Eve Eiler

Title: “John Brown: Idealist, Demented, or Fanatic?”
Faculty Advisor: Dr. James Haw
Paper written for: Hist A304: The United States from 1840 to 1865 (Spring 2010)

Eve Eiler is a returning presenter at the IPFW Annual History Conference. Her previous papers were “Cortez and Pizarro: The Engineering of Fame” in 2009 and “The Role of U.S. Eugenics in the Holocaust” in 2010. During her time at IPFW, Eve has been the recipient of numerous awards and honors: Outstanding History Senior Award 2011, the Philip A. Kennel Memorial Scholarship in 2010, and a summer research grant from the IPFW Office of Research and External Support for the project “Perceived Threats: Concentration and Internment Camps: 1933-1945.” Eve has published a book review in the Journal of Latin American Urban Studies vol. 9 (Fall 2010). Additionally Eve has served on the College of Arts and Sciences Dean’s Student Cabinet, is a member of Omicron Psi Honor Society, has worked as a teaching assistant since 2009, and has interned with the Lincoln Collection at the Allen County Public Library. She is a senior who will be graduating in May. Eve will be starting an MA program at Ball State University this fall.

Abstract

Ever since John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry in 1859 people have both vilified and deified him. Southerners immediately after Harper’s Ferry were the first to vilify him and northern Abolitionists came to his defense, noting the higher cause of freedom for which he was committing acts of violence. Historians have not been exempt from this. Since then they have continued the debate. Was he an evil character as depicted by Southerners who hated his cause? Was he insane or simply an idealist? Was he a religious fanatic? Was he a terrorist? To this day, none can agree. Yet evidence exists that Brown was indeed an idealist, a fanatic and may have been delusional as well, but it was a combination of all of these traits and the politically charged society of antebellum America which provided the perfect situation for Brown to become a terrorist for the cause of abolition.

Determining the root causes for John Brown’s actions is difficult not only because he was put to death after his trial in 1859, but also because contemporaries made a concerted effort to paint him in such a light that he could be used as a symbol either for or against their own causes. He was initially called courageous by the South, but then demonized as a representative of the actions which the North wished to carry out against the South. Even though, in reality, the majority, including leaders in the North, were perfectly willing to allow slavery to continue in order to preserve the union. Abraham Lincoln made this point very clear many times in his public addresses. The Abolitionists, on the other hand, tended to worship Brown for the attention which he brought to their cause, ignoring or excusing his use of violence as necessary in a fight against the perceived evil of slavery. One of the points which the Transcendentalists, most of whom were Abolitionists, made was that Brown “never lived until he died.” This shows that Brown became more than a person who chose violence as a means to an end. It was in their interest to make him into something he was not, namely a symbol for the cause of abolition.