

The John Brown Raid

About the middle of March in the year 1859, a party of strangers made their appearance at Sandy Hook, a small village in Washington County, Maryland, in the immediate vicinity of Harper's Ferry, in fact, but one mile distant.

With them was an old man of venerable appearance and austere demeanor who gave his name as Isaac Smith. They claimed to be prospecting for minerals and took long and frequent rambles with this ostensible purpose, over the various peaks of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Since the first settlement of Harper's Ferry it has been believed that in the earth beneath the Maryland and the Loudown Heights are mines of different metals, possibly of great value, awaiting discovery and development. Many persons, from time to time, have found what they supposed were pieces of ore and have sent specimens to undergo chemical analysis, of which they received favorable reports. No wonder, therefore, was felt at the appearance of the party and their expeditions over the mountains excited no suspicion. "Smith" stated that he was in the mining business and had come to Harper's Ferry to locate and open up mines in the mountains, exhibiting some ores he said he had dug up there. During the time they remained at Sandy Hook their conduct was unexceptionable, their manners courteous to all, and they paid cash for all purchases made.

Soon they rented and removed to the "Kennedy Farm" about five miles from Harper's Ferry, on the Maryland side of the Potomac River. Shortly afterward "Smith" bought a horse and wagon and used to go to the "Ferry" two or three times a week to get boxes from the railroad station, which, he said, contained mining machinery. It wasn't mining machinery at all, but from the length of the boxes, it was rifles, pistols, pikes, etc., used in the attack on the arsenal. Smith and his party, of whom three were his sons, were quiet and agreeable to the neighbors. The father was regarded as a man of stern morality and devotedly religious; the sons and others as good natured, amiable young men.

Thus things continued until the night of Sunday, October 16, 1859, when about ten o'clock, the watchman, William Williams, on the railroad bridge spanning the Potomac River, was surprised to

find himself taken prisoner by an armed party of about twenty men who suddenly made their appearance from the Maryland side of the river. Most of the party proceeded to the armory enclosure, taking with them their prisoner and leaving two men to guard the bridge. They next captured Daniel Whelan, one of the watchmen at the armory, who was posted at the front gate, and they took possession of that establishment.

The party then separated into two bodies, one remaining in the armory and the other proceeding to the rifle factory, half a mile up the Shenandoah River, where they took the night watchman prisoner and conducted him to the armory, and a detachment of the strangers was left to supply his place.

Next, a party of the invaders went to the houses of Colonel Lewis W. Washington and Mr. John Alstadt, living a few miles from Harper's Ferry, and took them and some of their slaves prisoners, conducting them also to the armory enclosure.

From the house of Colonel Washington, a great nephew of General Washington, they took some relics of the general and of the Revolution, which were very highly prized, among them was the sword sent to the "Father of his country by Frederick the Great, King of Prussia—a present as the inscription on it said, "from the oldest general of the time to the best."

About one o'clock a. m. on Monday, the eastbound express train on the B. & O. Railroad arrived. The train was detained and the telegraph wires were cut; after a considerable delay the former was allowed to proceed. The porter at the railroad station was a free colored man, Hayward Shepherd, hired by the station agent who was also the mayor of the town, a very valuable citizen and for years a magistrate of Jefferson County. Hayward slept in the station in the capacity of a watchman; he was awakened by the noise and walked out on the station platform where he was ordered to halt by the guards at the bridge, he turned to run back and was shot through the body. He succeeded in reaching the railroad office, where he died next day in great agony.

"John Brown's first victim at Harper's Ferry was an inoffensive, industrious, colored man."—(Charles Town Free Press, stereotype sentence.)

As the workmen at the armory and the citizens of the town appeared on the streets in the early morning they were halted, taken

prisoners and marched to the armory where finally there was quite a crowd of them.

The town had now become alarmed, and the citizens, realizing that it was in possession of an enemy, singly and in small companies armed themselves with guns procured from a building where they had been stored for safety, and a desultory skirmish commenced around the armory and the adjacent streets. The country was alarmed by express riders, and by ten o'clock on the morning of the seventeenth, the Jefferson Guards, a military company of the Virginia volunteers, from Charles Town, reached the scene; they crossed the Potomac River above the town and came down to the mouth of the railroad bridge on the Maryland side, fired a volley and charged the bridge, killing several insurgents and capturing most of the others stationed on it. Four other military companies, one from Jefferson County and three from Berkeley County, arrived during the day.

During the firing, Mr. Fontaine Beckham, an aged and respected citizen, local agent for the railroad company, mayor of the town and for many years a magistrate, was shot and killed by one of Brown's sons, and Mr. George Turner, a prominent citizen, a graduate of West Point, was killed by an insurgent from the corner of the street as he was walking along High Street. About the same time a number of other citizens were more or less severely wounded.

Brown began to see that his position was becoming desperate and called in from the streets the surviving pickets of his party, then choosing nine of the most prominent of his prisoners as hostages, he retreated with them and the remainder of his party, into the engine-house within the armory enclosure, this was the building afterwards famous under the name of "John Brown's Fort"; the doors were barricaded and the walls pierced with loopholes for musketry, from which a brisk fusilade was kept up, wounding and killing men in the streets.

