Harpers Ferry

Harpers Ferry
National Historical Park
West Virginia, Maryland, Virginia

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

George Washington

Thomas Jefferson

Meriwether Lewis

John Brown

J.E.B. Stuart

Robert E. Lee

Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson

George Armstrong Custer

Philip H. Sheridan

Abraham Lincoln

W.E.B. Du Bois

Frederick Douglass

ILLUSTRATIONS NPS/RICHARD SCHLECHT
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A Heritage Shared

Many prominent people helped shape Harpers Ferry history. Lesser-known people also contributed to the town's development through day-to-day community life. There were the workers, black and white, employed by the armory and other industries, and the tradesmen and shopkeepers who operated the hotels, taverns, restaurants, and general stores. There were the women who kept the homes, taught the children, and nursed the sick. And there were the slaves and freedmen whose visions of freedom and equality were often clouded by an uncertain future. All are part of the Harpers Ferry story.

They Passed This Way

Very little knowledge of history is needed to recognize the names of the many history-makers at Harpers Ferry. **Thomas Jefferson** stopped here with his eldest daughter Patsy in October 1783 on his way to Philadelphia to serve as a Virginia delegate to the Continental Congress. No town existed here then, only the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers crashing their way through the mountains in a drama that Jefferson declared "perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in Nature." Another early visitor, **George Washington**, knew Harpers Ferry much better than Jefferson because of his years as a surveyor working in the area. Washington also knew the power of the rivers and, as president in 1796, persuaded Congress to establish a federal armory and arsenal here to help safeguard the fledgling republic and spur its industrial and commercial development.

In March 1803 Washington's armory supplied **Meriwether Lewis** with items needed for survival on the transcontinental expedition that he and William Clark planned to undertake. For protection and acquiring food, armory gunsmiths provided Lewis with modified Model 1792 contract rifles bearing Harpers Ferry lockplates, along with spare parts and tools, including a simple grindstone, to repair them. Lewis also obtained powder horns, pouches, bullet molds, knives, tomahawks, and an innovative portable iron boat frame, which he planned to cover with animal skins and use for transport beyond the Great Falls of the Missouri River.

Fifty-six years later, weapons, slaves, and mountains lured abolitionist **John Brown** to Harpers Ferry. In October 1859, Brown attempted to seize the 100,000 rifles and muskets stored here as a first step in his revolutionary scheme to rid the nation of slavery. The plan failed when local militia and a contingent of marines under the command of Lt. Col. **Robert E. Lee**, ordered here by President James Buchanan, seized Brown and killed or captured nearly all of his raiders. (Lt. **J.E.B. Stuart**, destined to gain fame as a Confederate cavalry leader, served as Lee's aide throughout the incident and tried unsuccessfully to negotiate a peaceful settlement with the raiders.) Although Brown soon died on the scaffold, his actions further divided the nation over the issue of slavery.

The Civil War, which John Brown's raid helped to bring about, trapped Harpers Ferry on the border between North and South. After Virginia forces seized the armory in April 1861, **Thomas Jonathan Jackson** (in his first command of the war and not yet known as "Stonewall") dismantled the weapons-producing machinery and shipped it south to produce arms for the Confederacy. He returned to Harpers Ferry in mid-September 1862, during Lee's first invasion of the North, and conducted a brilliant siege from the mountains that forced the surrender of both the town and the Federal troops stationed there—the largest surrender of United States troops during the Civil War.

Despite Jackson's success here, the Confederate army retreated from Maryland following the Battle of Antietam. This prompted President **Abraham Lincoln** to travel to Sharpsburg, Md., for talks with his army commander, Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan. During a stopover at Harpers Ferry on October 1–2, 1862, Lincoln reviewed the Union troops stationed on the surrounding heights and even toured the fire enginehouse ("John Brown's Fort") on the old armory grounds. As the war dragged on, Harpers Ferry became a major Union supply base. In August 1864 it became temporary headquarters for Maj. Gen. **Philip H. Sheridan**, who had been assigned the task of driving Confederate forces from the strategic Shenandoah Valley. One of Sheridan's cavalry officers, flamboyant Brig. Gen. **George Armstrong Custer**, met with his wife Elizabeth in Harpers Ferry in September 1864, during a lull in the campaign.

Sixteen years after the Civil War, in May 1881, **Frederick Douglass**, a former slave who had become a prominent journalist and orator, journeyed to Harpers Ferry to deliver an important address on John Brown for the 14th anniversary of Storer College, established in 1867 to educate former slaves. Douglass, who had quietly supported the old abolitionist's activities in Kansas, remembered how he had cautioned Brown not to attack Harpers Ferry and declared him a martyr whose "zeal in the cause of my race was greater than mine."

