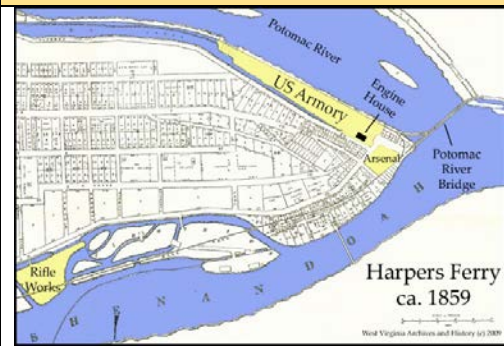


Chapter 276 – John Brown’s Forces Attack Harpers Ferry

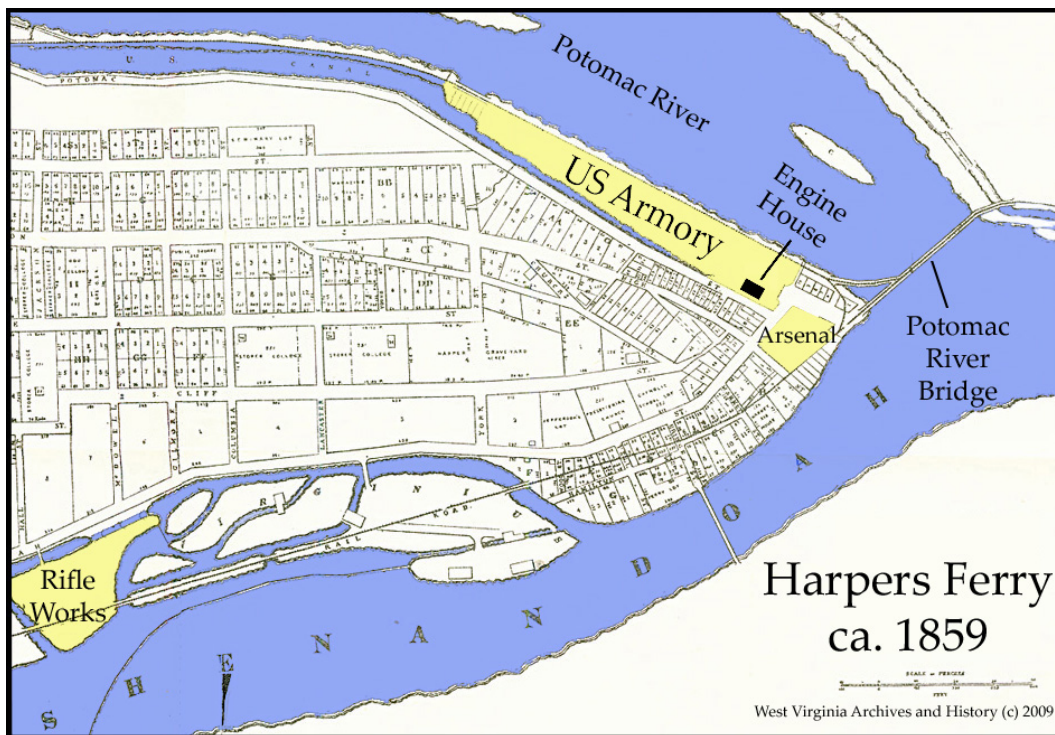


Dates:
October 15
–18, 1859

- Sections:**
- Final Assignments For The Raid Are Laid Out
 - After A Smooth Start Brown Apparently Changes His Plan
 - A Harried Commander Decides To Make His Stand In The Fire Engine House
 - The Violence Accelerates And Federal Troops Arrive On The Scene
 - Lee Storms The Fire Engine House And John Brown Is Captured Alive

Date: Saturday, October 15, 1859

Final Assignments For The Raid Are Laid Out



The Town Of Harpers Ferry, The Railroad Bridge Crossing The Potomac From MD, & The Shenandoah Bridge

The town of Harpers Ferry predates the American Revolution.

