HARPERS FERRY
NATIONAL MONUMENT

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A scenic and historic town, famous for the John Brown Raid and as a strategic point during the Civil War.

At the scenic confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers in the Blue Ridge Mountains is Harpers Ferry, the site of important events from Colonial times to the Civil War. In 1859 it was the scene of the electrifying John Brown raid, an event of importance in bringing the Nation to civil war. Strategically important, Harpers Ferry changed hands many times during that war. Its capture by "Stonewall" Jackson in 1862 was a dramatic prelude to the great battle at Antietam Creek that ended the first Southern invasion of the North.

Early History

A trader named Peter Stephens, in 1733, was the first settler at the site of the future Harpers Ferry. Fourteen years later, in 1747, Robert Harper, a millwright, purchased "Peters Hole," as the place was called. He saw the possibilities of waterpower and established a mill and a ferry around which a small village grew bearing his name.

In 1796 Congress, during the Presidency of George Washington who knew the area, authorized the purchase of land there for the erection of a gun factory. The presence of waterpower, a supply of iron, extensive hardwood forests for making charcoal, and a watercourse to carry the finished product to Washington were the principal reasons for establishing a Federal armory at Harpers Ferry. The gun factory, in production before the end of 1796, was turning out 10,000 muskets a year by 1810. Nine years later, John Hall, a gunsmith from Maine working at the arsenal, received a contract from the Federal Government for the manufacture of a breech-loading flintlock rifle, and two new buildings on Virginius Island in the Shenandoah River were assigned for his use. Thus, in 1819, Hall's Rifle Works came into being. Two years later it was producing 1,000 rifles and muskets a month.

