



# BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

## Mahala Doyle: Witness to the 1856 Pottawatomie Creek Massacre in Kansas And her Letter to John Brown in 1859

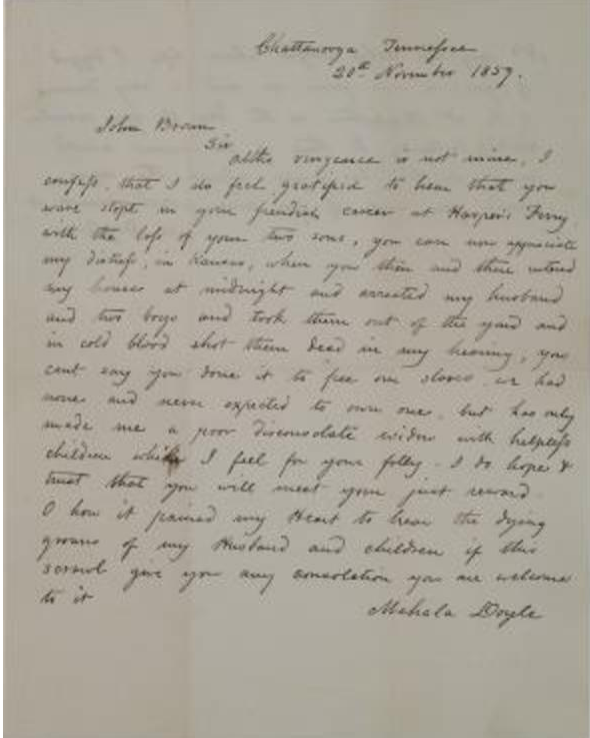
By Gloria Swift, Historian BGES

Last week we learned about John Doyle, who, at sixteen years old was a witness to John Brown's massacre at Pottawatomie Creek in Kansas on the night of May 24, 1856.

John's mother had also been a witness, and in fact had begged Brown for John's life. Shortly after the murders of her husband and sons, Mahala, afraid for her own life and those of her remaining children, packed everything up and fled to Missouri. While in Missouri, she was contacted and asked to provide an affidavit about her experience in Kansas for an official investigation into the troubles there by Congress.

On June 7, 1856 she appeared before the Justice of the Peace of Jackson County, Missouri and dictated her testimony (edited; in part): *"I am the widow of the late James P. Doyle; that we moved into the Territory, that is, my husband, myself, and children moved into the Territory of Kansas (from Chattanooga, TN) some time in November, A. D. 1855, and settled on Mosquito creek, about one mile from its mouth, and where it empties into Pottawatomie creek, in Franklin county; that on Saturday, the 24th day of May, A. D. 1856, about 11 o'clock at night, after we had all retired... we were all in bed, when we heard some persons come into the yard and rap at the door and call for Mr. Doyle, my husband This was about 11 o'clock on Saturday night of the 24th of May last. My husband got up and went to the door. Those outside inquired for Mr. Wilkson [sic], and where he lived. My husband told them that he would tell them. Mr. Doyle, my husband, opened the door, and several came into the house, and said that they were from the army. My husband was a pro-slavery man. They told my husband that he and the boys must surrender, they were their prisoners. These men were armed with pistols and large knives. They first took my husband out of the house, then they took two of my sons: the two oldest ones, William and Drury, out...My son John was spared, because I asked them in tears to spare him. In a short time afterwards I heard the report of pistols... My husband and two boys...did not come back any more. I went out next morning in search of them, and found my husband and William, my son, lying dead in the road near together, about two hundred yards from the house. My other son I did not see any more until the day he was buried...They were buried the next day. On the day of the burying I saw the dead body of Drury. Fear of myself and the remaining children induced me to leave the home where we had been living. We had improved our claim a little. I left all and went to the State of Missouri".*

Shortly after her testimony Mahala and her family moved back to Chattanooga Tennessee to try and put their lives back together. Three and a half years later, in 1859, Mahala learned of Brown's actions and arrest at Harper's Ferry, his trial and eventual fate.



Letter from Mahala Doyle (Tennessee) to John Brown(Virginia), November 20, 1859. Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC07590

John Brown ca. 1856

On November 20, 1859, shortly before Brown's execution, Mahala sat down to write John Brown a letter:

John Brown Care of the Jailer Commander of the Army Charles Town. at Harper's Ferry

John Brown

Sir

Altho vengence [sic] is not mine, I confess, that I do feel gratified to hear that you were stopt in your fiendish career at Harper's Ferry, with the loss of your two sons, you can now appreciate my distress, in Kansas, when you then and there entered my house at midnight and arrested my husband and two boys and took them out of the yard and in cold blood shot them dead in my hearing, you cant say you done it to free our slaves, we had none and never expected to own one, but has only made me a poor disconsolate widow with helpless children while I feel for your folly. I do hope & trust that you will meet your just reward. O how it pained my Heart to hear the dying groans of my Husband and children if this scrawl give you any consolation you are welcome to it

Mahala Doyle

my son John Doyle whose life I begged of (you) is now grown up and is very desirous to be at Charleston on the day of your execution would certainly be there if his means would permit it, that he might adjust the rope around your neck if gov: wise would permit it

M Doyle.

John Brown was hanged on December 2, 1859. I hope that Mahala received peace at last, having been able to give John Brown her last word.



John Brown, "The Tragic Prelude," displayed at the Kansas State Capitol in Topeka. Painted by John Steuart Curry, ca. 1938-1940

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