Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 95, 39.

³³ Merrill D. Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 171.

³⁴ Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800-1859: a biography fifty years after* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1943), 428.

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³⁸ Harpers Ferry Historical Association, *John Brown's Raid*, 43.

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⁴⁰ Harpers Ferry Historical Association, *John Brown's Raid*, 53.

⁴¹ Harpers Ferry Historical Association, *John Brown's Raid*, 53.

⁴² Harpers Ferry Historical Association, *John Brown's Raid*, 53.

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⁴⁵ Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 14; Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited*, 15.

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⁴⁷ Oates, *To Purge this Land with Blood*, 355.

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⁶⁰ Porter memorandum.

⁶¹ Porter memorandum.

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⁶³ Bradford Vivian, *Public Forgetting: The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 9.

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⁸⁴ “Weather and Attendance Favorable at Centennial,” *Daily Mail* (Hagerstown, MD), October 14, 1959, Clippings Files, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Archives.

⁸⁵ Irving, “Harpers Ferry Prepares to Mark Centennial of John Brown’s Raid,” *Evening Star*.

⁸⁶ Irving, “Harpers Ferry Prepares to Mark Centennial of John Brown’s Raid,” *Evening Star*.

⁸⁷ “Historians View John Brown as Mentally-Unbalanced Man,” *Martinsburg (WV) Journal*, October 17, 1959, Clippings Files, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Archives.

⁸⁸ Staff Historian J. Walter Coleman to Lee Bushong, 2 October 1959, “To Preserve the Evidences of a Noble Past” Files, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Archives.

⁸⁹ Coleman to Bushong.

⁹⁰ “Historians View John Brown as Mentally-Unbalanced Man,” *Martinsburg (WV) Journal*.

⁹¹ “Historians View John Brown as Mentally-Unbalanced Man,” *Martinsburg (WV) Journal*.

⁹² “Historians View John Brown as Mentally-Unbalanced Man,” *Martinsburg (WV) Journal*.

⁹³ Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 8.

⁹⁴ Charles J. G. Griffin, “John Brown’s ‘Madness,’” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 12 (2009): 375.

⁹⁵ Griffin, “John Brown’s ‘Madness,’” 375.

⁹⁶ Cliff Taylor and Frank Foye, “The Snoopers,” *TIMES* (Erie, PA), July 20, 1959, Clippings Files, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Archives; Loren Craft, “John Brown’s Body...Centennial of a Saga,” July 12, 1959, Clippings Files, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Archives.

⁹⁷ Jean White, “John Brown’s Raiders to Ride Again in Harpers Ferry Centennial Pageant,” Clippings Files, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Archives; “Prelude to Emancipation,” *Washington Post*, October 16, 1959, Clippings Files, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Archives.

⁹⁸ Senator Jennings Randolph, “Address by Senator Jennings Randolph at the Harpers Ferry Centennial Observance,” 16 October 1959, file HPD101, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Archives. Hereafter cited as Randolph address.

⁹⁹ Randolph address.

¹⁰⁰ Randolph address.

¹⁰¹ John W. Stepp, “Harpers Ferry Sees Brown’s Raid Again,” *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), October 17, 1959, Clippings Files, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Archives.

¹⁰² “Attendance Reaches 50,000 For Harpers Ferry Events,” October 19, 1959, Clippings Files, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Archives.

¹⁰³ Stepp, “Harpers Ferry Sees Brown’s Raid Again,” *Evening Star*.

¹⁰⁴ Editorial, "John Brown Centennial Observance," *Martinsburg (WV) Journal*.

¹⁰⁵ Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials* (Tuscaloosa, The University of Alabama Press, 2010), 26-27.

¹⁰⁶ "Harpers Ferry Prepares For Four-Day Invasion," *Hagerstown (MD) Morning Herald*, October 15, 1959, Clippings Files, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Archives.

¹⁰⁷ Stepp, "Harpers Ferry Sees Brown's Raid Again," *Evening Star*.

¹⁰⁸ Barry Schwartz and Howard Schuman, "History, Commemoration, and Belief: Abraham Lincoln in American Memory, 1945-2001," *American Sociological Review* 70 (April 2005): 185.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: How Should We Remember John Brown?

