Thomas Hovenden,

The Last Moments of John Brown (detail) 1884

Historians believe that Hovenden read the following account in the New York Tribune, from December 5, 1859:

"On leaving the Jail, John Brown had on his face an expression of calmness and serenity characteristic of the patriot who is about to die with a living consciousness that he is laying his life down for the good of his fellow creatures. As he stepped out of door a black woman, with her little child in her arms, stood near his way. The twain were of the despised race for whose emancipation and elevation to the dignity of children of God he was about to lay down his life. He stopped for a moment in his course, stooped over, and with the tenderness of one whose love is as broad as the brotherhood of man, kissed [the child] affectionately."

Hovenden could have also read "Brown of Osawatomie" by John Greenleaf Whittier.

Historians do not think that the incident is true, however. The article was meant to inflame readers - especially northern abolitionists. In the accounts of Brown's execution, civilians - like the woman holding the baby - were not permitted in the area.

Source: <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning_history/brown/hovdenden.cfm>