An illustration of John Brown before growing his trademark beard, based on an 1856 photograph.
© 1899, Small, Maynard and Company. All Courtesy Library of Congress.
In October 1859, abolitionist John Brown led a failed attempt to capture the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. His admitted goal was to use the captured weapons to arm slaves and bring about the end of Southern slavery.¹

A recent study notes that in northern newspapers in the initial weeks after the raid, “the common theme was that Harper’s Ferry was the work of a solitary madman.” That opinion changed as Brown went to trial, and his words and writings circulated. By the time of his hanging a wide range of views were expressed in the north about the wisdom, folly, and/or impact of the Harpers Ferry episode and Brown himself. To cite the same study, what began as an act of violence became “a cultural event. It became so because of the way Brown behaved and expressed himself [while in prison] and because of how his behavior and words were interpreted—in many cases misinterpreted—by leading figures in both the North and South.”²

The newspapers of Western Pennsylvania’s Cambria County offer a case study in how some segments of Northern opinion divided over the mission and the implications of Brown and his raid on Harpers Ferry. To some, what was initially viewed as madness turned into martyrdom. To others, he became (or remained) a symbol of fanaticism.
Such content reveals a wide range of political views over not just the raid, but over slavery and abolition, which of course were the fundamental issues involved. Some of these editorial patterns would remain in place for coverage of the election of 1860, the firing on Fort Sumter, and its aftermath.

The Partisan Press

At the time of the Harpers Ferry episode, Cambria County was home to four partisan weekly newspapers, three of them in the county seat, Ebensburg. Two served the Democratic Party, which had split into two camps. One of these newspapers, the Democrat & Sentinel, came into being in 1853 upon the merger of two other papers. It supported President (and Pennsylvanian) James Buchanan’s conservative-on-slavery administration and policies.7 The other, the Mountaineer, which began operating in February 1858, shortly after the Democrats split over the Lecompton Constitution for Kansas, backed Buchanan’s intra-party rival, future 1860 presidential candidate Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas.9 Historians have evidence of the latter’s pro-slavery position, although it has been subject to debate.7 But Douglas certainly clashed with Buchanan over the latter’s backing of the Lecompton Constitution—Douglas felt Buchanan capitulated to the slaveholding Southerners of the Democratic Party—which further fueled the national crisis over slavery.9

Ebensburg’s third newspaper was the Alleghanian. A newspaper by that name had been started in August 1853 as a Whig Party organ. In 1855, the press equipment was sold off, but in August 1859 the Alleghanian name was resurrected locally as a Republican, anti-slavery newspaper.7 This new Alleghanian was aligned with the county’s fourth newspaper:

John Brown’s polarizing actions were widely covered in daily newspapers. This November 19, 1859, article “The Harper’s Ferry Insurrection” begins: “We give in our present number a likeness of the arch-conspirator, which admirably portrays that stern and deluded man.” The image is based on an 1858 photograph.
the Cambria Tribune, based in Johnstown, a hotbed of anti-slavery sentiment and a stop on the “Underground Railroad” from at least 1837. The Cambria Tribune also dated to 1853, and was the successor to another Whig-aligned newspaper, the Cambrian. The two Republican papers seemed to remain in political sync during the period under study, but the Mountaineer and Democrat & Sentinel occasionally sparred, the former once referring to “the muddy brain of the Dem. & Sent.” The Mountaineer’s editorial slant kept Buchanan-aligned Democrats away when it came to advertising and printing work. In its early days, its printer, Robert Litzinger—whose interesting career and political evolution toward abolitionism put him in the employment of all three Ebensburg newspapers at one time or another—put out the Mountaineer without salary. In early 1860, the Mountaineer highlighted its independence from the mainstream Democratic Party, asserting that “on the people, and the people alone, we rely for our success in the future.”

The Democrat-Republican rivalry was locally embodied in sniping between the Alleghanian and the Democrat & Sentinel. Besides politics, issues of journalistic quality sometimes arose. At one point, after the Alleghanian criticized the Democrat & Sentinel over copy editing issues, the Democrat & Sentinel responded:

A Jack-ass, if we may credit the story, once undertook to criticize and find fault with the song of a Nightingale. Why then should we feel offended at the editor of the Alleghanian for pointing out the typographical errors he happens to discover in the columns of the Democrat & Sentinel? We are old enough to know the difference between the braying of an Ass, and the roaring of a Lion.

Reactions to Brown’s Raid
John Brown himself had several links to Western Pennsylvania. He lived in New Richmond, Crawford County, far to the north of Cambria County from 1825–1836. A geographically closer link to Cambria County came from the fact that Brown’s raiding party included Albert Hazlett, of neighboring Indiana County.

