

A Tale of Two Brothers: John and Moses Brown

An essay based on the book, Sons of Providence, by Charles Rappleye

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Teaching American History Seminar

Sept. 22, 2010

It snowed last year too: I made a snowman and my brother knocked it down and I knocked my brother down and then we had tea.

-Dylan Thomas

This is the story of two brothers set against the transformative historical backdrop of the colonial era and the American Revolution. In Sons of Providence, Charles Rappleye chronicles the divergent paths taken by brothers John and Moses Brown in eighteenth and early nineteenth century Rhode Island. It is a striking account of brothers on opposite sides of key political and moral issues of the time, who managed to remain close until the end of their lives. It is a story of deep moral, philosophical, and political division, much of it played out in public.

John Brown was the elder of Moses by two years. They were born to a Providence mercantile family; their father James engaged in the slave trade, along with other ventures. Rhode Island captains came to be known as “Rum Men,” rum being the export most prized on the African Coast (Rappleye, p. 12).

The boys’ father died the year Moses was born, and their uncle Obadiah became a father figure who guided them to taking their place in the family business. Their formal schooling ended at age 13 and they went to work at Obadiah’s countinghouse (p. 20). Obadiah and his nephews owned more than sixty vessels and, while the slave trade was never the primary concern of the family business, the family maintained an active interest in the slave trade (p. 21). The Browns, by the mid-eighteenth century, had become the leading family of Providence (p. 22).

Slavery at this time was an accepted part of life in the North as well as the South. It was common for those of means to have slaves working in homes and workshops. Few questioned

the institution, including Quakers. The Browns had slaves as well, while growing up and as adults. In fact, slavery was more prevalent in Rhode Island than in most of New England, and in Providence, slaveholding was a mark of the elite (pp. 56-57). In time, however, the question of slavery would sorely test the brothers' bond, as well as raise fundamental questions of liberty in the early republic.

The later political and moral differences between the brothers likely stemmed from core character differences. Both brothers were short, just over five feet tall, yet John was large in girth, while Moses was slim. John was gregarious and a big talker, Moses was a quiet listener. John, strong of ego, sought out conflict, while the humble Moses sought conciliation. In regard to religion, John rebelled against "disciplined pieties," while Moses was comfortable with moral leaders. Business was John's primary concern, while Moses later left the family business for spiritual pursuits (p. 25). Their family business was a success: "...together they presided over the largest shipping concern in Providence, the largest chocolate mill in the colony, and the largest candle manufacturing in North America" (p. 28). Leading quiet lives together running the family business was not to be. The events of the time not only inflamed the colonies and the young nation, but seared the bond of the brothers.

As conflict heated up between England and its colonies, the family business saw only modest profits. Influenced by the success of the Newport slave traders, the brothers decided to diversify their interests and entered anew into the slave trade (p. 52). Moses, many years later, said it was John who persuaded he and his other brothers to engage in the slave trade, based on "his love of money and anxiety to acquire it" (p. 54). There is a running theme of John's being motivated by money and power and justifying his actions in their pursuit.

Rappleye notes that in all of the Brown brothers' correspondence relating to their slave ship, *The Sally*, there is no commentary on deaths and horrific conditions aboard, just tallies. This does not seem surprising since slavery was an accepted institution and, to many, slaves were considered less than human. This was business.

What changed between the brothers? It appears that when Moses' newborn daughter died in 1768, he succumbed to bouts of depression and stopped working at the family business. Also, the firm was diversifying even further, into whaling and iron production, creating more demands on the partners, more than Moses was prepared to handle. John, meanwhile, believed that the course to true wealth lay through Africa (p. 77).

John wound up heading out on his own. The shipping ventures broke up the family business (p. 79). The other brothers had opted out of the slave trade, but as of yet, it seemed as if the morality of slavery had not been discussed openly. Moses, in particular, was moving farther away from John in his quest for spiritual peace, which only intensified as time wore on (p. 93). Moses would soon experience another tragedy, hastening this process.

In 1773, Moses' wife, Anna, died after a long illness. In her last days, Moses turned to God, but left the family church, and became a Quaker. He thought Anna's death was punishment for his sins, as a slaveholder and, through the family business, as a slave trader. He then committed himself to the eradication of slavery, saying:

"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" (p. 133).