Providing one of the few water level routes through the Blue Ridge Mountains, Harpers Ferry gap early attracted the attention of transportation interests. The 1830's brought a spirited race between the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, being built from Washington, and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, from Baltimore, to reach Cumberland, and from there the Ohio Valley. The canal reached Harpers Ferry in November 1833 a little more than a year ahead of its rival, but only the railroad reached the Ohio Valley; the canal stopped at Cumberland.
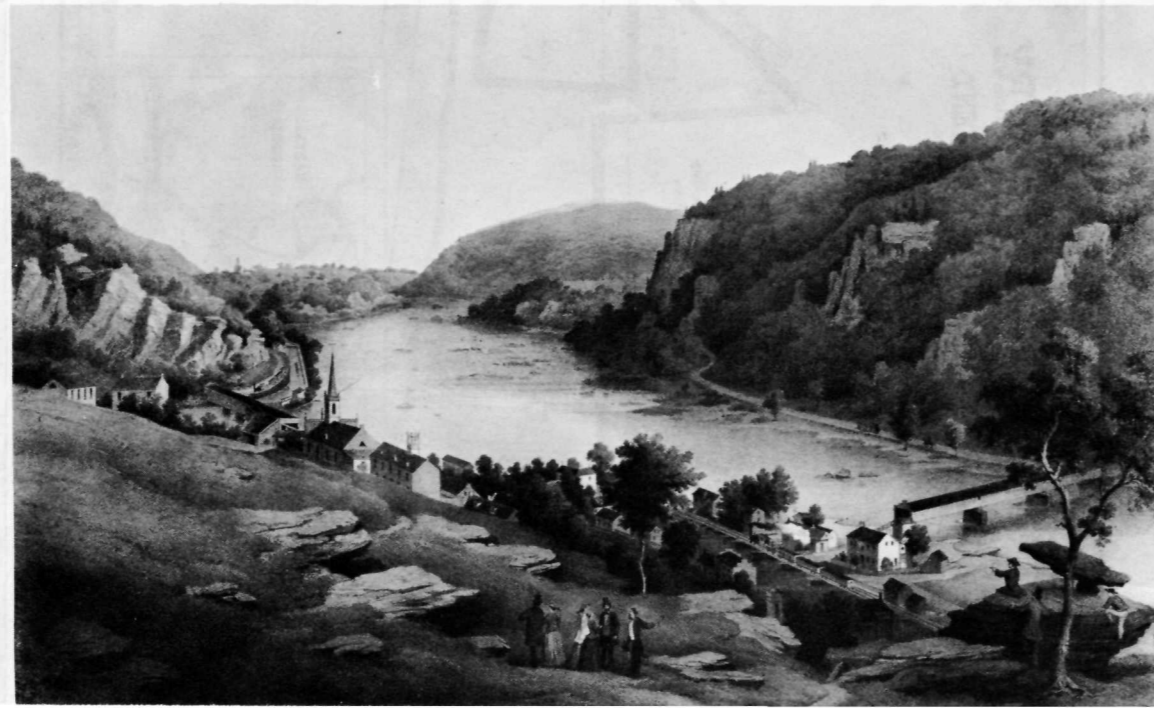
Thomas Jefferson, an early visitor to the locality, extolled the beauty of Harpers Ferry in his *Notes on Virginia.* "The passage of the Potomac through the Blue Ridge," he wrote, "is perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in nature . . . This scene is worth a voyage across the Atlantic."
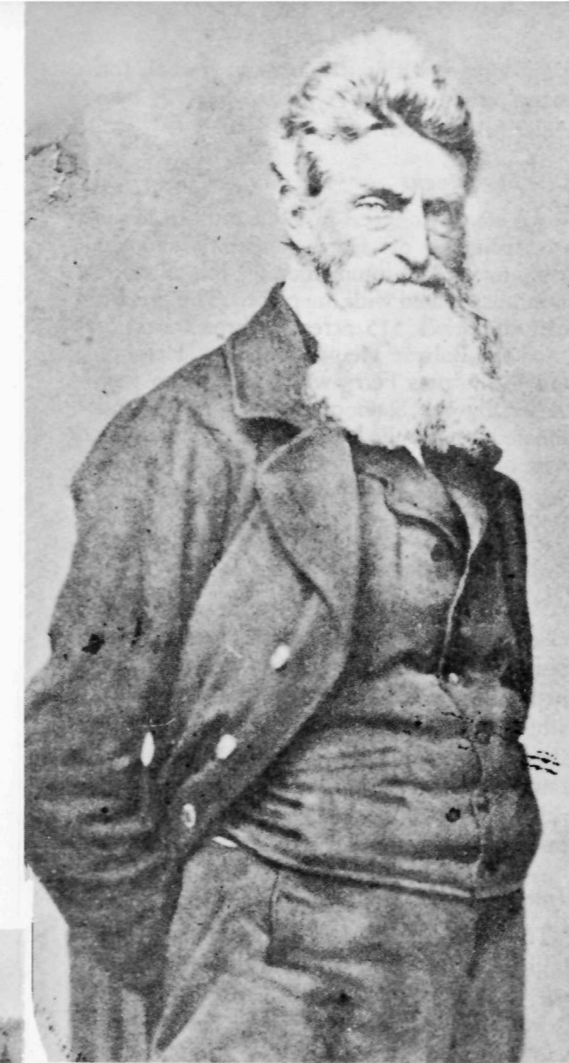
John Brown's Raid

Perhaps no more placid town than Harpers Ferry could have been found when suddenly in October 1859 John Brown's Raid focused the Nation's attention on it. John Brown, a native of Connecticut, had been an abolitionist all his life and in the years just past had been a leader in the bloody sectional strife in Kansas. Of stern religious bent, ardent to the point of fanaticism, John Brown had conceived a plan to liberate the slaves by violence and set up a free-Negro stronghold in the mountains. Brown chose Harpers Ferry as the point from which to start his operations, apparently because it was near the Mason-Dixon Line and at the head of the Shenandoah Valley and the mountains of Virginia offered a nearby hideout. He reached Harpers Ferry on July 3, and, with two of his sons, established a base of operations at the Kennedy Farm on the Chambersburg road some 5 miles northeast of the town. There during the summer he collected men, guns, and supplies.

On a Sunday night, October 16, John Brown set forth with 18 men and a wagonload of supplies for Harpers Ferry, leaving 3 men to guard the Kennedy House. At 10:30 p. m. the party seized the watchman at the bridge over the Potomac River and, soon thereafter, the arsenal and armory guards in the town. Brown then cut the telegraph wires and sent out parties to bring in slaves and hostages. An eastbound train arrived at the river after midnight, but the engineer, warned of the trouble, refused to cross the bridge until after daylight. Brown for some unexplained reason permitted the train to proceed. The engineer, upon arriving at Monocacy at 7 a. m., telegraphed the alarm.

