

John Brown of Kansas attacks Harpers Ferry Arsenal

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October 2009 was the 150th anniversary of the startling attack on United States Arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Va. (now West Virginia), concocted and led by John Brown. Brown, of course, was only a few months removed from his mostly successful operations in Kansas territory.

In the evening hours of October 16, 1859 Brown and 19 other heavily-armed abolitionist warriors entered Harpers Ferry with the goal of capturing the arsenal and taking weapons, with which they expected to arm escaping slaves at the several forts Brown planned for the mountain regions of Virginia and Maryland. Brown's "Provisional Army" included two of Brown's sons, a free black who hoped this was the way to free his family which was enslaved in Virginia, and several seasoned fighters from Kansas. Also with Brown were several hostages, including the nephew of George Washington.

The arsenal was easily captured after the two guards were quickly overmatched. Brown said to watchman Whelan "I came here from Kansas, and this is a slave state. I want to free all Negroes in this state. I have possession of the United States armory now and if the citizens interfere with me, I must burn the town and have blood." Brown was said to have been most interestingly attired in his "Kansas Cap," which was a peaked cap with earflaps supposedly given to him in Kansas by an Ottawa Indian leader.

The nearby Hall's Rifleworks was also captured to keep weapons out of the hands of counter-attackers.

Brown and his band did not harm the residents of Harpers Ferry in the beginning, and a train was allowed to pass through town unmolested. Passengers on the train alerted the rest of the world to the situation and, by the morning of October 17, President Buchanan awoke to the news of the attack. Several townspeople were ultimately killed, including the mayor of Harpers Ferry. The first casualty was an African American railway porter by the name of Shephard Hayward.

In retrospect, Brown delayed too long in attempting to get out of Harpers Ferry. A United States Marine force, led by Robert E. Lee, eventually overwhelmed Brown's forces in the armory and elsewhere and killed all but Brown and four others. John Brown was severely wounded, but able to be arraigned a week later and tried on October 26 on three felony counts of treason, murder and inciting insurrection. Brown rejected a defense of insanity.

Brown was found guilty and sentenced to death on November 2, and hung on December 2, 1859. His famous last words (in the form of a note) were –

"I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty
land will never be purged away but with blood."

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