

Public Is Invited to Symposium on John Brown on October 17 at STCC;
150th Anniversary of Raid on Harpers Ferry

“If any one man ignited the American Civil War, it was abolitionist John Brown, who lived in Springfield in from 1847 until 1851,” says John Gately, retired chair of the English Department at Springfield Technical Community College. Gately is one of the organizers of a symposium to be held at STCC on Saturday, October 17, the 150th anniversary of that fateful raid on Harpers Ferry. The public is invited to attend this event, free of charge.

The title of the symposium, *The Sword of the Lord and of Gideon: John Brown and the Coming of the Civil War*, refers to Brown’s favorite hymn, *Blow Ye the Trumpet, Blow*. The all-day event will outline John Brown’s intentions and actions, and will provide a look at Springfield and the United States in the 1840s and 1850s.

The symposium at STCC will begin at 9:00 a.m., in the seventh floor conference area of Scibelli Hall. The keynote speaker will be David S. Reynolds, author of the best-selling biography, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*. Reynolds is Distinguished Professor of English and American Studies at the Graduate Center and Baruch College of the City University of New York, and an expert on the culture and literature of the nineteenth century.

John Brown in Springfield, MA

“Springfield is where John Brown expands on the crucial anti-slavery work for which he is known,” explains Dr. Arlene Rodriguez, Dean of the School of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences at STCC.

John Brown and his family moved to Springfield in 1847. In a sequence of occupations, Brown was at that time working for a wool merchant, and hoped to establish a distribution method to expand the market for raw wool. Although the company failed, the years Brown spent in Springfield are seen by scholars as pivotal to his deepening involvement in the abolitionist movement. In November of that year, Brown met slavery’s most renowned critic, Frederick Douglass, who interrupted a speaking tour to meet him in Springfield.

In 1851, responding to the Fugitive Slave Law, Brown founded a black self-defense organization in Springfield called the League of Gileadites. The name referenced a hymn and the story of Gideon in the Book of Judges. The intent of the League was to arm local black men and women for self-defense. Springfield, and communities statewide, voted to defy the federal law, which required officials and citizens in free states to arrest anyone suspected of being a runaway slave. Brown’s raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, had a similar aim: to seize the weapons and arm the slaves in their own defense.

Also speaking at the symposium will be Dinah Mayo-Bobee, Professor of African-American History at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, who will discuss the controversial Pottawatomie Affair carried out by Brown and his followers in Kansas.

Richard Colton, historian at the Springfield Armory National Historic Site, will speak about John Brown’s raid as well as the destruction of Harpers Ferry a year and a half later, which

made Springfield Armory the only federal arsenal. Professor Gately will organize a small display and lead a discussion on items from his Abolitionist Collection, including some items related to John Brown. In addition, a local choir will perform several of Brown's favorite hymns.

A book sale and signing by David Reynolds will follow. Tours of the National Historic Site will also be available.

Pre-registration would be appreciated, and can be done by emailing Professor Gately at Gately@stcc.edu. Sponsors of the event are STCC and its School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

This symposium is the latest event at STCC celebrating local history. A conference in 2007 and a 2008 two-day event both focused on Daniel Shays' Rebellion, which took place on this site on January 25, 1787. A website on the Rebellion, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, presents the causes and results of the rebellion, including its influence on establishing the Constitution of the United States. A Ford Foundation grant created a website and course on Our Plural History, celebrating the contributions of the ethnic groups who settled in Greater Springfield. The annual Rosa Parks Day event at STCC includes guest speakers and receptions, including honoring Springfield-area civil rights activists.

"We are committed to educating our students and the community in the role that our city and its residents have played in American history," said Dr. Rodríguez.

The STCC event will be followed by a related event on John Brown, on Sunday, October 18th at the D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts, in conjunction with an exhibition at the new Museum of Springfield History on *John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, and the Civil War*.