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of the Harpers Ferry
Historical Association

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Border Town: Harpers Ferry in 1861

When U. S. Army Lt. Roger Jones lit the fuses in the armory and arsenals on April 18, 1861—destroying what he could not defend—war came to Harpers Ferry. The next day, an army led by “feather bed” and “corn stalk” militia officers began to fill the Virginia landscape.

Farmers joined doctors as privates. Teachers marched shoulder-to-shoulder with shoemakers. Laborers drilled daily with student scholars. Area citizen David Hunter Strother wrote these men were “earnest, eager, reckless fellows, marching with a free and vigorous step . . . most admirable material for a rebellion.”

Although enthusiastic and excited, the citizen soldiers lacked much needed discipline. The day after the arsenal explosion, Strother noted, “Confusion reigned supreme, ably seconded by whiskey.” Sent to the Ferry to bring order to the chaos was Colonel Thomas Jonathan Jackson.

Without delay, the former VMI instructor organized the recruits into regiments, began rigorous daily drill, and—to the chagrin of many soldiers—disposed of the whiskey. He also dismantled the armory’s valuable arms-making machinery and shipped it to Confederate factories further south. When Brigadier General Joseph E. Johnston arrived as the higher-ranking post commander on May 23, Jackson concentrated his energies on turning the First Virginia Brigade into the effective force soon to be known as the “Stonewall Brigade.”

Because it stood at the gateway into the strategic Shenandoah Valley, Virginia’s new

overall commander Robert E. Lee believed Harpers Ferry was a key defensive position. “As regards Harpers Ferry” he wrote,



“its abandonment would be depressing to the cause of the South.” General Johnston disagreed. After surveying its geography between two rivers and three heights, he informed Lee, “I regard Harpers Ferry as untenable.”

Thus on June 13, three weeks after his arrival, Johnston ordered an evacuation. As the rebels departed, they set fire to the armory buildings and B&O railroad bridge. Two weeks later, the rifle factory and nearest wagon bridges were all torched. Civilian trade was severed; their economy destroyed. All but a handful of families left town, many armory workers following the machinery

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Association
Celebrates 40 Years

*Ruins of the B&O Railroad
bridge at Harpers Ferry, June
1861. (Library of Congress)*

*The picture which appears
on our newsletter’s nameplate,
dating from 1803, is one of the
oldest prints of Harpers Ferry.
Twenty years earlier, in 1783,
Thomas Jefferson had declared
that this view was “worth a
voyage across the Atlantic.”*

Armory Superintendent Members

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memory of Jim Kuhn
and Alexander and Mary
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Border Town: Harpers Ferry in 1861 *Continued from Page 1*

south. “A dead calm reigned,” recalled resident Joseph Barry. “The stillness was rendered oppressive.”

Learning the Rebel position was abandoned, the Union Army advanced. After a brief occupation, the Federals prudently re-deployed on the Maryland side of the Potomac. The first skirmish in Harpers Ferry happened on July 4, 1861. After the firing ceased, confectioner and loyal Unionist Frederick Roeder walked to “the Point” where the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers flow together. There, a ricocheting Union bullet mistakenly hit him in the groin. Mortally wounded, Roeder made his way back to his house on High Street. There he died on the back porch of his home, the town’s first civilian casualty.

In mid-August the Federals withdrew to Frederick, Maryland, leaving behind one corps to prevent the Southerners from crossing the river, to protect the canal and fords in the vicinity, and to eliminate travel, communication, and trade between Maryland and Virginia. During September and October rifle shots often broke the silence and echoed from mountain to mountain. This kept the citizens on edge. “Everything that moved about the streets they shot at vindictively,” wrote Joseph Barry. “The appearance of even a mullein leaf swaying in the wind elicited a volley.”

One private business that survived the outbreak of war was Herr’s Mill, located on Virginius Island, an industrial area along the Shenandoah River. In August, Massachusetts troops had disabled it to prevent its use by Confederates. Now Abraham Herr, a Union supporter, proposed Union soldiers remove the wheat. Herr hoped to save his mill for future operation. The plan included a large boat for transport, local civilians

impressed to move the wheat, and troops and artillery to protect the operation.

In mid-October, Confederate authorities received word that Federal troops had invaded Virginia, and were confiscating valuable grain. Colonel Turner Ashby quickly maneuvered his men into place for an attack.

