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Terrible Saint: Changing Meanings of the John Brown Fort

ABSTRACT

Interpretations of national icons, including John Brown, often present themselves as timeless, rather than as the last link in a long chain of historical revisionisms. From generation to generation and from region to region, interpretations of John Brown have differed. This analysis demonstrates that the engine house, occupied by Brown and his followers during his attempted capture of Harpers Ferry, is an unstable sociocultural symbol among the white community, while it has been a stable icon among the black community. Its meaning and locations changed as the social and political atmosphere changed in this country.

Introduction

John Brown is one of the most controversial figures in American history. Today, the John Brown Fort sits quietly in Harpers Ferry National Historical Park about 150 ft. from its original location. The neat appearance of this apparently well-preserved structure belies the changing and volatile history associated with it (Shackel 1993:72) (Figure 1).

Some biographies convey the message that Americans have always revered John Brown; however, from generation to generation and from region to region, interpretations of John Brown have differed. Some American literature and versions of American history, especially during the epoch of southern revisionist history, have interpreted his actions as being vicious and fanatic. He has been characterized as a horse thief and a maniac (Wilson 1913; Masters 1922, 1926; Karsner 1934; Edson in Talbert 1941; Malin 1942). In contrast, others have claimed his actions to be that of a great abolitionist hero, a martyr who gave his life for fellow human beings in bondage (Webb 1861; Sanborn 1885; Von Holst 1888; Hinton 1894; Connelley 1900; Newton

1902; Villard 1910; Ruchames 1959; Quarles 1974; Graham 1980).

Historical archaeologists have relied upon various forms of data, such as text, settlement patterns, census data, and photographs, to develop an understanding of our historic past (Beaudry 1988; Little 1992; Little and Shackel 1992). Such studies have included landscapes, such as formal gardens. Some 18th-century garden analyses using garden plans and topographical maps have shown the intentional manipulation of landscape features to reinforce social hierarchy (Leone 1984). Social control in urban settings is often demonstrated by symmetrical architecture, floor plan designs, and town plans (Beaudry 1989). Shaker village layout creates the impression of equality if seen by outsiders, although a study of the community's internal mechanisms show that the internal structure was dominated by males (Savulis 1992). Some rural landscape studies demonstrate how ruins created connections to the past and justified precedence, thereby establishing control and power over others (King 1994). Praetzellis and Praetzellis (1989) illustrate the relationship between Jack London's self-expression in writing and his created landscape. London's Marxist-socialist perspective shaped his perception of the landscape as he combined scientific agriculture, utility, and artistic vision to create "Beauty Ranch." Other forms of material culture studies performed by historical archaeologists include medieval city walls (Samson 1992). These features separate the enclosed from the outside world and they define areas of authority and symbolize possession.

From formal and informal landscapes (Harrington 1989; Kelso and Most 1990) to temples and other forms of above-ground material culture (e.g., Leone 1977), historical archaeologists have tackled the meanings of material culture by relying on various forms of data. The present analysis of the changing histories associated with John Brown and the John Brown Fort relies upon this interdisciplinary approach. This particular study is set in a large geographical scale, and it shows the changing meanings and uses of one part of the built environment associated with one of the nation's most revered and despised icons.



FIGURE 1. Photograph of the John Brown Fort in contemporary Harpers Ferry. It sits in the former Armory Arsenal yard, surrounded by lawn and trees, about 150 ft. from its original location.

Commemoration

Community and national groups have always used and manipulated stories about the past for various social and political reasons (Susman 1964: 243–263; Meinig 1979). Preservation of public symbols and interpretation of past events in civic arenas influence people's beliefs about historic myths and the current attitudes they serve. Before addressing the specific case of John Brown and his fort, this study highlights a few examples to illustrate that interpretation of the past exists in relation to contemporary conditions and the questions that are asked of it (Jackson 1980:92; Blatti 1987:3; Wallace 1987:37). The influence of history museums and national historic sites in shaping the public's perception of the past has been scrutinized by scholars who have critiqued interpretations of American colonial life, the immigrant experience, and modern industrialism. Historic sites help affirm Americans' connection with a particular heritage and purvey messages such as an "American founding myth" (Wallace 1987; Leon and Rosenzweig 1989; Lowenthal 1989:120). These historical presentations can be understood in the context of the changing perceptions of history and the dominant ideology.

