

John Brown's Fort, Harper's Ferry, West Virginia

(Music)

David Fox - Park Ranger, Harpers Ferry National Historic Park

Here at Harper's Ferry National Historical Park one of the topics of conversation among many of our visitors is John Brown's Raid. It started on October 16th 1859 when Brown and his men crossed the Potomac River from Maryland, entered Harper's Ferry, Virginia and took over a town of 3,000 people, the United States Government gun factory called the Armory, the arsenal and also the U.S Rifle Factory. In all, over 30 buildings and he did this with less than two dozen men. Now, he had a spy here for twelve months before the raid; he had been planning this off and on for about 20 years. So, a lot of planning went into it and initially all of John Brown's targets fell just like a row of dominos; taking the buildings, taking the B&O Railroad Bridge, the Wagon Bridge over the Shenandoah, and eventually, 39 hostages which he kept in the building right behind me, known as John Brown's Fort. At that time it was the fire engine house and night watchman's office for the United States Armory. So this is where hostages were held, attacks were waged, defenses were staged and also where lives were lost.

Brown was here for 36 hours. During that time, ten of his men died, four townspeople died, three slaves from this area died directly related to this raid, if not during it, and one United States Marine. So there were lives lost in this affair known as John Brown's Raid. His goal was to free slaves. Now, coming here first may have been a symbolic effort on his part, perhaps an attempt to grab attention, to bring volunteers together. But the long-range goal was to get into the mountains and move south and start a provisional government for the United States, a government that would exist alongside state governments and the federal government and also a government where people regardless of race or gender would be treated as equals.

Brown may have expected many people to join him once he got started, but eventually he hoped to make property and slaves insecure by giving people who had been born into slavery a chance to defend themselves in the land where they were born.

John Brown had a map of the south with seven states with x's marked on them. These appeared to be targets, and they were later found. In the margins of these maps he had data, statistics, population statistics; the number of slaves in the area. So he had targets beyond Harpers Ferry. Also, near here Pennsylvania, a free territory where he had friends and supporters who were helping him put his plans in motion. So you bring all those together with the mountains here as his ultimate goal and the raid occurred here.

The first person mortally wounded during John Brown's Raid was a man named Hayward Shepherd, who was the baggage master working the graveyard shift for the

Winchester Potomac Railroad. Just a few hours after Brown and his men entered town, a train was coming down the B&O Railroad tracks and stopped, it had been warned by another night watchman that there was trouble on the bridge; John Brown's men were on that bridge. Well this train stopped and eventually backed up and Hayward Shepherd began to investigate on his own- where were the night watchmen, why was the train backing up? This was a pitch-black, rainy night, this was a covered bridge and Hayward Shepherd started to walk out towards the bridge to investigate. There is some conflicting evidence, but the story seems to have evolved to the point that Shepherd was told to halt by one of Brown's men on the bridge, he was told to halt a second time, he turned to walk away and bang! They shot at him in the darkness and he was the first person to die. Hayward Shepherd was also a free black man, a former slave who may have been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

This is one of the most important buildings in the entire national park. It is, of course, the building where John Brown was captured. But it started off as the fire engine house and night watchman's office for the United States Armory. About 150 feet just across the street over here, where there is a limestone obelisk marking the spot today. It was used for various purposes during the war; souvenir hunters carved it up into pieces, Massachusetts soldiers even took the bell from the cupola, which is still empty today. The bell is still in Marlborough, Massachusetts. But the building also had a life of its own; it was moved to Chicago for the World's Fair in 1891. It was there for about four years as part of the Civil War display, and then it came back to Harper's Ferry in 1895. And there's a plaque in the wall of this building, acknowledging the efforts of Kate Field, the crusading writer and speaker who raised the money to bring it back to town. But the original site had been destroyed or buried by a railroad embankment that was moving the B&O tracks to a better location while this building was in Chicago.

So, first move back to Harper's Ferry, the building ended up on a place called the Murphy Farm, which is part of the park today; it's about three miles away. And it was there on that farm in 1906 that the Niagara Movement, one of the first Civil Rights organizations of the 20th Century, paid a visit, homage if you will a pilgrimage. They called it John Brown Day and they marched around the building singing *John Brown's Body* and *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*.

About four years later the building was moved again, and another plaque in the building acknowledges that movement to the campus of Storer College, which was in Harper's Ferry from 1867 until 1955. While it was there and during the college's lifetime, this building was a museum. Then, when the college closed and the campus eventually became part of the national park, the building was moved its last time. It was picked up in-tact and transported to

the site where it now stands today. And again, this is perhaps the most important building in the entire national park to the majority of our visitors.

Because of John Brown and what he tried to do here, what happened to him, some people consider this the scene of a crime, where a murderer and a traitor was captured. To other people, this building is nothing less than a monument on a battlefield for universal freedom.

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