On October 16, 1861, the second anniversary of John Brown’s Raid, the Chambers family was warned of the approaching Confederate threat. While seeking refuge the family crossed paths with soldiers from Pennsylvania and Wisconsin on picket duty. Passing by the pickets, 17-year-old Jennie Chambers warned them of the approaching Confederates. Refusing to pull back without orders, the Federals told Jennie to go ahead but to signal them if the rebels appeared. She had only gone 25 yards when she saw a company of Confederate cavalry on the railroad tracks by the river. She turned and waved a warning to the Federal pickets.

Jennie’s mother Mary recalled, “Immediately a volley of bullets whistled over her head from the guns of the Confederate cavalry and the Union pickets returned the fire and ran. The Confederate cavalry came dashing down the railroad after them.” The Federal soldiers made their escape through town and across the Potomac to Maryland. Soon, Rebel artillery opened fire and the Union troops were under attack from both School House Ridge to the west and Loudoun Heights to the south.

Union commander Colonel John Geary quickly deployed to block the three principal routes toward the Ferry—leaning his left on the Shenandoah, his center atop Bolivar Heights, and his right protecting the Potomac. Ashby’s men pressed forward, driving the bluecoats backward, until reaching the outskirts of the village of Bolivar. The Rebel cavalry, supported by Ashby’s infantry mili-

This article combines material from the Association’s soon-to-be released publications *Harpers Ferry Under Fire: A Border Town in the American Civil War* by Dennis Frye, and *The Harpers Ferry Anthology: Civil War Era Stories by Park Rangers and Volunteers*. Anthology stories include: “In Good Hands: Jackson’s New Recruits at Harpers Ferry” by Autumn Cook; “The

House on High Street” by John King; “War on Their Doorstep” by David Fox; “A Patriot of Pennsylvania at Harpers Ferry” by Tyler Gum; and “The Battle of Bolivar Heights” by Jeff Bowers.

Both of these publications will be available for sale at the Park Bookshop or by calling 304-535-6881.



Union capture of abandoned Confederate cannon during the Battle of Bolivar Heights. (Sketch by Thomas Nast)

tia and two cannon, charged three times—“increasing in impetuosity with each repetition”—but were checked each time by the defenders from Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania.

A three hour stalemate ended at approximately 11:00 a.m. when Federals arrived with reinforcements, seizing the Rebel flank along the Potomac edge of the line. Seeing this as “the key to the success of the action,” Colonel Geary ordered an attack along his entire front. This forced a gradual Confederate withdrawal, during which the Southerners left behind one cannon with a broken axle. By 1:30 p.m., the Federals were “in possession of the heights from river to river.” Soon the colors of the 28th Pennsylvania Volunteers was unfurled “on the soil of Virginia, and planted on an eminence of Bolivar Heights.”

Geary claimed his “victory was complete.” Ashby, too, was pleased, as the U.S. forces withdrew from Harpers Ferry that

night, clearing that region of invaders. Despite all the bullets and cannonading, neither side suffered many casualties. During the night following the fight, Colonel Geary visited the iron foundry at Shenandoah City (just upstream from Virginius Island), where he ascertained it was “used by the rebels for casting shot and shell of all kinds.” He promptly ordered the foundry burned that night. Two days later, Confederate cavalry disguised as civilians crept onto Virginius Island and torched Herr’s Mill.

Approximately three weeks before his first clash with the South, Geary had written to his wife about Harpers Ferry. Where the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers converge “the waters seem to refuse to commingle and become one. The clearness and limpidity of the Potomac...the muddiness [sic] of the Shenandoah...I cannot help thinking it resembles the condition of our country; the clear waters of the north refusing to mingle with those from the south.”

Master Armorer Members (Cont’d)

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Civil War Sesquicentennial Special Event: “In the Shadows of John Brown: The 1861 Battle of Bolivar Heights” October 15-16, 2011

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park invites the public to attend “In the Shadow of John Brown: The 1861 Battle of Bolivar Heights,” 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM, October 15-16, 2011.

Two years to the day after John Brown’s Raid, Union and Confederate troops clashed on Bolivar Heights. Guided tours and orientation talks on this battle will be offered throughout the weekend. There will be artillery and small arms firing demonstrations and Living History programs depicting events leading up to the battle. The USPS will open a Cancellation Station Sunday at 10:00 AM with opening remarks by Bolivar Mayor Robert J. Hardy.

