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## Creating a National Readership for *Harper's Weekly* in a Time of Sectional Crisis

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# Journal

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OF THE National Collegiate Honors Council

## PORTZ-PRIZE-WINNING ESSAY, 2017

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# Creating a National Readership for *Harper's Weekly* in a Time of Sectional Crisis

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 1840s and '50s, localized and specialized periodicals serving specific regions, religions, pastimes, and vocations inundated the American magazine market (Lupfer 249). The vast majority of these publications were short-lived; Heather A. Haveman, a sociologist who in 2015 conducted a quantitative analysis of historical American magazines, estimates that the average lifespan of a magazine between 1840 and 1860 was a mere 1.9 years (29). As book historian Eric Lupfer says, “most were risky ventures—undercapitalized, poorly advertised, haphazardly managed, and with limited circulation” (249).

However, magazines with the stability and capital of a sponsoring publishing house, as opposed to independent upstarts, could withstand the challenges to the fragile and rapidly changing publishing industry:

After 1840 the production of magazines became ever more bound up with the production and promotion of books, newspapers, and other printed materials. Book publishers began issuing their own house magazines, magazines printed advertisements for newspapers and books, and the text generated by editors and contributors flowed freely between them all. (Lupfer 250)

One publishing house thrived by implementing this business model: Harper & Brothers. The New York City-based giant grew to be the largest publishing house in the world by 1853. It spent the 1850s producing books written by English authors and then serializing these same stories in their periodical *Harper's Monthly* (Harper 91). The magazine was successful not only because of the desirable content that circulated through the Harper & Brothers publishing house but also because of the way the content was curated and marketed; unlike most of its localized competitors, *Harper's Monthly* aimed to have something for every reader across the country ("A Word"). The publishing house had the capital to push the periodical nationwide through newly established transportation and distribution networks, and it had the content to intrigue subscribers.

By 1857, the Harper & Brothers books and magazine were doing so well that the Harpers launched an additional periodical entitled "Harper's Weekly: A Journal of Civilization." The Harper brothers strove for *Harper's Weekly* to be a general-interest, news-driven periodical for the entire nation. Unlike previous special-interest periodicals that relied on small but loyal pockets of homogenous readers, *Harper's Weekly* was designed to attract the widest swath of readers possible by presenting content for the center of the partisan spectrum instead of one extreme end. Consequently, the \$3/year subscription fee from a pro-slavery housewife in Savannah was worth the same as \$3 from a well-to-do, anti-slavery mother in Amherst, and the publication had to find a way to attract both.

When they launched the periodical on January 3, 1857, the Harper Brothers did not know that their aim of being "national" was about to become even more difficult as the United States faced first the sectional crisis and then a Civil War. Four occasions from this trying period demonstrate how *Harper's Weekly* covered contentious political events for readers across the country: the Dred Scott trial of 1857, John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859, the fallout of the 1860 election, and the buildup to the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861. The editors of *Harper's Weekly* chose to build a national readership in the face of this ongoing controversy by alienating as few readers as possible,

continually crafting only the necessary news content and sidestepping points of contention in their articles and images as often as possible. Usually, the magazine only engaged in the debate surrounding a controversial event when readers agreed on how it should be interpreted. Such tepid content did not capture how the majority of the nation felt, but readers did not need to see their own opinion reflected in *Harper's Weekly* so long as they were not angered or repelled by the content.

The policy of *Harper's Weekly* just prior to the Civil War, then, was more to identify and advance the fleeting middle ground than to represent differing opinions on issues that split its readership. As an advertisement for Harper publications stated in April 1858, “[t]he object of the magazine will be to unite rather than to separate the views and feelings of the different sections of our common country” (“Harper’s Monthly” 271). Even when the catastrophe of secession struck in 1860, the editors continued to publish content that attracted the broadest swath of readers although these readers were now living in a fractured nation that was nearing war. The goal of reaching as many readers as possible—and thus collecting their subscription fees—continued to guide the periodical through the upheaval of the late 1850s and chaos of the early 1860s.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars from history and literature frequently draw on *Harper's Weekly* for rich primary source material. The publication’s fifty-nine-year run provides consistent, high-quality examples of every genre from serial fiction by Charles Dickens to political cartoons by Thomas Nast—excellent material for scholars across the humanities. Several literary scholars rely on *Harper's Weekly* for its serialized literature, a medium that flourished in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century before monographs became affordable and widely available. Other scholars grapple with the fiction in *Harper's Weekly* directly: for example, Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa Surridge together study how Wilkie Collins’s illustrated serial *The Moonstone* landed in *Harper's Weekly* in the late 1860s, and Valerie DeBrava considers the *Harper's Weekly* short stories that portrayed Civil War veteran amputees.

Literary scholars are not the only researchers drawn to the content in *Harper's Weekly*. Celebrated magazine historian Francis Luther Mott claims that “[f]rom the literary point of view, *Harper's Weekly* must be conceded to have enjoyed a certain importance; but it was as a vigorous political journal of conservative tendencies that it was most noteworthy” (486). Historians

like Karin L. Zipf, Gib Prettyman, Deidre Murphy, and Cynthia Empen cite the publication's nonfiction and eye-catching illustrations as examples of how periodicals represented contemporary society, culture, and events.

Scholars from both literature and history analyze the content of *Harper's Weekly* not only to understand the world it represented but also to understand its own world: the publishing industry in the nineteenth century. A group of literary scholars including Ronald Weber and Sharon M. Harris and Ellen Gruber Garvey examines *Harper's Weekly* to understand the growth in the career of professional writing that occurred in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Text is not the only element of the periodicals that receives attention; researchers like Jo Ann Early Levin take special interest in the burgeoning use of illustration in periodicals, a lively art form that would soon be replaced by photographs.

In addition to authorship and literary production, historians look to *Harper's Weekly* as a source that sheds light on the business of publishing in the nineteenth century. Lupfer relies on *Harper's Weekly* to explain the ideal business model of a profitable periodical from the time period, and Susan Belasco uses it to illustrate how periodicals aspired to the status of books during their coming-of-age in the mid-nineteenth century. In addition, Mott's seminal series *A History of American Magazines* as well as Haveman's *Magazines and the Making of America* emphasizes the importance of *Harper's Weekly* (and Harper publications more generally) in the broad historical context of the American magazine industry.

*Harper's Weekly* is an especially rich source for historians looking to study how periodicals covered the Civil War. Several anthologies that focus on journalism and publications from the Civil War era draw on *Harper's Weekly* for poignant examples, including *Fighting Words* by Andrew S. Coopersmith and *The Civil War and the Press*, edited by David B. Sachsman, S. Kittrell Rushing, and Debra Reddin van Tuyl. Alice Fahs serves as a leader in the field, writing extensively about popular presses during the Civil War by liberally pulling from *Harper's Weekly*.

Finally, historians often use *Harper's Weekly* to understand the public's reaction to specific events. Mott says that the periodical's "record in text and picture of the events of sixty years make it a contemporaneous history of the highest value" (487). The periodical's claim to be national makes it especially attractive, for it can act as a stand-in for national opinion—a sentiment that is hard to measure in an era without opinion polls or a wide array of publications claiming to speak for the whole nation.

Though many historians and literary scholars rely on *Harper's Weekly* as a primary source, few have asked historical and literary questions about the periodical itself, perhaps because of a dearth of editorial notes and records from the nineteenth century or a perception of its middle-brow literary quality. John Gray Laird Dowgray, Jr.'s 1956 dissertation surveyed multiple Harper periodicals, but it seems no scholar has studied *Harper's Weekly* specifically in the same deliberate manner that others have studied periodicals like *The Atlantic*, *The Century*, or even *Harper's Monthly*. Existing scholarship on nineteenth-century publishing can thus benefit from the backstory of this publication, revealing the constraints that make *Harper's Weekly* and its label as national problematic. An attempt to fill the full deficit of research on *Harper's Weekly* is too ambitious for my current project, however, which instead generates meaningful analysis by focusing on the strategies that *Harper's Weekly* used to navigate its earliest years, from its inception in 1857 through the start of the Civil War in 1861. Investigation of how a fluctuating national readership constrained *Harper's Weekly* reveals both the complexity and the importance of the periodical within the mid-nineteenth century's publishing scene.

## THE DRED SCOTT DECISION

A mere three months after the first issue of *Harper's Weekly* hit newsstands, the periodical's editors faced a conflict that threatened to split their national readership in two. The clash at hand was the divisive Dred Scott v. Sanford Supreme Court decision, which was settled after ten years in the courts when majority opinions were delivered orally on March 6 and 7, 1857. The Dred Scott decision was the first controversial political story the new publication confronted, and the news left the staff scrambling to determine how *Harper's Weekly* should react to such events. The ruling forced the team to establish what kind of publication *Harper's Weekly* would be for its readers during times of political debate—remarkably high stakes for a periodical just beginning to solidify its identity within its publishing house and larger publishing market.