John Bodner (1992) provides a history of com-

memoration in the United States. Commemoration, Bodner claims, was created and used by the elite as a continual reminder of patriotic acts and civic duties. For example, during the rise of historical interest in the Revolutionary era in the mid-1820s, civic leaders, such as Daniel Webster, linked patriotism to commerce and industry. Through the 1830s Americans increasingly used patriotic symbols and language of the Revolutionary era for their own economic ends. Revolutionary heroes were used as defenders of industrial rights rather than heroic builders of a nation. The early labor movement "revived the memory of Thomas Paine and celebrated his notions of the right of workers to receive the full value of the products they produced and the need for all classes to share in the economic abundance of the nation" (Bodner 1992:27).

Later in that century, the World's Fair in Chicago (1893), the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo (1901), and the St. Louis World's Fair (1904) were created to celebrate technological progress (Wallace 1987). Economic decline faced by the United States in the second half of the 20th century led authorities to consolidate their own power, reinforce loyalty, and calm anxieties about the future by creating a history of nation building. Such a message served to imply that, since past change was purposeful and beneficial, the current social and economic changes must also be positive (Bodner 1992:169).

In a similar vein, the early preservation movement surrounding Civil War era sites, such as battlefields, must be placed in their larger context. In the late 1890s this movement began with a patriotic motive to preserve a tangible past and to provide a coherent cultural identity (Rainey 1983). John Patterson (1989:138ff.) outlines the different stages in the history of creating and preserving one of these national battlefields, Gettysburg. While the earliest stage of preservation was biased toward northern sentiment, after 1895 confederates became increasingly represented. Rather than remaining a monument to the northern cause the Gettysburg battlefield eventually became a symbol of reunion, progress, and peace. In contemporary preservation, Civil War battlefields play a variety of roles that are still being defined. Their preservation and com-

memoration is linked to political factions, development, profit, privacy, and the Green movement.

Attitudes toward more recent wars and their tangible remains also change. For example, the meaning of the battle at Little Big Horn changed dramatically through the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Soon after Custer's final battle military officials criticized his tactics as being reckless and careless. But journalists from 1876 through the mid-20th century countered this criticism and portrayed his outcome as a heroic death. Much like Masada, the Alamo, and the Confederacy's defeat, the Last Stand was transformed into a moral defeat: Custer died for timeless ideals while facing overwhelming odds in bringing civilization to the frontier. A more balanced and critical view of the Battle of Little Big Horn arose in the 1960s amidst Native American protests for equal representation. Today the Custer myth is no longer supported by the National Park Service (Linenthal 1993:267–281). The name of Custer Battlefield National Monument was changed to Little Big Horn Battlefield National Monument by an act of Congress in 1991.

Most recently Scott Sandage (1993) wrote about the contested pasts of Abraham Lincoln. He notes that the Lincoln Memorial is a memory site where people continually struggle over how the past is experienced and organized: "Ritual is a powerful weapon in these contests because it can be used conservatively or radically, to confirm or to transform social arrangements by affixing useful meanings onto sites and symbols" (Sandage 1993:137). Often, an official group creates the meaning of the monument and a vernacular group reinterprets the meanings in competing ways. During the 1910s and 1920s historians and bureaucrats created Lincoln as the savior of the Union and erected the Lincoln Memorial to him under this pretense. By the 1930s Lincoln was an increasingly coveted cultural and political symbol among African Americans. Some historians of the period rejected the notion that Lincoln was an emancipator, and they claimed that any such notion was "unhistorical," and unsupported by fact (Sandage 1993:139–146). Through the 1940s and 1950s most African Americans felt almost a universal admiration for Lincoln, and it was the memorial in Washington, D.C., that served

as a stage for many civil rights protests. It became a place to legitimate black voices in national politics (Sandage 1993:149–155). But by 1964 blacks became disenchanted with Lincoln as a symbol. Novelist John Oliver Killens (in Sandage 1993:161) wrote, "You give us moody Abraham Lincoln, but many of us prefer John Brown, whom most of you hold in contempt and regard as fanatic."

A critical analysis of some changing social, economic, and political circumstances, both local and national, helps to account for both changing perceptions of John Brown and the dynamic history of the John Brown Fort. While the fort is a single memorial to John Brown's acts, it is also an evocative reminder about the social and political context of the raid on Harpers Ferry (Lowenthal 1979:121; Greengold 1987:58; Ettema 1987:63ff.). As the national perceptions of John Brown and his mission changed, so too did the location and treatment of the fort. Moved from its original location to Chicago, near the Columbian Exposition, to a local West Virginia farm, and later to an African-American college, the fort eventually disappeared from the national eye. In the 1960s the National Park Service returned the fort to downtown Harpers Ferry where it is viewed by millions of tourists. In turn, the structure again contributes to the national identity. The changing uses and locations of the John Brown Fort correlate with national attitudes about John Brown and the issues of slavery and racism. A historiography of John Brown demonstrates the varying meanings and uses of history and shows the symbolic importance of a piece of the built environment.