In the meantime shooting began between the Brown party now barricaded in the Government arsenal buildings and some of the townspeople. Militia arrived from Charles Town, Va. (now West Virginia), 8 miles away, and, by noon, secured the bridge across the Potomac to Maryland. Ironically, a free negro named Heyward Shepherd, the station master, was the first person killed. During the day several persons were killed and wounded on both sides. At nightfall of the 17th, the survivors of Brown's party and their captive hostages and slaves had all taken refuge in the fire engine house of the armory. Only five of Brown's men remained unwounded. Two of his sons, Oliver and Watson, were badly wounded; one died during the night, the other later.

That night, Col. Robert E. Lee and Lt. J. E. B. ("Jeb") Stuart with 90 Marines arrived from Washington. The next morning, Tuesday, October 18, a party of Marines attacked the engine house. Using a heavy ladder to batter in the door of the building, the Marines thrust their way inside, bayoneting two men and capturing the others. John Brown himself was severely cut about the head in the action, but the wounds were not serious. Of Brown's party, 10 had been killed, 5 captured, 4 escaped; on the other side, 4 citizens, a free Negro, and 1 Marine were dead.

Amid great popular excitement, John Brown was brought to trial in nearby Charles Town a week after the raid. He was indicted for treason against Virginia and for "conspiring with slaves to commit treason and murder." Refusing to permit a plea of insanity, Brown was convicted and on November 2 sentenced to die a month later. In an eloquent statement he denied everything "but . . . a design on my part to free slaves." He felt no guilt. To "interfere" on behalf of God's "despised poor" was "no wrong, but right." Brown was hanged at Charles Town on December 2. Maj. Thomas J. Jackson, ("Stonewall" of Civil War fame) and his Virginia Military Institute artillery unit of 21 cadets with two howitzers were in the guard and had posts of honor directly in front of the gallows at the execution.

Those of Brown's associates who were captured were also tried, convicted, and hanged for treason.

In John Brown hanged, the North had a martyr; in John Brown's raid, the South saw an evil omen. Popular passion aroused by the event, North and South, made it increasingly difficult for moderates to find a common ground of compromise on which both sections could agree, and so maintain the Union. Before many months passed, men under arms would be marching to the tune of "John Brown's Body," and the once peaceful little town of Harpers Ferry would find itself a no man's land in a long and tragic civil war.

The engine house (John Brown's "fort") shortly after the war. *Courtesy, Bachrach.*

John Brown. *Courtesy, Library of Congress.*

Harpers Ferry from Jefferson Rock. From Beyer's Album of Virginia, 1857. *Courtesy, Library of Congress.*

Harpers Ferry in the Civil War

At the outset of the war, Virginia militia advanced on the town in April 1861, eager to obtain the machinery for manufacturing arms. The officer in charge thereupon destroyed the gun factory and a stand of 4,300 rifles and muskets. The Confederates salvaged all the equipment possible and removed it to places farther south where the Confederate government utilized it in the manufacture of arms. In this early period of the war, Col. Thomas J. Jackson with a body of troops held Bolivar Heights at Harpers Ferry for several weeks. On May 23, he seized 56 locomotives and more than 300 cars on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. Most of this equipment was taken to Martinsburg where it was burned and partially destroyed the next month. Later, multi-horse teams hauled 14 of these locomotives to Strasburg over the Valley Pike.

When Union troops removed a large supply of wheat from the mill on Virginius Island in the autumn of 1861, a Confederate

cavalry force raided the town and burned the mill. A few months later a sniper firing from a building in the town killed a Union scout, and in retaliation Union troops burned the entire "point" section of the waterfront.

September 1862 brought the first Confederate invasion of the North following victory in the battle of Second Manassas. Reaching Frederick on his way through Maryland toward Pennsylvania, General Lee decided to remove the threat to his rear and line of communications represented by the strong Union garrison at Harpers Ferry. In order to do this he decided to divide his army, sending part of it against Harpers Ferry while the main body pressed on toward Hagerstown. It was a daring plan, its success depending upon the Confederates ability to capture Harpers Ferry quickly and reunite in time to face Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan's Union army which was following them.

