

Chapter 274– John Brown Gets Ready For His Attack In Virginia



Dates:
April – September
1859

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Date: April-May 9, 1859

Brown’s Plan To Attack Virginia Is Revived After A Year-long Delay

After delivering the Missouri slaves he has liberated to the ferryboat to Canada in Detroit, John Brown swings east to revive his Virginia plan. It is now April 1859 and nearly a year has passed since the public disclosures by Hugh Forbes have spooked his Secret Six backers and forced him to send his original band of nine recruits on their ways.

He vows to pick up the pieces and travels east from Detroit, stopping off at Oberlin College before arriving in Cleveland on March 15, 1859 for a rally that turns out some 10,000 anti-slavery enthusiasts. He shares his latest exploits with the crowd, and leaves with two new black recruits – Lewis Leary, who will be killed in action, and his nephew, John Copeland, who will be tried and hanged.

He meets with abolitionist Governor Joshua Giddings and then arrives in Peterboro, New York, where he spends April 11-14 with Gerritt Smith, who is delighted by his rescue of the Missouri slaves. Smith donates another \$400 to the cause and heaps praise on Brown.

If I were asked to point out the man in all this world I think most truly a Christian, I would point to John Brown.

For the first time in two years he is also able to visit with his family in North Elba, lingering there for two weeks.

He swings down to Boston, receiving kudos from the Transcendentalists who continue to regard him as the self-reliant man of nature, willing to spring into action on behalf of a “higher law.” Bronson Alcott labels him:

The manliest man I have ever seen.

On May 9, 1859 he is back with the Secret Six, updating his progress and receiving more financial support. Dr. Samuel Howe is the only insider who criticizes his action in Missouri and is hesitant about the Virginia attacks.

Date: June to July 3, 1859

John Brown Occupies His Base At The Kennedy Farm



A Typical 19th Century American Farm Setting

The summer of 1859 finds a buoyant John Brown eager to seize the day in Virginia.

He turns his attention to assembling the arms he will need for the initial assault. On June 3, 1859 he is in Collinsville, Connecticut with one Charles Blair who is manufacturing what will be known as “John Brown’s Pikes.” These are fearsome weapons, featuring a stainless steel Bowie knife mounted at the tip of a six foot long spear. Brown has designed them for the slaves he expects to free, whom he feels will lack the proper training to use conventional guns. He gives Blair \$450 to finish up 950 pikes and ship them to his secret depot in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, 55 miles north of Harpers Ferry.

On June 11 John Brown makes his last visit to his home in North Elba. It lasts only five days, much of it devoted to discussions about the upcoming attack and Brown’s wish to have his sons accompany him to Virginia.

Three agree to go: Oliver at twenty and Watson at twenty-one will both suffer gut-shots in the battle and die slow and agonizing deaths, while Owen at thirty-four will fight and escape to safety, living for thirty more years. Thirty-eight year old John Jr. will oversee the shipment of some 198 Sharps rifles and 200 revolvers, but will be absent when the battle takes place.

Tough-minded Salmon at twenty-two, is convinced that the attack will fail, says that to his father, and refuses to sign on. Jason, a gentle soul at twenty-six, also bows out.

With their fates decided, the Browns head to the Kennedy Farm to meet up with the rest of the volunteers and begin training for their assault. The farm is on two acres of land roughly five miles north of Harpers Ferry. Brown has rented the property from heirs of the deceased Dr. Robert Kennedy under the alias of Isaac Smith. He pay \$35 on a lease running until March 1860, signaling his intent to be a long-term settler.

On July 3, 1859, Brown, his son, Oliver and Osborn Anderson move to the farm, along with Oliver’s pregnant wife, Martha and Brown’s daughter, Anne. Both women are sixteen years old, and their duty will be to handle the housekeeping chores and act as look-outs on the property, until just before the raid.

Some 105 days now remain until the bloodshed begins.