You can weigh John Brown's body well enough,
But how and in what balance weigh John Brown?
Stephen Vincent Benét
*John Brown's Body*¹

As Stephen Vincent Benét suggests, it is difficult to weigh the enduring significance of John Brown. He is a divisive historical figure, whose violence, egalitarian racial views, and strong religious convictions continue to provoke polarized reactions, even to this day. Over time, Americans across the political spectrum have mobilized Brown's memory to advance various political and social causes, sometimes on opposing sides of the same issue. John Brown serves as an ideal vehicle for articulating public memories because he embodies such important moral quandaries: the morality of slavery, whether violence can ever be justified, and the "lessons" of the Civil War. Brown's life and legacy have strong symbolic resonance, which makes his public memory all the more malleable. In fact, "each generation has reinterpreted Brown according to the demands and politics of their time," notes historian Robert Blakeslee Gilpin.² This pliability of Brown's memory is evident in the three case studies examined in this project.

In Kansas, John Brown's identity became intertwined with that of the Kansan people. To John Steuart Curry, no greater compliment could be paid to Kansas than to highlight Brown's role in the state's history by making him the centerpiece of *The Tragic*

Prelude. In Brown, Curry saw the iron will, firm convictions, and pioneering spirit that he so admired in the people of Kansas. The idea that Brown helped to start the Civil War on Kansas soil was a source of pride for Curry, as it meant that Kansans were among the first to take a stand against slavery—something they knew was morally wrong. Yet many Kansans, including members of the state legislature, interpreted the abolitionist and his actions very differently. To them, Brown was an emblem of radicalism and insurrection. The last place that they wanted to have a reminder of these ideals was in their Statehouse—the very center of law and government. Thus, in Kansas, Brown’s memory functioned as the battleground on which a dispute over state identity was fought. *The Tragic Prelude*—and specifically, its controversial depiction of Brown on Kansas soil—acted as a site for Kansans to contest their state’s identity and place in the larger narrative of Civil War history.

Santa Fe Trail also mobilized John Brown’s memory for particular political ends—to shape U.S. public memory of the Civil War. *Santa Fe Trail* offered a coming-of-the-Civil War narrative that played directly into nostalgic Southern mythologies. Within this narrative, Brown assumed the key role of “villain.” The film rhetorically constructed Brown as a religious fanatic, obsessed with becoming the embodiment of Christ and with using his religious persona as a license for violent actions. According to *Santa Fe Trail*, the Civil War was not fought over the issue of slavery. Rather, the war was a product of fanaticism and, specifically, Brown’s radical desire to split the nation apart for his own delusional and misguided religious reasons. *Santa Fe Trail* thus constructed a memory of Brown that capitalized on and embellished his legendary acts of violence to portray him as a madman or villain motivated by religious delusions, instead

of as an abolitionist hero. Ultimately, then, the film mobilized Brown's public memory as a way of articulating a new narrative of how the Civil War began. Within this narrative, Brown becomes a scapegoat, freeing the South from the guilt of having started the Civil War.

John Brown's memory surfaced once again at Harpers Ferry, at what many considered to be a rather inopportune moment. In the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S. was struggling to maintain a strong national front while reckoning with the civil rights movement and the political tensions of the Cold War. Simultaneously, however, the centennial of the Civil War was quickly approaching. The federal government was keenly aware that a little rhetorical framing would be necessary to commemorate the divisive Civil War without highlighting the sectional strife that the conflict embodied. The national Civil War Centennial Commission (CWCC) thus framed the war as a manifestation of patriotism—on *both* sides. John Brown's Harpers Ferry raid did not fit well within this narrative framework. Commemorating the raid—commonly viewed as an abolitionist insurrection—could very well have fractured the CWCC's patriotic master narrative. So, instead of mobilizing Brown's public memory, the CWCC opted to strategically downplay it, encouraging the National Park Service to do the same.

Yet such an important moment in the nation's history could not simply be ignored. The local Harpers Ferry Area Foundation (HFAF) thus planned and organized four days of commemorative events that represented yet another way of remembering the abolitionist. The HFAF's commemoration abandoned the portrait of John Brown as a hero, instead framing the abolitionist as a madman with a drive for violence, yet no clear political or religious motivations. In the social and political context of the time, this

mobilization of a negative public memory of Brown functioned rhetorically as an expression of Cold War distaste for “radicals” and as a rejection of an important historical moment that helped to lay the foundation for the civil rights movement.

Each time that Brown’s memory is invoked, the resulting portrait of the abolitionist is always a rhetorical construction. As historian Merrill D. Peterson argues:

It is as if the historical John Brown has unfolded layer after layer as successive generations of inquiries, both proponents and opponents of his fame, have imagined him to have been. His biography is less an existential thing than a work of intelligence and imagination, ever changing in answer to new questions and purposes.³

In the Kansas struggle, Brown is the embodiment of the state’s identity, a representation that some Kansans welcomed and that others ardently opposed. In *Santa Fe Trail*, Brown is delusional, a perversion of Christ, and becomes a scapegoat for those who might blame the South for the Civil War. At Harpers Ferry, Brown is simply a madman emblematic of the dangers posed by radicalism, whatever its rationale or purpose. In each situation, Brown served as a political tool of the moment rather than a relic of the past.