The Dred Scott decision was a defining moment not only for *Harper's Weekly* but also for the greater sectional conflict in which the publication operated. The ruling reignited controversy about how a nation with both free and slave territories could carry on, brought to attention by none other than an enslaved man by the name of Dred Scott. Scott's slaveholder, John Sanford, had taken Scott and his wife, Harriet, to live in the free state of Illinois and in the free part of the Louisiana Territory in 1833. When Scott returned to the slave state of Missouri in 1843, he sued Sanford (with the help of

abolitionists) based on the idea that his prior residence in free areas made him permanently free. He won the initial suit, but appeals pushed the case to the Supreme Court. In a decision that enraged many Northerners, the ruling was overturned by a 7-2 margin, with Chief Justice Roger B. Taney delivering the majority opinion.

Taney's decision both ruled against Scott and overreached to settle other debates about slavery. The ruling declared that no African American was a citizen of the United States and that Congress lacked the authority to ban slavery in the Territories. The latter claim gave slaveholders the opportunity to move their slaves into Western Territories, thus defying the current *modus operandi* of popular sovereignty deciding whether a territory was slaveholding or free. The decision electrified both its supporters and opponents. Historian Paul Finkelman says that "the sweeping political opinion in Dred Scott pleased southern whites of all political stripes," but that Northerners were less unified about the decision due to the political affiliations, business interests, and racist sentiments of some citizens (128). Presented with a divided nation, the *Harper's Weekly* staff faced a contentious and consequential question: How could it cover the Dred Scott decision for its entire readership? The coverage from the spring of 1857 reveals that the periodical avoided covering the decision as much as possible. Rather than openly agreeing or disagreeing with the ruling, which would have led many readers to oppose the periodical's interpretation, *Harper's Weekly* published a bare minimum—a single full-length article, in fact.

The first and only substantive mention of the Dred Scott ruling filled two columns on the front page of the March 28 issue. Both the author's justification for covering the ruling and his strategies for crafting coverage for a diverse audience play out in this article, entitled "The Dred Scott Case." The unnamed author, whose piece thus represents the periodical and not just himself, begins the article by claiming that the only sources available were "one or two of the dissenting opinions [that] have leaked out somewhat irregularly" ("The Dred Scott Case" 193). He uses this alleged information deficit as an excuse to avoid evaluating the Dred Scott decision. Instead, the article focuses on the decision's potential effects: "It may not be amiss to consider what is likely to be the practical effect of the decision which is, in certain quarters, producing such a fervid heat" ("The Dred Scott Case" 193). With this statement, the author explains why he chose to write about the Dred Scott decision even if he couldn't critique it: the story was too popular in the public discourse to skip. Focusing on the effects is an attempt to satisfy the readers



who demanded content about the top story of the spring without dividing those readers.

Shifting the dialogue toward the “practical effect” of the decision rather than its validity pushes the piece to consider a hypothetical situation that is difficult to challenge or disprove. The author’s speculation is merely an idea posited to readers about a potential event, not a report or editorial about something that has already occurred. Moving toward his own theories allows the author to deliver content about the ruling while maintaining full control of what will and what will not be shown as results of the Dred Scott decision. Even if the speculations are grounded in current events, the analysis is ultimately a fiction about the future. The author can shape the narrative in a way that makes it palatable to the readers of *Harper’s Weekly*.

It is soon clear that the *Harper’s Weekly* narrative about the Dred Scott decision will be one of appeasement and assurance that the ruling is not the catastrophe it has so far been made out to be. The author describes the sentiment he is up against when he writes that

when half a dozen old lawyers at Washington, after racking their heads for two years over a question that has bothered the Robe for half a century, announce as their decision that free blacks are not citizens of the United States, and as such not permitted to sue . . . we fume, and fret, and bubble, and squeak, as if some dreadful injustice and oppression were committed. (“The Dred Scott Case” 193)

For the author and, implicitly, the readers he speaks to, this anxiety is unnecessary. He finishes the paragraph by writing, “It really does not seem to us that this part of the Dred Scott decision is likely to produce any very serious practical results” (“The Dred Scott Case” 193).

To dispel any concern about “practical results” of the Dred Scott decision is to silence the human beings who were central to the case, particularly Scott and his wife, Harriet (“The Dred Scott Case” 193). Even if the effects on the nation were confined to the future, unclear and speculative, the fate of these two people was fully in the present, determined without a doubt. Yet Scott receives no mention in the article. Instead of dwelling on Scott or others affected by the Dred Scott ruling, the author appeals directly to his readers by making the case that they will go unscathed. If he can claim that his audience will not be affected by the ruling, he must conceptualize them as white and living in a society that places them above another group that will be affected by the loss of citizenship. He even names the readers’ whiteness by saying,

“We daily arrogate to ourselves of the Caucasian stock a complete and absolute superiority,” and he continues by underscoring the social segregation of whites and African Americans (“The Dred Scott Case” 193). This remark establishes a “we” that the author uses throughout the rest of the piece—a “we” that groups the author and readers together and sets them in opposition to African Americans.

The author’s “we” is not only hierarchically above African Americans but is also granted ownership of the society the latter group occupies. The author writes, “Nor does it appear that the question of the citizenship of our free black population is a question likely to take any practical shape capable of profoundly agitating the public mind” (“The Dred Scott Case” 193). Calling African Americans both “our[s]” and “free” is oxymoronic but perfectly reflects the fact that Northern African Americans existed as technically free but only within the bounds of society controlled by the free population that wasn’t black. The white Americans’ opinions and experiences dominate the “public mind” because, after all, if African Americans’ experiences were included, the discourse would be a lot more than “agitated.”

After working to dismantle the fears surrounding the loss of citizenship for free African Americans, the author transitions to his concluding thought:

The only result, therefore, that we can arrive at is, that however repugnant the Dred Scott decision may be to the feelings of a portion of the Northern States, it can have no practical effects injurious to our tranquillity [sic], or to our institutions. The subject of slavery will be left to be decided, as it ultimately must be, by the laws which govern labor and production. (“The Dred Scott Case” 193)

The author’s statement relegates dissatisfaction with the decision to a minority of the nation and limits its damages to an emotional bruise. He furthers the impersonal stance by striking a final compromise: that the states must consider the institution of slavery from an economic point of view. The author sweeps aside moral sentiments or appeals to tradition in favor of an argument that can be presented as based on logic and fact. He neither celebrates nor condemns the institution of slavery—a middle ground for the large number of readers who stood between the extreme ends of praise and abhorrence.

When compared to other periodicals’ coverage of the Dred Scott decision, the *Harper’s Weekly* reporting is noticeably light. Historian Don E. Fehrenbacher explains that “Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* set the pace with editorials almost every day [beginning March 7] denouncing this ‘atrocious,’

this ‘wicked,’ this ‘abnormal’ judgement” (417). *The New York Times* echoed Greeley’s concern when it published an analysis that claimed the court decision “completes the nationalization of Slavery” (Finkleman 145). Northern religious papers, too, weighed in, exemplified by the weekly *New York Independent’s* article titled “Wickedness of the Decision in the Supreme Court against the African Race” (Finkleman 149). Of course, not all Northern papers opposed the decision. New York’s weekly *Journal of Commerce*, for example, said that “by the great masses of people who prefer truth to error, light to darkness . . . the decision will be respected and honored” (Finkleman 138). Southern papers, too, lauded the courts—such as the semiweekly *Richmond Enquirer*, which praised the “learned, impartial and unprejudiced” court for handing the South a “prize” (Finkleman 130).

*Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, the weekly publication that *Harper’s Weekly* most resembled at the time, was even quieter than *Harper’s Weekly* in that fateful March, suggesting that *Harper’s Weekly* might have adhered to the hybrid-genre conventions of emerging weekly newspaper-magazines in largely ignoring the initial news about the decision. However, *Frank Leslie’s* revisited the topic in late June with a remarkable spread entitled “Visit to Dred Scott—his family—incidents of his life—decision of the Supreme Court” (see Figure 1). According to Fehrenbacher, this coverage occurred during “a new surge of public interest in Dred Scott’s case” that arose once news of his manumission broke and the official version of the decision was published (421).

Whether as part of a trend or by coincidence as the article claims, the *Frank Leslie’s* author presents Scott favorably to readers, dubbing him “a real hero” (“Visit to Dred Scott” 49). Characterizing Scott as a hero moves *Frank Leslie’s* well beyond the tight, neutral confines that editors of *Harper’s Weekly* drew for their own periodical. Perhaps *Frank Leslie’s* aimed to be more provocative than *Harper’s Weekly*, the latter earning the nickname the “Weakly Journal of Civilization” from the *New York Tribune* (Williams 230). While *Harper’s Weekly* profited by avoiding controversy, *Frank Leslie’s* didn’t fear publishing a more “vivid and lively picture of the American scene” (Williams 465) in an article that allows Scott to speak for himself with his own experiences and quotations. The editors also included illustrations of Scott, his wife, and his daughters, Eliza and Lizzie. The humanizing portrayal in both image and word, both first- and third-person, could not be more different from the *Harper’s Weekly* coverage, which left out Scott the man and covered his trial only minimally.