John Brown

Born in 1800 into a Calvinist family, John Brown was raised with the doctrine that people were sinners and totally dependent upon a sovereign and angry God. While successful in his early businesses, by 1831 John Brown's economic circumstances began to deteriorate. By 1852 John Brown had guided 15 business failures in four different states (Villard 1910:36ff.; Oates 1970:33–77). Enticed by promotional literature, Brown and his family moved to make a new start in the territory of Kansas, which

was in the midst of debate over whether it should be slave or free territory. The pro-slavery faction won the 1854 election although contemporary reports concluded that pro-slavery members from Missouri crossed the border and stuffed the ballot box. As civil war erupted in Kansas Territory, the Brown family, living in the Pottawatomie–Osawatomie area, joined the skirmishes against the pro-slavery factions. Battles ravaged many of the border towns and in one instance six free-staters were killed. John Brown organized a retaliatory night raid on several of the large slave-holders in the Pottawatomie area. According to later testimony by one of his sons, Brown and his men dragged the pro-slavery men out of their houses, killed them, and mutilated them with swords. Brown, however, never claimed a role in the murders (Sanborn 1885: 191ff.; Malin 1942:492–497): “He told a friend that the victims deserved to die because they ‘had committed murder in their hearts already, according to the Big Book,’ and later asserted that the killing of those men had been ‘decreed by Almighty God, ordained from eternity’” (Oates 1970:147).

An East Coast newspaper correspondent, James Redpath, went to Kansas in search of stories of the Kansas civil war. Unable or unwilling to recognize John Brown’s role in these murders, he sensationalized Brown’s efforts and began the building of the John Brown myth, calling him a warrior-saint. Redpath (1860:112–114) wrote, “I left this sacred spot [Camp Brown] with a far higher respect for the Great Struggle. . . . And I said, also, and thought, that I had seen the predestined leader of the second and the holier American Revolution.” Brown had built a reputation as being a great abolitionist, and in 1858 he revealed his secret plan of attacking the South to a select few, including Frederick Douglass and Franklin Sanborn. He believed that once he attacked, all of the slaves would revolt and join his cause. He would first attack the queen of the slave states, Virginia, then march into Tennessee and then northern Alabama. Brown created a Provisional Constitution that would create a new state in the southern mountains. If his plan failed it would serve to consolidate Northern emotions and the hatred for slavery and thus promote a crisis (Douglas 1881; Sanborn 1885:440ff.; Oates 1970:224–279).

Brown eventually rented a farm on the Maryland side of the Potomac River close to the federal arsenal located in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. On the night of 16 October 1859, Brown and his party of 21 men approached Harpers Ferry. They overpowered the armory guard and captured the federal arsenal with relative ease, taking hostages. The next day Brown was on the armory grounds, but refused to escape when he had the chance. He may still have hoped for the slave insurrection to occur, or he may have settled on his martyrdom. Amid the confusion, church bells rang throughout the countryside alarming Southerners of what they dreaded: slave insurrection. Trapped in the armory with a growing and increasingly intoxicated crowd gathering around the complex, Brown, his volunteers, and the hostages took refuge in the armory’s engine house. He tried to negotiate a truce several times only to have several of his men shot or captured. A group of marines under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee finally overthrew Brown at the engine house. Not a single slave had come to Harpers Ferry, and some of the slaves Brown forcibly liberated during his raid refused to fight with him; others escaped and returned to their owners (Anderson 1972 [1861]:36; Hinton 1894:311ff., 709ff.; Villard 1910:440; Oates 1970:293–300).

Changing Histories and the Built Environment

Northerners received news of John Brown’s raid with varying degrees of condemnation and approval. Some abolitionists preferred a peaceful solution to ending slavery, while others thought the only way was by using force. Southerners were united in condemning Brown and calling his raid the work of a madman. Between his capture and his hanging for treason on 2 December 1859, Northern abolitionists intensified the John Brown martyr myth. Wendell Phillips wrote that Harpers Ferry “is the Lexington of to-day. . . . Virginia is a pirate ship, and John Brown sails the sea a Lord High Admiral of the Almighty” (Oates 1970:318). Ralph Waldo Emerson (in Redpath 1860:40) claimed “that new saint, than whom none purer or more brave was ever

led by love of men into conflict and death, the new saint awaiting his martyrdom, and who, if he shall suffer, will make the gallows glorious like the cross." Henry Thoreau (in Oates 1970:318) wrote, "I almost fear to hear of his deliverance, doubting if a prolonged life, if any life, can do as much good as his death."