By the first decade of the 20th century, John Brown and Harpers Ferry had become symbolic to the African-American struggle for justice and equality. For this reason, in August 1906, **W.E.B. Du Bois**, black educator, editor, and writer, brought the Niagara Movement, a black civil rights organization he had helped establish, to Harpers Ferry for its first public meeting. In his "Address to the Country," presented at Storer College on the last night of the conference, Du Bois argued persuasively against "the exploitation of the worker, regardless of race and color." In 1909 Du Bois and other members of the Niagara Movement helped form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Harpers Ferry on the Eve of the Civil War

Harpers Ferry, Va., in the summer of 1860 was a diverse, vibrant, and thriving community. Seven combination dry goods/hardware stores, four men's clothing stores, five shoemakers, four tailors, four taverns, and six churches lined the narrow streets and competed for patrons among a population of almost 3,000.

Farmers and butchers filled the market place with freshly cut produce and meats. Trains delivered fresh seafood from the Chesapeake Bay. The Masons met regularly to share their fraternal secrets. The temperance hall provided reformers a place to rail against alcohol, tobacco, and other sins and vices.

The town's major business was the U.S. Armory, which consisted of the musket factory, a complex of 20 handsome brick structures stretching for 600 yards along the Potomac River; two arsenal buildings, where thousands of finished weapons were stored; and the U.S. Rifle Factory, formerly the Hall Rifle Works, about half a mile away on Upper Hall Island along the Shenandoah.

The armory employed over 250 men with wages averaging just over $2 per 10-hour day. Slave owners also rented their human property to the government as laborers. Altogether, men and machines turned out over 10,000 rifles and muskets each year for American soldiers to defend their growing country.

The town's origins could be traced to 1733, when Peter Stephens, a Pennsylvania Dutchman, settled here and began a ferry boat service. In 1747, Robert Harper, a Philadelphia millwright and the man for whom the town is named, bought out Stephens, improved the ferry operation, and built a gristmill on Virginius Island. The gristmill disappeared long ago, replaced by a succession of industries: an iron foundry, flour mill, cotton mill, and machine shop, all powered by water diverted from the Shenandoah River. The ferryboat across the Potomac was replaced by a bridge in 1824. By 1836 a 900-foot covered railroad bridge had been built, the same one John Brown's raiders used in 1859. A toll bridge spanned the Shenandoah.

Thanks to the expansion of industry and the extension of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad and the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, the population of Harpers Ferry had grown to almost 3,000. Of these about 150 were free blacks, whose lives were controlled by state and local laws, and 150 were slaves, who had no freedom at all to determine their own destinies. Many of the white male residents were employed at the armory or at the manufacturing plants on Virginius Island. Women had limited job opportunities, owned some property, and could not yet vote.

With land at a premium, shops were aligned tightly along the Shenandoah, Potomac, and High streets, and sprawled up the slopes of Camp Hill. In some places the rocky cliffs had been blasted away to make room for another building. Most of the homes were of simple design; those of the armory officials were more elaborate.

Manure and stagnant water often covered the streets. Outhouses occupied the backyards.
Hogs roamed the town, coal smoke from the armory and the industries filled the air, and disease often plagued the citizens. (A cholera epidemic in 1850 killed over a hundred people.) It was a far cry from the bucolic scene Thomas Jefferson believed "worth a voyage across the Atlantic."

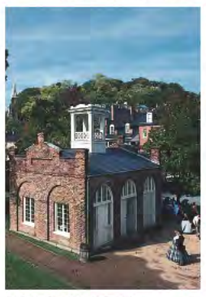
Nevertheless, it was a prosperous time for the town and its people. Despite the ominous clouds on the political horizon, no one expected that the whirlwind of civil war would soon consume them.

Visiting Harpers Ferry Park

Shenandoah Pulp Company mill ruins

Harpers Ferry water gap

The old Winchester and Potomac Railroad trestle



John Brown's Fort

Civil War living history groups

Original Storer College Building

PHOTOS TOP, NPS / ROBERT LAUTMAN; FAR LEFT, NPS / DAVE GILBERT; CIVIL WAR SOLDIER GROUPS, NPS; ALL OTHERS, ©ERIC LONG

Understanding the Past

The history of Harpers Ferry has few parallels in the American drama. It is more than one event, one date, or one individual. It is multi-layered, involving a diverse number of people and events, decisions and actions that influenced the course of our nation's history. Harpers Ferry witnessed the first successful application of interchangeable parts, the arrival of the first successful American railroad, John Brown's attack on slavery, the largest surrender of Federal troops during the Civil War, and the education of former slaves in one of the earliest integrated schools in the United States.

