

Harpers Ferry

NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK WEST VIRGINIA · MARYLAND

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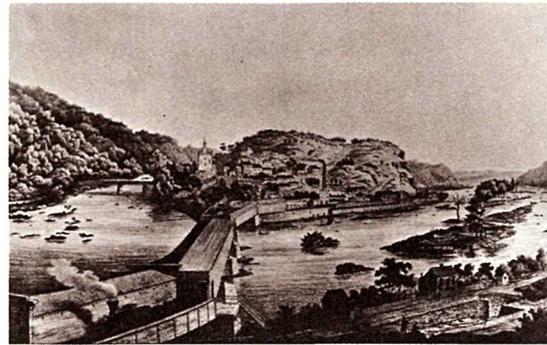


National Parks Centennial 1872-1972

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1972-483-433/27
REPRINT 1972

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National Park Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



Harpers Ferry, situated on a point of land at the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers and dominated by the Blue Ridge Mountains, was a beckoning wilderness in the early 1700's. By mid-19th century it was an important arms-producing center, with mills, armory, arsenal, and other buildings, and a transportation link between east and west. John Brown's raid in 1859 and the Civil War brought it into national prominence and eventual decline.

EARLY HISTORY

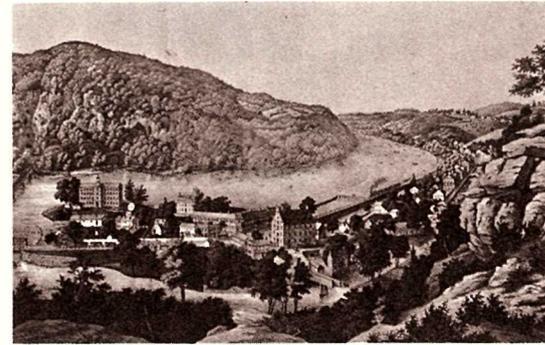
The first settler on the land later called Harpers Ferry was Peter Stephens, a trader, who came into this then remote area in 1733. Fourteen years later Robert Harper, a millwright and the man for whom the town is named, was so impressed with the site's natural beauty that he purchased it for his home. Harper established a ferry at the junction of the two rivers and later, seeing the waterpower potential, built a mill. The ferry and the mill have long since disappeared.

Within a century, Harpers Ferry developed from a tiny village to an industrialized community. In 1796 Congress, under the urging of President George Washington, established a gun factory here. The first arms were completed in 1801 and by 1810 production had increased to 10,000 muskets a year. The Hall Rifle Works, established under Government contract in 1819, turned out 1,000 breech-loading flintlock rifles—John Hall's own invention—using interchangeable parts. This was the first successful application of the principle that led to modern mass production.

The 20 buildings that comprised the U.S. Armory on the south bank of the Potomac River and the manufacturing plants on nearby Virginus Island testified to the town's expanding industrial activity. The development of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in the 1830's made the area an important transportation link between the Ohio Valley and the east. By mid-century Harpers Ferry was a growing community.

JOHN BROWN'S RAID

John Brown's raid in 1859 caught the quietly thriving town unawares and proved an ominous prelude to the tragic Civil War that followed 17 months later. Brown, an ardent aboli-



tionist fresh from bloody antislavery activities in Kansas, with 18 men, attacked the Federal Armory on the chilled, drizzly night of October 16, 1859. They seized several strategic points before the startled townspeople realized Brown's purpose. When the alarm spread and local citizens and State militia converged on the town, the raiders barricaded themselves in the armory fire enginehouse. A contingent of 90 marines, commanded by Col. Robert E. Lee and Lt. J. E. B. Stuart, reached Harpers Ferry late on October 17. Early the following day, the marines stormed the enginehouse, killed 10 of the raiders, and captured Brown, thus ending the short-lived attempt at insurrection.

Brown was tried in nearby Charles Town for murder, treason, and conspiring with slaves to commit treason. Found guilty, he was hanged on December 2, 1859, and his body taken to North Elba, N.Y., for burial. The abortive attack on Harpers Ferry increased tensions both north and south and further inflamed passions in the already divided Nation.