Furthermore, the level of coverage that *Harper's Weekly* gave the Dred Scott decision is not consistent with how *Harper's Weekly* grappled with other

**FIGURE 1. "VISIT TO DRED SCOTT—HIS FAMILY—INCIDENTS OF HIS LIFE—DECISION OF THE SUPREME COURT"**



Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper. June 27, 1857. <<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002707034>>.

political stories. For example, Buchanan's inauguration—an equally political but far less electrifying moment—inundated the periodical just two issues before the March 28 edition. The center spread included an astonishing six illustrations laid out in near-perfect symmetry; such heavily illustrated pieces were rare this early in the periodical's history, which only makes the complete lack of illustration about Dred Scott—arguably the more consequential political event—starker in contrast. Clearly it was the controversy, not the political nature, of the Dred Scott piece that made the coverage so scant.

The Dred Scott trial did not make for as compelling a narrative as other news stories in *Harper's Weekly*. The event's timeline did not make it particularly appealing to readers; it was sustained over several months, made slow-moving by complicated and specialized legal happenings rather than coalescing around one flashpoint moment. Such timing could have been especially taxing for a new periodical trying to develop a system for covering weekly news. Just as the narrative timeline was complicated, so were its characters. With a divided nation, the decision of who was the true hero and who was the villain was also up for debate. Identifying characters was especially problematic once the ruling was known, for the court decided that Scott wasn't really a person at all but rather private property. Recognizing the humanity of an African American by making him a character, let alone making him a hero or martyr of a narrative, would have been profoundly risky for a periodical trying to reach Southern readers. Offering a textual or illustrated portrait of Scott, then, would have been even more daring, especially at a time in the periodical's development when illustrations drew more attention.

The scant Dred Scott coverage does not just reflect narrative constraints, though; it also reveals a *Harper's Weekly* that was still finding its footing in the quagmire of the national political arena that deteriorated each year in the late 1850s. In these early days, the periodical went a route that risked losing only readers who would be dissatisfied with a lack of political coverage—likely a much smaller minority than readers who would take issue with the perspective used to cover such political events. With its light coverage of the Dred Scott decision, *Harper's Weekly* announced that although it would not stay silent about the largest news issue of the spring, it would attempt to appeal to a broad swath of readers by not taking a side.

## JOHN BROWN'S RAID ON HARPER'S FERRY

A second political crisis, fundamentally different from the Dred Scott decision, arose on October 16, 1859, when John Brown arrived at the Harper's

Ferry federal arsenal ready to enact his plan for a slave insurrection. Brown and his eighteen loyal followers seized the armory from unsuspecting night guards but lost it to a contingent of U.S. Marines led by Colonel Robert E. Lee just thirty-six hours later—too soon for the action to inspire the desired insurrection. The raid did not meet Brown's initial hopes but nonetheless made for a story that captivated the nation. Two weeks after the events, *Harper's Weekly* began delivering the enthralling tale to its readers.

The raid could not have been more unlike the events of the Dred Scott decision that had rocked the publication two and a half years earlier. Whereas the ruling was drawn out and weighed down by legal affairs, the raid presented a condensed drama full of guns, plots, violence, and perhaps insanity. The trial had a ten-year history, while the two-day raid concentrated action into a spectacle. While the former led to lasting jurial upheaval, the latter was a momentary crisis that drew its significance from the electric atmosphere it created rather than its nonexistent legal consequences. The former elicited minimal coverage in *Harper's Weekly* that catered to a split readership while the latter resulted in abundant, openly one-sided coverage. The striking increase in content reveals an evolved *Harper's Weekly*, a periodical with nearly three years under its belt, that no longer avoided dramatic current events as it had when covering the Dred Scott decision.

In understanding why these two political events, both culminating in trials, received such uneven treatment in *Harper's Weekly*, one must consider how audience reactions to the two events differed since the diverse audience of *Harper's Weekly* guided the publication's content. Different political, socio-economic, and geographical groups varied in their reaction to the Dred Scott decision. The public response to the John Brown raid, though, was much more uniform. Publications across the nation agreed that the raid was "the work of a madman," as the anti-slavery *New York Tribune* put it on October 19 (Daigh 176). Brown's actions were not without controversy—some groups tried to frame him as a Republican to harm the party's already troubled image—but even if readers disagreed on his motives, they did not disagree on naming him a villain. The *Harper's Weekly* team appears to have believed that nearly all readers could agree that he was a malicious madman, and the editors consequently presented him as such at every turn. Once again, the publication focused on common ground and avoided the deep sectional divides that caused readers to interpret the event differently.

Because the editors could present stories about the raid that appealed to all readers, they included every ounce of intrigue in order to attract new

readers and satisfy their existing base. Subscriptions had steadily climbed from 60,000 in May of its first year to 75,000 in November 1858 to 90,000 in October 1859, and this story was another opportunity to push those numbers higher still (Mott 473). The great number of articles targeting Brown gave the periodical several opportunities to appeal to the readers across the nation who supported a blatant indictment of him.

Coverage of the raid begins in the October 29 issue. In the Domestic Intelligence section, the short paragraphs work together to provide a play-by-play of the raid, which is dubbed “one of the most extraordinary events that ever occurred in our history” (“Extraordinary Insurrection” 694). *Harper’s Weekly* draws on an array of sources to share the story with its readers, such as the description of what Brown and two of his followers looked like as they were captured according to a *Baltimore Exchange* reporter and snippets of dialogue from an interview Brown did with Senator Mason that ran in the *Herald* (“Extraordinary Insurrection” 694). The coverage also uses lists to quickly inform readers of who was involved in the raid and of the resulting casualties. The narrative, interviews, and lists only provide facts for the readers—not analysis and interpretation—but give nearly every detail available. Acting as an in-depth news source was new for *Harper’s Weekly*; because of the raid, the periodical temporarily moved from an entertainment-driven publication that included news to a publication that prized its news content and its role of informing the public about political events. The publication’s identity took on a new dimension once nearly the entire national readership could support a specific interpretation of a flashy news story.

The October 29 issue also features the article “Insurrection at Harper’s Ferry,” which speaks to the unified readership that holds contempt for Brown. The author ties Brown’s actions to his unforgivable desire for a slave insurrection, something the author says “all are unanimous against,” no matter the “opinions a man may hold in reference to the slavery controversies which are agitated in this country” (“Insurrection” 690). Such a claim turns away anyone who does support Brown or his ideology, but that fringe minority is sacrificed for bold coverage that appeals more strongly to the readers who are appalled by Brown.

The author rails against Brown first by calling him, among other insults, “a half-crazed white, whose views and aims were, to say the least, extremely vague and indefinite” (“Insurrection” 690). In just the first paragraph of the first article, Brown is mentioned more than the man Dred Scott ever was in the coverage about the latter’s trial. While Scott only existed as an unseen,

intangible figure who launched a trial, Brown is almost immediately labeled a crazed villain and therefore granted a sizable role in his coverage. Furthermore, while the importance of the Dred Scott decision was muffled in *Harper's Weekly*, the importance of the raid is foregrounded when the author writes, "It is hardly necessary to add that the event will possess marked political significance at the present time" ("Insurrection" 690). Whereas it was too soon to accurately assess what would happen after the Dred Scott decision—and any of the hypothetical effects were written off as inconsequential—the author of the John Brown piece claims that the raid will "cost the Republicans many thousand votes" in the next election ("Insurrection" 690). In stark contrast to the Dred Scott piece, the first John Brown article is unafraid to make Brown a character in a narrative, evaluate his actions, and elevate their significance.

In the November 5 issue, the text of "The late invasion at Harper's Ferry" spans the center spread before spilling onto the following page (Strother 712–14). In all, the article totals about 5,500 words and includes four illustrations, all created by "artist correspondent" D. H. Strother, who illustrated under the popular pseudonym Porte Crayon. Strother adds the context, assessment, and interpretation that was largely absent from the Domestic Intelligence coverage of the previous week. Strother's first-person account caters to readers' desires for information when no new details could be crammed into a report on such short notice.

When Strother sees Brown held as captive, he first employs animalistic language to describe him: "His speech was frequently interrupted by deep groans, not awakening sympathy like those of a young soldier dying in the adjacent office, but reminding one of the agonized growl of a ferocious beast" (714). When Strother does describe Brown as a person, he does so with deep reproach:

Any man who has heretofore imagined that he has sounded the depths of human folly and human wickedness will be amazed when he considers the affair at Harper's Ferry. It is generally regarded as the insane attempt of a monomaniac; an act which, as it is without precedent, and is likely to remain without parallel, whose intense silliness is only equaled by its atrocity, would be ludicrous had not the blood of some of our best citizens made it tragic. (714)

Both the description of Brown as an animal and as an invested criminal succeed in putting him outside the bounds of societal sympathy. The opinionated coverage suggests that the editors behind *Harper's Weekly* believed its base would accept a one-sided, villainous portrayal of Brown. In fact, the



editors could believe that they stood to gain readers from this harsh treatment of Brown. Perhaps those most riled up by the failed insurrection would be drawn to a publication that criticized him so harshly.