John Brown also participated in the creation of his own martyrdom. On 12 November 1859, while awaiting his execution, Brown (in Villard 1910:496) wrote his brother Jeremiah that he was worth "inconceivably more to hang than for any other purpose." At his last public statement from the Charles Town jail Brown said, "I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land, will never be purged away, but with blood. I had as now think: vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed; it might be done." Blood atonement, in 19th-century American mythology refers to, on the religious level, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, or a Christian martyr (Slotkin 1985:275–276).

By the time of his execution, Northern fervor had increased dramatically. At the hour that Brown was to hang, a 100-gun salute was fired in Albany, New York, to honor him. Church bells tolled from New England to Kansas, and many Western Reserve towns closed to mourn John Brown's death. In Cleveland a banner stretched over the streets, proclaiming a quote from John Brown during his last days: "I cannot better serve the cause I love than to die for it" (Oates 1970:354).

The engine house, which immediately became known as the John Brown Fort, also became an emblem for the resistance against slavery. This structure is a symbol of changing attitudes towards John Brown, in particular, as well as of the changing perceptions of Civil War era history on the national level.

The John Brown Fort was one of the only armory buildings to escape destruction during the Civil War as Harpers Ferry changed hands eight times between the Union and the Confederacy. The fort served as a rallying point for northern troops. During the Union occupation, troops were said to have sung the familiar tune "John Brown's body lies a moldering in the grave" as they marched passed the

fort, a symbol that eventually helped justify Northern involvement in the War.

Influential intellectual centers in the Northern states quickly used John Brown as a rallying point for their anti-slavery cause. John Brown's death was continually described as martyrdom. In helping to create the John Brown myth, Thoreau wrote,

I see now that it was necessary that the bravest and humanist man in all the country should be hung. He could not have been tried by his peers, for his peers did not exist (Thoreau 1893:234; cf. Thoreau in Redpath 1860:4).

Apparently the journalist Redpath ignored or misreported many of the incidents of John Brown's participation in the Kansas Civil War, creating a history based on abolitionist fervor. Redpath denied any allegations that Brown had participated in the murder of the five pro-slavery men in Pottawatomie, Kansas, although much oral testimony existed to the contrary. Redpath (1860:155ff.) described the pro-slavery faction as "men whom hell would blush to own," thus legitimizing the Pottawatomie massacre. Brown was the man whom "God had appointed, and the man whom the people appointed" (Redpath 1860:272). "History," Redpath claimed, "will place John Brown, in her American Pantheon, not among Virginia's culprits, but as high, at least, as Virginia's greatest chiefs" (Redpath 1860:42). Talbert (1941:83) suggests that some Southern writers became apologists. They contented that secession was not for the continuation of slavery, but rather for political liberty. Slavery eventually would have been discarded by the South. These Southern writers attacked John Brown mainly for his actions at Pottawatomie. This is noted in the work of a Southern poet, M. S. Valentines's (in Talbert 1941:111) *The Mock Auction, or Osawatomie Sold: A Mock Heroic Poem*.

Immediately after the Civil War the John Brown Fort stood neglected. The U.S. government sold the fort along with other government property in an 1869 Harpers Ferry auction. When Harpers Ferry's economy recovered in the 1880s, Thomas Savery purchased the armory grounds, which included the John Brown Fort, for the purpose of milling. From the 1870s to 1890, during the martyr-building years of John Brown, Harpers Ferry became a mecca for

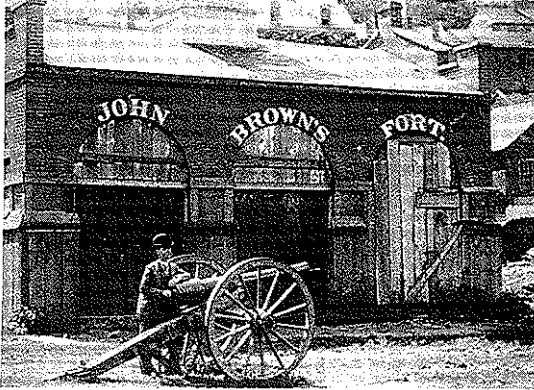


FIGURE 2. Photograph of the John Brown Fort on Army grounds, ca. 1886–1889. (Thomas Featherstonbaugh Collection, Library of Congress; courtesy of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, HF-190.)