John Brown and the Politics of Civil War Memory

Historically, John Brown is tied so closely to the Civil War that his memory has become intertwined with that of the war itself. When people clash over Brown’s memory, the debate often has more to do with how the Civil War should be remembered than with how we should recall the life of John Brown. Thus, this study of John Brown’s public memories—and the contestation of these memories—can also lend insights into how Americans tend to remember the Civil War as a part of their national history. In this

section, I will explore the competing public memories of the Civil War that have been illuminated through contests over Brown's public memory.

One approach to remembering the Civil War is by conceptualizing it as a necessary evil. Those who take this stance typically accept certain premises: that slavery was the cause of the war, that slavery is an ultimate evil, and that abolitionists such as Brown had legitimate reasons for refusing to compromise with evil. As historian David Reynolds writes in his biography of Brown:

John Brown's violence resulted from America's egregious failure to live up to one of its most cherished ideals—human equality. To expose this failure, Brown exercised the right of the individual to challenge the mass.⁴

Arguably, John Steuart Curry took this position in *The Tragic Prelude*. Through his mural, Curry depicted John Brown as a key figure in the coming of the Civil War, suggesting that he should be honored for helping to start the war on Kansas soil. Curry celebrated Brown's defense of Kansas territory against slavery, which he considered to be representative of the abolitionist's strong moral fiber. Also implicit in this tribute to Brown was the argument that his actions in Kansas—violent though they were—helped to bring about a war that was necessary to free the nation from the scourge of slavery. Thus, when Kansans clashed over Curry's *The Tragic Prelude*, they debated not only the public memory of Brown, but also the appropriateness of this Civil War memory. Those who embraced Curry's depiction of Brown likely agreed with the artist that the Civil War was a necessary evil. The vocal dissenters, however, snubbed this liberal narrative of the coming of the Civil War by opposing Curry's portrayal of Brown.

These objectors would likely have favored a second approach to remembering the Civil War—the notion that the war was a product of radicalism. This perspective is best

exemplified by *Santa Fe Trail*, which adopts the narrative that John Brown almost single-handedly triggered the war. In the film, Brown voices his belief that slavery is “a carnal sin against God that can only be wiped out in blood,” a notion that reflects the perspective that the war was a necessary evil. The film’s hero, James “Jeb” Stuart, however, argues that war was not necessary because the Southern states already sensed that slavery was “a moral wrong” and were moving toward abolishing it through more gradual and peaceful means. In the words of Stuart, “[t]he South can settle her problems alone, without loss of pride at being forced by a band of fanatics.” Brown was the villain in *Santa Fe Trail* precisely because he rejected this view. Thus, in terms of Civil War memory, this artifact holds fanaticism—and radical abolitionist personalities like Brown—responsible for a war that was otherwise unnecessary. This public memory of the Civil War is particularly useful for Southerners, whose actions are commonly blamed for inciting the war. Public memories that convey the Civil War as an unnecessary product of fanaticism redeem the Southern role, relieving their guilt for causing the devastating conflict. Ultimately, then, it is no wonder that Brown is a frequent scapegoat of the Civil War. Locating the conflict’s origins in Brown allows for a complete reconfiguration of how the Civil War began and who should be blamed for the death and destruction.

There is at least a third insight that John Brown provides regarding how Americans choose to remember the Civil War. As controversy over the Harpers Ferry raid centennial demonstrates, this public memory articulates the Civil War as a manifestation of heroism—on *both* sides. Like the public memory that frames fanaticism as the cause of war, this narrative also avoids blaming the South for the war. However,

this version is reconciliationist in nature, as it focuses on the reunion of the sections instead of on blaming one side or the other. Of America's perpetual need to remember the war in terms of reunion, historian David W. Blight has written:

For Americans broadly, the Civil War has been a defining event upon which we have often imposed unity and continuity; as a culture, we have often preferred its music and pathos to its enduring challenges, the theme of reconciled conflict to resurgent, unresolved legacies.⁵

Amid the political and social turmoil of the 1950s and 1960s, one can understand why many Americans might have preferred such a theme. This probably explains why the Civil War Centennial Commission and the National Park Service tried to downplay commemoration of Brown's Harpers Ferry raid—an event that would force remembrance of some of the “resurgent, unresolved legacies” of which Blight speaks. Even the Harpers Ferry Area Foundation's (HFAF) eventual commemoration event echoed the theme of reunion. Through their commemoration activities, the HFAF portrayed Brown as a madman whose violence was unjustified, lacking in motivation, and destructive to national unity. The real heroes of Harpers Ferry were those representatives of the federal government who captured Brown and squelched the raid. Thus, the champions of national unity were in the right, while Brown was relegated to the role of fanatic—all for the sake of articulating a public memory of the Civil War centered on patriotism and national unity.