In 1761 the Virginia General Assembly gives Robert Harper the rights to run a ferry across the Potomac River from the Maryland Heights to the east, into the town which will ultimately bear his name. Thirty years later the federal government acquires land at the point to construct a second U.S. Arsenal to supplement its first at Springfield, Massachusetts. In 1824 a wooden bridge is constructed to span the

river, and in 1839, a single track railroad line is added by the B&O, making Harpers Ferry one of its central hubs. By 1859 the town is flourishing, with a population of some 2,500 citizens.

John Brown means to violate its serenity and security beginning Sunday evening, October 16.

In early October he has made one final departure from the Kennedy Farm, meeting with John Jr. and John Kagi in Philadelphia to put the finishing touches on his raid. While there, he picks up his final recruit, a fifth black man, Francis Merriam, who will successfully escape after the fight. Merriam will arrive at the last minute, bringing with him rifle primers and caps, along with a \$600 donation from Lewis Hayden, a run-away slave who has prospered as a merchant in Boston and played an instrumental role in the 1848 escape of Ellen and William Craft.

With Merriam on board, Brown has a total of twenty-two men in his Provisional Army, well short of the fifty he had hoped for, but enough, he believes, to achieve victory.

On October 15, 1859, he gathers the men together to announce that the Revolution would get under way the next day, Sunday, October 16.

It is the Sabbath, and the day begins with Brown reading from the scriptures and asking for God’s support for their righteous endeavor.

He turns symbolically to Osborne Perry Anderson, born a free black, to walk through the final assignments.

Three men – Owen Brown, Francis Merriam and Barclay Coppoc, will stay at the Kennedy Farm to begin.

The other nineteen will march in strung-out pairs to assemble near the Potomac River Bridge. Once there, each pair will have an assigned task:

Brown’s Detailed Plan To Assault Harpers Ferry

Assigned Tasks	Who
Cut the telegraph wires to the outside world	John Cook & Charles Tidd
Capture the guard at the railroad bridge over the Potomac	John Kagi & Aaron Stevens
Guard the railroad bridge as the action plays out	Watson Brown & Stewart Taylor
Capture the 2 nd bridge to town over the Shenandoah River	Oliver Brown & Will Thompson
Seize the Engine House where trains are stored	Jerry Anderson, Dauphin Thompson, Wm Leeman
Seize the U.S. Arsenal where 2,000 rifles are stored	Albert Hazlett & Edwin Coppoc
Seize Hall’s Rifle Works, largest gun mfr. In the South	John Copeland & John Kagi
Move to the countryside and begin freeing slaves	Aaron Stevens, Charles Tidd, John Cook, Shields Green, Perry Anderson, Lewis Leary
Stay back and guard the Kennedy Farm	Owen Brown, Francis Merriam, Barclay Coppoc

Date: October 16 Evening To October 17 Mid-day

After A Smooth Start Brown Apparently Changes His Plan

The operation begins like clockwork. By midnight Sunday, Brown is in control of both bridges into town, plus the key structures he is after, the Armory, U.S. Arsenal, the Fire Engine House, Hall's Rifle Works. His six outriders have captured Colonel Lewis Washington, the great grand-nephew of the former president, along with another planter and six slaves, and have brought them to the Armory building fronting the Potomac. All this without any casualties.

A simple retreat from there, back across the railroad bridge to the Kennedy Farm with his captured bounty, will mark the assault a success.

But then John Brown, the man of action, pauses, apparently shaken by the responses from the now liberated slaves in his presence. When he passes out his pikes and asks them to guard their four white prisoners, their response is fear not empowerment. One slave refuses to handle the pike, telling Brown "I don't know nuffin' bout handlin' dem tings." The others exhibit comparable alarm and puzzlement. Who is this white man in charge? Have they been taken to be sold down south? What form of savage retaliation will they face if their masters recapture them?

This unexpected response from the freed slaves evidently shocks Brown, and causes him to alter his entire plan. Instead of escaping into the hills, he will now make his stand against slavery at Harpers Ferry.

Soon enough his party begins to lose the advantages of surprise. At 1:30am an eastbound train is halted at the railroad bridge and an alarmed baggage porter named Shephard Hayward is mortally wounded by shots from Oliver Brown and Stewart Taylor. He is a free black man, and the first to die at the site.