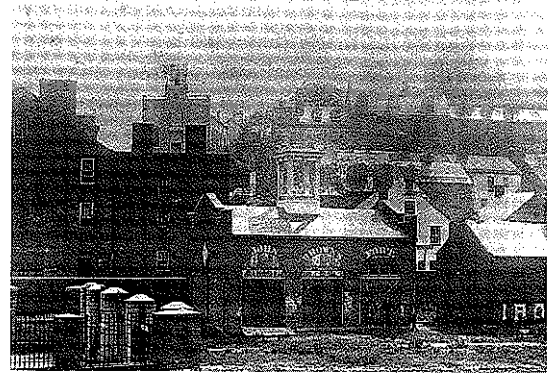


FIGURE 3. Photograph of the John Brown Fort on Army grounds, ca. 1880–1890. (From the scrapbook of Mrs. C. E. Dudrow; courtesy of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, HF-655.)

summer tourists and curiosity seekers. The fort received little care in private ownership, although the words “JOHN BROWN’S FORT” were painted on the engine house for easy tourist identification (Figures 2–4). Advertisements often ran in Washington and Baltimore papers for special excursions on both the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to Harpers Ferry. Summer homes sprang up as it became fashionable to visit Civil War sites (Fairbairn 1961:13, 20).

During the 1880s writers increasingly opposed some of the acts of John Brown. The reversal of support was triggered by a published confession in a Lawrence, Kansas, newspaper by John Townsley, a member of the Pottawatomie assaulting party, who claimed that John Brown was the instigator of the Pottawatomie murders. This information damaged the martyrdom myth of the abolitionists. Soon after, John Brown, Jr., admitted that his father participated in the murders.

Some people became disillusioned with the John Brown myth while others sought to justify his deeds, claiming the actions as necessary for liberating Kansas. Was John Brown really a “murderer and a horse thief” or were his actions justified by his cause? The image of John Brown became increasingly difficult to justify as patriot and saint

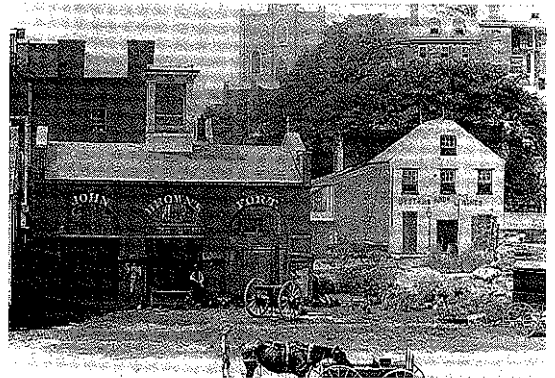


FIGURE 4. Photograph of the John Brown Fort on the Army grounds, ca. 1890–1891. By T. A. Flynn. (Courtesy of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, HF-57.)

during the mending years between the North and the South. As John Brown’s image diminished, little was done to enhance the integrity of the fort that had earlier been an important symbol. In 1888 it was rumored that the John Brown Fort would be relocated to a New York Park. The local newspaper’s editor wrote in favor of this idea and exclaimed “& joy go with it” (*Spirit of Jefferson* [SoJ] 1888:1). The next year the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad

made plans to move the railroad tracks 250 ft. west from the banks of the Potomac River and deemed it necessary to move the John Brown Fort (*SoJ* 1889:3). In 1891 Savery sold the fort to the John Brown Fort Company, a group founded by several government officials who wanted to exhibit the building at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The Act of Incorporation was created for the “owning, controlling and exhibition of the building known as the John Brown Fort as well as other historical relics” (Fairbairn 1961:22a).

The John Brown Fort Company dismantled the structure and shipped it to Chicago by rail to be erected at 1341 Wabash Avenue. While the fort was located several miles from the Columbian Exposition, its owners hoped to capitalize upon the fair. After considerable delay the fort opened for public visitation 10 days before the Exposition closed. The fort contained curios related to Brown, and a public lecture was delivered by Colonel S. K. Donavin, an eyewitness of the raid, trial, and execution. The company attempted to get relatives of John Brown to speak, but a daughter replied “I may be a relic of John Brown’s raid of Harpers Ferry, but I do not want to be placed on exhibition with other relics and curios, and such” (Gee 1958:94). Because the fort opened in the waning days of the fair and temperatures became increasingly cold, only 11 paid admissions were collected. At 50 cents each, the John Brown Fort Company had lost about \$60,000, the cost of moving and rebuilding the structure in Chicago. The John Brown Fort Company abandoned the structure in Chicago, and in 1895 *The Chicago Tribune* published the “Ignoble use of the John Brown Fort,” stating that it was being used as a stable for delivery wagons for a new department store (Gee 1958:94; Fairbairn 1961:14, 26, 33, 34).