As Blight argues, “Americans have had to work through the meaning of their Civil War in its rightful place—in the politics of memory.”⁶ The mobilization of John Brown's public memory provides one important space where this politics of memory has been contested. An understanding of how Brown's memory has been contested thus

offers a glimpse into how Americans choose to remember or forget the causes and key players in the greatest tragedy in their nation's history, the Civil War.

John Brown's Enduring Legacy

Today, as America approaches the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, that great contest will again rise to the surface of public consciousness—and so too will memories of John Brown. Old public memories will be picked up and dusted off. Some will endure, while others may be re-evaluated in the light of a different world. History is not static, as this project has demonstrated. It is more important now than ever to recognize that our changing public memories of the war—and of key players like Brown—continue to shape our politics, our education, and our society as a whole. There have always been multiple, competing public memories of the Civil War, and those divisions are still evident 150 years after the fighting ended.

For example, in 2010 a new history textbook for Virginia fourth-graders made national news for its claims that "[t]housands of Southern blacks fought in the Confederate ranks, including two black battalions under the command of Stonewall Jackson."⁷ This assertion is "rejected by most historians but often made by groups seeking to play down slavery's role as a cause of the conflict," stated an article in the *Washington Post*.⁸ These groups cling to a memory of the war in which Southerners fought not to defend slavery, but rather to protect their Southern identity and way of life. This Southern nostalgia surfaced again in 2011, when the governor of South Carolina refused a request by the NAACP to remove the Confederate Flag from a monument on Statehouse grounds. (The flags had only been moved there from their prominent positions

on the Statehouse dome and in the House and Senate chambers as recently as 2000.)⁹ This type of Southern pride is a remnant of Civil War-era politics and displays a total disregard for the issues of race and human bondage that are tied up in public memories of the war. However, Southerners are not the only ones with a selective memory of the Civil War. As Blight argues, Americans are constantly evading “the deeper meanings of the Civil War. It haunts us still; we feel it... but often do not face it.”¹⁰

Clearly, the wounds caused by the Civil War have not completely healed. John Brown’s identity is caught up in disagreements that began before the war and that continue to endure even today. Brown has been—and probably always will be—a rhetorical resource for advocates with larger purposes—advocates making claims about the legacies of the Civil War, about American national identity, or about the morality of violence. Understanding how Brown’s identity is mobilized can help rhetoricians interpret these claims and arguments and reveal their deeper meanings. In an article in *The American Prospect*, historian David W. Blight asks: “Can John Brown remain an authentic American hero in an age of Timothy McVeigh, Usama Bin Laden, and the bombers of abortion clinics?”¹¹ Perhaps not, but he has never been *just* a hero or *simply* a villain. What makes Brown’s legacy important is that he will always be linked to our country’s greatest conflict, the Civil War, and to enduring moral quandaries. What we should take away from the story of his life will forever be contested. And because of this, John Brown will continue to live on, ever evolving in public memory.

Notes

- ¹ Stephen Vincent Benét, *John Brown's Body* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1954).
- ² Robert Blakeslee Gilpin, "Monster and Martyr: America's Long Reckoning with Race, Violence, and John Brown" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2009), 306.
- ³ Merrill D. Peterson, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 171.
- ⁴ David Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2005), 505.
- ⁵ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 397.
- ⁶ Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, 4.
- ⁷ Kevin Sieff, "Virginia 4th-grade textbook criticized Confederate soldiers," *Washington Post*, October 20, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/19/AR2010101907974.html?hpid=topnews>.
- ⁸ Sieff, "Virginia 4th-grade textbook criticized Confederate soldiers," *Washington Post*.
- ⁹ "South Carolina: Confederate Flag Issue Rises Again," July 26, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/27/us/27brfs-CONFEDERATEF_BRF.html.
- ¹⁰ Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, 4.

¹¹ David W. Blight, “John Brown: Triumphant Failure,” *The American Prospect*,
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