Editorial positions on Brown’s hanging in late 1859 reveal how wide the partisan gulf was between Cambria County’s Democratic and Republican newspapers. The Democrat & Sentinel praised the “even handed justice human malignity follow him [Brown] beyond the grave.” Nor, it added, should Southerners, while understandably concerned over the raid and its implications, underestimate northern Democrats’ loyalty to the union. “Let them ... be just to the conservative men of the North, who have so earnestly sustained them of late, by being true to the constitution....” The Mountaineer observed. “Let them be just; then can they with confidence look forward to the earnest assistance of the North in their tribulation, should it come.”

In keeping with many northern papers, made into a martyr even as he awaited execution, many artists dramatized John Brown’s fate.
would be allowed in their territory. This policy had, the Alleghanian observed, opened up a "Pandora's box of evils," as swarms of zealots, both pro- and anti-slavery, flocked to the disputed territories, which erupted in violence. Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry was an offshoot of that violence, said the Alleghanian. It added: "Those who suffered in person, in the sanctity of their houses, became, like Brown of Osawatomie, frenzied with the scenes of diabolical horror thro' which they had passed. Reason fled her throne, and the idea of resistance to the supposed cause of all the tumult and outrage became a religious fanaticism." Similar sentiments came from the Cambria Tribune.

But within a few weeks, both Republican papers saw the raid and the hangings of Brown and his followers differently, largely due to the way Brown comported himself in prison. He had, as one scholar has noted, "lived to talk, to write, and to be hanged. It was for this reason more than any other that he influenced American history." Some voices likened him to Christian martyrs, while northern abolitionists and New England transcendentalists took part in what another author referred to as "the propaganda effort that turned 'madness' to martyrdom." In Johnstown, the Tribune reprinted a piece which painted the hanging—which had taken place two weeks earlier—as meant to send a larger message. "[A]ttempt to disguise it as you may," it read in part, "John Brown was executed not as a traitor, not as a murderer, but that his death might be a terror to the Abolitionists of the North." In Ebensburg, just a week after Brown's execution, the Alleghanian reprinted an article that prophetically foresaw Brown's hanging as the catalyst for a deeper convolution: one which would bring about the end of "the bold hypocrisy of our boast of being the freest government on earth, whilst the notorious denier of fundamental rights to millions on our own soil."

Will any one ... be found in the North ready to exult in the final doom of a man whose only crime was the desire of realizing to the oppressed the initial truths of the immortal Declaration? We believe, sincerely, that the death of Brown will do more for the final overthrow of the system of Southern slavery than any single fact of the century. It has already done far more than even Brown and his followers ever dared to hope.

The Alleghanian continued to attack slavery, sometimes working religion into its editorial positions. A month before Brown's raid, for example, the Alleghanian had condemned Buchanan for allowing more slaves to be brought into the U.S. despite federal prohibitions on "a traffic condemned alike by the laws of God and man." Some similar observations in early 1860 prompted a long response from the Democrat & Sentinel. "We do not object to his [i.e., the Alleghanian editor] furnishing the Brown[-]worshiping, Virginia[-]hating portion of his readers with a schedule of the price of [slaves]," the column read at one point, "nor do we object to his very chaste essay on the subject of slave
breeding…." But after a long refutation of the Alleghanian’s points, it observed that “The Black Republican party ought to try and get along without dragging religion into the political arena. Religion has holier work to perform than that of promoting the success of any political organization.” Shortly afterward, it set forth its views on slavery in unequivocal terms:

As we hinted at the commencement of this article, the [D]emocratic party neither defends nor condemns slavery in the abstract. It contends that if slavery is a moral, social and political evil, the inhabitants of the Southern States, the slave owners[,] are the only sufferers. It is one of their domestic institutions, and they have the right to regulate and control it. It is a matter with which we of the North have nothing to do. And even if the assertion of the Abolitionists be true, that it is a crime, it is one which will not “be laid to our charge either here or hereafter.”

The Role of Slavery

Just before the 1860 election, the Democrat & Sentinel charged Republican Presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln with promoting racial equality. This was a provocative concept for the era, and the Alleghanian responded editorially. Its rebuttal included a quote from a Lincoln speech, followed by a passage in which the Alleghanian castigated the Democrat & Sentinel for “going about with such a brazen-faced and cast-iron-countenanced falsehood on your unprepossessing exterior, endeavoring to diddle voters in the support of your candidates….”