As Monday, October 17, dawns, John Brown allows the train across the bridge, despite having earlier cut down the telegraph lines to conceal his presence. It arrives at Monocacy, Maryland and wires news to Baltimore that "150 abolitionists have taken Harpers Ferry, killed the porter Hayward and are freeing slaves." This report is ignored until 10:30am when the B&O line president wires the news to President Buchanan and Governor Henry Wise of Virginia. Wise orders two militia units, the Jefferson Guards and the Botts Greys to move east from Charles Town to the Ferry, seven miles away.

In the interim, the townspeople and local militias swarm toward the Armory where Brown is now holding some 30 hostages he has rounded up on the farms and in town. From beginning to end, he promises not to harm them, and he keeps his word.

But further violence is now inevitable, and the next death belongs to an Irish grocer in town named Thomas Boerly, shot by Dangerfield Newby, the freed slaves who comes with Brown in hopes of freeing his wife and family held on a nearby plantation. But this rescue is not to be, as Newby is gunned down while running along the bridge to the shelter of the Armory. Newby will be the first of the eight raiders who will lose their lives in action of October 17. After his death, the angry crowd cuts off his ears and genitals, jabs sticks into his wounds, and feeds his remains to feral hogs. Variations on this level of savagery will also accompany the treatment of several other members of Brown's band who are captured or killed.

By mid-afternoon on Monday, the window of opportunity for Brown to flee from Harpers Ferry closes for good.

Date: Early Afternoon October 17, 1859

A Harried Commander Decides To Make His Stand In The Fire Engine House



“John Brown’s Fort” In The Fire Engine House At Harpers Ferry

In town at the Hall’s Rifle Works factory, Brown’s second-in-command, John Kagi finds himself trapped along with Lewis Leary and John Copeland. All three run for their lives out the back and down to the Shenandoah River, attempting to swim to safety. Kagi is quickly shot dead, while Copeland is dragged to the shore and jailed along with Leary, who is mortally wounded and will die on October 20.

As the afternoon wears on, more local militias and armed citizens surround Brown’s survivors inside the Armory. His options now are to surrender, fight, or negotiate his way out. He tries the latter, sending Will Thompson out under a white flag of truce. It is ignored and Thompson is taken into custody.

With desperation setting in, “Old Osawatomie” decides to consolidate most of his remaining forces at the best structure in sight, the town’s Fire Engine House, later famous as “John Brown’s Fort.” It is a one story brick structure comprising some 36 x 24 feet in space. Brown selects eleven of his highest profile hostages and moves them there, along with seven of his troopers: his sons, Owen and Watson; his son-in-law, Dauphin Thompson, his long-time Kansas sidekicks, Aaron Stevens and Jerry Anderson; the mild-mannered Quaker, Edwin Coppoc; and his final recruit, Fred Douglass’ friend and fugitive slave, Shields Green.

Jerry Anderson and Albert Hazlett will remain hiding in the Armory, which is unguarded when they find it and largely overlooked throughout the action.

Despite his first failed attempt at negotiating, Brown tries again, this time sending Aaron Stevens and his son, Watson, out under a truce flag. Both are immediately shot. Watson is struck in the bowels and crawls back inside the Fire Engine House, groaning in agony. Stevens is badly wounded and transported to the Armory as a prisoner. Seeing this, Will Leeman panics, and dashes out of the building and down to the Potomac River. He dives in and is wounded before trying to surrender. With his hands up, he is shot in the face. His body remains on a rock in the river, where it is used as target practice for the irate attackers.

About this same time, John Cook, reaches the east side of the Ferry bridge and climbs a tree to reconnoiter the status of conditions in the town. His day has been spent as an out-rider, rounding up the liberated slaves, and waiting back at the Kennedy Farm, along with Charles Tidd and three others, each with limited physical capacities, Owen Brown with a crippled arm from childhood, Barclay Coppoc, suffering from consumption, and the frail and easily rattled, Francis Merriam.

Cook sees the overwhelming militia and civilian forces gathered around the main buildings, then hears by word of mouth that Brown and seven other raiders have all been killed. With that, he turns back to the Kennedy Farm and tells the others that it would be “sheer madness” to try to cross the bridge. Together the five men pack their gear and escape into the mountains.