Four illustrations accompany Strother's verbose account, two of Brown himself. The first image shows Brown weak and broken, with only his head poking out of a large blanket. His lip is curled into a snarl; paired with a sharp nose, Brown looks to be the epitome of disgust. This bedridden criminal is nevertheless better off in the first image than in his next portrayal. On the second page, Brown writhes on the floor alongside his son and "another of the outlaws" (Strother 713). The two sketches of Brown afford readers the opportunity they were never given with the Dred Scott ruling. *Harper's Weekly* had failed to include a portrait of the human beings central to Scott's court case but now has no problem illustrating the people involved in the John Brown raid. In this piece, the (sub)humanity is front and center, and the reader can judge specific characters instead of reading through nebulous hypothetical explanations bereft of a villain and victor. Putting Brown's face in the article signals that he, a specific human being and not a larger social condition or political climate, is responsible for the chaos.

John Brown once again dominates the front page of *Harper's Weekly* on November 12, this time in the form of two large illustrations. In both these drawings and the coverage found in the rest of the issue, the scene has shifted from the makeshift prison of the prior issue to the courtroom in Virginia where Brown would ultimately be sentenced to death. While *Harper's Weekly* devoted little coverage to the consequential Dred Scott trial (certainly no dramatic courtroom illustrations), John Brown's trial earned three pages in one issue alone. The disparity could result from the narrative arc; for Dred Scott, the trial was the narrative in its entirety whereas for John Brown the trial was simply the conclusion to a string of dramatic events. More likely, though, the John Brown trial receives ample coverage because few readers doubt what the rightful verdict should be, unlike in the contentious and confusing Dred Scott trial. If *Harper's Weekly* based its coverage on the significance of a story—how many people it affected and in what ways—Dred Scott would undoubtedly receive more space in the periodical, but significance is not the indicator of how much attention a story receives; its attractiveness to a wide readership is. The captivating tale of John Brown speaks to more readers than a murky court case and its polarizing decision. Once again, the desire for a national readership guided the team behind *Harper's Weekly*, this time as it filled the periodical with clips about Brown.

The captions for the front-page images encourage readers to “see page 729,” steering their attention over a brief trial article on the second page toward a full-page illustrated article entitled “The Trial of the Conspirators” (Porte Crayon 721). Thanks to the captions, those reading *Harper’s Weekly* just for the most vivid John Brown coverage need not flip through the rest of the issue but can instead skip to the meaty content they most desire. Writing as Porte Crayon, Strother offers another literary first-person account in this article, detailing his visit with the prisoners before the trial and then narrating the trial itself. He is just as comfortable condemning Brown and his followers in this article as he was in previous ones, crafting insults like “They have a cowed and haggard look that would excite pity, were such a feeling possible under the circumstances” (Porte Crayon 729). Porte Crayon writes extensively about the African American co-conspirators of Brown in this article, giving attention to their characters that Scott did not receive two years earlier. Covering these three African Americans is not as risky as covering Scott was, though, for the editors likely believe that the readers will agree that they are undisputed rabble-rousers.

The editors also employ strategies to extend the lifespan of Porte Crayon’s images beyond the week’s news cycle. A small sidebar on the first page demonstrates that the role of *Harper’s Weekly* was not just to report on the news but to preserve it. “We continue in this number our illustrations of the Harper’s Ferry outbreak, drawn by our special artist, Porte Crayon,” the blurb reads, followed by a list of previous illustrations (“Our Illustrations” 721). Such a notice marks the November 12 illustration as part of a set. The coverage is not only relevant in this particular issue but is also part of a longer arc that a reader can use to retrace the entire story of the raid. The blurb functions as an advertisement, selling other recent issues of *Harper’s Weekly* and encouraging readers to preserve them as a record of the event as the tale winds down. *Harper’s Weekly* makes the switch from a timely news source about John Brown to a reliable record of his exploits; posterity becomes an added goal of a periodical that heretofore succeeded because of its timeliness.

Even though the trial sealed the fate of Brown, *Harper’s Weekly* continued to cover the aftermath of the raid through mid-December. The coverage took on two functions: first, finishing the narrative by reporting on Brown’s eventual execution and, second, evaluating the legacy of the raid by depicting what slaves would do after the failed insurrection. The news coverage vacated prominent positions in the periodical and instead returned to the Domestic Intelligence section once the trial ended. The November 26 issue includes

four bulletins updating readers about Brown's condition based on an interview "a lady," whose name is intentionally omitted, conducted with him while he was in prison. The bulletins give Brown a chance to share his thoughts and feelings with readers. For example, he tells the interviewer:

I am not conscious of ever having had a feeling of revenge: no, not in all the wrong done to me and my family in Kansas. But I can see that a thing is wrong and wicked, and can help to right it, and can even hope that those who do the wrong may be punished, and still have no feeling of revenge. ("His Principles" 758)

Here, Brown is more than the maniacal villain who dominated Porte Crayon's narratives. He is a person with motivations who is capable of reflection and remembering his family members—an opportunity no people in the Dred Scott decision were granted. The article gives readers the chance to know Brown only after the debates about his crimes were settled in court. Still, readers can hear his voice before he meets his end as opposed to continuing to see him as a one-dimensional villain.

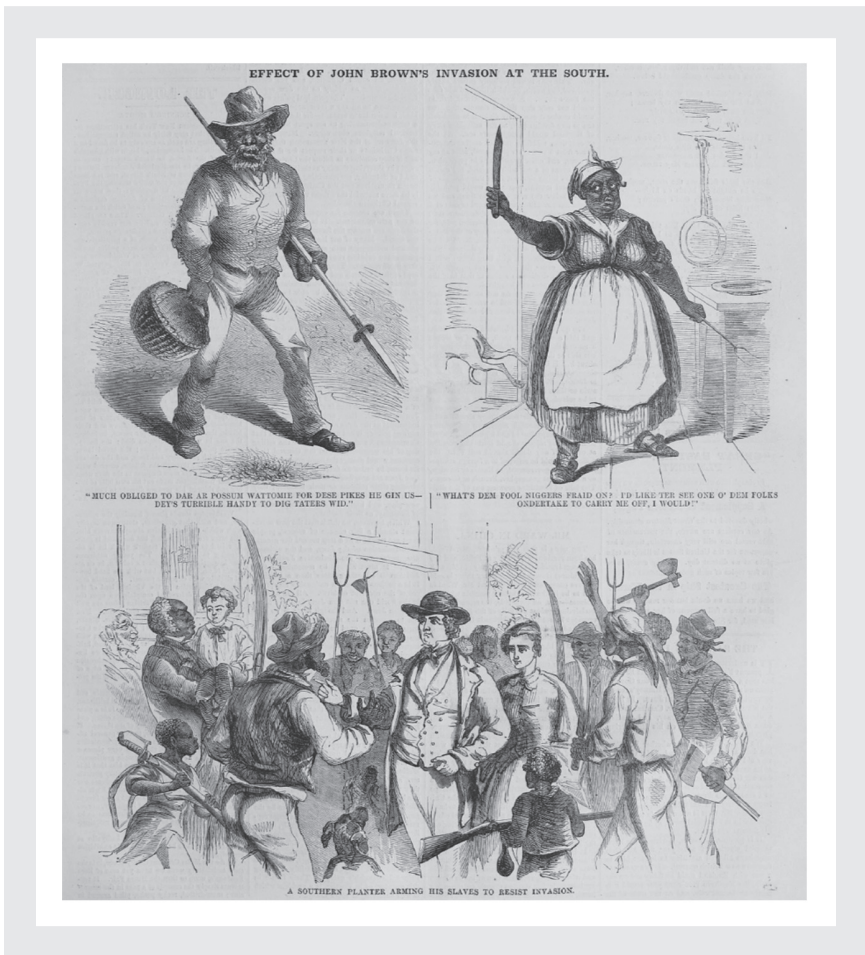
The story of his execution, which occurred on December 2, 1859, does not appear in the periodical until the December 10 edition, when the Domestic Intelligence section dedicates just over a column to relate the story of his death, a space allotment similar to the initial account of the raid. The bulletins include the words of both Brown and his wife, continuing the trend of making Brown seem like more than just a criminal in his death. To finish the news narrative, the bulletins also offer a graphic depiction of John Brown's demise: "He was swung off at fifteen minutes past eleven. A slight grasping of the hands and twitching of the muscles were seen, and then all was quiet" ("On the Gallows" 794).

Next, *Harper's Weekly* explored the ramifications of the raid in a much less speculative way than it did with the Dred Scott decision. Rather than say what slaves might do after learning of the failed insurrection, the editors instead included illustrations purporting to show how slaves would behave. The November 19 issue was the first to depict this slave reaction, with a front page entitled "Effect of John Brown's Invasion at the South" (see Figure 2) (737). The captions of the first two illustrations are quotations from the slaves pictured, written in the eye dialect whites often used to portray African-American speech.