CIVIL WAR AND AFTER

The Civil War brought the near total destruction of Harpers Ferry's industrial potential. When Virginia seceded in April 1861, a large body of Virginia militia planned to seize the stockpile of guns and the machinery from the armory for the Confederacy, then badly in need of arms. The Federal soldiers assigned to guard the Government property retreated, but not before setting fire to the arsenal and armory, destroying the muskets, rifles, and machinery. The Virginia forces, however, did manage to seize vital arms-producing equipment which helped the South throughout the war and destroyed Harpers Ferry's principal industrial base. Other Confederate troops were hurried to the town but, in June, when they found it could not be held against a strong Union force, they moved out, demolishing the bridge over the Potomac and destroying everything that might prove useful to the enemy.

Harpers Ferry again felt the hand of war in September 1862, when the crucial Battle of Antietam was fought a few miles north of the town. Confederate Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, under orders from Gen. Robert E. Lee to capture the Union garrison commanded by Col. Dixon S. Miles, occupied the surrounding heights and, after a 2-day siege, compelled



the surrender of about 12,700 Union soldiers and much equipment. The victory released Jackson's troops to rejoin Lee at Sharpsburg in time to stop Gen. George B. McClellan's attack and allow the Confederate army to retreat safely into Virginia.

After Antietam, Harpers Ferry was occupied intermittently by Union or Confederate soldiers. Much damage resulted from troop movements through the town and from the occasional skirmishes that struck the area. The destruction of the community's industrial life was a blow from which it never fully recovered. Many people who had left because of the fighting returned after the war to begin life anew, but a series of devastating floods in 1870 and later in 1889 dashed all hopes for the town's economic revival. Today the old buildings of Harpers Ferry stand as mute witnesses to the epic events that once occurred in this now peaceful town.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The visitor center, where you can see exhibits and obtain information, is open daily. Hours vary according to season. A walking tour of Harpers Ferry and the automobile route to Bolivar Heights and other points of interest are shown on the maps.

Park trails include the Maryland Heights Trail, the Loudoun Heights Trail (which connects with the Appalachian Trail), and Jefferson Rock Trail. A picnic area is available on the shore across from the parking area; only charcoal fires in grills are allowed. Food and overnight accommodations are available in Harpers Ferry and vicinity.

All rocks, wildflowers, trees, and animals must be left in place and undisturbed so that others, too, may enjoy them. Gathering specimens or collecting souvenirs is not allowed. This protection is a matter of law and of good citizenship and consideration for others.

Park rangers are here to assist you and to enforce regulations.

ADMINISTRATION

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Box 117, Harpers Ferry, W. Va. 25425, is in immediate charge.

A WALKING TOUR OF HARPERS FERRY

1. **Stagecoach Inn (visitor center).** Once housing an inn operated by Maj. James Stephenson, this structure, built 1826-34 and now restored, serves as the park visitor center.
2. **Master Armorer's House.** This dwelling, built in 1859 as the home of the chief gunsmith of the Harpers Ferry Armory, has been restored and is now a museum where the story of gun-making is told.
3. **Arsenal Square.** Here can be seen remains of the small U.S. Arsenal and partially exposed burned muskets, destroyed when Federal forces burned the arsenal buildings in 1861.
4. **John Brown's Fort** was the Armory fire enginehouse used by John Brown for refuge during the abortive October 1859 raid.
5. **The Point,** where the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers meet, was the heart of the town during the Civil War. From here two other States can be seen—Maryland on the left, and Virginia beyond the first ridge on the right.
6. **The Stone Steps,** hand-carved at the turn of the 19th century into the natural rock, allowed access to the upper levels of the town. Today they are part of the pathway on your tour to the Harper House and Jefferson Rock.
7. **Harper House,** the oldest surviving structure in Harpers Ferry, was built by Robert Harper between 1775 and 1782. Now restored and refurnished in period pieces, it is open to visitors in summer.
8. **Marmion Row Houses.** These three buildings were erected between 1832 and 1850 and are part of the four structures comprising "Marmion Row." They have been restored to the pre-Civil War period.
9. **St. Peter's Catholic Church,** built in the 1830's and remodeled in the 1890's, is still in use today. It is not part of the park, but visitors are welcome during open hours.
10. **St. John's Episcopal Church** was first built in 1852 and is believed to have been used as a hospital and barracks during the Civil War. It was abandoned at the turn of the century and today only the ruins remain.
11. **Jefferson Rock.** Thomas Jefferson journeyed to Harpers Ferry in 1783 to view the splendid scenery and mountains from this point. He thought the view "stupendous" and "worth a voyage across the Atlantic."
12. **The Lockwood House** was built in 1848 as a home for the armory paymaster. In 1867, it became the first classroom and school building of newly opened Storer College, one of the earliest institutions to offer higher education to the American Negro.