Four of the five will succeed, but not John Cook. After hiking 100 miles, the five men are near Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, when Cook ventures out for supplies on October 26, He is recognized, captured for the \$1,000 bounty on his head, and returned to Richmond where he is hanged on December 16, 1859.

Date: Afternoon To Evening On October 17, 1859

The Violence Accelerates And Federal Troops Arrive On The Scene

Around 3pm, the locals are further enraged when the popular Mayor of Harpers Ferry, Fontaine Beckham, is killed by a bullet fired by Edwin Coppoc from inside the Engine House. This loss, along with that of another prominent citizen, George Turner, prompts the mob to haul Will Thompson, captured earlier under a flag of truce, out of his cell at the Waters Hotel and march him to the railroad station. Once there he is tied to a post and shot to death, and his corpse is throw into the Potomac.

The next casualty is Brown’s youngest son, Oliver. He is firing out from the Engine House, when a shot catches him in his intestines. He is laid out next to his brother, Watson, suffering from the same excruciating wound. Oliver will die during the night of October 17-18; Watson will linger, succumbing on the 19th, after telling his captors: “I did my duty as I saw fit.” Stewart Taylor is also shot and dies after three hours inside the Engine House.

As darkness falls, the two raiders hidden in the overlooked Arsenal, manage to sneak down to the Potomac and cross over in a skiff. After trying, unsuccessfully, to connect with the other escapees from the Kennedy Farm, they head to Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, where Hazlett, like John Cook, is spotted, captured, returned to Virginia and hanged. Perry Anderson is more fortunate, eventually making it all the way to Canada. Of the five blacks in Brown’s party, Perry Anderson is the only one who manages to escape.

Meanwhile, in town, Captain Thomas Simms of the Frederick Militia enters the Engine House under a white flag and talks about possible surrender terms. But Brown insists on free passage for his men back across the river, in exchange for his eleven hostages, and Simms demurs.

It is 11PM on October 17 when 52 year old Brevet Colonel Robert E. Lee arrives on the scene accompanied by ninety U.S. Marines. Lee is a career military officer, having served in the Mexican War and as Superintendent of West Point from 1852-55. Given Brown's isolation and the mob scene he encounters, Lee decides to delay a move against the Engine House until the morning of the 18th.

Date: October 18, 1859

Lee Storms The Fire Engine House And John Brown Is Captured Alive



James Ewell Brown (Jeb) Stuart
(1833-1864 kia)

Dawn on Tuesday, October 18, finds 1st Lieutenant Jeb Stuart under a white flag peering into the Engine House and, for the first time, recognizing that the assumed "Mr. Smith" who rented the Kennedy Farm is none other than the Kansas renegade "Osawatomie Brown." Their meeting is brief, Stuart demanding unconditional surrender, Brown still countering with safe passage in exchange for his captives.

When Stuart exits, he crouches behind the heavy door and raises his hat, signaling a twelve man unit under the command of 2nd Lt. Israel Green to rush the building, with battering rams and fixed bayonets at the ready.

Brown waits inside with his eleven hostages, including Lewis Washington, his dead son Owen and his dying son, Watson, the corpse of Stewart Taylor, along with four able bodied defenders: Edwin Coppoc, Jerry Anderson, Dauphin Thompson and Shields Green.

The assault is brief but bloody. The one marine casualty is Private Luke Quinn, born in Ireland and joining the corps in 1855. His death merely adds to the lust for revenge in the congested room.

Jerry Anderson and Dauphin Thompson are killed by bayonet thrusts, while Edwin Coppoc and Shields Green are taken alive.

It is Lt. Green who attacks John Brown, stabbing and slashing him repeated, but with an officer's sword rather than a more lethal cavalry saber. Thus instead of dying on the scene, Brown survives. He is bleeding badly when carried to the Armory and laid next to Aaron Stevens, captured earlier at the Rifle Works.

The fact that Brown lives on for an additional 45 days through his nationally covered questioning and trial, and his eventual execution on December 2, 1859 will alter the entire narrative that follows from his Harpers Ferry raid.

