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Harpers Ferry: A Cradle of American Identity

The river valley below the northwestern face of Loudoun Heights, the first peak of the Blue Ridge Mountains, is home to the sleepy bucolic town of Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. A place frozen in time, the winding streets lined with 18th and 19th-century stone and brick buildings meander up a slope from the riverbanks. Steps carved into the shale bedrock pass by the ruins of a church as they scale steeply towards legendary hiking trails and battlefields. Peregrine falcons and bald eagles soar through the air while reverent visitors watch them from Jefferson's Rock, where the eponymous founding father stood in 1783. So moved by the grandeur of what he saw, Thomas Jefferson described it in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* as "...perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in Nature." (17)

Harpers Ferry appears as simple as it is beautiful, with a population of less than three hundred. Charming boutique shops and quaint restaurants serving local beers on tap line the narrow streets. This town, however, is anything but simple. Its geography and history are turbulent and complex. The implications of Harpers Ferry's legacy reverberate through time. Its identity is America's: a place of convergence and divergence, conflict and reconciliation.

Harpers Ferry is the location of a unique natural convergence. Three states and two rivers meet at Harpers Ferry. The Shenandoah and Potomac become one at The Point, wherefrom an observer can look upon Maryland and Virginia. It is a geological dichotomy where two distinct eco-regions abut. (Geology of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park) It sits among mountains,

valleys, and deciduous forest, yet the town is less than half a square mile in size. It is the "psychological halfway point of the Appalachian Trail," which spans Canada to Alabama. (Appalachian Trail Conservancy) Harpers Ferry is a U.S. National Historical Park encompassing over 2.4 square miles. It overlaps with seven other national parks and heritage areas. (Ferrell)

Harpers Ferry is not the first place that comes to mind when a person thinks of American history, as Gettysburg or Philadelphia do. It has remained obscure despite its dense history and the hundreds of thousands of visitors who flock there yearly. The area was settled in 1733 but came into prominence in 1795 when another founding father, President George Washington, chose it as the site for the 2nd Federal Armory and Arsenal. "He felt that it was 'the most eligible spot on the river.' [because] it offered waterpower, supplies of iron, hardwood forests for making charcoal to fuel forges, and a watercourse on which to ship [products]." (Founders and Frontiersmen) In 1803 Thomas Jefferson acquired the "Louisiana Purchase" and tasked Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore the land. Lewis' first stop of the expedition was the Armory in Harpers Ferry to get supplies. There, he outfitted the Discovery Corp with weapons and commissioned his self-designed collapsible iron canoe. (Meriwether Lewis at Harpers Ferry)

In 1819 John Hall was awarded a contract by the government to "manufacture 1,000 unique breech-loading flintlock rifles..." (Founders and Frontiersmen) He opened Rifle Works in Harpers Ferry, on Halls Island, where he invented the first interchangeable firearm parts. Guns were hand-crafted at the time, but Hall's design was such that machines could be used to make them instead. His invention did not make Rifle Works popular with the local craftsmen (Winter 20), but it became the blueprint for "modern mass production." (Founders and Frontiersmen)

A focal point of the American Industrial Revolution, Harpers Ferry served as ground zero in the transportation war between the B&O Railroad and C&O Canal. The Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad Company "laid its first stone" in July of 1828 (Britannica), and by December 1836, it had arrived in Harpers Ferry. (Lee ix) It transported goods and people between Baltimore, Maryland, and Wheeling, [West] Virginia. The same year B&O started construction, President John Quincy Adams broke ground at ceremonies for the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal (C&O) company, a direct competitor for B&O; the Harpers Ferry section opened for Navigation in 1833. (Canal Construction) Coal and other goods were trafficked along the C&O for over fifty years before financial woes struck the canal company, exacerbated by economic downturns and catastrophic flooding in 1877 and 1886. (Canal Construction) "After the great flood of 1889, the canal went into receivership to the B&O Railroad." (Gay 16). However, it remained intact for another thirty-five years until the next inevitable flood hit. The canal was never repaired.

The town is most well-known for abolitionist John Brown's bloody raid on the U.S. Armory and Arsenal. He had gathered a small raiding party of eighteen, comprised of white and formerly enslaved black men. They entered Harpers Ferry on the night of October 16, 1859, and quickly took control of the railroad, bridges, Rifle Works, and the Armory. (John Brown's Raid) His goal was to start a revolt that would end slavery. The first person to be killed by the raiders was, ironically, a free black man employed by the B&O Railroad. (John Brown's Raid) By daylight on the 17th, Brown and his men had captured several hostages. They were locked in the Armory's fire engine house while Brown and his raiders exchanged fire with the townsfolk and local militiamen. By then, any chance of escape for Brown and his men had been cut off. (John Brown's Raid) In the afternoon, the "militiamen freed most of the hostages and forced Brown and his men into the engine house," and by nightfall, the streets were filled with a drunken mob

comprised of hundreds of citizens of Harpers Ferry and an increasing number of militiamen. (John Brown's Raid) Late in the evening, "... a force of 86 [marines] sent by President James Buchanan" arrived. (McGlone) They were commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee, the renowned future Confederate General of the Civil War. It was all over by the morning of the eighteenth. The raid had failed, leaving sixteen people dead. Ten of them were Brown's men, including his son. (John Brown's Raid) An injured Brown and his remaining men were captured.