From "the fort" Brown sent one of his hostages under parole to return, with a verbal proposal that if he would be allowed to retire with his men, living, dead, wounded and prisoners, a certain distance across the bridge into Maryland, he would release the prisoners. Colonel Robert W. Baylor, commanding the volunteers, declined the proposal, but agreed that if he would release the citizens held as prisoners, he would leave the United States Government to deal

with him as to the property he had seized. The same proposal submitted in writing was also declined.

On the night of the seventeenth, a company of United States Marines arrived under Colonel, afterwards General, Robert E. Lee, and were stationed so as to closely invest the engine-house.

Early on Tuesday morning Colonel Lee sent, under a flag of truce, his aide, Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart of the First United States Cavalry Regiment, to summon the garrison to surrender. Brown stubbornly refused, and an attack by the marines immediately began, led by Lieutenants J. E. B. Stuart and Israel Green. They first tried to break open the doors with heavy sledge hammers, but failing in this, they picked up a forty foot ladder lying near and using it as a battering ram, succeeded in making a breach. Through this narrow opening Lieutenant Green squeezed himself, but he found the insurgents had barricaded the doors with a fire engine and hose; over these Lieutenant Green and his men scrambled and attacked Brown and his men who had fired on the marines while they were making an entrance, killing one and wounding another. The insurgents were all bayoneted or captured, but none of the citizen-prisoners received an injury which was almost miraculous as it was difficult for the marines to distinguish them from the enemy. Brown himself received a cut on the head and a sword thrust in the shoulder in a hand-to-hand fight with Lieutenant Green. He was taken to another building where he was examined by a physician and his wounds were dressed, (Northern assertions to the contrary notwithstanding.)

Up to the time when Lieutenant Stuart demanded his surrender, Brown's identity had not been known, but Lieutenant Stuart in a moment, called him by name, having known him in the Kansas border warfare and returning to Colonel Lee told him it was "John Brown of Osawatoie."

The bodies of the slain raiders were collected from the streets and rivers and buried in a deep pit on the southern bank of the Shenandoah about half a mile above Harper's Ferry, and all the prisoners were taken to the jail in Charles Town.

Some of Brown's men had escaped during the skirmishing, notably Cook, who was seen crossing the bridge over the Potomac on Monday morning, taking with him two horses and a wagon stolen at Colonel Washington's place on the previous night, and two or three slaves belonging to that gentleman.

On the day of the capture of Brown and his invaders, a detachment of marines and volunteers visited Brown's farm and found the following articles: 102 Sharpe's rifles, 102 Massachusetts Arms Company's pistols, 56 Massachusetts Company's powder flasks, 4 large powder flasks, 10 kegs of powder, 23,000 percussion caps, 100,000 percussion pistol caps, 1,300 ball cartridges for Sharpe's rifles, 160 boxes Sharpe's primers, 14 lead balls, 1 major-general's sword, 12 old artillery swords, 483 standard spears, 150 broken handled spears, 16 picks, 40 shovels, 1 tin powder case, 1,500 pikes, 1 box of clothing and stationery, a carpet sack containing Brown's documents, private papers and the constitution for his new government, termed a "Provisional Constitution and Ordinance for the People of the United States." Ten of his men were made officers under himself as commander-in-chief with the title of general; John Henri Kagi was "Secretary of War" with the rank of captain; four others were captains and as many had the rank of lieutenant. All these things tended to show that he was in communication with men of his kind in several of the northern states, in fact, with this "Provisional Constitution" and other papers, was a large number of letters addressed to Brown from northern accomplices.

The fifteen hundred pikes were readily-looking weapons, having a double-edge blade fourteen inches long by two inches wide, tapered to a point, with a cross-guard, and attached to the end of a stout handle about six feet long. These pikes were intended to arm the negroes who did not understand the use of fire arms, and Brown evidently expected a large number to join him as soon as the signal was given.

Governor Henry A. Wise of Virginia, arrived on the eighteenth and to him Brown confessed his whole plan. Until the surrender every one outside of the engine-house had been in complete darkness as to the object of the raid.

Brown lost twelve men in the fight including his two sons, Oliver and Watson, and his son-in-law Thompson. One son was shot in the stomach, in the engine-house, and was suffering terrible agony, he called upon his companions to relieve him by shooting him, but his father manifested no feeling beyond saying to him, "that he must have patience, he was dying in a good cause and should meet his fate like a brave man." The other son was wounded, and died after the marines had taken the engine-house. On learning that one

of his men had died and that it was his other son, he displayed the same stoicism and remarked, "that the cause was good and it was glorious to die for its sake."

John Brown's trial took place in the court house in Charles Town, opening October 26, Judge Parker of the circuit court presiding. The jury of twelve to try the case was selected with the greatest care, and as to intelligence and character was above the average of American juries.

