

Sons of Providence

The Brown Brothers,

the Slave Trade,

and the American Revolution

By: Charles Rappleye

Literature review and pedagogical uses

Kristen Finn

TAH Grant

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The state of Rhode Island was among the first to declare independence from its mother country, Great Britain. Similar to the shock one receives after discovering that 12 of America's presidents were slave owners, Sons of Providence captures the dilemma between the American ideal of liberty and the reality of the slave trade.

Rappleye explores the family dynamic of the notable Brown family of Providence to emphasize the minute details regarding loyalty to family, country, and oneself. The book focuses on John and Moses Brown; brothers, and successful business partners in the maritime trade. As a result they were authorities and leaders in their community, laying their names down in posterity through educational institutions. John's personality, as described in the book, is aggressive and passionate, in contrast to his brother Moses whose character is more restrained and contemplative. Despite the differences the two brothers worked together with other members of the family in various lucrative ventures such as the slave trade and the Hope Furnace, which produced iron. They both were also called upon at various times to lead and guide construction projects around the Providence area.

John Brown was born in 1736 and is most known for his contribution in the destruction of the Gaspee, a British ship anchored in Providence Harbor. There were events that contributed to John's motivation to burn the Gaspee and Rappleye captures them succinctly. By 1770 new tensions between the American

colonies and Britain had arisen. The townsend duties, the navigation acts, and the Boston Massacre all contributed to those tensions. Saltwater captains had become aggravated by British Captain Dudingston's increased regulations in customs activities. John decided to act on this aggravation and was the ringleader in a night "pirate raid" upon the ship which resulted in British sailors being constrained and the boat set afire. Rappleye exposes the community allegiance of the citizens of Providence by revealing how many people were aware of John Brown's involvement in the affair yet refrained from speaking out. The culture and ideas of the people living in Providence at this time is constantly emphasized, giving the reader a fine insight to their perspectives. In addition Rappleye summarizes the colonial web of bureaucracy that took place to save John Brown from being taken back to England for trial depicting the significant role that illegal trade and geography played for the state of Rhode Island. Rappleye also discusses John's capture and release after using two small freighters, the Diana and the Abigail, to provide provisions to the colonial force now engaged with the British. The book continues with other examples to show how the personal decisions of John Brown contributed to the tension between himself and British forces. He was not a captive of the events of his time but made decisions that had a profound effect on the lives of his family, himself, and American history.

Moses Brown was born in 1738 and had a personality quite opposite of John. Rappleye provides insight as to how Moses's personality

develops and spends a chapter discussing the death of Moses's wife Anna and the momentous effect it had on his life. Before her passing Anna had begun attending Quaker meetings and Moses immediate family left their church to join the society of friends. Moses blamed himself to a point for her death and was firmly of the conviction that gods providence was all knowing and with reason. His spirituality increased tremendously as did his perspective on important issues. Moses was quoted, " I saw my slaves with my spiritual eyes plainly as I see you now, and it was given to me as clearly to understand that the sacrifice that was called for of my hand was to give them their liberty." Moses makes it his life's mission to eradicate and assist in the ending of the institution of slavery.

This book could serve high school teachers of social studies well particularly on the topics of the transatlantic slave trade and the conflicting ideals of liberty and slavery. In addition excerpts could be used in a unit involving the Great Awakening or a study on conflicting religious and political ideas.

There is a chapter called "Sally" after one of the Brown's ships that made the transatlantic voyage to capture slaves on the African coast. In general the vocabulary is at an honors level however vocabulary lists handed out to students before the reading would suffice in order for them to comprehend the reading selection. The chapter includes a map and vividly describes the conditions that Africans were exposed to on the voyage. The primary excerpts from this chapter illicit empathy for those involved in the slave trade.

Quite a few chapters could be used to examine the issues or lead a discussion on religious and political views of early colonists. Moses Brown, a conscientious objector to the Revolution, was profoundly influenced by the society of friends and he used his political skill and moral foundation to attempt to get legislation passed to eradicate slavery. Carefully crafted questions could lead to a good classroom discussion on the motives and reasons for the slave trade in colonial America. John became the first object in Moses's mission to diminish slavery, after all if he could not get his brother to agree with him on the issue how was he going to reform an entire nation? (Rappleye, p 271) The students could be hooked into this discussion by being asked about their family dynamic and whether everyone in their household agree's on the same things. John thought that abolition was "wicked and abominable." "Many bloody wars," he wrote, "have ensued from less beginnings. A little fuel has sometimes kindled a great fire." Little did he know that America would erupt in great fire during the civil war.

Sons of Providence serves as an intial look at the problems caused by the slave trade and lends itself to a discussion on whether there were any solutions that could have avoided future conflict.

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