In freeing his slaves, Moses said: "I no longer consider you as slaves, or myself as your master, but your friend" (p. 133) He also helped them secure employment and fair wages, and

he handled and invested their surplus wages. To atone for his self-perceived sins, Moses did what he could as an individual, but soon began to extol abolition. He became an early leader of the abolition movement. He lobbied Quakers to free their slaves, promoted abolition in print, and worked with Stephen Hopkins on a bill to ban the slave trade in Rhode Island. To get around the idea of confiscating “property” of slaveholders, he led a petition drive endorsing manumission at age 21 for slaves born in Rhode Island (pp. 144-147). One can only imagine how his brother John viewed Moses’ newfound crusade. Perhaps out of brotherly loyalty, John signed the petition, but he continued to deal in slaves, and took steps to hide it (p. 147). Yet, it would not be long before John would become a vocal opponent of Moses’ mission.

The brothers would also experience division in their views of the fledgling American Revolution. John, motivated by the pursuit of wealth, used the American Revolution to his advantage. He became an early “defense contractor,” making contracts for supplies and munitions, including forging cannon, for the American war effort (p. 200). This became a lucrative business and he prospered during the war, while many others did not (p. 210). Yet, only a week into the revolution, John was imprisoned for leading a raid on British ships and ferrying supplies to the Continental Army (p. 155). Moses, who was not gung-ho about the war like his brother, not being motivated by personal gain, worked to free his brother. He met with General Gage in Boston and secured John’s release on the following condition: The brothers were to sign a pledge that they would lobby the General Assembly in Rhode Island to intercede between the Patriots in Massachusetts and the British forces in Boston (p. 161). John, however, did not hold up his end of the bargain for long. He soon underwrote an armed expedition against Britain, and Moses was mortified (p. 165).

The brothers' differences were exacerbated by the Revolution. While John was a fighting Patriot, motivated by personal gain, Moses was a conscientious objector who risked being labeled a British sympathizer (p. 155). Yet, Moses demonstrated courage by braving enemy lines to try to free his brother. This shows that their family ties transcended their personal differences.

Moses continued his mission to abolish the slave trade. In "Observations and Historical Remarks upon the Slave Trade," he described the horrific conditions of the Middle Passage for those ripped from their homeland. He petitioned the Rhode Island General Assembly to end slavery, highlighting the cruelty and inhumanity of slavery (p. 169). Making a connection between the colonists' fight for freedom, he quoted Stephen Hopkins: "Liberty is the greatest blessing that men enjoy, and slavery is the heaviest curse that human nature is capable of" (p. 170).

During the war, Moses was opposed to separation from England. He worked, instead, to lead relief efforts to help those dispossessed by the war. He said: "We ought to keep an eye to a peaceable union and not think of Independency" (p. 175). The Revolution characterized the brothers as polar opposites. Moses was motivated by peace and helping others; John was motivated by making money and used the war to his advantage. By the end of the war, John had emerged as the richest man in Rhode Island (p. 211). Moses, too, was successful in his relief efforts, making a name for himself as a Quaker leader, a man of action, to help those impacted by the war, Quaker and non-Quaker alike.

Rhode Island would become the last state to swear allegiance to the new republic. One leader of the opposition was John Brown, still motivated by self interest, and refusing to be

infringed upon by “another authority” (p. 216). Thomas Paine criticized the leaders of the opposition, writing: “... [the merchants] who have self-interest in the matter and who, with a very profitable trade pay very little taxes in proportion...by their present opposition, are drawing themselves away from the common burdens of the country, and throwing them upon the shoulders of others” (p. 221). When the new country needed to band together, John was still motivated by his own interests, just as he had been during the war.

Moses continued to struggle with the guilt of his early association with the slave trade. He said this had led to “the most uneasiness and has left the greatest impression and stain upon my mind of any if not all my other conduct in life” (p. 224). He would have been dismayed to see the slave trade, which had diminished greatly during the war, revived post-war. He again petitioned the Rhode Island Assembly for a more comprehensive anti-slavery legislation. He called for gradual emancipation and a strict ban on any resident taking part in the slave trade. Using the language of the Revolution, he said: “... now that America has awakened to the ‘blessings of liberty,’ slavery represented ‘a national evil, with accumulated guilt’” (p. 226). It is likely he was referring to his own guilt as well.

It is at this point that the brothers’ political and moral differences became glaringly public. John took the floor of the Assembly as the leader of the opposition to Moses’ petition. This is interesting because John was no longer participating in the slave trade. Yet, he said: “... now is the time to fight for the prerogatives of the merchants” (p. 228). He went on to justify the institution of slavery, saying that slavery in America was preferable to slavery in Africa or in the West Indies. He did not address, nor would he accept, that slavery was an inhumane practice, wherever it occurred. The Assembly did not approve a ban on slave trading, but did

approve gradual emancipation. Moses accused the “triumph of interest and influence over the justice of the subject” (p. 230).