The court appointed two of the ablest lawyers at the local bar to defend the prisoner, who took no pains to extenuate his guilt and openly avowed that he expected no favors from the State of Virginia. On the morning of the twenty-eighth Mr. George H. Hoyt of Boston, arrived to act as counsel for the prisoner, and on the morning of the twenty-ninth the fourth day of the trial, there arrived as additional counsel for him, Mr. Samuel Chilton of Washington, D. C., and Mr. Henry Griswold, of Cleveland, Ohio.

The indictment of the grand jury against each of the prisoners was "for conspiring with slaves to produce insurrection; for treason against the commonwealth; and for murder." The specific acts were fully proven, and the penalty for each, under the laws of Virginia, was death. At the conclusion of the trial the jury retired to consider their verdict and returned in an hour with the verdict of "guilty."

The trial was fair and impartial, both of Brown's lawyers expressing that opinion and being pleased at the straightforward testimony of the witnesses and with the rulings of the court. The trial closed on Monday, October 31. Brown was brought back to court November second to hear his death sentence. Being asked if he had anything to say before his sentence, he answered, in part, "I feel entirely satisfied with the treatment I have received at my trial. Considering all the circumstances, it has been more generous than I expected. But I feel no consciousness of guilt. I have stated from the first what was my intention and what was not. I never had any design against the life of any person, nor any disposition to commit treason, or incite slaves to rebel, or to make general insurrection. I never encouraged any man to do so, but always discouraged any idea of that kind, etc." The judge after a few preliminary remarks announced the day of execution, Friday, December 2, 1859.

During the term of imprisonment, many ministers called to offer him the consolations of religion. At their introduction, Brown always

asked, "Do you approve of slavery " As the answer was sure to be in the affirmative, their services were invariably refused. One reverend gentleman remarked to him that St. Paul himself had sent back a fugitive slave to his master, when Brown with a flash from his eyes, answered back, "Then St. Paul was no better than you are."

During imprisonment he formed an attachment for Sheriff Campbell and Deputy Sheriff John Avis, who was also the jailer. In return for their kindness to him he willed to each of them one of the Sharpe's rifles used in his raid on Harper's Ferry, and to Captain Avis a pistol.

He said to his guard one day that he "Had been in as tight places as this but his god had always delivered him." The guard answered, "You have never had Virginia's god to deal with!"

As he rode to the place of execution in an open wagon he said, "I see no citizens here; where are they " "The citizens are not allowed to be present; only the soldiers," replied Mr. Saddler, the undertaker. The military commandant had issued a request, equivalent to an order, that all citizens would keep off the streets and remain at their homes that day, and the order was obeyed, no "negro woman with her child in her arms" was abroad, or on the street.

After the execution Brown's body was taken to Harper's Ferry on a special train under guard of the soldiers. Mrs. Brown was there, at the hotel in her room, awaiting it. Her dinner was served to her in her room, the landlady went in to see if she could do anything to add to her comfort. Mrs. Brown said, Mrs. F—— do you make your own pastry " "Yes." "Then I must ask for the recipe, it is the finest I ever ate." Mr. Lewis P. Starry, who accompanied the remains to Harper's Ferry, as undertaken in charge, gives this incident: "A man who seemed to be acting for Mrs. Brown came to me and introducing himself as Mr. Lyndale, said, "Mr. Starry, you will have to show me that Mr. Brown's body is in that casket; how do I know that it isn't some other body?"

"The body had been fastened up for several hours, and when I lifted the lid of the casket to let him see, Tyndale said, 'This is strange, the body seems to have become offensive already and has been read only a few hours.' One of the soldiers forming the guard was standing by and answered hmi, 'Yes, he's a damn bad article and won't keep'."

From Harper's Ferry the remains went to Philadelphia and on to New York and Albany, accompanied by the widow and Wendell Phillips, the notorious abolitionist, who said, "After this (i.e., the execution of that bold outlaw and condemned murderer) the gallows will be as sacred as the cross," from Albany to North Elba, where the family lived.

"The History of West Virginia and Its People," published as lately as 1913, says: "And John Brown, of Harper's Ferry fame, went down into American history along with Lovejoy, Garrison, Wendell Phillips and the martyred Lincoln." A choice group of congenial spirits!

Dr. J. William Jones in the "Davis Memorial Volume," relates the following story:

"I overheard a very lively discussion at Winchester, Va., when 'Old Stonewall' captured it in May, 1862, from 'Quartermaster Banks,' between a federal colonel who was a prisoner, and a private soldier in the Thirteenth Virginia Regiment.

"After the discussion had progressed for sometime the colonel, with a considerable air of confidence, said to 'Johnny': 'I will settle the discussion, sir, by asking you just one question. Who fired the first gun in this war?'

"As quick as a flash the Confederate replied: 'John Brown at Harper's Ferry, sir. He fired the first gun. And Mr. Lincoln, in attempting to reinforce Sumpter, fired the second gun. And the Confederates have acted on the defensive all of the time. We did not invade your country, but you invaded ours. You go home and attend to your own business and leave us to attend to ours, and the war will close at once.'

"Did not this humble private soldier in his reply to the federal colonel give the philosophy of the whole question? And does the world's history afford a cleaner example of a brave people standing on the defensive and resisting the invasion of their rights and of their territory than that of the people of the South?"

Charles Town,
Charleston, W. Va.

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