The first individual, a male slave carrying a basket and spear says, "Much obliged to dar ar possum Wattomie for dise pikes he gin us—det's turrible

handy to dig taters wid” (“Effect” 737). The second slave, a woman, says, “What’s dem fool niggers fraid on? I’d like ter see one o’ dem folks ondertake to carry me off, I would!” (“Effect” 737). These two depictions suggest that the slave population was either not intelligent or not motivated enough to use Brown’s efforts to break out of slavery. The final illustration, too, shows slaves using the weapons provided by their slave owner “to resist invasion” (“Effect” 737). Even if Brown’s followers came to lead another insurrection, the slaves the illustrator imagines would stay loyal to their slave owners instead of seeking freedom. Porte Crayon uses this racist portrayal to allay readers’ fears and assure them that African Americans were too childlike to revolt.

**FIGURE 2. “EFFECT OF JOHN BROWN'S INVASION AT THE SOUTH”**



*Harper's Weekly*. November 26, 1859.

The last piece of John Brown coverage attached significance to the raid by considering how its aftermath affected sectional sentiments. In the editorial, titled “North and South,” the unnamed author expresses concern about the brewing “misunderstandings” that falsely divide Northerners and Southerners: “The South imagines that the Northern people sympathize with John Brown[, but] . . . The bulk of Northern people have no sympathy whatever with John Brown” (802). Northerners are also mistaken: “apt to be misled by the vapping of Southern newspapers and Southern politicians, clamoring for disunion” (“North and South” 802). The editors of *Harper’s Weekly* believed that the bulk of their national readership saw Brown as a villain and consequently portrayed him as such, but this editorial shows that they realized not all periodicals employed the same tactic. The author closes with a foreboding prediction: if left uncorrected, he says, the growing misunderstanding could “plunge a peaceful and contented people into the horrors of civil war” (“North and South” 802). In closing the John Brown raid story, the editors of *Harper’s Weekly* called on their audience’s common ground for fear of “exacerbating sectional divisions” and losing the national audience they were working to build (Kennedy 73).

## FROM ELECTION TO SECESSION

Abraham Lincoln responded to John Brown’s raid in his famous Cooper Union address in the fall of 1859, but the speech earned no coverage in *Harper’s Weekly*. In fact, the periodical hardly mentioned Lincoln’s unforeseen rise to political prominence throughout the following months. Lincoln’s unexpected triumph over Seward in the Republican primary earned him some coverage in May of 1860, but the periodical stayed mostly mum about the rest of the campaign even as the Democrats split along geographic lines and talks of secession swirled. The first post-election issue of *Harper’s Weekly* debuted on November 10 with a full front-page illustration of Lincoln and a caption that reads, “Hon. Abraham Lincoln, born in Kentucky, February 12, 1809” (705). Newspapers had already named Lincoln as the victor, but *Harper’s Weekly* did not yet grant him the explicit win.

The following week, lists of results took the prime page two position, residing in the center two columns. The article states in a removed, impartial tone:

At least half the returns of the popular vote for President have yet to come in, and no reliable statement of the work of 6th November can

yet be made. It is certain, however, that Abraham Lincoln, of Illinois, and Hannibal Hamlin, of Maine, have been elected by the people President and Vice-President of the United States respectively. . . . According to the returns which have thus far come to hand, Lincoln has carried fifteen States, . . . casting together 169 out of the 303 votes which are cast in the electoral college. (“The Presidential Election” 722)

The news report, different from the editorials or discussions that typically dominated the nonfiction in *Harper’s Weekly*, situates the periodical as a source on the political news it had thus far kept at arm’s length. The unnamed author does not offer analysis or interpretation of the election as it had for both the Dred Scott decision and the John Brown raid, instead conveying just enough information to appease readers who were eager for news. Dwelling on the subject—or, worse, celebrating or condemning it—posed the risk of alienating a sizable minority that might not agree and might take issue with the analysis at a high-stakes political moment.

Regardless of what *Harper’s Weekly* chose to publish or not, the greater political sphere was shifting toward splitting its readership into citizens of the Confederacy and the Union. With Lincoln’s election formally recognized, Southerners’ threats of secession that *Harper’s Weekly* had avoided all summer moved front and center in a divisive political discourse. The periodical no longer had the luxury of deciding if the magazine should cover secession and instead had to determine how to frame the coverage. The editors began incorporating an abundance of content about the South, especially illustrated content that focused on South Carolina. Perhaps they hoped that that the sheer quantity of largely impartial Southern-centric content would offer a new way into the news that appealed to both Southern and Northern readers. In *Harper’s Weekly*, South Carolina is venerated for its rich history and prized for its magnificent cities, but the periodical’s South Carolina is a state that is firmly part of the Union. Its heroes, architecture, and cities are continually discussed in relation to the entire United States—fitting for a magazine that tried to secure South Carolinians as part of its national readership even though the state was rapidly proceeding toward secession.

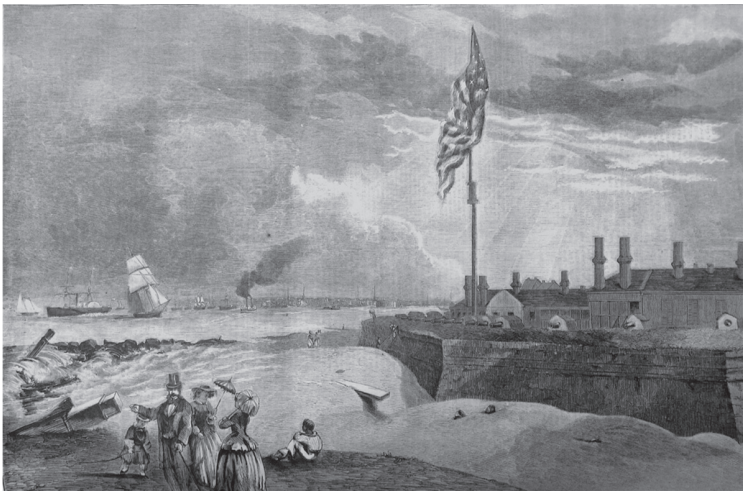
South Carolina’s first illustrated appearance came in the same November 17 issue that announced Lincoln’s win. A full-page illustration of the view of Charleston from Fort Moultrie on Sullivan’s Island ran near the front of the issue. The extended caption was penned by “an eminent Southern writer” who describes the city as if entering from the sea (“Fort Moultrie” 723). He

dubs Charleston “the ancient city” and compares it to Venice, with its “verandas, balconies, piazzas, . . . [and] ample gardens” (“Fort Moultrie” 723). At the same time, the author takes note of the Union military presence when he says Fort Moultrie is “distinguished in American history as the scene of one of the first and best-fought battles of the Revolution” (“Fort Moultrie” 723). The illustration brings the literary description to life, looking onto Charleston from the islands (see Figure 3).

On the left side of the image, steam from the ships mingles with storm clouds, but, on the right, sunbeams break through to grant a heavenly glow to Charleston. The sunshine also backlights the largest object in the illustration: the fort’s American flag, crumpled and twirling lackadaisically near the pole. Like the author, this illustrator portrays Charleston as an attractive and powerful place, but only when framed and protected by the Union.

While the illustration draws a connection between Charleston and the Union, it also hints at how tense the relationship was. Visitors seem more interested in the harbor or the ships sailing into it than in the flag; in fact, many have their backs turned to the banner. The most prominent people, elegantly dressed in the lower left corner of the illustration, ignore not only the flag but also the boy sitting near them. This boy, who appears to be African

**FIGURE 3. “FORT MOULTRIE (SULLIVAN’S ISLAND), CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, IN THE DISTANCE”**



*Harper's Weekly*. November 17, 1860.

American and could be the rich family's slave, stares out toward the water instead of towards Charleston or the flag. Perhaps he knows that neither welcomes people like him. A keen eye might notice that only eleven stars are visible on the flag thanks to its furled droop—the same number of Southern states that seceded just a month after the illustration ran.

The following week, South Carolina was once again in the spotlight but in an image harkening back to the Revolutionary War hero Sergeant William Jasper ("Patriots" 744). The dead and dying collapse in clouds of cannon smoke around the fatally wounded Jasper, who musters his last bit of strength to plant the flag during the battle of Savannah in 1779. Sarah J. Purcell explains that "public memory of the Revolutionary War, particularly praise for Revolutionary martyrs and heroes, had been an important part of American national identity since the time of the Revolution itself" (282). By the eve of the Civil War, the memory that had once created a unified national identity was, like so many other facets of American life, split along sectional lines. Both Northerners and Southerners "looked back to the opening days of the Revolutionary War and concluded that historic sacrifice both hallowed their own cause and delegitimated their opponents as they took up arms" (Purcell 283).

Because the artist of this *Harper's Weekly* illustration is not credited, it is difficult to know if he was a Southerner using Jasper "as a symbol of Southern resistance" or a Northerner claiming the war hero as a fighter for the Union (Purcell 283). This uncertainty works in the favor of *Harper's Weekly*: both Southerners and Northerners could draw inspiration from the dramatic portrait without the publication being accused of heralding Jasper as an icon for the Secessionists or the Unionists. As in the image of Fort Moultrie, the flag is central here, but it is a tattered regimental banner rather than the stately stars and stripes. This illustration, like the previous one, conveys an undertone of South Carolinian discontent; after all, Jasper places his own State's flag, not the Union's. However, portraying a South Carolinian war hero sacrificing himself for the new nation is also a not-so-subtle reminder to the Southern readers that their prized ancestors fought for the same nation that some now planned to abandon as well as a reminder to Northern readers that Southerners, too, share a history of sacrifice for the nation.