Mary Katherine Keemle Field, a news reporter from Washington, D.C., was actively involved in social reform issues and concerned with the problems of post-Civil War African Americans. One of her missions included a fund-raiser to purchase the John Brown Farm and grave at North Elba, New York, in the late 1860s in order to save the site from ruin and decay. In 1895 she also campaigned for donations to move the fort from Chicago back to Harpers Ferry (Fairbairn 1961:14, 31), to be close



FIGURE 5. John Brown Fort on Murphy farm with members of the Pilgrim Party from the National League of Colored Women, ca. 1896. (Courtesy of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, HF-599.)

to Storer College, a school established in 1865–1867 primarily for the education of newly freed African Americans. These plans agitated many whites in Harpers Ferry. Meetings were held at Storer College to discuss a monument for John Brown and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad’s plans to provide a site (*SoJ* 1894:2). Apparently there were rumors about reburying John Brown’s remains at Harpers Ferry. The pendulum of sentiment for the abolitionist was still swinging in his disfavor as the *Spirit of Jefferson’s* editorial proclaimed it was against disinterring John Brown’s remains and erecting a monument, although the paper favored the return of the fort “where Robert E. Lee captured the old villain” (*SoJ* 1895:2).

The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad offered to have the fort relocated to an area near the original site which would have encouraged tourism on the railroad line (Gee 1958:97). Instead, in 1895 Field’s campaign contracted Alexander Murphy of Jefferson County, West Virginia, to deed 5 acres of his farm, Buena Vista, for the placement of the fort several miles from its original location and railroad line (Figure 5). Field had envisioned an avenue of houses that would approach a park that encompassed the fort. Katherine Field died in 1896, and Murphy did not receive any compensation for care of the fort promised to him. He eventually pur-

chased the fort in 1903 for \$900 and he curtailed visitation since people often left litter and trampled his crops (Gee 1958:100; Fairbairn 1961:14, 31, 35). Field's dreams of a park and an avenue of houses surrounding the John Brown Fort never came to fruition. Murphy used the structure as a grain barracks (*SoJ* 1903).

Concurrent with the disappearance of the fort from the national eye was the birth of the Southern revisionist movement in history and American literature. For instance, C. L. Edson (in Talbert 1941: 417–119) wrote in his 1911 poem “In Idol Smashing Land,”

Over there in Kansas they have torn their idols down,
They are standing up and jumping on the grave of Old John
Brown;
They say he was a murderer, a cut-throat and a “red,”
He started Kansas bleeding, and no more it should be
“bled.”

In 1926 Edgar Lee Masters wrote *Lee; A Dramatic Poem*, in which John Brown plays the role of a spectator and vengeful instigator of the downfall of General Lee, who had commanded the troops that captured Brown in October 1859.

During the 1910s and 1920s several John Brown biographies humanized his character. They concluded that Brown was neither devil nor saint; his attack on Pottawatomie was considered irrational. Although Villard (1910) condemned Brown's Kansas activities, he believed that Brown's conduct during his prison days made him a truly great man. On the other hand, Warren (1929) interpreted the last letters of John Brown as a need for self-justification. He claimed that Brown was a courageous common thief. Wilson's (1913) work was not very sympathetic to his character, while Malin (1942) claimed that Brown was “more vile than anything his worst enemies have pictured him.” Later, Woodward (1952:109–130) emphasizes the case for Brown's insanity as 19 affidavits claimed that insanity was inherited from his mother's family.

In the midst of the Southern revisionist movement there were prominent voices who resisted this standard. A major biography written in the early 1900s by W. E. B. Du Bois, an African-American activist, recaptured and reinforced the sympathy for John Brown much in the way Redpath did. Calling



FIGURE 6. “A Tragic Prelude” by John Steuart Curry is located in the Kansas State Legislature Building. (Courtesy of Mrs. John Steuart Curry.)

John Brown a prophet, Du Bois (1962:339) claims that Brown was justified in his actions at Harpers Ferry. Of particular importance in demonstrating the struggle for human rights is John Steuart Curry's “The Tragic Prelude,” a mural painted in the late 1930s in the Kansas statehouse (Figure 6). While Curry was criticized for his treatment of John Brown and the slavery issue, he was as “socially committed as anything one was likely to see at the time” (Baigell 1970:27). In the mural pro-slavery and free-soil forces face each other with the dead of the Civil War at their feet. The immediate background depicts the suffering and humiliation of slaves. In the rear is a tornado with settlers moving westward. John Brown dominates the foreground, clutching a Bible and a rifle. He is portrayed as a man possessed, a man of action and committed, willing to use force for a cause and use the Bible to justify his action.

