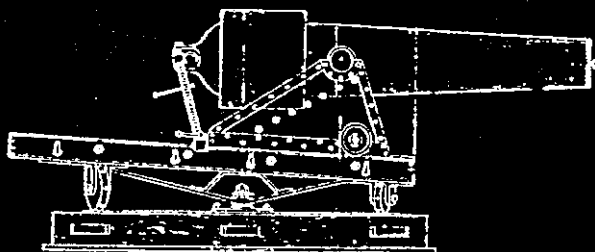# LOOK TO THE EARTH

Historical Archaeology and the American Civil War

Edited by Clarence R. Geier, Jr. and Susan E. Winter

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE / KNOXVILLE

The paper in this book meets the minimum
requirements of the
American National Standard for Permanence of
Paper for Printed Library Materials.
∞
The binding materials have been chosen
for strength and durability.

CONTENTS

12

Paul A. Shackel

MEMORIALIZING LANDSCAPES AND THE CIVIL WAR IN HARPERS FERRY

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park receives about half a million visitors a year, many with an interest in Civil War history. Although the war devastated the town's industrial and social fabric, most of the town's commercial and residential sections redeveloped in the 1870s and 1880s. Industrial ruins of private and government factories were allowed to stand and decay. The ruins became part of a vernacular landscape that memorialized early industry. Allowing ruins to stand in a decaying state is a form of preservation that memorializes past events. As historian Richard Sellars (1987: 19) notes, "Even without monuments, [preservation] is an act of memorializing. Preservation acknowledges that something so important happened that it must be remembered and at least some terrain set aside."

The armory and industrial ruins created by the Civil War in Harpers Ferry served to memorialize the war's industrial context. The Civil War served as a sharp dividing line in the town's history. Industrial ruins functioned as a conduit to the past by creating

monuments to the early industrial era. They also placed the Civil War within an industrial context, showing it as the first major conflict of the modern era. During the hostilities, both sides exploited new factory technologies. Armies used the railroads extensively; new technologies developed fast-firing weapons; and people and machines mass-produced guns, uniforms, and other equipment. The commemoration of these new industrial phenomena in Harpers Ferry, as well as other areas throughout the country, helped to reinforce an industrial consciousness and still serves as a reminder of the "immutable" traditions of industrialization.

Only recently have landscape issues been addressed and questions asked about the changing dynamic cultural landscapes and the built environment in this historic town (Gilbert et al. 1991; Joseph et al. 1993; Shackel 1992). Here I examine how private and government industries developed in early-nineteenth-century Harpers Ferry and how entrepreneurs and federal agencies used the built environment to encourage a particular ideology. After the Civil War, northern industrialists constructed a memorializing landscape that established and reinforced an industrial ideology through the remainder of the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries.

Social Context of an Industrializing Town

After the end of the French and Indian War, George Washington began to speculate in land along the lower Potomac River (Mitchell 1977: 59, 127). Washington dedicated himself to improving navigation along the river and invested in the Potowmack Company, a corporation involved in constructing canals along the Potomac. Such improvements, he believed, would attract trade to the ports of Alexandria and Georgetown and create economic growth in the new Federal City and the Potomac Valley region (Smith 1977: 27–28).

In 1794, the United States Congress proclaimed it necessary to establish armories for the manufacture and storage of arms. As part of his plan to develop the Potomac Valley, President Washington was determined to build an armory at Harpers Ferry, located at the confluence of

the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers. He received endorsements from Georgetown and Alexandria merchants who stood to profit from hinterland trade (Smith 1977: 29–30). The Wagers, heirs to the founder of Harpers Ferry, Robert Harper, owned the lands that contained the community, a small cluster of buildings with several water-powered mills. Acquisition of all lands in Harpers Ferry necessary for construction of the armory had been completed by 1796. By agreement, the proprietary family kept a six-acre reserve for commercial development, a ferry concession of three-quarters of an acre, and rights to monopolized mercantile trade (Smith 1977: 147). Additional lands deemed to be unworthy of development were excluded from the agreement. Among the lands excluded was Virginius Island, which later developed into a thriving industrial community.