One can only imagine the conversations at the family dinner table, if the brothers chose ever to dine together. One would think their relationship had to be strained considering their vocal opposition to each other’s views played out in the public arena. Moses, on a mission to eradicate the evils of slavery, faced no greater opposition in Rhode Island than his own brother, who justified slavery and was motivated by economic considerations. John, in fact, returned to the slave trade in 1786, during a time of sluggish profits. Moses wrote a letter to John emphasizing the moral issue, but in an effort to reach John’s sensibility, also mentioned that “slave voyages often failed to return a profit” (p. 239). John countered that slaves were better off in America and that “all the estates that have been acquired” in Newport had been won through slaving (p. 240). One can hardly expect Moses to respond, “Oh, well, if it’s a matter of a acquiring a fine estate, then by all means, continue the slave trade.” This correspondence shows how fundamentally at odds the brothers were.

Meanwhile, the delegates of the Constitutional Convention were meeting in Philadelphia. Moses saw this as an opportunity to address the issue of slavery, of freedom for all. He was frustrated by the convention’s objective to, above all other issues, solidify and unite the new nation, thus maintaining the status quo of slavery. Slavery was a highly divisive topic, especially regionally. Moses said: “... instead of extending humanity and good will to [the Africans], the convention has I think very unhappily wounded the cause of liberty and the rights of man” (p. 246). Using the language of the revolutionaries, the “rights of man” did not apply to those enslaved.

John Brown, meanwhile, carried on a letter-writing campaign in favor of slavery, commending the Constitution. He wrote that slavery was “right, just, and lawful, and consequently practiced every day” and therefore enjoyed the protection of the Constitution (p. 261). Thus began a war of words in the newspapers between John, who used the pseudonym “Citizen” and his brother Moses. John accused Moses of hypocrisy for owning an estate built by slave labor and said that if Moses were to sell even a part of his estate he could buy the freedom of every slave in Providence (p. 267). John even ridiculed Moses’ quest for spiritual atonement. Yet, Moses maintained ties with his brother and never rebuked him for his public attacks (p. 271). This is the striking aspect of the brothers’ relationship, that even amid vitriol and public attacks, they never became estranged.

The brothers’ separate agendas took the national stage. After Congress banned the slave trade, John sent out another slave ship in direct violation of the law. The Providence Abolition Society sought charges against him. In a letter to Moses, John vowed to rally political and popular support in a bid to repeal the law (p. 305). Moses was torn between his allegiances to the Society and to his brother. He, in Quaker fashion, urged John to recognize the “evil business” of the slave trade (p. 306). The suit against John eventually failed.

John won election to Congress in 1799. Regarding slaves as personal property, he was a supporter of the Fugitive Slave Act, and warned of division between North and South (p. 321). In fact, he directly opposed legislation, written by Moses, barring participation in the slave trade: “Why should we see Great Britain getting all the slave trade to themselves? Why may not our country be enriched by that lucrative traffic?” (p. 322).

John Brown died in 1803, while Moses went on to live another thirty-three years, dying shortly before his 98th birthday. The brothers remained close, even reuniting in a business venture, the establishment of a local bank, in the late eighteenth century. Perhaps their greatest legacy was the founding of Rhode Island College, which later became Brown University.

This was an extraordinary relationship between two brothers who publicly advocated opposing views on key issues of the time, most notably, the issue of slavery, throughout much of their adult lives. One has to wonder if such political and moral battles stemmed from a deeper sense of insecurity and competition on the part of one or both brothers. Moses, for example, had been treated more like a son by their uncle, Obadiah, and was rewarded as such in his will, unlike John. One wonders if John resented this and, feeling insecure, went out of his way to publicly oppose his brother's stand on moral and political issues. As Rappleye states: "Moses made abolition of slavery the defining struggle of his life so John chose to make the defense of the slave trade the centerpiece of his public life and integral to his legacy" (p. 324). The slave trade was never at the center of John's business interests; it was one of many, and it was sporadic, yet he chose to publicly lambaste his brother through print and in speeches.

Because Moses' deep commitment to his faith and moral principles appears undeniably genuine, one must look to John to try to understand where the vitriol came from. It is clear John was motivated by financial success and power; that is who he was. Yet, it was not enough to go about his business; he continually took on the role of agitator to his brother's beliefs. Moses, perhaps more forgiving, managed to rise above while clearly being troubled by his brother's action and values. Had it existed at the time, perhaps family therapy would have

helped the brothers. John, however, not one to give in or acknowledge that he was wrong, probably would not have gone anyway.

This tale of two brothers played out during an extraordinary time when Americans were dealing with questions of human rights and liberty. They were, in a way, a microcosm of what was happening on a larger scale: one brother for the Revolution, one opposed. One brother advocated for slavery, one against. The striking reality in this story is that as oppositional as they became, they remained brothers to the end. It is a hopeful story of conciliation, forgiveness, and the bonds of family.

