

Harpers Ferry

National Historical Park
West Virginia

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 1700s. By mid-19th century it was a town of some 3,000 inhabitants, an important arms-producing center, and a transportation link between east and west. John Brown's raid in 1859 and the Civil War thrust the town into national prominence. The destruction wrought by the war and repeated flooding was responsible for the town's eventual decline.

The first settler on the land later called Harpers Ferry was Peter Stephens, a trader, who came into this area in 1733. Fourteen years later, Robert Harper, a millwright and the man for whom the town is named,

settled here and established a ferry service at the junction of the two rivers. Later, seeing the waterpower potential, he built a mill. The ferry and the mill have long since disappeared.

Within a century, Harpers Ferry developed from a tiny village into an industrialized community. The town received its first real impetus in the 1790s when President George Washington urged Congress to establish a national armory here along the Potomac. The armory supported the economy of the town and encouraged the establishment of small industries on adjacent Virginus Island. The arrival of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in the 1830s assured Harpers Ferry of the economic success it was to enjoy well past mid-century.

Then came disaster. In October 1859 John Brown's raid jarred the peaceful town, and the civil war that followed 17 months later was to leave a path of destruction that wrecked the town's economy. The armory and arsenal buildings were burned in 1861 to keep them from falling into Confederate hands. Because of the town's geographical location and its railway system, Union and Confederate troop movements through Harpers Ferry were frequent, and soldiers of both armies occupied the town intermittently throughout the war. The largest military operation against Harpers Ferry occurred prior to the Battle of Antietam in September 1862 when Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's Confederate corps seized the town and captured the 12,700-man Union garrison commanded by Col. Dixon Miles.

Discouraged by continual war damage and the lack of employment, many townspeople moved away. When some of these returned after the war to begin life anew, any hopes they might have had for the town's economic revival were dashed by a series of devastating floods in the late 1800s. For years following, empty buildings stood in silent desolation and once-active industrial sites were slowly reclaimed by nature.

The one bright hope in the story of Harpers Ferry after the Civil War was the establishment of a normal school for the education of freed blacks. The first classroom of what was to become Storer College was located in the paymaster's house, an abandoned armory dwelling above the town. The college remained in operation until 1955.



In Harpers Ferry today history lies around any corner.



Streets, shops, houses, and public buildings appear much as they did when the town flourished and prospered in the mid-19th century.

Past and present mingle here to provide a sense of timelessness, of continuity, for visitors to the national historical park.



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Harpers Ferry Today

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park continues to undergo extensive restoration. As work on additional buildings is completed, the park will expand its programs of living history demonstrations, exhibits, and audio-visual presentations.

The best place to begin your visit is at the visitor center. It is open all year except Christmas and New Years Day. Feel free to ask questions about the park and surrounding area, and be sure to view the introductory slide program and exhibits on the park themes. Information on self-guiding and conducted walks is also available.

Most of the activities in the park are centered around the summer months, when employees in uniform or period clothing explain the significance of the town, and allow you to experience some of the mid-19th-century life styles. Conducted walks, demonstrations, and short talks by historians help you to visualize and understand the old armory complex, the John Brown Raid, and the mysterious ruins on Virginus Island. The appearance of "Union soldiers" will allow you to derive some sense of what military life was like in this river town, and to better understand the role Harpers Ferry played in the Civil War. Shopkeepers, businessmen, and townspeople, all dressed in period costume, provide, if only for an instant, the feeling that you are a part of the historic scene.

In the fall and spring, park activities are usually restricted to the weekends, but the visitor center and several of the historic buildings do remain open. Informational signs and audio stations help to enhance your visit. Current activities are posted on bulletin boards in the park and at the visitor center. A variety of hiking trails are located nearby.

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Box 65, Harpers Ferry, WV 25425, is in charge.

A word of caution. The early settlers used brick and natural stone when constructing steps and sidewalks. Take care—these are sometimes uneven or slippery. Pedestrians, especially children, should be cautious, as automobile traffic on the narrow streets is often very heavy. Mountain climbers should register at the ranger station before climbing the cliffs on Maryland Heights.

First aid is available at the Health Unit above the visitor center.

Beware the rivers. At low water they appear calm and peaceful. This is deceptive, however, as deep holes and swift undercurrents make them treacherous at any time of year. Also, the park does not conduct any analysis of the water; consequently, there are no frequent checks on pollutants. Swimming is not advised. Fishermen and boaters should wear life jackets.

Picnic areas and camping grounds are located in the immediate area of Harpers Ferry. There are none in the park itself. In addition to the several hiking trails within the park, the Appalachian Trail and C & O Canal Towpath are also within easy access. A few steps down a trail is an excellent way to free yourself in the summer, or on fall week-ends.

John Brown 1800-1859
John Brown, whose raid brought Harpers Ferry to national attention, was a native of Connecticut, had been an abolitionist all his life, and in recent years had been a leader in the bloody sectional strife in Kansas between pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces. Of stern religious bent, ardent to the point of fanaticism, he had conceived a plan to liberate slaves by violence and set up a free-Negro stronghold in the mountains of Maryland and Virginia.