Construction of the armory began in 1799, and the first guns were produced by 1801. The armory's initial management and labor force centered on Northern gunsmiths, but by the 1810s native Virginians controlled the installation's daily functions. Complex social networks and intermarriages allowed four families to dominate the armory as well as the social and economic affairs of the community. Under the native civilian management, labor practices consistently followed a craft ethos. Armorers were involved with many of the steps related to the guns' production. Workers could enter the manufacturing facility whenever they chose, as long as they met monthly quotas. Armorers prided themselves on being craftsmen, and the industrial complex was slow to adopt any new form of work discipline. Outsiders with new industrial ideals were ostracized and sometimes chased out of town (Smith 1977).

The town developed slowly, in a rather haphazard fashion (fig. 12.1). An 1805 observer described the town as consisting of a post office and about fifteen houses (Scott 1805). By 1810 it had "a good tavern, several large stores for goods, a library, one physician, and a professor of the English language" (Vale in Noffsinger 1958: 20).

The development of new forms of transportation in the 1830s heightened Harpers Ferry's importance as a center between the Ohio and Shenandoah valleys and the East. In 1834, the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal connected the town to the coastal ports of Georgetown and Alexandria, and in 1837, the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad linked

Fig. 12.1. 1803 Patowmack Company map of Harpers Ferry. Courtesy of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.

Harpers Ferry to Baltimore and more distant hinterlands. Connecting Harpers Ferry to regional and national networks was essential to its continued economic growth (Everhart 1952: 22). This new infrastructure stimulated private industry on Virginius Island in the Shenandoah River, an area excluded from the original 1796 agreement between the federal government and the Wager family. The island contained a variety of mills by the early nineteenth century. One of the larger enterprises began as a custom gristmill, called Peacher's Mill after the first proprietor of the island (*Harper's Ferry Mill Co. v. Thos. H. Savery et al.* 1887: 17). In the 1830s, the machinery was upgraded by Fontaine Beckham, enabling the mill to produce refined flour for export rather than only grinding grains for local farmers who marketed their own meal (*Virginia Free Press*, Aug. 18, 1831: 3). The mill burned in 1839, only to be rebuilt the following year. The owners of the mill, which stood adjacent to the recently installed Winchester and Potomac Railroad line, rebuilt the structure to about twice its original size and capitalized on the new transportation network. By 1844, the mill was purchased by Abraham and John Herr (*Virginia Free Press,* Feb. 7, 1839: 2; *Virginia Free Press,* June 15, 1843: 3; Virginia, Jefferson County, Deed Book 28, Sept. 2, 1846: 292–93) and its production volume reached thirteen times the national average (Bergstresser 1988: 22).

The railroad's development also generated other industrial investment on Virginius Island, including a cotton factory (*Virginia Free Press*, Apr. 2, 1846: 2; Johnson and Barker 1993: 41). A spur from the main line connected the factory with national markets. However, the factory went bankrupt in the 1850s, and it was converted to a flour mill after the Civil War (*Spirit of Jefferson*, July 30, 1867: 2; Johnson and Barker 1993: 44–46).

As Harpers Ferry increasingly relied on industrial networks, workers were forced to conform to many of the routines associated with the new capitalist infrastructure. In the 1840s, the armory labor system and physical plant underwent major revision. Before that time, most of the armory buildings were unsuited to the implementation of a division of labor, as they lacked architectural and functional unity. Factories were usually constructed when needed, without regard to manufacturing discipline or the routines needed for mass production. The Harpers Ferry

facilities contrasted sharply with the orderly layout commonly associated with the New England factory system.