Even as the Confederate maneuver got under way, an unlooked-for blunder threatened its success. Shortly after noon of September 13, Pvt. B. W. Mitchell of F Company, 27th Indiana Volunteer Regiment picked up on his unit's bivouac ground at

Harpers Ferry, near the end of the war. Ruined armory buildings on the left.
Courtesy, Library of Congress.

Frederick, which it had just reached, a copy of General Lee's Special Order No. 191 ordering this Confederate maneuver. The order wrapped around three cigars had been dropped here where Maj. Gen. Daniel H. Hill's troops previously had bivouaced. Within the hour McClellan had the order and was thus alerted to the possibility of destroying first one and then the other of the separated parts of Lee's army. McClellan's effort to do this resulted in the battle of Antietam.

Lee sent three columns against Harpers Ferry: Maj. Gen. Thomas J. Jackson approached from the south; Maj. Gen. Lafayette McLaws invested Maryland Heights from the north; and Brig. Gen. John G. Walker approached from the east. Jackson reached the vicinity of Harpers Ferry on the south on September 12; the same day McLaws seized possession of Maryland Heights and emplaced his cannon there; Walker arrived at Loudon Heights a day later. Thus, on September 13, Col. Dixon S. Miles, in command of the Harpers Ferry garrison, found himself surrounded with Confederates on heights overlooking his positions at Camp Hill and Bolivar Heights.

Miles and his men withstood the Confederate artillery fire from across the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers on Maryland and Loudon Heights for 2 days, almost upsetting Lee's schedule for re-concentrating his army. Although the Union casualties were not heavy, Miles surrendered his garrison on the 15th, not knowing that if he held out a little longer a rescue force would arrive. A cannon shot from the Loudon Heights batteries mortally wounded Miles at the very end of the action. Approximately 11,500 men of the Harpers Ferry garrison were taken prisoners, 44 were killed, and 173 wounded. Col. B. F. Davis led his cavalry command over a pontoon bridge across the Potomac and escaped. Except for prisoners, Confederate casualties in the action were greater than the Union losses, incomplete returns indicating that they were in excess of 303 killed and wounded.

Immediately after the capitulation of the Union garrison, Jackson hurried off toward Sharpsburg to reinforce Lee in the battle of Antietam, leaving Maj. Gen. A. P. Hill to arrange the parole of the Union prisoners. Having hurriedly done that, Hill, in turn, rushed to Sharpsburg with his men and reached there at a critical moment in time to save Lee's army from threatened disaster in the battle of Antietam.

When Lee invaded the north a second time—in the 1863 campaign that led to Gettysburg—a Union garrison evacuated Harpers Ferry but held the strong system of fortifications that had been built on Maryland Heights the preceding year. The Confederates held Harpers Ferry briefly for the last time in the course of Lt. Gen. Jubal A. Early's raid against Washington in the summer of 1864.

At the end of the war Harpers Ferry was

a ghost town with mills, armory, arsenal, and many other buildings destroyed. It was never fully to recover.