Music will be provided by The Wildcat Band Saturday at 12:00 and 4:00 PM. Songs of the Civil War will be performed by Greg

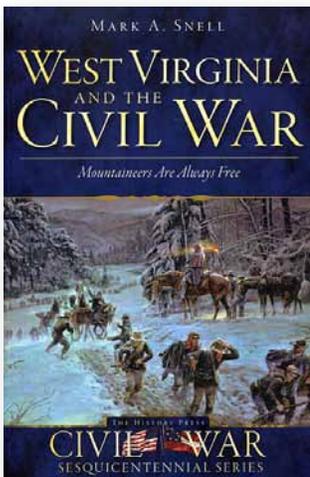
Artzner and Terry Leonino at 12:30 PM Sunday. Also on Sunday, visitors can hear Home Front Musicians: The Gallant 28th NY, at 1:00 and 4:00 PM.

Family/youth activities include a telegraph station, scavenger hunt, battlefield bivouac, and “Wonder Wall” which invites visitors to share their thoughts on the justification of war for the freedom and equality of all Americans.

Commemorative items, books, and music will be sold at the Harpers Ferry Historical Association’s Sales Tent. HFHA will also host author presentations and book signings. See below for author information.

For more information call 304-535-6029 or visit the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park website at www.nps.gov/hafe.

Local Authors to Speak at Sesquicentennial Event



West Virginia and the Civil War: Mountaineers are Always Free (The History Press, 2011) The only state born as a result of the Civil War, West Virginia was the most divided state in the nation. About forty thousand of its residents served in the combatant forces—about twenty thousand on each side. The Mountain State also saw its fair share of battles, skirmishes, raids and guerrilla warfare, with places like Harpers Ferry, Philippi and Rich Mountain becoming household names in 1861. When the Commonwealth of Virginia seceded from the Union on April 17, 1861, leaders primarily from the northwestern region of the state began the political process that eventually led to the creation of West Virginia on June 20, 1863.

The book about these West Virginians and their civil war was written by renowned Civil War historian Mark A. Snell. Snell is the director of the George Tyler Moore Center for the Study of the Civil War in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. He is a retired U.S. Army officer and a former assistant professor at the U.S. Military Academy

at West Point. He has written several books about the Civil War.

Discussion and book signing, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, Saturday, October 15, 1:00 PM.

Trembling in the Balance: The Chesapeake & Ohio Canal During the Civil War (Blue Mustang Press, 2011) HFHA member Timothy Snyder’s new book is the story of a canal company’s struggle to operate a significant business enterprise in one of the nation’s major theaters of war. Since the C&O Canal was located on Maryland’s southern border with Virginia, it experienced much of the war firsthand. Due to the proximity of the canal to so many conflicts, large and small, this book includes a great amount of detailed military history. The canal played a role in major battles, like Antietam and Gettysburg, and in smaller conflicts, such as Ball’s Bluff and Stonewall Jackson’s raids on Dam Number 5.

Snyder grew up near Williamsport, Maryland, about a half mile from the canal.

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Life on the Canal

by Suzanne Silvia

Many years ago, while out walking along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal towpath with my husband, an abandoned lock house caught my eye. I immediately crossed the dry canal bed—much to my husband's consternation—and peered into the window. I wondered what the house thought, empty and seemingly forgotten, waiting these long years . . . My interest was sparked. I wanted to know who lived there, what was life like for the family? Thus, began my journey to learn as much as possible about this bygone way of life.

I read as much as I could on lock house families and the history of the canal. Every trip down South meant another stop along the canal. However, I still wanted to see and feel what the canaller's life was like—to live it. Imagine my delight when I learned about the Canal Quarters program! This is a program in which guests can stay overnight in a lock house. Different lock houses depict various eras of the canal. This program literally transports one back in time.

Last October, my husband and I stayed at Pennyfield Lock. (#22) The house stands as it did in the 1840s. Everything is authentic—the furniture, the dining, living and bedroom quarters, the paint scheme. Walking into the house is like walking through a portal into the past. A table is set up with vintage photographs, books on the canal, and articles with firsthand accounts by those who lived and worked on the canal. Sitting outdoors by the house during the nighttime hours

is truly amazing. There is no traffic to be heard, no electric lights . . . only the soft sounds of the Potomac River and crickets singing their songs. As I readied for bed

Lockhouse 22 on the C&O Canal near Potomac and historic Tobytown, Maryland. (Courtesy Suzanne Silvia)



(by the light of a lantern) I heard the water rushing into the canal. “So this is what life was like,” I marveled to myself.