In 1844, Superintendent Major John Symington, an engineer, created a plan for the armory's renovation. Government factory buildings were reconstructed in a homogeneous architectural plan that facilitated the mass production of weapons. Architectural style became consistent throughout the armory, conforming to a Gothic Revival style. Symington also imposed a grid pattern over the existing town street plan (fig. 12.2). The new plan facilitated industrial development and provided a sense of order and uniformity.

Government supervisors also reorganized the workers' daily routines. Workers became increasingly alienated from their labor and became responsible for only one part of the manufacturing process. A poem appeared in the *Virginia Free Press* (Mar. 31, 1842: 3) denouncing this new work discipline. The author condemned the new "oppression" and likened it to wearing the "chains of servile slavery." The armory workers went on strike, rented a canal boat, and marched to President Tyler. In Washington, the president noted that he was sympathetic to the workers' cause but told them that they must "hammer out their own salvation" (Barry 1903). Armory workers were forced to accept the new work discipline or lose their jobs.

By 1854, twenty-five new government industrial structures were built, all within a unified architectural plan (Smith 1977: 275–76). Harpers Ferry, including Virginius Island, became a sprawling industrial town containing the United States Armory and Arsenal. Private manufacturing establishments also thrived, including a textile mill, flour mill, sawmill, iron foundry, machine shop, and carriage manufactory, as well as over forty mercantile shops (Gilbert 1984: 1). An 1855 account described the town:

> The village is compactly, though irregularly built around the base of a hill, and is the center of considerable trade. It contains four or five churches, several manufactories and flour mills, a United States armory in which about 250 hands are employed, producing, among other articles, some 10,000 muskets annually, and a national arsenal. In the latter are continually stored from 80,000 to 90,000 stand of arms. (Edwards in Noffsinger 1958: 43)
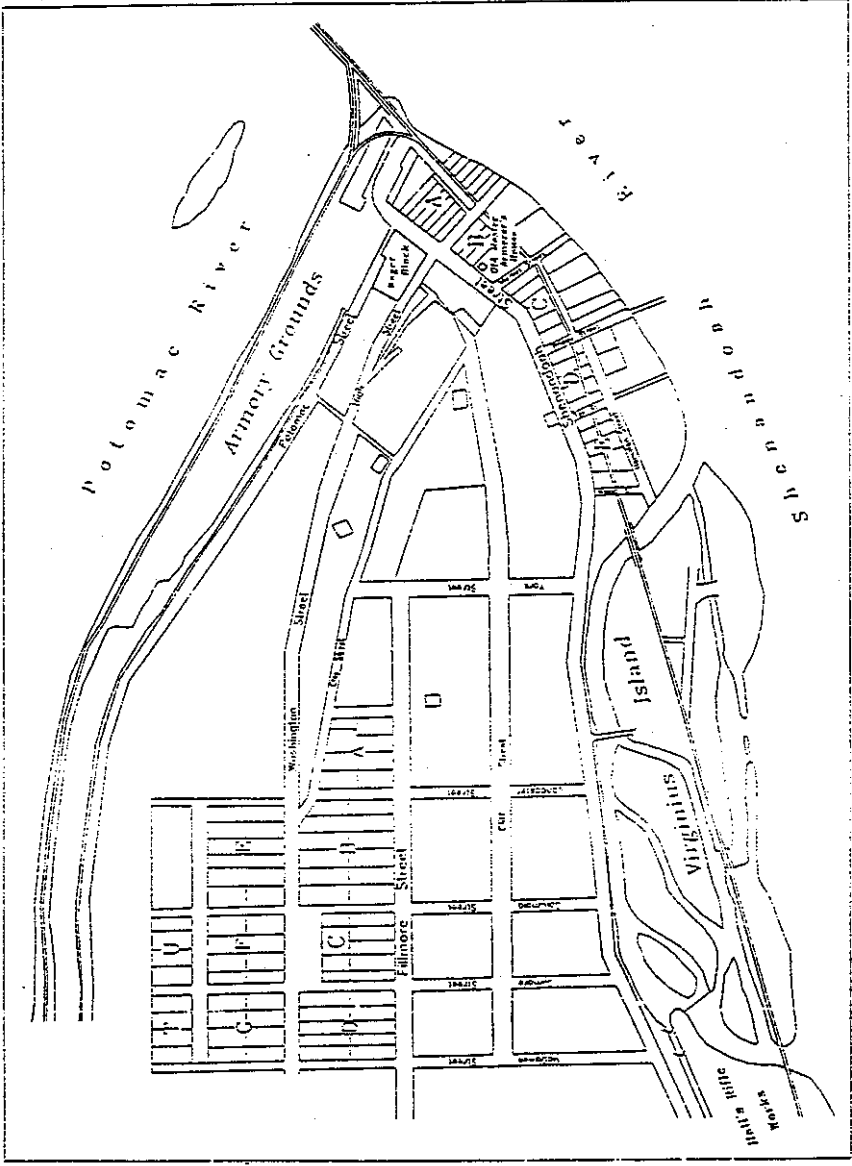
Fig. 12.2. Symington's 1840s grid design for Harpers Ferry. Courtesy of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.