A modern scholar notes, “the surprising fact that even many people who detested slavery nonetheless accepted the prevalent racial views of the day.” He could have been writing about the Alleghanian’s editors and

To some, what was initially viewed as madness turned into martyrdom. To others, he became (or remained) a symbol of fanaticism.
When Lincoln won the presidential election of 1860, carrying Cambria County along the way, the Alleghanian had no doubt that an appropriate message had been sent: Republicans of Pennsylvania! There is a good time coming. The Augean stables are to be cleansed all over the country. Peace and prosperity are again to shine upon our nation, and the people will again enjoy a season of repose from the storms of slavery agitation which have been thrust upon us by the Slave Oligarchy.

Famously, John Brown, in the note he handed to a guard on the day he was hanged, expressed it more presciently, observing that “the crimes of this guilty, land: will never be purged away; but with Blood.”

Yet the Democrat & Sentinel resisted the idea that Southern slave power, and slavery itself, were to blame for the sectional crisis. The Democratic paper responded to the fall of Fort Sumter with a new logo—an American flag inscribed “The Union forever”—on its second editorial page, while at the same time editorializing that it was supporting the war on the basis of preserving the union, not to free the slaves. “Slavery,” it would observe late in April 1861, “has really nothing to do with this contest.”

The Democrat & Sentinel did not long outlive the Confederacy. It closed its doors late in 1866, and in January 1867 Robert L. Johnston and Philip Collins bought its press equipment at a sheriff’s sale. On the 31st of that month they used the machinery to produce the first issue of the new Cambria Freeman.

Joseph Gibbs is an associate professor of mass communication at the American University of Sharjah. This article is based on a paper originally presented at the February 6, 2009, Black History & Underground Railroad Conference held at Temple University. His books include Three Years in the Bloody Eleventh: The Campaigns of a Pennsylvania Reserves Regiment (University City, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002).

1 A recent study of this episode is contained in Elizabeth Varon, Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008), 325-335. The author wishes to thank Dr. Varon, a professor of history at Temple University, for feedback incorporated into this article.


6 Storey, History of Cambria County, I:388.


8 Donald, Lincoln, 203-205.

9 Storey, History of Cambria County, I:386, citing an undated 1866 Alleghanian article called “The Press in Ebensburg.”


11 Untitled article, Mountaineer, 18 May, 1859, 2.

12 “New Arrangement,” Mountaineer, 8 June, 1859, 2. For Litzinger, see Gibbs, Three Years in the Bloody Eleventh, 6-7.


14 Untitled article, Democrat & Sentinel, 18 Jan., 1860, 2.

15 Reynolds, John Brown Abolitionist, 44-46, 57.


17 Untitled article, Democrat & Sentinel, 7 Dec., 1859, 2.


28 Reynolds, John Brown Abolitionist, 117.


32 As quoted in Reynolds, John Brown Abolitionist, p. 395.

33 “The Meeting,” Democrat & Sentinel, 24 April, 1861, 2.

34 Storey, History of Cambria County, I:377-381.
John Brown in Western Pennsylvania
Tannery and Museum

By Terri Blanchette

John Brown lived in Western Pennsylvania longer than any other place.

Tucked away in a scenic area of New Richmond, Pennsylvania, 13 miles northeast of Meadville, are the John Brown Tannery and the John Brown Museum. These two historic spots, directly across a gravel road from one another, are little known to the public but have already been discovered by avid researchers, historians, and Civil War enthusiasts from around the United States. Brown worked at the tannery from 1825–1835. The site features remnants of the tannery walls and outdoor interpretive panels. Across the road is the museum, a small white building on the land where Brown had a home with his first wife Dianthe Lusk. Dianthe, who died in 1832, was buried beside their 4-year-old son Frederick who died the year before; the headstones are a short, picturesque walk from the museum. The museum building features displays and books on John Brown’s life, along with artifacts from that era, and is open to the public by appointment.

In 1825, abolitionist and tanner John Brown, along with Dianthe, settled in the area just outside of New Richmond. The infamous incidents in Kansas—where in 1856 John Brown and a group of men that included two of his sons, took part in the execution of five pro-slavery men at Pottawatomie Creek in Kansas and three years later in Harpers Ferry when Brown and his sons led a raid on the U.S. Armory and Arsenal at Harpers Ferry believing that confiscation of the weapons stockpiled there would foment a revolt against slavery by uniting, and arming, those who were enslaved—were still 30 years away. Settling in the area as a tanner, postmaster, and leading citizen, Brown stayed for 10 years in the home directly across the road from the shop.

Terri Blanchette is Community Programs Director for the Heinz History Center.