The Monument

An act of Congress in 1944 authorized the establishment of Harpers Ferry National Monument to commemorate the historic events associated with the place. The present area comprises 515 acres in three tracts located on Bolivar Heights, Loudon Heights, and in Harpers Ferry which have been purchased by the State of West Virginia and donated to the Federal Government. The State of Maryland is in the process of acquiring part of Maryland Heights for addition to the monument.
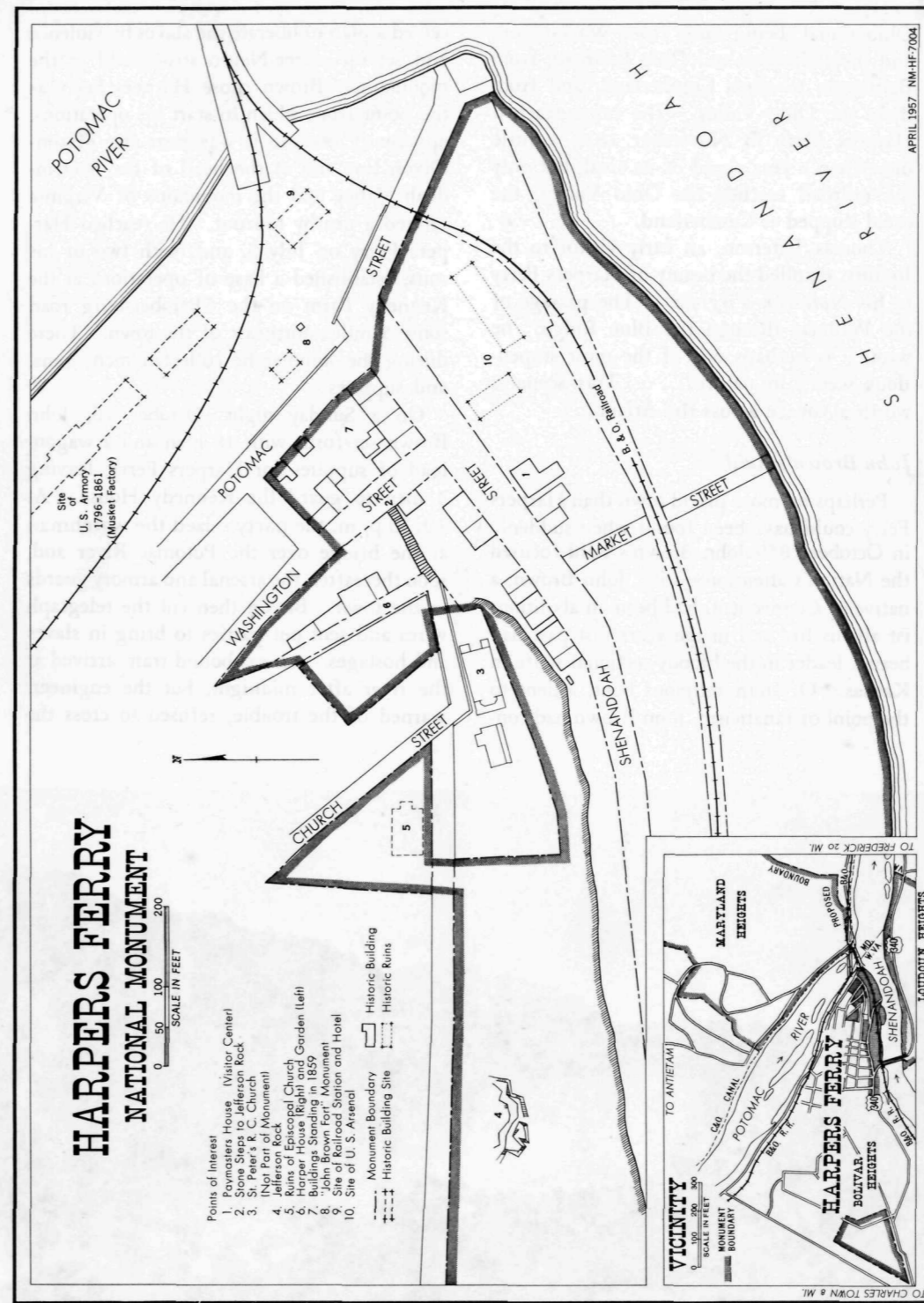
Points of Interest

A suggested walking tour of the downtown area of Harpers Ferry and the automobile routes to Bolivar Heights are shown on the map. There is as yet no development on either Loudon or Maryland Heights. "John Brown's Fort," moved three times, now stands on Storer College Campus. Several historical markers are at points of interest in the towns of Harpers Ferry and Bolivar.

How to Reach Harpers Ferry

The main line of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad west from Washington, and U.S. 340 between Frederick, Md., and Charles Town, W. Va., pass through Harpers Ferry National Monument.