The Civil War and the Creation of a Memorializing Landscape

After the bombardment of Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call to raise 75,000 troops in April 1861, Virginia seceded from the Union. Seizing the armory and arsenal at Harpers Ferry became a major objective for the Confederacy. Lieutenant Roger Jones, stationed at Harpers Ferry with fifty regulars and fifteen volunteers, feared that an advancing force of 360 Confederates would capture the town. Before these forces arrived on May 18, 1861, Jones set fire to the federal factory buildings and abandoned the town. The arsenal, along with seventeen thousand guns, was destroyed, although the townspeople, in an attempt to salvage their livelihood, saved the machinery. The Confederates shipped the armory machinery to Richmond, where it was used to make arms for the South (Noffsinger 1958: 45–46; Snell 1960b: 5). The musket factory on the Potomac River and the rifle factory on Halls Island in the Shenandoah River also were rendered inoperable during the war.

Private industry suffered as well. Even though Abraham Herr, the flour mill's main proprietor, owned four slaves in 1860, he supported Union troops when they arrived in Harpers Ferry in 1861. The commanding officer ordered the partial destruction of the flour mill to prevent Confederate troops from using the facility. When the Confederates arrived several weeks later, they forced Herr's partner, James Welch, to torch the mill. This action, they claimed, was retaliation for wheat donated by Herr to the Union army (Barry 1903: 131–34; Johnson and Barker 1993).

During the Civil War, Harpers Ferry changed hands eight times. From 1861 to 1863, Harpers Ferry was occupied alternately by Union and Confederate troops. At times the town was left unoccupied; Joseph Barry, a local historian, characterized the town as a "no-man's land" (Barry 1903; also see Snell 1960b). The town was mostly deserted, and portions were in a ruinous state (Drickamer and Drickamer 1987: 124; Ward 1985: 63). Annie P. Marmion, a resident of Harpers Ferry, stated that the town's population during unoccupied times declined from a prewar total of 2,500 to "less than 20 families" (Marmion 1959: 4). Food and safety during these periods were the major concerns: "The great objects in life were to procure something to eat and keep yourself out of

sight by day, and your lamps or rather candle light hidden by night, lights of every kind being regarded as signals to the Rebels were usually rewarded by a volley of guns" (Marmion 1959: 7).