Sidebar: Fates Of The Twenty-Two Men At Harpers Ferry

Of the twenty-two men who participate in the raid, ten are killed in action:

- Five die outright: Newby, Kagi, Leeman, Jerry Anderson, Dauphin Thompson
- One is summarily executed: Will Thompson
- Four succumb to mortal wounds: Oliver and Watson Brown, Taylor and Leary

Five are captured at the scene:

- Three are unhurt in the fighting: Quaker Edwin Coppoc, John Copeland and Shields Green
- Two others, Brown and Aaron Stevens, surrender after being severely wounded

Two flee, but are caught near Chambersburg, Pennsylvania by bounty hunters:

- John Cook, who has lived in, and scouted, Harpers Ferry for a year before the raid
- Albert Hazlett who is able to slip out of the Arsenal

All seven of those taken into custody are tried, convicted and hanged.

Brown goes first and is convicted on October 31 and dies on December 2.

Four more follow shortly, with Edwin Coppoc found guilty on November 3; the two black men, Copeland and Green, on November 4; then Cook, despised for betraying his neighbors in town who call for him to be lynched. All will be hanged on December 16, Copeland and Green in the morning, Coppoc and Cook in the afternoon.

Trials for the other two, Aaron Stevens and Albert Hazlett, are delayed when the term of the current court expires. They will be convicted in February 1860 and executed on March 16.

That leaves the five men who successfully escape. Three share similar fates, enlisting in the Union army and dying soon thereafter. Barclay Coppoc dies in a troop train accident in 1861 at age 22; Charles Tidd of disease in 1862 at 28; and Francis Merriam, also at 28, of disease in 1865.

Two live on. One is Osborn Perry Anderson, the only black who survives, and writes his own account of the incident before dying at 42 in 1872. The other is John Brown's third son, Owen, who has been at his side since the Pottawatomie massacre and will reach age 65 before his death in 1889.

Killed Outright	Age	Race	Profile	Dates
Dangerfield Newby	24	B	Slave in Va, freed, at HF to free his family	KIA 10/17
John Kagi	24	W	Ohio, Kansas militia, 2 nd in command to JB	KIA 10/17
William Leeman	20	W	Maine, settles in Kansas	KIA 10/17

Will Thompson	25	W	NH, son-in-law to JB, brother of Dauphin	Executed 10/17
Jerry Anderson	26	W	Indiana, Kansas, Missouri raid with JB	KIA 10/18
Dauphin Thompson	21	W	NH, North Elba neighbor, in-law Watson B	KIA 10/18
Mortally Wounded				
Stewart Taylor	22	W	Canada, wagon maker	10/17, dies 10/17
Lewis Leary	24	B	NC, born a free black, Oberlin	10/17, dies 10/20
Oliver Brown	20	W		10/17, dies 10/18
Watson Brown	24	W		10/17, dies 10/19
Hanged Later				
John Brown	59	W		Hangs 12/2/59
John Cook	29	W	Conn, law, Kansas, lives in HF for year	Esc, hangs 12/16
John Copeland	25	B	NC, Oberlin, nephew of Lewis Leary	Jail, hangs 12/16
Edwin Coppoc	24	W	Ohio, Quaker, Kansas but not fighting	Jail, hangs 12/16
Shields Green	23	B	SC, run-away, friend of Fred Douglas	Jail, hangs 12/16
Albert Hazlett	22	W	Pa, with Montgomery in Kansas	Esc, hangs 3/16/60
Aaron Stevens	28	W	Conn, Mexican War, Kansas militia	W, hangs 3/16/60
Successful Escape				
Perry Anderson	29	B	Born a free black in Pa, attends Oberlin	From Armory
Owen Brown	24	W	JB's stalwart 3 rd son, longest survivor at 66	From Farm
Barclay Coppoc	20	W	Ohio, Quaker, meets JB Springdale, Ia	From Farm
Francis Merriam	21	W	Mass, in Kansas but not fighting	From Farm
Charles Tidd	25	W	Maine, Missouri raid with JB, fears failure	From Farm