Administration

Harpers Ferry National Monument is administered by the National Park Service of the U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Harpers Ferry, W. Va., is in immediate charge.
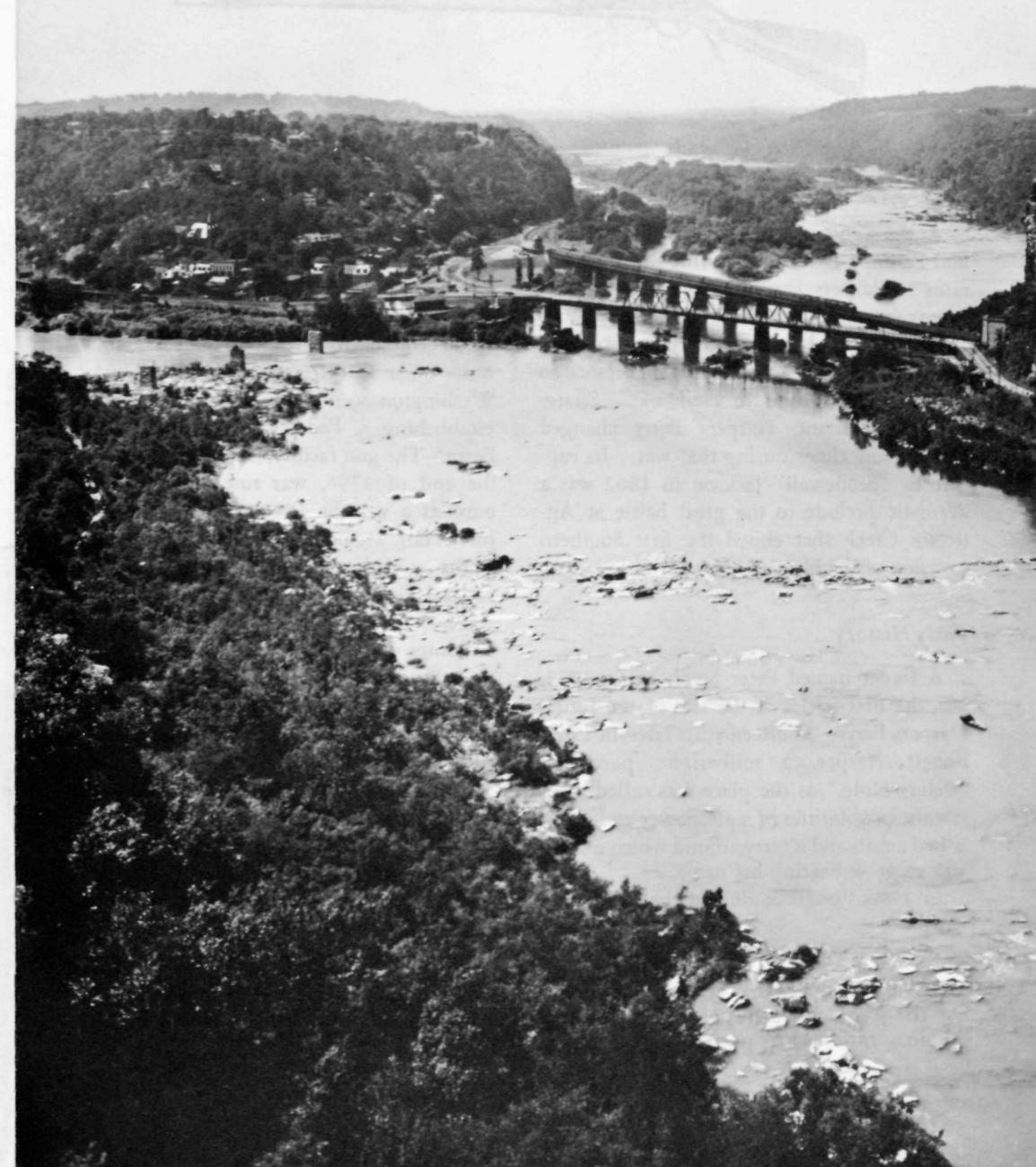
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POTOMAC RIVER

SHENANDOAH RIVER

SCALE IN FEET
0   50   100   200

Points of Interest
1. Paymasters House—Visitor Center
2. Stone Steps to Jefferson Rock
3. Site of St. John's Church
4. John Brown's Fort (Not Part of Monument)
5. Ruins of Episcopal Church
6. Arsenal Square (and Garden Bath)
7. Buildings Standing in 1859
8. John Brown Monument
9. Railroad Station and Hotel
10. Site of U.S. Arsenal

Monument Boundary
Historic Building
Historic Ruins
Historic Building Site

VICINITY
SCALE IN MILES

MARYLAND HEIGHTS
HARPERS FERRY
BOLIVAR HEIGHTS
POTOMAC RIVER
SHENANDOAH RIVER
LOUDON HEIGHTS

TO FREDERICK 20 MI.
TO CHARLES TOWN 6 MI.
TO ANTIETAM

(Cover) View looking west showing Potomac River, Shenandoah River confluence at left, and town of Harpers Ferry.

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