Date: July-August 1859

Frederick Douglass Hears The Plan And Fears For The Outcome

While Brown is elated that the day of reckoning is near, there are still many details left to prepare for the attack.

To celebrate the Fourth of July he drafts his own version of the Declaration of Independence which will later be found at the farm. It reaffirms his intentions for the new Provisional Government.

To secure equal rights, privileges and justice for all... We will obtain these rights or die in the struggle to obtain them. We make war upon oppression.

By the end of August, twenty of the twenty-one men who will fight at Harpers Ferry are present on the farm.

They will be crammed into tight quarters, as the farmhouse consists of only two rooms, and much of the barn space is given over to the eventual storage of weapons. But most are accustomed to living rough in the outdoors, and they settle in nicely.

Their daily routine consists of reading Hugh Forbes manual on guerrilla tactics, training with their weapons, debating religion and politics, singing songs and keeping up with the news via the *Baltimore Sun*, brought to them by John Cook, who has been living in town for over a year to scope out the operation.

On Sundays, John Brown attends the local Dunker Church. During the week, he is called upon by neighbors to act as veterinarian for their sick farm animals. Efforts to conceal their purpose are wanting all along, with the men sending details to their families back home and engaging in loose talk. Secretary of War John Floyd even receives an anonymous letter in August citing Brown's presence and intentions in Virginia, but discards it as implausible.

The one moment of real tension among the men occurs when, for the first time, many of them learn that the initial attack will be made on the U.S. Arsenal. Like many other Brown supporters – even including members of the Secret Six – the assumption is that the plantations in and around Harpers Ferry are the target, not federal property. Upon hearing to the contrary, "Captain" Charles Tidd and several other predict failure, but Brown eventually brings them around.

He hears a similar forecast from Frederick Douglass who visits the farm in mid-August. Brown tries very hard to persuade Douglass to join him:

Come with me Douglass. I want you for a special purpose. When I strike, the bees (i.e. slaves) will begin to swarm, and I shall want you to help hive them.

Brown is convinced that the slaves will spontaneously rise up to join his crusade, but fails to devise a system for getting the word out to the plantations, a critical oversight.

After listening to Brown's plan, Douglas declines the invitation to join in, and tells his old friend, "I believe you will die there."

While disappointed, the meeting does result in Brown's final recruit, twenty-three year old, Shields Green, a fugitive slave from Charleston, S.C., who has accompanied Douglass to the farm.

The presence of a white man ready to die for black men astonishes Green, who will go to Harpers Ferry, fight, be captured and subsequently hanged.

Date; September 1859

The Raiders Reflect On Their Mission And Fate

In early September the weapons supplied by the Massachusetts State Kansas Committee and the Secret Six arrive at the Kennedy farm. Included are 198 Sharps rifles and 200 Maynard revolvers, although the latter lack priming devices needed to make them functional.

They are followed at the end of the month by the supply of "John Brown's Pikes," which he intends to distribute to the men he frees. As he says with great assurance:

Give a slave a pike and you make him a man.

Fall is harvesting season across the South, when slaves are particularly over-worked and most prone to flight. Brown's feels it is the perfect time for his attacks to begin.

On September 29, 1859 he takes another step forward, ordering the two women to leave the farm and return home for safety. He gives a note to his daughter Anne, telling her to "save this letter to remember your father by."

Oliver Brown's pregnant wife Martha also says good-bye to her husband for the last time. Both will be dead within the next six weeks, he from a mortal wound in battle, she following an illness after also losing her newborn baby.

Thoughts of impending death also mark the correspondence of the other would-be soldiers. While Charles Tidd escapes in the end, his fears about the assault on the armory persist, and he writes his parents:

This is perhaps the last letter you will ever receive from your son.

Two men who will die during the battle assume the worst while trying to rationalize it in their own minds. Jerry Anderson writes...

If my life is sacrificed, it can't be lost in a better cause.

John Kagi says that if he dies, "the result will be worth the sacrifice."

As September ends, the men are just sixteen days away from discovering their individual fates.