

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 this land was Peter Stephens, a trader, who came here in 1733 and set up a primitive ferry service at the junction of the two rivers. Fourteen years later, Robert Harper, a millwright and the

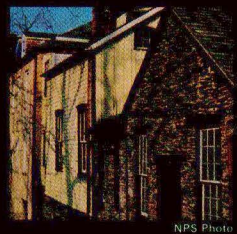
man for whom the town is named, settled here, taking over Stephens' ferry operation. Seeing the waterpower potential, he later built a mill. The ferry and the mill have long since disappeared.

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 Lockwood 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.

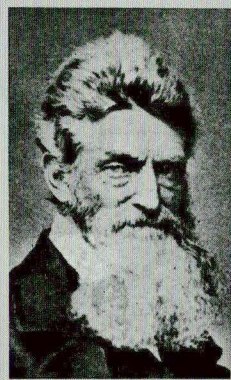
First aid is available at the Health Unit above the visitor center.

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 from the crowded days 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 1855-56 had been a leader in the bloody sectional strife in Kansas. 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. Armory at the ferry could equip a formidable army.

Brown and his 18-man "army of liberation" attacked Harpers Ferry

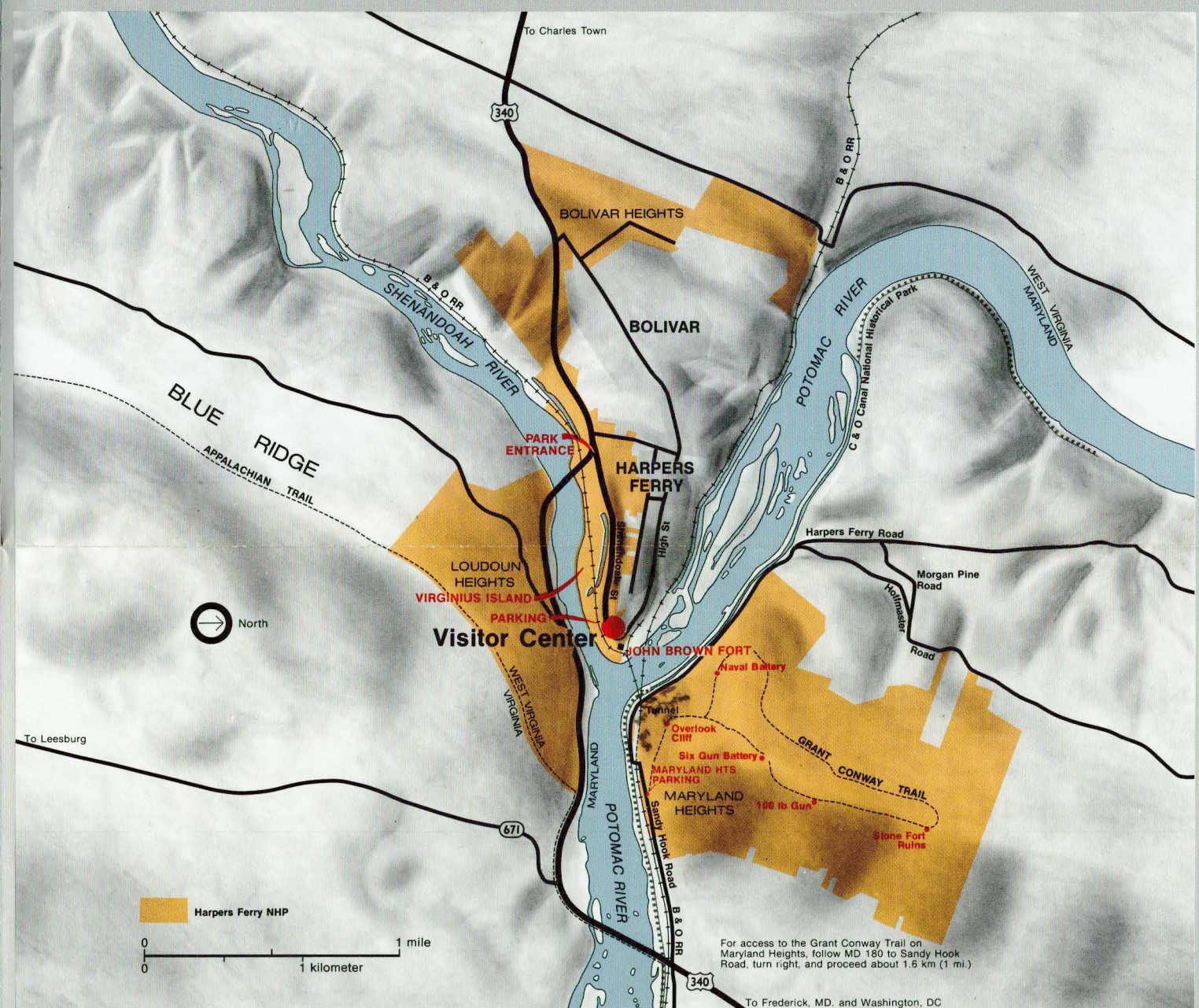
on the night of October 16, 1859, seizing the armory and several other strategic points before the startled townspeople realized their purpose. When the alarm spread and local citizens and State militia converged on the town, the raiders barricaded themselves in the armory fire engine and guard house ("John Brown's Fort"). 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 create insurrection, Brown was found guilty and subsequently hanged at nearby Charles Town on December 2, 1859.

The day of his execution, Brown wrote a last (and prophetic) message to the world and handed it to his jailor. In clear but slightly unsteady handwriting, it said: "I, John Brown,

am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had, as I now think, vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done."

Sixteen months later, on April 12, 1861, the war that John Brown seemed to foretell began at a place called Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina.



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Touring the Park

Park buildings shown in red. Not all of the town of Harpers Ferry is shown. Many buildings have been left off the map.



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, closely resembling the Pennsylvania-Kentucky 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.