In 1863, Union forces returned to Harpers Ferry for the duration of the war and revived the town's economy. Many offices, boardinghouses, restaurants, and other businesses opened to serve the expanding population (Drickamer and Drickamer 1987: 130). Feeling that they were safe, civilians flocked to Harpers Ferry (Marmion 1959: 11). During the last year of the war, General Philip Sheridan fortified Harpers Ferry to secure his supplies. His army reroofed the burned musket factory buildings and established a supply depot at Harpers Ferry (Snell 1960a: 39). From August 1864 through February 1865, Sheridan's army used Harpers Ferry as a base of operations to attack the Confederate stronghold in the Shenandoah Valley. Trains of up to one thousand wagons left town to supply troops and returned carrying prisoners and wounded. John Mosby, a Confederate committed to guerrilla warfare in the Harpers Ferry region, constantly harassed these wagon trains. Such actions necessitated the deployment of large numbers of Union troops to Harpers Ferry to protect shipments from further harassment (Snell 1960a: 3, 38).

Union clerk Charles Moulton noted in 1864, "While the supply depot was stationed here, there was nothing but a perfect jam all day and night in the streets, army wagons blocking up the streets and large number of soldiers were coming in continually and goodly share of them getting drunk" (Drickamer and Drickamer 1987: 213). This military occupation produced a thriving but unstable economy that was responsible for the majority of the Civil War era archeological deposits found throughout Harpers Ferry.

An Archaeology of the Civil War and the Memorializing Landscape

Soon after the war, the military withdrew from war-torn Harpers Ferry. The government decided not to rebuild the armory and sold most of its property holdings at auction. Many of the townspeople were left in a desperate situation, as the industrial viability of prewar Harpers Ferry

became nothing more than a memory. Archaeological investigations found a hiatus of mass-produced material goods in the postwar community. This hiatus may be attributed to the slow reoccupation of the town and to disastrous floods in 1870 and 1877 which accelerated the town's deterioration.

Water power had been the catalyst for much of the industrial growth prior to the Civil War. By the 1870s, there was little movement to reexploit this natural resource. Steam power gained importance as its cost decreased, and water power came to be perceived as inadequate and more expensive. As a result, Harpers Ferry never regained the economic prominence it had had during the 1840s and 1850s (Gilbert 1984).

In the 1880s and 1890s, touring battlefields and other areas of historical importance became a popular recreational activity among Americans. Harpers Ferry became a popular tourist spot along the B&O Railroad and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. Citizens developed and rebuilt the main business district in the lower town area. New enterprises, such as restaurants, hotels, and boardinghouses flourished (Shackel 1993; Fenicle 1993; Winter in press). Many portions of the early- and mid-nineteenth-century commercial district were either renovated or replaced by new and imposing Victorian structures. In some cases the materials used for renovation were "salvaged" from the town's industrial ruins (Fisher, Chickering, and Jenkins 1991).

Visitors to Harpers Ferry were either day travelers or those who owned or rented cottages in the community. Tourist brochures described several important landmarks, including the site of John Brown's fort (the original armory engine house) and the ruins of the United States Armory (Anonymous 1910; Anonymous n.d.; Taft 1898). The United States Armory grounds along the Potomac River were purchased by William Savery, a Delaware entrepreneur interested in reexploiting the river's water power potential. He constructed a pulp mill that stood adjacent to the armory ruins and the John Brown fort. In 1891, a group of entrepreneurs purchased the fort from Savery and moved it by rail to the Chicago Exposition. Several years later, the fort was relocated on a farm outside Harpers Ferry. In the first decade of the twentieth century, it was purchased by Storer College and transported to its campus in upper Harpers Ferry.

Savery sold a right-of-way to the B&O Railroad, and after 1891 ten feet of railroad berm fill covered the original engine house foundation, as the railroad line through Harpers Ferry was realigned. The first thing tourists saw as they entered town was an obelisk monument erected by the railroad marking the fort's original location (fig. 12.3). Adjacent to this feature, the federal government placed iron tablets commemorating the Confederates' 1862 siege of the town, in which 12,500 Union troops had surrendered. The tablets were mounted there for "the enlightenment of travelers concerning the fighting that took place in the capture of Harpers Ferry by the Confederate Army in September, 1862" (qtd. in Gilbert et al. 1991: 3.88) Also visible from the tracks were several remaining foundations of the former musket factory. In 1916, the B&O Railroad landscaped the grounds around the musket factory foundations with trees and flower beds. By 1923, a large garden filled the remains of the old armory grounds (*Spirit of Jefferson* May 16, 1896: 2; Gilbert et al. 1991: 3.95). The garden's design "incorporated the embankment, the matured trees and ornamental shrubs planted along the old river wall, and the rectangular outlines of old building foundations, creating a distinctive gateway of monuments, history, and ornamental landscape" (Gilbert et al. 1991: 3.95–3.96; *Spirit of Jefferson* May 16, 1916: 2) (fig. 12.4). Many of these landscape changes made by the railroad were celebrated by the town, as they were incorporated into an unofficial "public square."