The nod to history continues on the following page with an illustration of American soldier and spy Nathan Hale walking toward his execution by British troops ("Patriots" 745). Together, the two images form a powerful and cohesive spread: on the left, a sacrifice by a Southerner; on the right, a sacrifice by a Northerner for the same new nation. The two images' captions fall under the same headline, "Patriots of the Olden Time," on the following

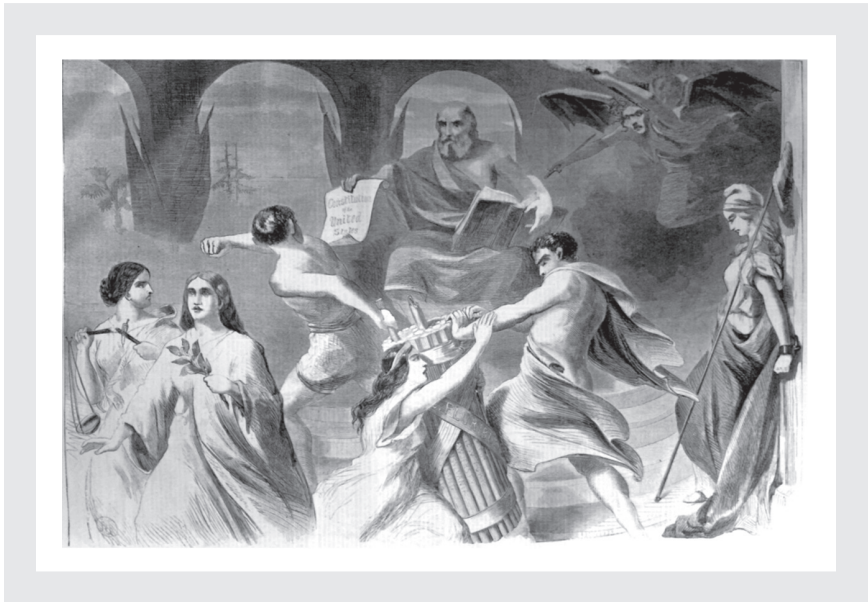


page. The images “will stir the patriotic blood in every true heart,” the caption claims, intentionally speaking to readers from both regions (“Patriots” 746). The images remind readers that Sergeant Jasper was from South Carolina and Nathan Hale from Connecticut, showing that men from both regions fought for the Union.

By the December 15 issue, South Carolina was mere days away from leaving the Union. Amid the chaos, *Harper’s Weekly* strengthened its commitment to using illustrations. The best example, shown in Figure 4, is the haunting “A Record of the Day,” which uses classical imagery to depict an American story—namely, the chaotic end to the Union (“A Record” 792). All the characters are clad in cloaks or togas and are gathered in a room with grand archways and pillars. Palm fronds and what could be disheveled palmetto trees in the background evoke a Southern, if not explicitly South Carolinian, setting.

In the center sits a bearded man holding both a book with the word “law” inscribed on its spine and a scroll with the words “Constitution of the United States.” A male figure faces the man, leaving his bare back to the viewer, and appears to be finishing a swing at the Constitution. With his left hand, he grabs a stick from the bundle of stakes that comprises the focal point of the image. The stakes within the bundle each bear the name of a State and are

**FIGURE 4. “A RECORD OF THE DAY”**

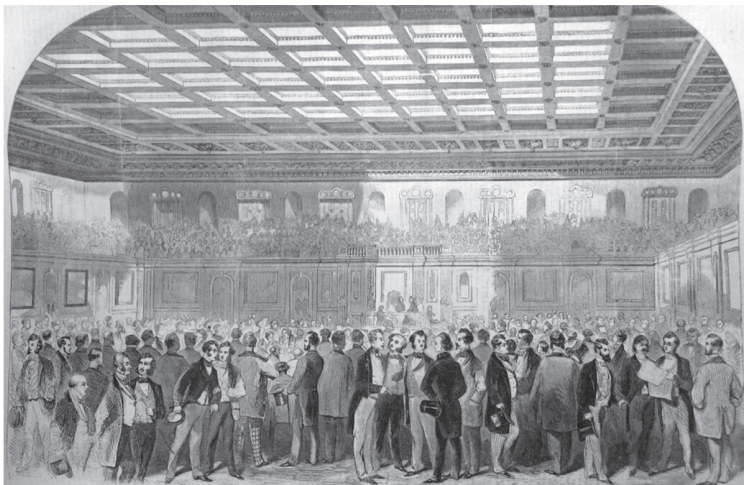


*Harper’s Weekly*. December 15, 1860.

bound with “E. Pluribus [Unum],” though one appears already to be pulled out and broken off. The bundle is protected by Columbia, who falls to the steps to use her full weight against the bundle’s assailants. Another man tries to topple the stakes although Columbia does her best to stop him.

On the left, two women representing peace and justice, bearing broken scales and a small olive branch, evacuate the scene. The peace figure looks forward with a dazed expression as if she knows she is no longer welcome in this arena, but the justice figure looks backward at the fighting with grave irritation as if she will not forgive the aggressors for cracking her scales. Finally, the right-hand side of the picture casts a darkness over the frenzied scene. Additional characters forecast not just the end of the Union, but violent anarchy. A demon enters from the upper right corner, bearing a torch and sword. His eyes are glued to either the book of laws or the stakes, and he looks ready to strike. In stark contrast to his grey features and black wings stands the traditional figure of a revolutionary chained to a pillar. The woman has a pike topped with a cap as well as a cap on her own bowed head, eyes closed in what appears to be either grief or defeat. Ultimately, Columbia is left to do her work—the work of the nation—alone. In this cartoon, only the nation can save itself from the impending struggle.

**FIGURE 5. “ASSEMBLING OF CONGRESS, HALL OF REPRESENTATIVES, WASHINGTON CITY, DECEMBER 3, 1860”**



*Harper's Weekly*. December 15, 1860.

Opposite the classical image is a realistic illustration (Figure 5) captioned “Assembling of Congress, Hall of Representatives, Washington City, December 3, 1860” (793). Crowds of men dominate both the foreground and the background, gathered in small groups centered around conversations or newspapers. The two images do not form a coherent spread but are nonetheless in conversation with one another. The right image shows, factually, what happened at the assembly: well-dressed men gathered, spoke, and listened. The photo-like image allows *Harper’s Weekly* to represent what occurred without evaluating the action and thus stay impartial, but the left image reveals what the right image cannot: what such a meeting meant. Certain well-dressed men acted as the assailants did in the symbolic image, attacking the Union and its Constitution. The seemingly innocuous conversations lead to utter chaos—a loss of peace and justice and the start of destruction to the Union’s laws. The symbolic image, then, reveals more about governmental proceedings than an impartial snapshot of what the House looked like, though that interpretation also loses its impartial credibility by taking a stance and labelling heroes and villains. The loss of impartiality in “A Record of the Day” cartoon signals that the work of remaining neutral was about to become not just taxing but in fact impossible. South Carolina seceded just five days later, launching a spiral that finalized the split within the national audience of *Harper’s Weekly*.

## **FROM SECESSION TO THE CIVIL WAR: THE FINAL ATTEMPTS TO APPEAL TO SOUTHERNERS**

By 1861, coverage of the chaotic and uncertain political climate was too important to omit from *Harper’s Weekly*. The publication continued to cover controversial events with as little opinion as possible, but the events became increasingly frequent and urgent. Before 1861, political content seemed to intrude on the rest of the news, fiction, and illustration found in each issue. Once secession edged the nation toward war, though, political content dominated the publication. The January 26 issue, for example, featured a front-page story and illustration discussing Fort Sumter, another two full pages of Sumter illustrations and text, an editorial about the Union capital, a full-page illustration and lengthy article about the Star of the West (a Union merchant ship that was fired upon at Fort Sumter on January 9, 1861, marking the first time the North and South exchanged fire), a full-page and a half-page illustration of Fort Moultrie, a full-page illustration of Charleston, and a Domestic Intelligence section full of secession- and crisis-related news. Scant room was

available for the fiction and other small news items that once comprised the periodical.

In order to maintain readers on both sides of the conflict, the editors did not take “a strong political stand against secession” (Fahs 44). They refused to indict Confederate sympathizers for as long as they could hope to retain their Southern readership—an effort that lasted well into the spring of 1861. Fahs says that the publication “assumed during the secession crisis . . . that they could continue to appeal to a Southern as well as a Northern audience” (46). In “Let Us Be Friends,” which ran as late as March 30, an unnamed author pleads with readers directly, asking that “Heaven conduct us to happier ends / And keep us like brothers for ever and ever” (195). The poem is not of exceptional literary merit, but its politics are clear: this author is willing to let the seceding states leave the Union in the name of peace. He writes, “If you must go, let us part like good friends— / It’s hard on the heart that our Union should sever!” (Let Us Be Friends” 195).