What a wonderful program, and a wonderful opportunity to breathe, see, touch, hear, and live history.

For information about staying at a lock house visit the C&O Canal Trust's website: www.canaltrust.org/quarters.

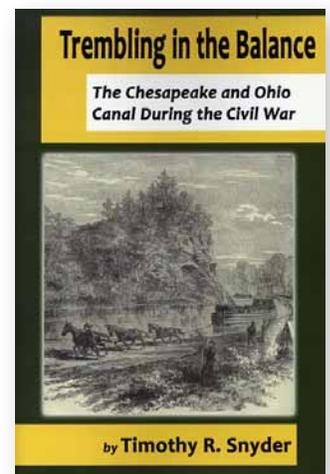
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His book began as his M.A. thesis and is the culmination of over a decade of research and writing. He earned an M.A. degree in history from Shippensburg University and has published several articles on Maryland's history concerning the Underground Railroad, the Secession Crisis, and the Civil War.

“This book is filled with fascinating information on the people, places, and

events that make the C&O Canal's Civil War history so colorful and dramatic. It is a rare and remarkable story, and Tim Snyder tells it more fully and expertly than anyone has before.” – Karen M. Gray, Ph.D., C&O Canal historian

Discussion and book signing, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, Saturday and Sunday, October 15 and 16, 3:00 PM.



HFHA Celebrates 40 Years

Right: NPS personnel and HFHA charter members Marsha Wassel and Dennis Frye recognize Debbie Piscitelli's years of service with a signed Charley Harper print, "Beach Birds".

Below: Piscitelli receives a commissioned replica of the original Park Bookshop sign from HFHA president Jim Silvia and staff member Sue Baker. (Courtesy Jim Wassel)

Thank you to all of the members and old friends who joined us on June 4th and 5th to help celebrate our 40th Anniversary. Members were treated to several private tours and got to participate in nineteenth century bread baking and ice cream making demonstrations. (Quite a work out!) The Sunday picnic had a wonderful turnout and a few tears were shed as Executive Director Debbie Piscitelli was honored for her 30 years of selfless dedication to the Association and to Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.



Congratulations to raffle winners Mark Elrod (collection of Civil War books), Adam Bowles (overnight stay at C&O Canal House), and Carol Gallant (limited edition Mort Kunstler Civil War print). Special thanks to all those who helped organize and execute this special event including: Sue Baker, Stephanie Sager, Wally Magaha, Melinda Day, Susan Journell, Dave Gilbert, John Frye, David Fox, Tyler Gum, Anne Long, and Jim and Suzanne Silvia.

Below Left: Mark Elrod claims his raffle prize. (Courtesy Jim Wassel)

Below Right: Member Bill Berry learns the art of nineteenth century bread baking.



The Harpers Ferry Historical Association operates the National Park Bookshop in Lower Town Harpers Ferry. Profits from sales are returned to the park to support interpretive and educational programs to enhance your visit.

You are invited to join this unique organization and be a part of Harpers Ferry's special family. For more information call (304) 535-6881, send e-mail to hpha@earthlink.net, or visit our website at www.harpersferryhistory.org.

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2011 Schedule of Events

These events are made possible through the efforts of park staff, NPS volunteers, living history groups, and the Harpers Ferry Historical Association. For more information call 304-535-6029 or visit the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park website at www.nps.gov/hafe.

October 29-30 **Under Fire: The Battle of Harpers Ferry 1862**

11:00 AM to 4:00 PM. Bolivar Heights Battlefield. Join the members of the Baltimore Light Artillery as they demonstrate the might and intimidation of field artillery. Firing demonstrations at 1:00, 2:00, and 3:00 PM.

November 5-6 **Roeder's Tavern Cider Making 1860**

11:00 AM to 4:00 PM. Lower Town. Join living history rangers and volunteers for cider-making demonstration and fall food preservation.

December 3-4 **Captain Flagg's US Quarter Master City: Prospects of Peace 1864**

11:00 AM to 4:00 PM. Lower Town. Join over 175 living history volunteers as they help present park visitors with a unique window into the magnitude and scope of Captain Flagg's 1864 US Quartermaster city.



The Harpers Ferry Historical Association is now on Facebook! Search Facebook for "Harpers Ferry Historical Association". Like our page to receive notifications of upcoming park special events, bookshop news, and related park information.