While the Potomac River side of Harpers Ferry was slow to redevelop, the railroad explicitly recognized the town's early industry, John Brown's raid, and the Civil War. On the Shenandoah River portion of Harpers Ferry, northern entrepreneurs eagerly invested in Virginius Island's industrial revitalization. Jonathan Child and John McCreight, industrialists from Ohio, purchased Virginius Island and made repairs to the old cotton factory and converted it into a flour mill. Even though they renovated the worker's domestic dwellings and surrounding grounds, Child and McCreight allowed the substantial ruins of Herr's flour mill to stand and incorporated them into the vernacular landscape of the island (fig. 12.5). In the late nineteenth century, William Savery, owner of the pulp mill on the Potomac River, purchased Virginius Island and developed a second pulp mill on Hall's Island. Hall's Rifle Works and later armory buildings were submerged when the pulp mill created a holding pond for its industry. Herr's flour mill ruins continued to stand
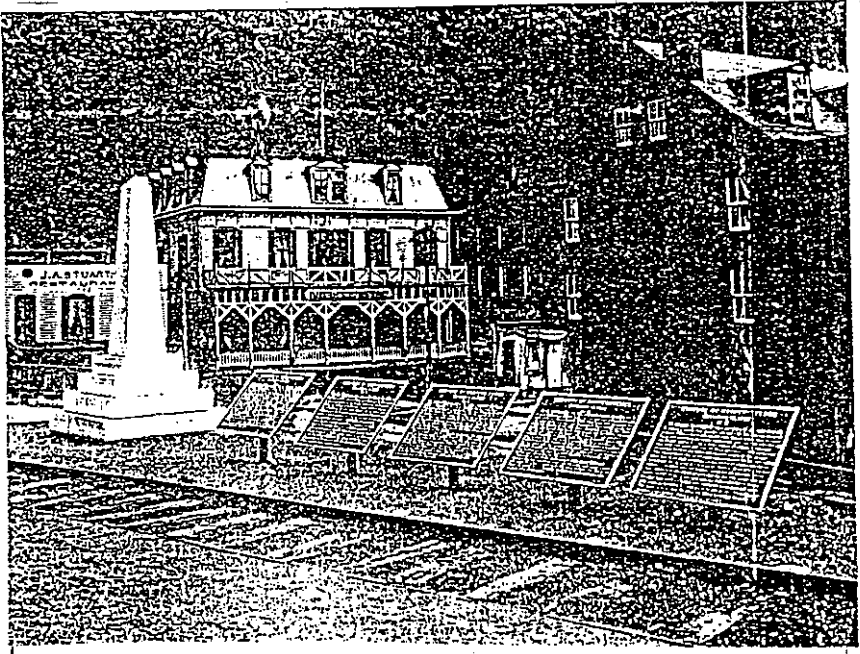
Fig. 12.3. The "John Brown Fort" obelisk monument and the five commemorative tablets, ca. 1900. Courtesy of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, HF 1149.
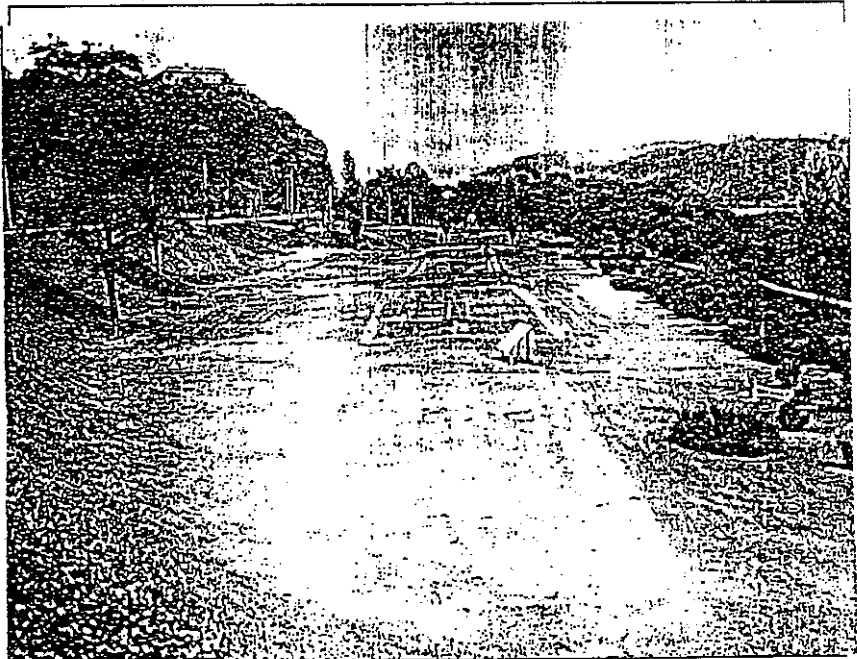