To help you understand Harpers Ferry's complex past, the National Park Service has identified six themes that run through the town's history: Industry, Natural Heritage, Transportation, John Brown, Civil War, and African American History. Each theme, or "Path Through History," deals with a specific set of events or circumstances that influenced the growth and development of Harpers Ferry and the role this area played in the history of the United States. Although each path *(highlighted below)* focuses on a single subject, you will discover that the stories within each path often intersect and influence the direction of one or more other paths.

Exploring the Park

Begin your visit at the visitor center and get information on park sites and activities. Brochures on specific park areas help you choose one of the "Paths Through History." Ranger-led tours and programs may be available in the spring, summer, and fall. In winter, organized activities are limited, but the visitor center, museums, and trails are open. Winter visitors experience a tranquil environment. Service animals are welcome.

We invite you to explore our many diverse park areas, keyed by number to the map at right:

1 Bolivar Heights Walk in the footsteps of Abraham Lincoln and Stonewall Jackson. Enjoy a splendid view of the Harpers Ferry water gap. *1 hour*

2 Lower Bolivar Heights Near the foot of the heights, along the modern road, Union skirmishers clashed with the Confederates. *1 hour*

3 Schoolhouse Ridge North Site of Confederate advance during the 1862 battle. *1 hour*

4 Schoolhouse Ridge South From this position, Jackson orchestrated movements sealing the fate of the Federals. *1 hour*

5 Murphy Farm Explore a site where Civil War conflict and Civil Rights freedom come together. *1 hour*

6 Lower Town Relive 19th-century Harpers Ferry through restored buildings, exhibits, living history, and ranger-conducted programs. *3–6 hours*

7 Virginius Island Explore the ruins of a once-thriving 19th-century industrial town along the Shenandoah River. *1–2 hours*

8 Camp Hill Visit Harper Cemetery and examine old armory buildings devastated by civil war and returned to use as classrooms for Storer College. *1–2 hours*

9 Maryland Heights Hike to discover ruins of Civil War forts and campgrounds and savor the spectacular views. *3–6 hours*

10 Loudoun Heights Ascend the Blue Ridge via the historic and scenic Appalachian Trail and relish the splendid mountain vistas. *3–5 hours*

Protect Your Park Help us protect the park's cultural and natural resources. The hunting and collecting of artifacts and natural specimens are forbidden by law. No camping or open fires are allowed. Picnic only in designated areas.

Caution: Steps and sidewalks Early settlers built steps and sidewalks with brick and natural stone. Walk carefully and use handrails; surfaces can be uneven or slippery. Pedestrians, especially children: be alert to traffic on the narrow streets.

Beware of the rivers At low water they look calm, but deep holes and swift undercurrents make them treacherous at any time. The park does not monitor water quality, so swimming is not advised. Anglers and boaters must wear life jackets. Transporting inflatable devices to or from the river across park property is permitted only at designated locations.

More Information
Harpers Ferry
National Historical Park
P.O. Box 65
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425
304-535-6298
www.nps.gov/hafe

For firearms laws and policies see our website.

To learn more about parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities, please visit www.nps.gov.

Paths Through History

Turning gun stocks on Blanchard lathes

Visitors at Jefferson Rock

Lock 33, C & O Canal, opposite Harpers Ferry

ILLUSTRATIONS NPS / RICHARD SCHLECHT

Industry

The United States Armory and Arsenal, established here in the 1790s, transformed Harpers Ferry from a wilderness into an industrial center. Between the time the first buildings were constructed in 1799 and the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the armory produced over 600,000 muskets, rifles, and pistols, and employed, at times, over 400 workers. Among the weapons the armory produced were the first U.S. military rifle (the Model 1803 flintlock) and the first percussion rifle (the Model 1841). Inventor John H. Hall developed interchangeable parts technology at his rifle factory in the 1820s and helped lead the change from craftsmen-based production to manufacture by machine.

Before the Civil War, Virginius Island boasted several private industries, including a sawmill, flour mill, cotton mills, tannery, and iron foundry. Following the war a paper pulp industry provided local jobs. Today only ruins remain of Harpers Ferry's 19th-century industrial heyday.