The publication’s conciliatory effort was cut short in mid-April when the conflict outgrew the editors’ hopes for peace. Confederates fired on Fort Sumter on April 12, causing a whirlwind of armament, secession, and blockades. The April 27 issue positioned Lincoln’s Proclamation of War as the lead editorial and included a two-page center-spread illustration of the “Bombardment of Fort Sumter by the Batteries of the Confederate States, April 13, 1861” (260). Civil War was now a reality, and *Harper’s Weekly* had to decide not just how much country but what country at all a national periodical was supposed to serve. This identity question could not be dodged by hypothetical situations or by catering to both sides of an ever-widening gap.

By the following week, May 4, *Harper’s Weekly* made its choice to include war coverage “that explicitly aligned itself with the Union” (Fahs 47). On that date, its lead editorial was boldly titled “The War.” The daring editorial declared:

It is not now a question of slavery or anti-slavery. It is not even a question of Union or disunion. The question simply is whether Northern men will fight. Southerners have rebelled and dragged our flag in the dirt, in the belief that, because we won’t fight duels or engage in street brawls, therefore we are cowards. The question now is whether or no [sic] they are right. (“The War” 274)

Such a statement first condemns the actions of Southerners—not rebels or Confederates, but the entire geographic bloc. It then insults the region

by implying that their people engage in lowly fights and assess courage by the same measly measure. In this editorial, Southerners are no longer worth accommodating; instead, they are the villains that brave Northern men must vanquish. “The rebels have appealed to the sword, and by the sword they must be punished,” the unnamed writer says (“The War” 274). Calling Northerners to fight was a complete reversal from the tepid acceptance of “The Great Southern Movement” that graced the periodical a month prior (Fahs 46).

The brazen editorial continues by giving Lincoln tactical advice about what to prioritize. The author says that if men show up for Lincoln, the war will be over by January 1862. The piece ends by posing “three considerations,” the second of which incited the most controversy:

The Government troops will not march into the Southern States under an Abolition banner. But . . . wherever the United States Army goes, local, municipal, and State laws will be superseded by martial law; and the Fugitive Slave Act is not to be found in the Army Regulations. Whatever may be the intentions of the Government, the practical effect of a war in the Southern States, waged by Northern against Southern men, must be to liberate the slaves. (“The War” 274)

The editorial blatantly “foregrounds” slavery in connection to the war in a way readers of *Harper’s Weekly* would likely not expect (Fahs 49). Just a few weeks earlier, the periodical had shunned discussion of slavery for fear of this very controversy; now the publication initiated the debate.

*Harper’s Weekly* received so much backlash for this comment that a follow-up editorial titled “To Our Southern Readers” graced the pages of the periodical three weeks later. “We have received a number of letters from Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee, and other Southern States, complaining bitterly of the tone of the editorial article” from May 4, the article begins (“To Our Southern Readers” 322). Rather than quiet the controversy or explain that the partisan statement was not representative of the publication, the renewed pro-Union *Harper’s Weekly* held firm. The editorial neither revised nor tempered its previous controversial stance even though the author mentions that it had cost the periodical subscribers. The editorial’s most indignant parting words for Southern readers were the following:

We calculate to produce such a paper that it shall be in every man’s interest to buy it. If we fulfill our aim, our Southern friends merely cut off their own noses when they stop our circulation among them. It is purely their affair. If they think they can do without an illustrated

record of the war we will not object. We have work enough to supply the Northern demand for *Harper's Weekly*. ("To Our Southern Readers" 322)

This comment demotes Southern readers and elevates Northern ones. Southerners were welcome to read *Harper's Weekly* but were no longer integral; instead, attention, energy, and ultimately content went to Northern readers. The geopolitical split was finalized by the end of 1861, when the federal mail service was suspended and the Southern ports were blockaded. Southern readers were left no way to continue to subscribe to the periodical that had shunned them (Fahs 22).

Losing access to the Southern market freed *Harper's Weekly* from balancing Northern and Southern readers. However, becoming a publication for the new Union was not as easy as ceasing shipment of papers to Atlanta. The identity of *Harper's Weekly* as a national publication had been torn asunder along with the nation. The publication that had served a national audience for four years could no longer exist because that nation no longer existed. Buoyed by significant capital, the editors chose to become a periodical for a new, uncertain nation of Northerners.

Though the heterogeneous mishmash of Northerners did not always have much in common, its members did share one trait: they were citizens of a nation that was engaged in war. *Harper's Weekly* capitalized on the unifying experience by producing an enormous amount of war content for its new audience: short stories about soldiers, illustrations of battles, reports from the front lines, and poetry about generals inundated the periodical. The increase in war content was not only an attempt to exploit common ground but also a response to changes in demand. As Fahs explains, news content had renewed importance as Northerners yearned to know what was happening to their loved ones, soldiers or civilians, in the South. "War changed what people read, what was available to read, and how, where, and with what expectations they read it," Fahs writes (18). The war crippled smaller book publishing houses, but large firms like Harper & Brothers, publishing multiple media, benefited from the increased demand for information (Fahs 19–20). Despite the loss of Southern readership, the circulation numbers of *Harper's Weekly* grew from 90,000 in October 1859 to 120,000 by the end of 1861 (Mott 473, 475), and it remained above 100,000 for most of the war, which Mott calls "a very unusual circulation for that time" (476). The editors' strategy of increased war coverage thus maintained the publication's existing Northern readership and attracted new subscribers to make up for the loss of Southern readers.

The war coverage in *Harper's Weekly* spread across genres until no corner of the so-called “general interest” periodical was left untouched by the conflict.

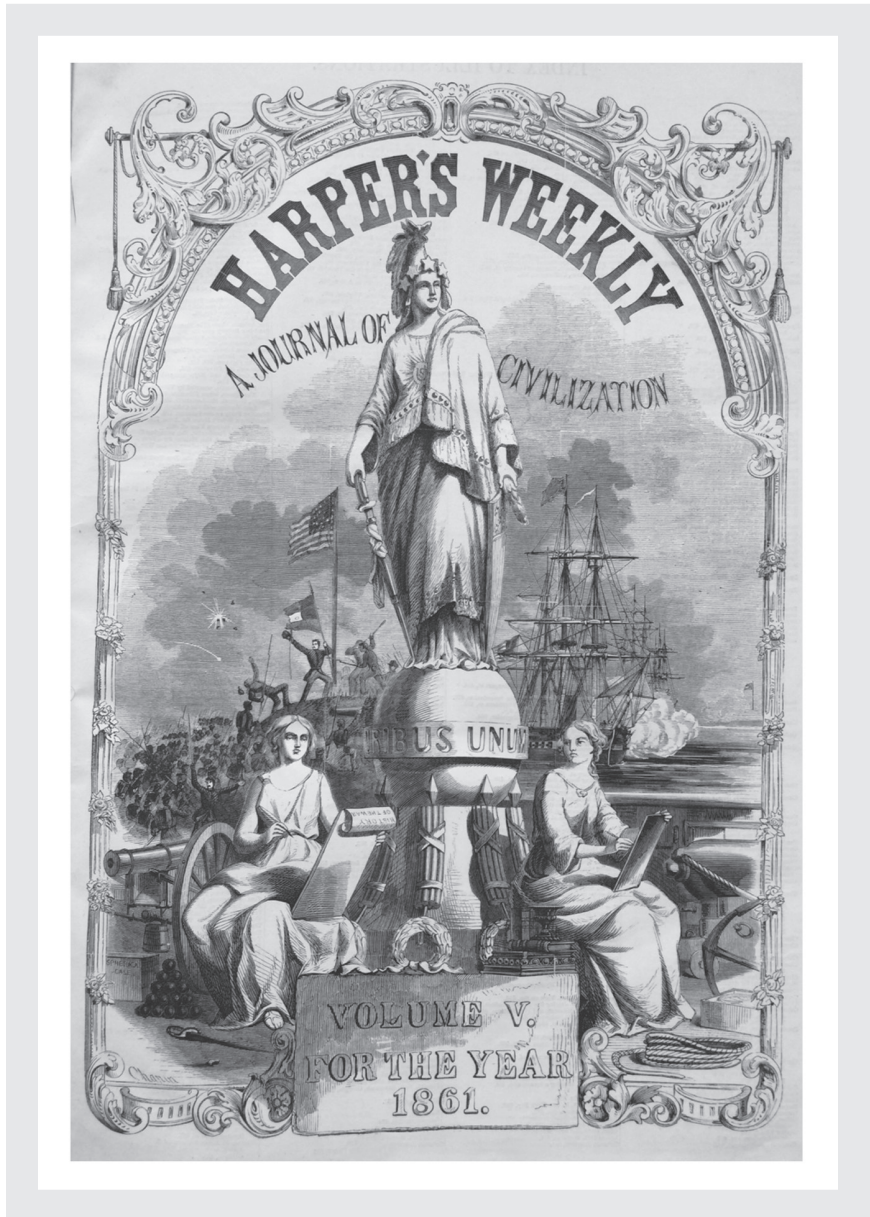
The second change that the editors of *Harper's Weekly* made to the publication involved the timing of all the new war content. Since the publication's debut, the editors had aspired to be more than an ephemeral newspaper by encouraging readers to collect and bind issues into volumes that were larger than, but not unlike, the books the publishing house produced (“*Harper's Weekly*” 32). This desire to serve as a historical record continued, even deepened, when the war began; *Harper's Weekly* saw itself as the place to collect stories—both fictional and nonfictional—about the war and wanted that collection to last beyond the week's news cycle. However, the war increased the competing impulse to be as timely as possible. Getting news out quickly suddenly mattered more than ever when in the balance of each update from the front lines hung news about the lives of soldiers and the state of the nation. A quality record takes time to construct and is enhanced by keeping the long view in mind rather than the most recent report; it takes the time to sort through multiple accounts of an event and throw out incomplete or erroneous pieces while synthesizing the true reports into a compelling story. Readers, though, demanded prompt updates about their sons, fathers, husbands, and brothers on the battlefield. News was in high demand and, as Fahs says, “Newspapers suddenly became an urgent necessity of life” (19).