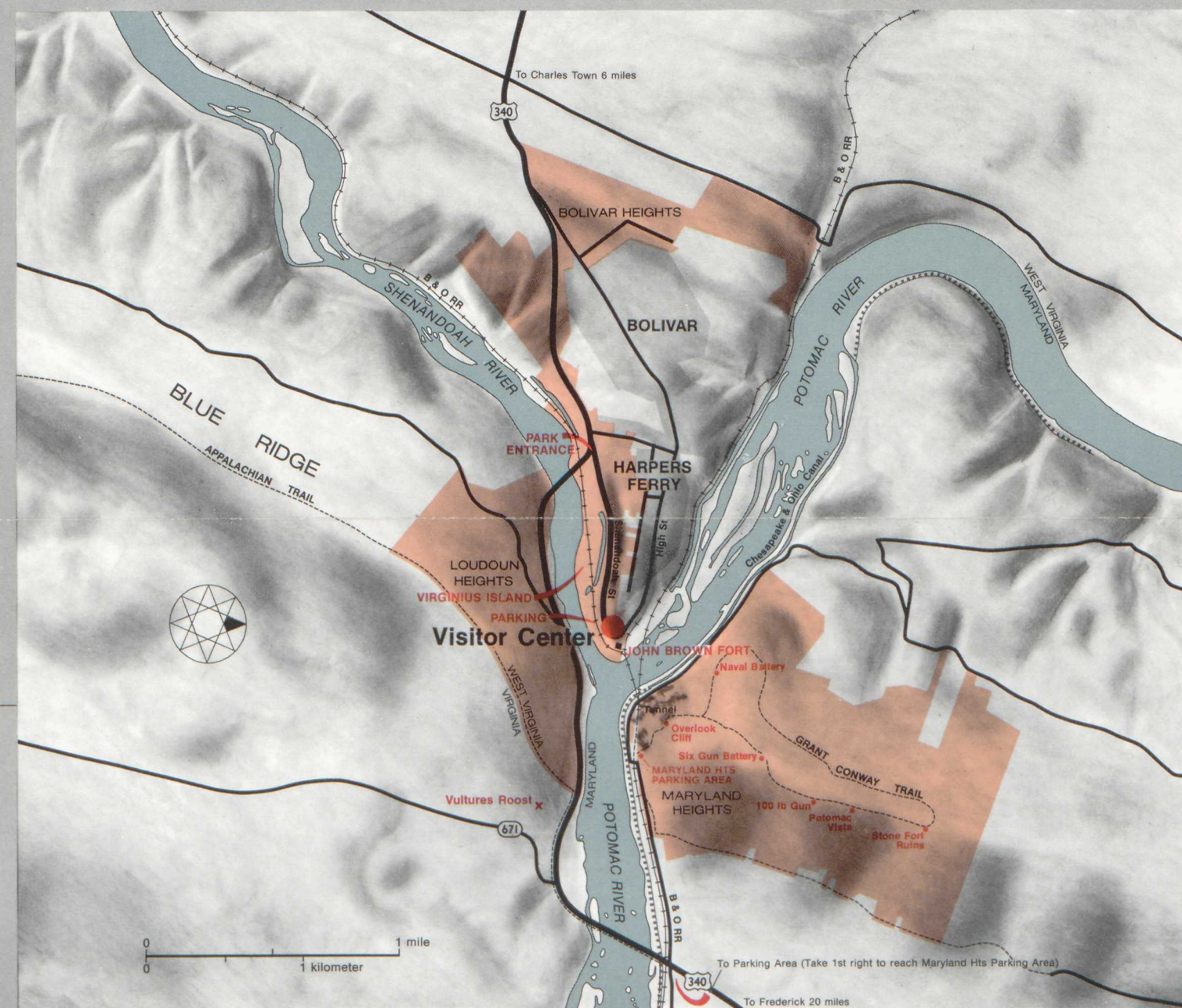


He fixed upon Harpers Ferry as the starting point for the insurrection, apparently because the town was near the Mason-Dixon line and the surrounding mountains were suitable for guerilla warfare. Further, capture of the thousands of arms stored in the arsenal of the U.S. Army at the ferry could equip a formidable army.

Brown and his 18-man "army of liberation" attacked Harpers Ferry on the night of October 16, 1859, seizing the armory

and several other strategic points before the startled townspeople realized their purpose. When the alarm spread and local citizens and State militia converged on the town, the raiders barricaded themselves in the armory fire engine and guard house. They were captured when a contingent of marines commanded by Col. Robert E. Lee and Lt. J.E.B. Stuart stormed the building on the morning of October 18. Brought to trial for murder, treason, and conspiring with

slaves to commit treason, Brown was subsequently hanged at nearby Charles Town, W.Va., on December 2, 1859.



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Touring the Park

Entrance to Park

Note: The town of Harpers Ferry is much larger than indicated here. Park buildings are shown in red.

FORMER STORER COLLEGE CAMPUS

No buses or trailers beyond this point.

Mather Training Center
This building, completed in 1848, once housed the Army's Superintendent. After the Civil War it became the main building of Storer College. It is now a training center for Park Service personnel.

