

By the Kansas Historical Society

Who is John Brown?

Tragic Prelude is a mural of the abolitionist John Brown. Born in Torrington, Connecticut, on May 9, 1800, Brown's Quaker upbringing instilled in him a lifelong hatred of slavery. As an adult he openly called for the abolishment of slavery and used his house to hide runaway slaves.

At age 55 Brown moved to Kansas and played a prominent role during the "Bleeding Kansas" period. While in Kansas he voiced his strong opposition to slavery through speeches and violence. Following the sacking of Lawrence in April 1856 by proslavery forces, Brown and seven of his followers sought revenge. They murdered and mutilated five proslavery men in Franklin County. This event became known as the Pottawatomie Massacre. This action was denounced in both the North and the South.

In 1859 Brown left Kansas Territory in hopes of sparking a slave uprising in the South. He was captured while trying to take the armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Tried for treason and found guilty, he was executed by hanging on December 2, 1859.

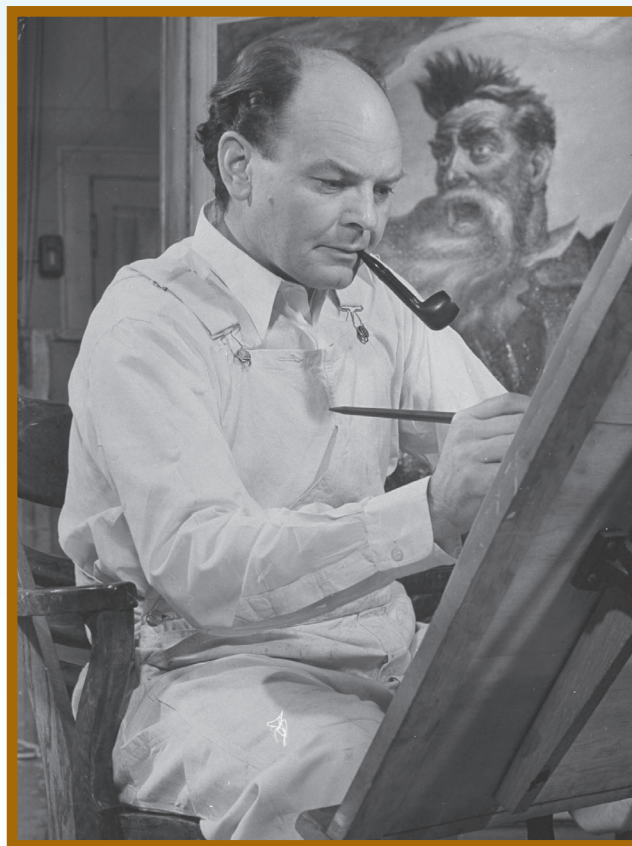
History has not always been kind to John Brown's complex personality. Abraham Lincoln called him a "misguided fanatic." His stirring speeches and brave composure while being executed made Brown a martyr for the abolitionists. Poems, ballads, and songs were written in his honor and his legend grew in popularity through the Civil War. Brown's actions remain controversial to this day. Some condemn his brutal methods while others see his use of violence as a necessity in the fight against slavery.



John Stuart Curry painted *Tragic Prelude* as part of a series of murals he began in 1937 at the Kansas State Capitol. Controversy arose over Curry's choice of subject matter and the way it was portrayed. Critics particularly objected to Curry's depiction of John Brown. In defense of his choice of Brown for the mural, Curry stated,

"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 which brought about the onslaught against the greatest curse which this nation has ever known, and its final eradication – human bondage."

Amidst the conflicts and criticism, Curry quit the project midway and never signed his murals. Despite the controversy Curry remained proud of his work. In an interview with the *Topeka Daily Capital* Curry said, "I sincerely believe that in the fragments, particularly the panel of John Brown, I have accomplished the greatest paintings I have yet done, and that they will stand as historical monuments."



John Stuart Curry