While the fort stood on the Murphy farm it served as a place of homage for people who revered John Brown. As a symbol of social reform, African-American groups frequently visited the fort, including those who participated in the 1906 Niagara Movement meeting held in Harpers Ferry. In 1909, six years after the closing of the farm to the public, the College Trustees of Storer College voted to buy the building. Dismantled in 1910, the John Brown

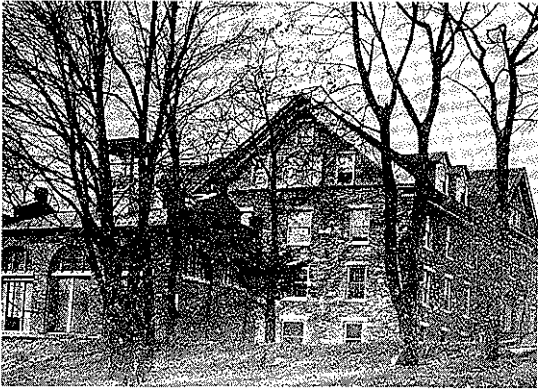


FIGURE 7. Photograph of the John Brown Fort adjacent to Lincoln Hall on Storer College Campus, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, ca. 1923–1924. (Courtesy of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, HF-581.)

Fort was rebuilt near Lincoln Hall on campus grounds (Figure 7). Even with the Southern revisionist movement in full force, blacks continued to use the fort as a symbol of their cause for social justice (Fairbairn 1961:14). Storer College struggled financially through most of its existence, and after the Supreme Court decision on desegregation the college closed in 1955. The grounds were then purchased by the National Park Service.

The 1960s saw the growth of a new history that focuses not on the great men or public events of traditional history, but on those who had been left out of those stories. African-American history has become a viable intellectual pursuit and an important component of the history from the bottom up (e.g., Morgan 1975; Gutman 1976; Breene and Innes 1980; Curry 1981; Berlin and Hoffman 1983; Norton et al. 1983:175–192; Fields 1985; Kulikoff 1986). The archaeology of slavery and of white and black social relations was pioneered by Robert Ascher and Charles Fairbanks (1971:3–17) and emphasized later by John Otto (1984), James Deetz (1977), and others (Baker 1980; Geismar 1982; Fairbanks 1984; Kelso 1984). Currently an ever-increasing interest exists in such research (Singleton 1985; Klingelhoffer 1987:112–119; Orser 1988a:313–343, 1988b:735–751, 1989:28–

40, 1990; Adams and Boling 1989:69–96; Joseph 1989; Ferguson 1992; Reitz 1994).

A greater interest in African-American history and views of the John Brown raid is evident in the new publications and reprints of original accounts of this incident published in the 1960s and 1970s (American Anti-Slavery Society 1969[1861]; Anderson 1972[1861]; Quarles 1974). In particular, Jean Libby (1979) produced a collection of reprinted articles entitled *Black Voices from Harpers Ferry: Osborne Anderson and the John Brown Raid*. It contains the perspective of Anderson, an African American who collaborated with John Brown in the Harpers Ferry raid. He was one of only three who escaped. Benjamin Quarles (1974) edited a volume of letters written by African Americans about John Brown, and Du Bois's (1962) biography of John Brown was reprinted several times through the 1960s. Louis Ruchames's work, a collection of readings often used in traditional African-American schools, resurrects much of the favorable prose and poetry of John Brown including that of Henry Thoreau, Oswald Villard, and Stephen Vincent Benét. Ruchames (1959:15) explicitly states that his goal is to educate the American public to the evils of slavery and to "help our own generation, in a small way, toward a greater appreciation of those very ideals which motivated Brown and his friends."

The fort remained on the grounds of the former college after it closed. It was finally moved again in 1968, this time by the National Park Service. Unable to place the fort upon its original foundations, which are now under 9 ft. of fill on railroad property, the National Park Service relocated the fort to the former Arsenal Yard that Brown had captured over 100 years before. It sits in lower town Harpers Ferry, about 150 ft. from its original location.