Morrell House
Constructed in 1858 for the Armory Paymaster's Clerk, it was later used by Storer College as one of its school buildings.

The Brackett House
Completed in 1858, this structure served as a home for the Armory Superintendent's Clerk. Named for the Reverend Nathan Brackett, instrumental in establishing Storer College.

The Lockwood House
Built in 1848 as office and home for the armory paymaster. In 1865 it became the first classroom building of future Storer College, one of the earliest institutions of higher education for the American Negro.

Grave of Robert Harper

HARPER CEMETERY

SAVORY MILL RUINS

Water intake arches for canal network

Hall's Rifle Works Site

Virginus Island
Site of an early industrial community where water-powered factories produced a variety of products. Ruins of factories and waterways remain. Island contains self-guiding trail.

Jefferson Rock
Thomas Jefferson visited here in 1783. From this point, he thought the view "stupendous" and "worth a voyage across the Atlantic."

Armory Worker's House
Built between 1822 and 1831 by an armory worker, this is the only surviving example in the park of a typical workman's dwelling.

MILL RUINS

St. Peter's Catholic Church
Built in the 1830s and remodeled in the 1890s, it is still in use today. Not part of the park.

Blacksmith Shop
Originally built in 1845, this structure now houses a typical mid-19th century industrial forge.

Stagecoach Inn
Once housing an inn operated by Maj. James Stephenson, this structure, built 1826-34 and now restored, serves as the park visitor center.

Recruiting Office
During the Civil War this building probably served as officers' quarters as well as a recruiting office for the Union army.

Tailor Shop

Dry Goods Store
Built in 1812, this building was the home for the Master Armorer from 1818 to 1858. Today it is restored to represent a typical dry goods store of 19th century Harpers Ferry.

Master Armorer's House
Built in 1859 as home for the chief gunsmith of the Armory, this restored dwelling is now a museum where the story of gunmaking is told.

Arsenal Square
Here can be seen remains of the small U.S. Arsenal and partially exposed burned muskets, destroyed when Federal forces burned the buildings in 1861.

John Brown's Fort
This was the Armory fire-enginehouse used by John Brown for refuge during his 1859 raid.

The Point
This was the heart of the town before the Civil War. From here two other

states can be seen—Maryland on the left, and Virginia beyond the ridge on the right.

The United States Armory and Arsenal at Harpers Ferry
Provided for in the Armory Act of 1794, a U.S. Armory was located at Harpers Ferry through the persistent efforts of George Washington. President Washington chose Harpers Ferry because of its convenient access to water power and raw materials, its secure position, and, more importantly, its proximity to the new capital of the Nation. Construction of the armory buildings and

canal got underway in 1796. By 1801 the armory was producing its first weapons. Arms produced here were used by Lewis and Clark on their famous expedition of 1804-06.

The armory eventually expanded into three sections. The main component, a 20-building complex where weapons were fabricated, was located along the Potomac River. Across the street from the entrance of the armory along Shenandoah Street stood the

arsenal where completed arms were stored and displayed. The third portion, the Hall Rifle Works, was located at the upper end of Virginus Island along the Shenandoah River. The one armory building destined for lasting fame was the fire engine and guard house, built in 1848 during a period of major renovation of the armory. It is now known to many as "John Brown's Fort."

During the early years while the canal was

being built, work at the armory consisted primarily of weapon repair. In 1803, the Secretary of War issued an official request for the armory to manufacture the Model 1803 rifle. By 1810 production was up to 10,000 muskets a year. It was not until 1823 that inspection gauges were adopted in an effort to standardize production.

The highest ranking officials at the armory were

the superintendent, the master armorer, and the paymaster. The superintendent was responsible for managing the complex operations of the entire armory. The master armorer served as chief gunsmith, inspecting the completed arms for uniformity and meeting government standards. The paymaster handled the bookkeeping and payroll.

Most of the first workmen hired were skilled artisans from the Philadelphia area who passed

on their knowledge to their sons, as well as local apprentices. Later, as modern machinery was installed, the workmen were usually unskilled. Fairly content with their lot except during the period of military control of the armory, workers complained of little except the high cost of living in Harpers Ferry, and the unhealthy conditions that produced frequent epidemics.

Hall's Rifle Works
The Hall Rifle Works, established on Virginus Island in 1819 under government contract, produced breech-loading flintlock rifles—John Hall's own invention—using interchangeable parts. This was the first successful practical application of the principle that led to modern mass-production. The Rifle Works was captured and held briefly by John Brown's raiders in 1859. The buildings were destroyed at the beginning of the Civil War.



Craft vs. Technology
Reports show that the production at the Harpers Ferry armory consistently lagged behind the output of the Springfield Armory in Massachusetts. Both skilled craftsmen and administrators at Harpers Ferry resented introduction of new machinery and technological advances used in New England armories (their desire to protect their trade was accompanied by fear of lower wages). The result was the rejection of industrial innovations

that would have meant greater production. Not until the 1850s were the shops adequately equipped for interchangeable manufacturing.