

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPTS from *THE ABOLITIONISTS*, PBS AMERICAN EXPERIENCE HISTORY TELEVISION SERIES

Copyright 2013 https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/abolitionists/#film_description
Transcript: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/abolitionists/#transcript>

Part One

Narrator: For years, John Brown had been trying to divine God's purpose, to make sense of his afflictions. He had once been a successful merchant and tanner, a good provider to his family. But then, suddenly, his life collapsed: a series of business disasters plunged him deep into debt.

R. Blakeslee Gilpin, Historian: Brown is drifting just further and further into a very deep and dark relationship with God. He's always trying to discern what God wants for him. That's really what Calvinism is all about. You're eternally in sin. You're just constantly trying to get out of it like a drowning man.

Narrator: In November of 1837, news came that an anti-slavery printer had been murdered by a mob in Illinois. Elijah Lovejoy's death struck at something deep within John Brown, conjuring up a memory that had haunted him for years.

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith, audio): When I was a child, I stayed for a short time with a very gentlemanly landlord who held a slave boy near my own age. The master made a great pet of me, while the Negro boy was badly clothed, poorly fed, and beaten before my eyes with iron shovels or any other thing that came first to hand.

Narrator: For Brown, Lovejoy's death was a sign from God: He must never again stand helpless in the face of evil. As he dressed for a prayer meeting a few days after the killing, John Brown knew what God meant for him. He sat silently at the back of the room as one speaker after another fired up the congregation with accounts of Lovejoy's death. Finally, John Brown stood up and raised his right hand. "Here before God," he announced, "in the presence of these witnesses, from this time, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery."

Part Two

Narrator: In the fall of 1847 . . . Douglass moved to Rochester, New York. Just over the border from Canada, Rochester was the last stop on the Underground Railroad, the network of safe houses used by slaves fleeing north to safety. . . . [There.] he made the acquaintance of a man whose name he had heard in whispers, failed tanner and fervent abolitionist John Brown.

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): Your speeches have been an inspiration to us. I do wonder, though, whether speeches will ever be enough.

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): What do you mean, sir?

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): You've been at this for years.

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): Freedom is a long road, Mr. Brown. I don't know any shortcuts.

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): I do, Douglass. I do. Sir -- God has placed these mountains here for a reason.

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): You know God's thinking?

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): I know these mountains. From here, we can strike a blow against the slave masters. The mountains are full of natural fords. One good man could hold off a hundred soldiers. My plan is to take handpicked men and post them in squads of fives on a line here. They come down off the mountains, raid the plantations, bring off the slaves, offer them a chance to fight.

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): Sir, you have no idea -- the entire state of Virginia will rise up against you. They will fight you tooth and claw.

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): The colored people must fight back. They will never respect themselves otherwise, nor will they be respected. I read your book, sir. You said yourself, you became a man when you fought Mr. Covey.

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): I did. But I was young and this is very different. We must follow in our Savior's footsteps. We must convert the sinner.

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): This is the sin, right here! We sit here, all of us, debating this point of law, whether the Constitution says this or that, and in the meantime, day after day, year after year, the slaveholders are free to do their worst.

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): But if we stoop to bloodshed, we are no better than they are.

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): You can preach for all eternity and nothing will change. Mr. Douglass, how many slaveholders have you converted? How many slaves have you freed?

David W. Blight, Historian: John Brown had a very beguiling personality. He was a stunning man. His sense of moral commitment was vivid and overwhelming. He was the real thing, and to a Frederick Douglass, he was also the real thing in terms of actually believing, about as deeply as anybody Douglass had ever met, in racial equality.

Narrator: Soon after their meeting, Douglass described Brown in *The North Star* as someone who, "though a white gentleman, is as deeply interested in our cause as though his own soul had been pierced with the iron of slavery."

Part Three

Narrator: On the morning of March 7th, 1857, the papers brought stunning news. Out of the blue, the Supreme Court had radically altered not just the battle over slavery, but the status of every black person in America. The case had seemed inconsequential: a Missouri slave named Dred Scott wanted the court to set him free, because his master had taken him to live in Illinois and then Wisconsin Territory, where slavery was illegal. Chief Justice Roger Taney saw the case as an opportunity to settle the question of slavery once and for all. In a sweeping decision, Taney ruled that Congress had no authority to prevent the spread of slavery to the territories. Most ominously for free blacks like Frederick Douglass, Taney wrote that, "blacks were so far inferior they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect," and that, "any free black might lawfully be reduced to slavery, for his benefit." . . . It was with a sense of foreboding and hopelessness that Frederick Douglass responded to an urgent summons in August of 1859 from his old friend John Brown. Together with Shields Green, a fugitive he had befriended in Rochester, Douglass quietly made his way to a stone quarry at Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): Mr. Douglass!

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): Captain Brown -- I would never have known you, sir!

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): Our time has come...

Narrator: Brown was secretly encamped at a nearby farmhouse with 22 recruits.

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): I had hoped for more men, of course. But I believe we have enough to achieve our ends -- with your help.

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): What end is that?

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): Well, sir: In one stroke we shall rouse this nation. We will deal the Slave Power such a blow, it shall never recover.

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): All with 22 men?

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): It takes one spark to light a fire. We are the spark that will set this country ablaze.

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): But how?

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): The armory at Harpers Ferry.

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): Good Lord, man. You can't be serious.

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): A hundred thousand rifles.

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): What will 22 men do with 100,000 rifles?

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): As I said, the spark -- we are but the spark. There are four million men in bondage who will fly to our banner. Not immediately, of course, but even a few thousand slaves in this vicinity will fly to our aid.

Tony Horwitz, Author: Douglass expected Brown to unveil a mission to free slaves and funnel them north along the mountains to freedom. But when he gets to the stone quarry, Brown presents a very different plan.

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): I know. My friend, I have been over this a thousand times. I can assure you ...

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): And I can assure you that you'll be walking into a perfect steel trap ...

R. Blakeslee Gilpin, Historian: He's talking about invading the South and occupying the South and taking over the South, sort of building this republic out, one mile at a time, and that republic is going to be a new country.

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): It will kill you. And it will serve no purpose. There will be a bloodbath ...

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): Without the shedding of blood, there's no remission of sin, Douglass.

John Stauffer, Historian: Douglass spends two days trying to convince John Brown not to raid Harpers Ferry. Brown spends the same amount of time trying to convince Douglass to go to Harpers Ferry with him to be his right-hand man.

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): My friend, the world will remember what we do here. How do you want the world to remember you? How do you want your children to remember you?

Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks): I don't want them to remember me as throwing my life away for nothing. Captain, it pains me more than you will know, to leave you. Mr. Green, you've heard Mr. Brown. What will you do?

Shields Green (Thomas Coleman): I believe I'll go with the old man.

John Brown (T. Ryder Smith): Come with me Douglass. I will defend you with my life. I want you for a special purpose. When I strike, the bees will begin to swarm, and I shall want you to help hive them.

Narrator: Frederick Douglass returned home alone. The decision to leave Brown would haunt him for the rest of his life.