The move occurred during the height of social upheaval and racial strife in the 1960s, in the same year that Detroit and Newark burned and brought international attention to racial inequalities in the United States. That same year Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., two social reformers, were assassinated, and President Johnson's "new society" based on the social reform policies of John F. Kennedy was initiated. Today, Harpers Ferry is one

of the most visited national historical parks in the United States, and John Brown and the John Brown Fort contribute significantly to the visitor's recognition of the place. The fort is surrounded by a nicely manicured lawn which contributes to the creation of a monumental landscape that commemorates the deeds of the abolitionist and his men. The structure contains earlier plaques that recognize the 1895 rebuilding sponsored by "Kate Field," the 1910 rebuilding on the Storer College Campus, and the stone placed on the fort's exterior wall by the college's alumni in 1918 to acknowledge the "heroism" of John Brown and his 21 men. The fort is once again easily accessible and part of the national historical consciousness, much as African-American history is part of the new social history today.

Monuments and the Subaltern

Interpretations of American landscapes, heroes, and historic events that support an American ideology often are presented as timeless, rather than as one link in a long chain of historical revisionisms. Today, as often in the past, histories are being challenged and rewritten as they are related to changing social, political and economic circumstances. For instance, historical reconstructions have created controversies at the National Museum of American Art's recent interpretation of the American West and the genocide of native peoples (Masters 1991; Truettner 1991). The meanings of the Lincoln Memorial changed from honoring the savior of the Union to paying homage to a proponent of civil rights. Native Americans have also challenged the National Park Service's interpretation of Custer as a great American war hero. The American quincentenary observation has also raised questions about interpreting the European conquest of the New World.

An historiography of John Brown provides an account of, first, America's changing attitudes towards John Brown by various social groups and the social and political contexts of such changes; and, second, effects of these changing attitudes on the built environment in Harpers Ferry. This historiography examines the challenges to and the restruc-

turing of versions of history and the material culture consequences related to one national figure, John Brown, and the monument that symbolizes his actions, the John Brown Fort.

The John Brown Fort serves as one of only a few Civil War shrines/monuments claimed by the African-American community. After the Civil War, the nation began constructing monuments, a testimony to moral reformation and the justification of the most violent war in American history. Vernacular monuments, such as a stone or metal soldier standing on a pediment, could be mass-produced and supplied by cemetery-monument companies. These monuments are indistinguishable throughout the American landscape, except for uniform and inscription details. These inscriptions are never controversial; they do not mention slavery or African-Americans, and they generally justify the war as "the cause" or "state sovereignty." The common soldier portrayed in these monuments is always understood to be white Anglo-Saxon (Savage 1994:135).

A survey of Civil War monuments lists only three monuments with African-American representation, even though blacks played a major role in the balance of power. Two monuments show a single black surrounded by other white soldiers, and the third is the Shaw Memorial in Boston, a local white hero who led the first black troops, the 54th Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, into battle. This memorial shows Shaw, elevated on horseback, adjacent to his marching African-American troops. The monument can be interpreted as more of a monument to Shaw than the infantry (Savage 1994:136). The introduction of African-American troops into the Civil War played an influential role in changing the tide of the war. Yet the lack of African-American representation among Civil War monuments is noticeable. Savage (1994:135) writes, "public monuments do not arise as if by natural law to celebrate the deserving; they are built by people with sufficient power to marshal (or impose) public consent for their erection."

There are few memorials that the African-American community can embrace that relates to the moral struggles of the Civil War. The John Brown Fort is one such memorial that symbolizes the fight

against inequality, and it has been embraced by whites and blacks in varying degrees. The histories of John Brown have changed among whites along with the political climate of this country. But the John Brown Fort has always been revered by the black community, and it even found a home on the Storer College campus for over 50 years. In fact, a recent 50th-anniversary celebration of the West Virginia Chapter of the NAACP was held at the fort in 1994.

An analysis of John Brown is more than an examination of one of American history's most controversial characters, but rather an examination and continual reevaluation of the changing social and political character of the nation. It is more than an examination of one person, nor should Harpers Ferry or the engine house fall into the genre of "great men sites," as it is a symbol of resistance of the oppressed for various ethnic groups. This historiography provides insight into a minority group's definition of history which is separate from the "mainstream" history, and the fort has transformed into a monument that symbolizes the struggle against repression. Interpretations of America's pasts continually change based on present values and social and political strategies (Lynch 1972; Handsman 1983:63-79; Linenthal 1983, 1993; Lowenthal 1985; Patterson 1986; Leone et al. 1987: 283-302; Hill 1992:809-815). As the social and political atmosphere changes in this country, so too will the histories of John Brown as well as many of America's other national heroes and historic sites.

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