An armory worker checking the Model 1841 Harpers Ferry percussion rifle

1 **Lower Town Point of Interest**
1 Information Center/Master Armorer's House
2 Restoration Museum
3 Frankel's Clothing Store
4 Industry Museum
5 Bookshop
6 Blacksmith Shop
7 Hamilton Street
8 A Place In Time
9 Provost Marshal Office
10 Mrs. Stipes' Boarding House
11 Dry Goods Store
12 Arsenal Square
13 John Brown's Fort
14 The Point
15 John Brown Museum
16 Harpers Ferry Wetlands
17 Storer College/Niagara Movement
18 A. Burton Clocks and Jewelry
19 1862 Battle of Harpers Ferry
20 Confectionery
21 Civil War Museum
22 Black Voices
23 White Hall Tavern
24 Meriwether Lewis Exhibit
25 Harper House
26 Jefferson Rock/Harper Cemetery

Natural Heritage

In Harpers Ferry the landscape shaped the history. The water gap, carved out by the rivers, provided a travel route for American Indians, explorers and settlers, and later the canals and railroads. The Potomac and Shenandoah rivers produced power for local mills and factories. Surrounding hills yielded building stone, hardwood for charcoal, limestone, and iron ore for a growing community. This development and the strategic terrain lured John Brown and helped bring about the devastation of the Civil War.

Floods, intensified by a war-torn and denuded landscape, ravaged what human hands had built. Wetlands filled abandoned canals, and plants and animals converted lost ruins into homes. Today's altered landscape and the natural forces that shape it remind us of the unbreakable connection between people and place.

Transportation

The convergence of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, the Winchester & Potomac Railroad, and the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal in the mid-1830s inaugurated an era of economic and industrial growth for the town that lasted well into the 1850s. Trains and boats reduced travel time from days to hours and served as avenues for local commerce. Passengers traveled with ease from the Ohio and Shenandoah valleys and from growing eastern cities like Baltimore, Washington, and Alexandria.

The German and Irish laborers who helped to build the railroads later settled in the area and diversified the local culture. The ferry service that Robert Harper managed in the mid-1700s became obsolete in the early 1800s as bridges spanned the rivers. Today, only the railroad remains as an active reminder of Harpers Ferry's transportation heritage.

Steam engine of the 1850s and competitor of the C & O Canal

John Brown

John Brown believed he could free the slaves, and he selected Harpers Ferry as his starting point. Determined to seize the 100,000 weapons at the arsenal and to use the mountains for guerrilla warfare, abolitionist Brown began his raid on Sunday evening, October 16, 1859. His 21-man self-styled "army of liberation," which included three of his sons and five free African Americans, seized the armory and several other strategic points. Thirty-six hours after the raid began, with most of his men killed or wounded, Brown was captured in the armory fire enginehouse (now known as John Brown's Fort) when U.S. Marines stormed the building. Brought to trial at nearby Charles Town, Brown was found guilty of treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia, conspiring with slaves to rebel, and murder. He was hanged on December 2, 1859. John Brown's short-lived raid failed, but his trial and execution focused the nation's attention on the moral issue of slavery and headed the country toward civil war. Today John Brown's Fort and the arsenal ruins are part of the legacy of the nation's struggle with slavery.

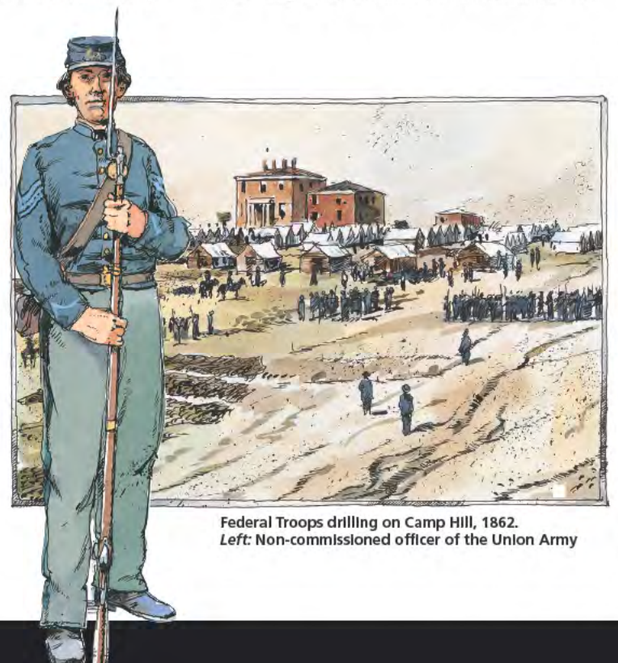
John Brown's Fort

Civil War

The Civil War had a profound effect on Harpers Ferry, wrecking its economy and forcing many residents to leave forever. Because of the town's location on the strategic Baltimore and Ohio Railroad at the northern end of the Shenandoah Valley, Union and Confederate troop movements through Harpers Ferry were frequent. The town changed hands eight times between 1861 and 1865.