Fig. 12.4. The outlining of armory buildings and the creation of an ornamental landscape, ca. 1936. Courtesy of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, HF 1049.
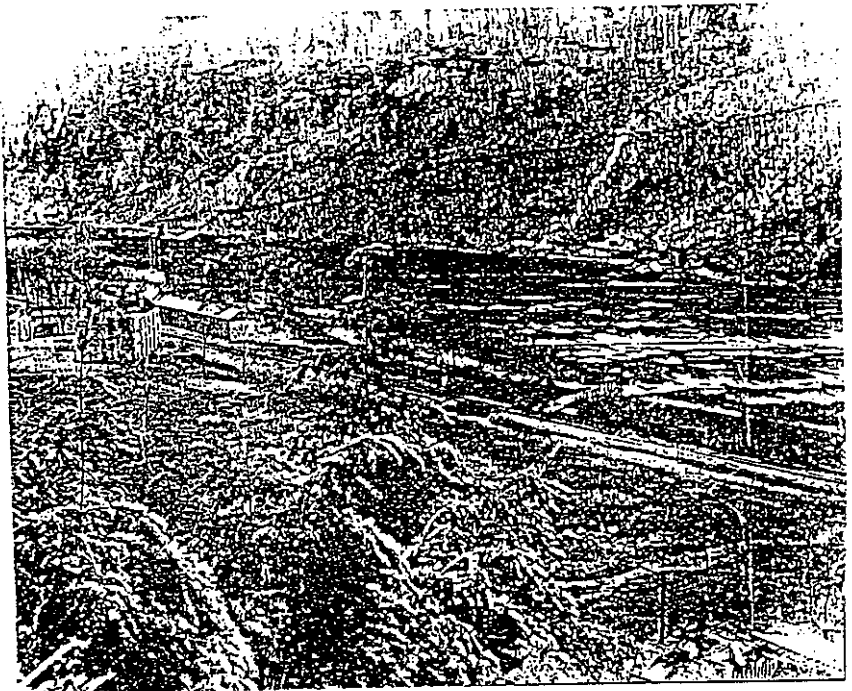
Fig. 12.5. *Herr's flour mill (lower building), domestic structures (center buildings), and recently abandoned Child and McCreight flour mill (top building), ca. 1900. Courtesy of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, HF 895.*

on Virginius Island and often were mistaken as the "Rifle Factory ruins" of Hall's Island (Taft 1898). A 1941 guidebook describes the island as containing Herr's mill and the rifle factory (Anonymous 1941: 234; Joseph et al. 1993). Virginius Island never contained the rifle factory, which was located to the north on Hall's Island.