"[Virginia] Senator Mason and Governor Brown [led] his questioning," proving to him that "his raid had not altogether failed to win an audience." (McGlone). He was tried, convicted, and ultimately hung for murder, treason, and inciting a slave insurrection. During his imprisonment, he wrote several letters smuggled out by a guard. In one, he had written, "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 *verry much* bloodshed; it might be done." (qtd. in Trodd 5) While his personal campaign to end slavery ended in Harpers Ferry, "Browns' raid sent shockwaves through the nation... [and] reverberated throughout the political season." (McGlone) Protests of his death in the north were met by furious condemnation by white southerners, setting the stage for the greatest divergence of American unity.

The Civil War started two years later, in April 1861, five months after President Abraham Lincoln was elected "by a strictly northern vote." (Civil War Begins) Six days later, the Federal Army burned the Armory in Harpers Ferry, destroying an arsenal of 15,000 weapons as the Virginia Militia marched on the town. (Harpers Ferry and the Civil War Chronology) Confederates would leave the Shenandoah and B&O Railroad, Hall's Rifle Works, and all remaining Armory buildings in ruin before that July. In 1862, the Battle of Harpers Ferry would cost the Union over 12,000 soldiers. All told, Harpers Ferry saw four battles and changed hands

eight times. (Harpers Ferry and the Civil War Chronology) By the war's end, the town was nearly emptied of civilians and bereft of industry. John Wilkes Booth wrote to a friend after assassinating Lincoln. In his letter, "...he remembered witnessing John Brown's hanging. 'I looked at the traitor and terrorizer with unlimited, undeniable contempt.'" (McGlone) John Brown's actions foreshadowed the war and the death of a President.

African American History cannot be told without mentioning Harpers Ferry. It spans from the first free black family that settled there during colonial times (Stories) through the civil rights movement. The Underground Railroad shepherded people fleeing enslavement through Harpers Ferry. John Brown was friends with Harriet Tubman, whom he designated "General Tubman," and sought her help with his campaign. (Conrad pp. 90, 92) Immediately following the Civil War, the school that would become Storer College was established with a mission to provide higher education to formerly enslaved people. (Storer College) Frederick Douglass, a formerly enslaved person and abolitionist, gave the keynote speech at the school's dedication. It was about his friend, John Brown. (McCormick) W.E.B. DuBois, the founder of the NAACP, wrote his famous *Address to the Country* during the second meeting of the Niagara Movement in 1906. The meeting was held at Storer College in Harpers Ferry. (Williams 337) Storer College remained unsegregated through Jim Crow until it closed nearly ninety years later, in 1955. (Storer College) DuBois wrote his biography, *John Brown*, in 1909, which is still in publication. In 1965, civil rights activist Malcolm X said, "If you are for me and my problems, then you have to be doing as old John Brown did." (qtd. in McGlone) Today the Historical Park continues to uncover more information and tell the authentic story from the perspective of African Americans in Harpers Ferry. "Parks are not frozen elements of the landscape... [they] possess a plasticity that defies even the best efforts to avoid change." (Mooney-Melvin 986+)

Harpers Ferry is a town that's past predicts our country's future. The central themes of Harpers Ferry's history are at the forefront of our nation's strife today. Black Lives Matter continues the fight for equality while white supremacist groups and right-wing militias are seeing their memberships swell. A direct line can be drawn from Rifle Works to the United States military-industrial complex. Gun violence is off the charts. There are more civilian-owned guns than people in America; (America's Gun Culture) a goal the U.S. tried to achieve during the war of 1812 when the government attempted to outfit every man in the country with a rifle so they could join a [well-regulated] militia. (Bellesiles 445-446) Our nation's Capitol building was the site of a bloody riot on January 6, 2020, just sixty miles down the Potomac from where John Brown raided the U.S. Armory in Harpers Ferry. It appears that determining what constitutes a patriotic rebellion versus high treason depends on which "side" you are on.

The Hilltop House sits perched above Harpers Ferry. It was built one hundred and thirty years ago by Thomas Lovett, a black businessman whose grandmother was formerly enslaved. DuBois, "presidents Woodrow Wilson and Bill Clinton, as well as Alexander Graham Bell, and Mark Twain," (MacArthur) were among the many esteemed guests of the hotel. Closed in the 2000s, Hilltop House droops from disrepair, and its fate has cleaved the town of Harpers Ferry in half. One faction wants to see it rebuilt into a luxury hotel. The other wants to see anything but that luxury hotel built and distrusts the proposed development. Following an election in 2020, which was to be the referendum on Hilltop's future, "Public screaming matches erupt[ed] between neighbors, and death threats [were] reported to the police. There [were] accusations of election-rigging. The county sheriff... confiscated the town's ballots, and... the mayor's daughter plead[ed] guilty to illegal voting." (Jamison) Ballots came in 84 votes for a candidate against the project to 82 for a candidate in favor of the project. There were four unopened provisional

ballots. "The town council – which doubles as an elections tribunal, and was still controlled by critics of the proposed development – refused to open the provisional ballots;" (Jamison) a clear conflict of interest. Lawsuits made it all the way to the state's supreme court, and the West Virginia state legislature had to implement a law to override the town council to approve the new hotel. If Harpers Ferry is the harbinger of America's future, then the sword of Damocles looms above the country's future elections.

Midge Flinn Yost, a former Harpers Ferry council member, calls the town "... a big, eccentric, dysfunctional family." (qtd. in Jamison) If that is not America today, what is?

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