

LESSON TITLE:

“Romance, Raid, and Reaction: Dangerfield Newby and Harpers Ferry, 1859”

VIRGINIA SOL CORRELATIONS:

VUS.6(c), USI.8(d), USI.9(a, b, d)

INTRODUCTION:

Dangerfield Newby, one of twenty-two participants in John Brown’s Raid, had a particular source of motivation for seeking an end to slavery—his wife and children were enslaved in Prince William County. Use Newby’s biography and the sources included in this lesson to explore the challenges facing the Newby family in 1859. Your students can also debate the legacy of John Brown by using contemporary sources. Was he a patriot in the tradition of George Washington and Patrick Henry? What impact did Newby’s and Brown’s activities at Harpers Ferry have on relations between the North and South?

Primary sources available from the 2009 African American Trailblazers in Virginia History Web site:

- Letters from Harriet Newby to Dangerfield Newby, April–August 1859.
- Letters to Governor Henry A. Wise in defense of John Brown and his raid
 - "Brutus" to Governor Henry A. Wise, n.d. [ca. November 1859], Governor's Office, Letters Received, Henry A. Wise, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia.
 - Anonymous to Governor Henry A. Wise, n.d. [ca. November 1859], Governor's Office, Letters Received, Henry A. Wise, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia.

Additional Resources:

- A letter advocating the execution of John Brown
 - Mahala Doyle to John Brown, 20 Nov 1859, http://65.254.39.125/~gilderle/collection/docs_pdfs/T-7590.pdf

HISTORY:

Dangerfield Newby (ca. 1820–1859) was born in Culpeper County, the oldest child of Henry Newby, a white man, and Elsey Newby, an enslaved black woman. In 1858, Henry Newby sold his land in Culpeper and moved with his family to Bridgeport, Ohio, thereby freeing his wife and their children. Shortly after moving to Bridgeport, Dangerfield Newby began raising money to buy his own wife and children, who were enslaved in Prince William County, Virginia. In the spring and summer of 1859 his wife wrote to him three times expressing concern that her owner would sell her before Newby was able to raise the money to free her. "Come this fall with out fail monny or no monny I want to see you so much," Harriet Newby wrote. "[I]t is said

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Lesson Suggestions—Dangerfield Newby

Master is in want of money[:] if so I know not what time he may sell me an[d] then all my bright hops of the futer are blasted."

Newby raised nearly \$742 toward the \$1,000 price that Harriet Newby's owner had set for her and one child, but he was unable to free his family. Shortly after learning of this disappointment, he joined John Brown in the planning for the raid on Harpers Ferry. During the raid, Newby shot and killed a grocer before he himself was shot and killed. His wife's letters were found on his body. In the 1890s his remains were moved from an unknown location to John Brown's Farm in North Elba, New York.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

Romance: The surviving letters from Harriet Newby to Dangerfield Newby, the father of her children and the man she considered her husband despite laws prohibiting such unions, offer a rare personal articulation of the challenges that slavery presented to African American men, women, and children. Her descriptions are desperate and heart-wrenching, but Harriet Newby's words address the real-life choices that African Americans, whether enslaved or free, faced in the antebellum South. Have students read Harriet Newby's letters and answer and discuss the following questions: What do her letters reveal about her relationship with Dangerfield Newby? What was Harriet Newby's expectation of him? Why does her situation become even more drastic or dire? What was at risk for the Newby family if they were to be put up for sale?

Raid: After it became apparent that Dangerfield Newby would not be able to purchase his wife and children, he joined John Brown and his men in what would be a failed raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, one of the most significant events in antebellum history. The Trailblazers Web site features an image timeline of John Brown's Raid comprised of etchings from *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Weekly*. Have students use the images in this slideshow to develop a timeline of events leading up to and following John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry. Consider the pivotal role of Brown, Newby, and the others in this important episode in American history. Why was it so significant? How did relations between the North and South change after this event?

Reaction: John Brown's Raid helped to drive a deep wedge between Northerners and Southerners over the issue of slavery. Public opinion was understandably heated. Radical abolitionists championed men like Brown and Newby as patriots in the tradition of George Washington and Patrick Henry. Others saw the men, their actions, and the tacit support of abolitionists as a threat to the Southern way of life. Documents included here reflect the varied reactions of Americans to the raid and to the trial and execution of John Brown. Have students read these letters and analyze them. What's significant about the letters from Anonymous and "Brutus"? What rhetoric did these writers use in their letters? Do you agree or disagree with their characterization of Brown's role in history? For a contrasting view, have students examine the letter from Mahala Doyle of Chattanooga, Tennessee. What is her opinion of John Brown?

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Lesson Suggestions—Dangerfield Newby

SUGGESTED READING AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Books

Schwarz, Philip. *Migrants Against Slavery: Virginia and the Nation*. Charlottesville : University Press of Virginia, 2001.

West, Emily. *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004.

Online Resources and Films

“Death or Liberty: Gabriel, Nat Turner, and John Brown.” Online exhibition, Library of Virginia. <http://www.lva.virginia.gov/whoweare/exhibits/DeathLiberty/index.htm>.

“John Brown.” Harpers Ferry National Historic Park Web site: <http://www.nps.gov/hafe/historyculture/john-brown.htm>. Provides an overview of John Brown’s Raid along with profiles of Brown and his raiders.

“John Brown’s Holy War.” Film. Public Broadcasting Service, 1999. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/filmmore/index.html>.

“John Brown’s Raid: Records and Resources at the Library of Virginia.” Bibliography (PDF format), Library of Virginia. <http://www.lva.lib.va.us/WHATWEHAVE/notes/JohnBrownBib.pdf>.