RESILIENT SHRINE

by PAUL A. SHACKEL

Few American shrines have been so mistreated as the engine house where John Brown ended his famous raid on Harpers Ferry October 16, 1859. This modest brick structure was originally built on the grounds of a government armory to house a pair of fire engines. Brown had hoped to gain control of the armory, thus encouraging slaves from the surrounding plantations to join his insurrection. Once armed, these slaves would launch a revolution and overthrow slavery.

Brown’s group encountered little resistance at the armory, but when word of the raid spread, it drew a noisy, drunken lynch mob rather than the slave fighters Brown had hoped for. Brown took refuge in the engine house and tried to negotiate a truce. A young colonel by the name of Robert E. Lee arrived with a contingent of marines; Lee stormed the engine house and overpowered the renegades. Not a single slave had rallied to Brown’s cause. Tried for treason in nearby Charles Town, Virginia, he was found guilty and hanged six weeks later.

The nation divided quickly over Brown. For enemies of slavery, he became a prophet and martyr, a visionary fighter against inequality, a new American saint; for slave-holders and secessionists, he would remain an arch-villain, murderer, and horse thief. The engine house itself was dubbed John Brown’s Fort and served as a symbol of resistance to slavery throughout the Civil War. During the Union’s intermittent occupation of Harpers Ferry, Northern troops sang “John Brown’s Body” as they marched past it. From the 1870s through the 1890s it was fashionable to visit Civil War sites, and Harpers Ferry was a mecca for summer tourists wishing to view the engine house.

John Brown’s reputation began to tarnish in the 1880s when one of his sons confessed that Brown had participated in some notorious murders in Kansas. As Brown’s stock declined, so did that of the engine house. Threatened with removal by a new railroad line, it was sold to a group of entrepreneurs who dismantled it in 1893 and transported its bricks by rail to the Columbian exhibition in Chicago. Rebuilt and opened to the public only ten days before the exhibition closed, it collected only 11 paid admissions at 50 cents apiece. Its owners, the John Brown Fort Company, lost $60,000, the cost of transportation. Abandoned, the structure was reutilized by a new department store as a delivery wagons stable. “Ig noble Use of the John Brown Fort,” lamented The Chicago Tribune.

Elsewhere in the country sentiment for the old engine house was rekindling. A reporter and civil rights activist from Washington, D.C., Mary Katherine Keemie Field was determined to bring the engine house back east. Her plan was to relocate it close to the grounds of Storer College, an African-American institution in Harpers Ferry founded in 1867. Since the original site of the fort was now buried under nine feet of railroad embankment fill, and town sentiment was against moving the fort into the central commercial district, it ended on a nearby farm. Because visitors littered his field and trampled his crops, the farm’s owner closed it to the public and used it to store grain.

Storer College eventually took possession of the fort, which was dismantled again and moved in 1910 to its campus. Unfortunately, the fort was rebuilt according to an image on an old glass-plate negative, in reverse. Storer College closed in 1955, and the National Park Service was deeded the lands and the buildings. The agency moved the engine house whole to its current location on Arsenal Square just 100 feet from its original location in downtown Harpers Ferry, where it is easily accessible to the town’s half-million annual tourists.

Every step in the fort’s odyssey has cost it wear and bricks: originally 24 by 35½ feet, it now measures 22 feet 3 inches by 34 feet 3 inches. Pinched by attrition and literally the mirror image of its former self, it remains nonetheless a dignified, surprisingly handsome building—and a resilient piece of Americana.

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