On April 18, 1861, Federal soldiers set fire to the armory and arsenal to keep them out of Confederate hands. The arsenal and 15,000 weapons were destroyed, but the armory flames were extinguished and the weapons-making equipment was shipped south. When the Confederates abandoned the town two months later, they burned most of the factory buildings and blew up the railroad bridge.

U.S. forces reoccupied Harpers Ferry in 1862, using it as a base for operations in the Shenandoah Valley. During the Confederacy's first invasion of the North, Stonewall Jackson captured the town's 12,500-man Union garrison on September 15, 1862. After the Federals returned to Harpers Ferry, they transformed the surrounding heights into fortified encampments to protect both the town and the railroad. In 1864 Union Gen. Philip H. Sheridan used Harpers Ferry as his base of operations against Confederate troops in the Shenandoah Valley.



Federal Troops drilling on Camp Hill, 1862.
Left: Non-commissioned officer of the Union Army

African American History

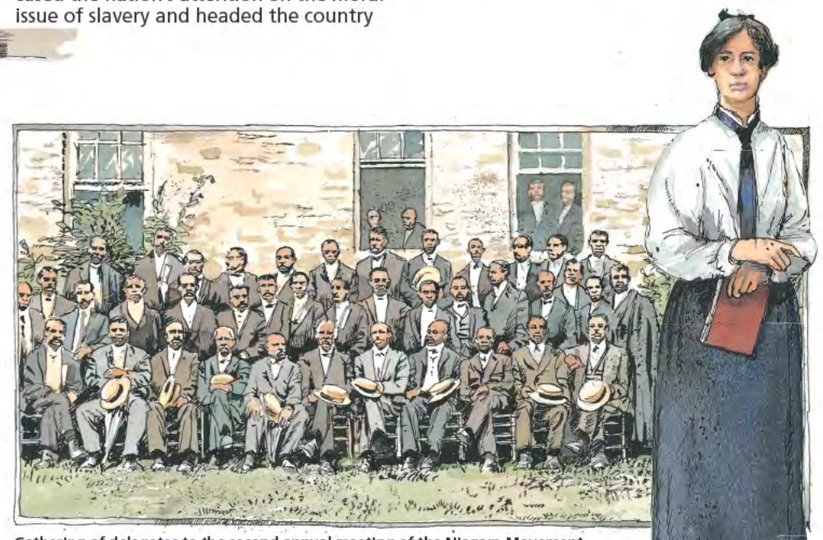
African Americans have been a part of Harpers Ferry history since before the American Revolution. The first black arrived here in the mid-1700s as a slave to Robert Harper. By the time of John Brown's raid in 1859, about 10 percent of the town's residents were black and a key element in the town's economy.

The town's 150 slaves, considered property, could be rented out, sold, used as collateral for business transactions, or given away. Another 150 free blacks often worked as laborers or teamsters, but some prospered as skilled masons, plasterers, butchers, and blacksmiths.

During the Civil War, Harpers Ferry became one of many Union garrison towns where runaway slaves, or "contraband" as they were called, sought refuge. In 1864 reformer/educator Julia Mann established a freedmen's school here for their benefit. In 1867 New England Freewill Baptist missionaries acquired several vacant armory buildings on Camp Hill and started Storer College, an integrated school designed primarily to educate former slaves but open to students of all races and both genders. Frederick Douglass was one of the school's trustees.

By the end of the 19th century, the promise of freedom and equality for blacks had been buried by Jim Crow laws and legal segregation. To combat these injustices, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois and other leading African Americans created the Niagara Movement, which held its second conference at Harpers Ferry in 1906. In "one of the greatest meetings that American Negroes ever held," Du Bois declared: "The battle we wage is not for ourselves but for all true Americans."

For the next 48 years, Storer College taught its students the ethic of honest labor, religion, education, and property ownership. In 1954, legal segregation finally ended and the next year Storer College closed its doors. Today the National Park Service continues the college's educational mission by using part of the old campus as a training facility.



Gathering of delegates to the second annual meeting of the Niagara Movement at Storer College, 1906. *Right:* Storer College student, early 1900s.

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