Discussion

The meanings and uses of ruins in the American landscape have only recently been discussed by archaeologists (see King 1994a, 1994b). Different groups have had varying degrees of success in preserving ruins or saving graphic reminders of the past. Many working-class people view the preservation of old buildings and ruins as an attempt to save the memory of a degrading phase of human history. Robert Vogel of the

Smithsonian Institution notes, "The dirt, noise, bad smell, hard labor and other forms of exploitation associated with these kinds of places make preservation ludicrous. 'Preserve a steel mill?' People say, 'It killed my father. Who wants to preserve that?'" (qtd. in Lowenthal 1985: 403). While ruins may stir unfavorable emotions for some people, other groups may implicitly or explicitly perceive these material culture remains in different ways. Those who prescribe to an industrial decay may see the preservation of ruins as a symbolic link to the past that provides a sense of continuity between past and present. Ruins show the impact of time and lend credibility to the long-term establishment of any particular institution that occupied that ruin.

In the case of Harpers Ferry, the Civil War created these industrial ruins. After the war, local entrepreneurs renovated their community using various construction materials, including those salvaged from industries found on the armory grounds and on Virginius Island. These actions dismembered many prominent standing industrial structures and symbolically dismantled the industrial ideals that the community had resisted throughout the armory's occupation of the town. While local entrepreneurs dismantled the town's industries, northern capitalists, including Savery, Child, and McCreight, purchased industrial sites and kept the armory and flour mill ruins intact and visible to the community and tourists. By the end of the nineteenth century, Savery owned both the armory and Virginius Island lands. These northern entrepreneurs developed or redeveloped industries according to northern industrial ideals. Their enterprises stood adjacent to the decaying ruins that demonstrated the long-term establishment of industrialization. David Lowenthal reminds us that "precedence legitimates action on the assumption, explicit or implicit, that what has been should continue to be or be again" (Lowenthal 1985: 40).

The armory and flour mill ruins stood as graphic reminders to Harpers Ferry citizens of their town's former industrial prowess. The armory ruins remained through the nineteenth century and soon became a popular attraction during the postbellum fad for visiting Civil War sites. After the railroad realignment covered the original site of the John Brown fort and part of the armory grounds, the B&O Railroad created a monumental landscape with trees, shrubs, bushes, and terraces that

memorialized the former industry that once had existed on B&O Railroad property. At Harpers Ferry, ruins and relics of industrialization and of the Civil War became intertwined with commemoration and visitation; they remain so today.

Historian J. H. Plumb argues that industrial society, unlike agrarian communities, does not need the past. He states that "scientific and industrial society have no sanction in the past and no roots in it; we now look back only as a matter of curiosity, of nostalgia, a sentimentality . . . the strength of the past in all aspects of life is far, far weaker than it was a generation ago" (qtd. in Lowenthal 1985: 364).

While Plumb sees the past in industrial society as not serving any moral or educational value, and some claim that preserving ruins may run counter to the spirit of modern enterprise (see Lowenthal 1985: 402–3), I believe that preservation serves a major function in industrial society. While the Civil War left much of Harpers Ferry's industry in ruins, these remains served as a symbol of historical precedent, bolstering a claim to roots in an industrial past. The existence of decaying ruins amplifies the age of industrial institutions and grounds their symbolic meanings in a legitimate past. Decay secures antiquity, even if that "antiquity" is only a few decades old. Ruins help to inspire reflections on institutions that once had been proud or strong. As Lowenthal (1985: 197) again reminds us, "Remembering the past is crucial for our sense of identity . . . to know what we were confirms that we are."

Acknowledgments