This dual aim of timelessness and timeliness is perhaps manifested most clearly on the title page of the bound journals from the war years. Each year's issues could be bound into a large book with its own front matter, table of contents, and index. The title page (see Figure 6) included an image that in 1861 became an elaborate, full-page illustration of the role of *Harper's Weekly* in the war (“Title Page” i).

A war-clad Columbia stands in the center with a helmet and sword in hand for the battles that rage in the background. The Union flag stands tall behind Columbia, but a man who carries what appears to be the “Stars and Bars” (the first Confederate battle flag) advances toward the Union's defensive line. Two women in gowns sit near Columbia's feet, writing on tablets with quills. One paper spills over the tablet to reveal the document title “History of the War.” Clearly, the women are on the scene to write up-to-the-minute accounts, but they are also fashioning a history of the entire conflict. As this illustration shows, the war coverage that dominated the periodical—content about battles, generals, and soldiers—challenged the editors to strike a balance between being prompt and being a chronicle.

Most of the time, the role of record beat out the role of informant within the periodical's pages. This decision seems counterintuitive when the greatest demand was for timely updates. Understanding the choice requires knowledge of the larger print culture of the 1860s. *Harper's Weekly* subscribers likely

**FIGURE 6. "TITLE PAGE"**



*Harper's Weekly*. 1861.



had access to several other publications, including various local newspapers. Many of these papers, especially in bigger cities, were released each day. These daily periodicals could get updates from telegrams and publish their contents almost immediately so that news was disseminated much more quickly than the Saturday updates *Harper's Weekly* offered. The weekly production timeline meant that the news was dated, and the way that the editors chose to cover the news—through detailed illustrations—slowed the production even further. By the time the engravers could produce illustrations for the periodical, the battle that the sketches depicted had likely been over for a week or two.

*Harper's Weekly* turned this disadvantage into an advantage by marketing itself as more than a newspaper and instead as a record of the war events. The publication aspired to be a chronicle that would make sense to readers seeking to remember the war in later years. They curated their content not to be as current as possible but to be as complete and comprehensive—as deserving of a place in a definitive record—as possible. The role of “record” marks a specific choice the editors made to differentiate their periodical from competitors in the field and to create a demand for the kind of periodical they could produce. The publishers likely saw little financial benefit from people ordering back issues and building a record, but the periodical's image as a long-lasting publication could have enticed readers to subscribe at the present because it elevated the content as belonging to the prized realm of history instead of simply the passing present. That is, the status of *Harper's Weekly* increased by being a record; their brand improved in the present by marketing for the future.

The aspiration of being timeless could have arisen because *Harper's Weekly* was part of a publishing empire portfolio that included media that were much more durable: books. The goal to endure in a bound, permanent record echoes the novels already published by the Harper brothers. Furthermore, content was shared between *Harper's Weekly*, *Harper's Monthly*, and monographs published by Harper & Brothers. Finally, the connection to a bustling book publishing house likely helped *Harper's Weekly* to be seen as a serious publication. After all, Frank Leslie ran several newspapers, much as the Harpers did, but produced no books, and his publications demonstrate no intention of lasting longer than the current news cycle.

Producing content for a record and not just an eager weekly readership put separate strains on the periodical. To be a reliable source, editors first needed to collect detailed information about each of the war's many twists and turns. Next, editors had to evaluate which events would be of greatest

consequence not just to readers on Saturday but to readers looking back on *Harper's Weekly* in the future. A quick word about how many men died would not suffice; instead, the writer had to attach significance to each battle to justify its place in the record of the war. Providing a complete and comprehensive picture, then, one that took time to construct accurately, was the strength of the weekly periodical as opposed to timely daily newspapers. The audience *Harper's Weekly* served had shifted from being national to being Northern, and the periodical responded by crafting a periodical that served present-day Northerners and future ones.

## CONCLUSION

As publishing pioneers, the editors of *Harper's Weekly* not only had to define what a national periodical was but also had to engineer ways to make the new genre popular, profitable, and sustainable. *Harper's Weekly* primed readers to have certain expectations about what the genre would include and what that content would be like in terms of quality, reach, and posterity. The periodical was as much selling the idea of a national publication as it was selling the content within its pages; the editors were not attempting to woo a preexisting audience but were instead creating a new one that desired a national periodical. The team had to convince readers across the country that a national periodical was worth adding to their reading lists and did so by producing content that attracted the widest base of readers possible.

The editors were in the early stages of sorting out how to reach a national audience when the sectional crisis increased in intensity until the nation itself threatened to break apart. Without surviving editorial notes and records, it is difficult to know exactly how the editors of *Harper's Weekly* planned to grow their periodical in the face of this challenge, but analyzing articles and illustrations reveals that creating and serving a national audience guided the *Harper's Weekly* content. First, the Dred Scott decision of 1857 shows a time when an untested, tentative *Harper's Weekly* remained largely aloof from the decision, attempting to avoid the controversy as much as possible. It is unclear if omitting Dred Scott resulted more from the fact that the periodical did not yet know how to cover such controversial events or from a conscious decision not to cover the ruling, but the effect was the same: by leaving out the prolonged and complicated trial, the magazine signaled to readers that *Harper's Weekly* would not juxtapose weighty, complex legal cases with flashy current events.

Staying outside of a conversation, however, was sometimes too risky since readers expected a stance from what became a leading news periodical.

The coverage of John Brown's 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry shows a time when *Harper's Weekly* engaged in controversy, echoing the dominant opinion that John Brown was a villainous invader. The damning language reflected the majority opinion of their readers while writing off the small contingent of his abolitionist supporters who might have subscribed to *Harper's Weekly*. The coverage showed readers that moments of visible violence and tangible drama that occurred on the national stage would be integral to the publication. The difference between John Brown's raid and Dred Scott's trial in part resulted from the enticing narrative structure of the raid, but more important was the fact that the nation could largely agree that John Brown was a crazed scoundrel.

Just a year later, Lincoln's election amplified Southerners' threats of disunion. The editors worked to secure South Carolinians as part of their national readership even as the state rapidly marched towards secession. They flooded the periodical with content about South Carolina that underscored the state's contributions to and relationship with the Union without explicitly incriminating the Southern leaders working to secede. In these articles, the editors made liberal use of illustrated content. Images rather than words gave the periodical the chance to express complex ideas in a palatable way, allowing both realistic depictions and symbolism to do the work of explaining the country's conditions rather than the words of the *Harper's Weekly* team.

Despite the editors' attempts to show the value of the Union, a drastic shift in circumstances—secession, the start of the war, and the subsequent loss of Southern readers—caused the editors to change the way they covered the nation. Their goal of having the greatest number of readers possible remained the same, but now these readers were only in the Union and were engaged in a war effort. All the small tweaks the editors made are part of one larger change: prioritizing record-keeping. Valuing timelessness over timeliness was an especially odd choice for a period when exigencies of war made timely news a high priority, but the maneuver allowed the periodical to capitalize on its comparatively slow print schedule and continue to position their publication as more than an ephemeral newspaper. The periodical constructed a narrative of the war by placing stories—both fictional and nonfictional—about the war in a collection built to last beyond the week's news cycle. The editors again altered readers' expectations, this time encouraging them to value comprehensive coverage of battles molded into a stable, reliable record from a weekly publication instead of hasty news updates.

*Harper's Weekly*, part of the “magazine mania” of the mid-nineteenth century, represents the early stages of regular, timely, and powerful national media in the United States (Lupfer 249). With each issue, the editors of *Harper's Weekly* conditioned readers to have certain expectations about what a national weekly periodical would and would not cover, making them true arbiters of the genre. Their content shaped the audience for national publications, paving the way for a thriving magazine market in the 1870s and eventually mass-market national periodicals in the 1890s. Reading *Harper's Weekly* with a full understanding of these commercial dynamics—the national aspirations and economic realities—is crucial. Such a perspective allows a researcher to look beyond the eye-catching cartoons and sappy serial fiction and fully appreciate the periodical as the complex but “rich treasury for the historical investigator” that it is (Mott 469).

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