

John Brown and His Black Allies: An Ignored Alliance

AS JOHN BROWN PLANNED the start of his war on slavery in the late 1850s, he sought allies to aid in his great crusade. Although a number of white abolitionists supported his efforts financially and philosophically, John Brown knew that the people most willing to pick up arms and join him on the ground were black people already engaged in the struggle for freedom. But Brown faced a number of hurdles in gathering such an "army." First, he would have to identify and make common cause with black abolitionists; and second, he had to determine where the kind of attack he envisioned would have the best chance to succeed. Brown found both in the network of antislavery activists clustered along the length of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Brown knew that the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857 had radicalized many free blacks. Indignation meetings occurred regularly in the churches. Discussion in the Maryland legislature after *Dred Scott* about reenslaving the free blacks of the state motivated Baltimore's Africans to prepare to defend themselves and their families. With leadership from Baltimore, black conventions held in Ohio were also adopting increasingly revolutionary ideas, fueled by fear and anger over the court's rejection of black citizenship. All the political compromises that had limited the growth of slavery within the Union were voided by the decision and with them went any measure of security free blacks might have felt living in a free state. *Dred Scott* convinced both Brown and black abolitionists that slavery would not be ended by legislative or court action.

Brown went to seek allies and information to build alliances among the more radical elements of the free African population. He could find radical free Africans in the independent black churches, working with the Underground Railroad, in Prince Hall Masonic lodges, and in the black convention movement. Brown knew that this black infrastructure existed and he recruited support among its members, especially in centers of radical free

black activity like Baltimore and Philadelphia. Baltimore had the largest free black community in the South. Brown's allies with Baltimore connections included Frederick Douglass, Reverend William J. Watkins, and the pastor's niece, Frances Watkins, a novelist and poet.¹ Baltimore's free black population also hosted a militant network with direct ties through the convention movement to Cleveland, where Brown was also recruiting his army. The African Methodist Episcopal churches and Prince Hall lodges of Philadelphia and Baltimore were historically and institutionally linked, and both were militant and dedicated participants in the Underground Railroad. Brown cultivated allies in Philadelphia, meeting with leaders of the Frank Johnson Guards, a militia company formed by a number of black men with connections to the Underground Railroad.² During the summer of 1859, the night before a grand parade was scheduled in Philadelphia:

General J. J. Simons of New York, one of Brown's lieutenants . . . made a speech in which he commended the Negroes of Philadelphia for organizing a military company and stated that there was a grand project on foot to invade the South with an army of northern Negroes and free the slaves. He called for recruits for this invading army from the Negroes of Philadelphia.³

Later that night a meeting was held among a dozen local antislavery leaders, including Thomas Dorsey, Dr. William Henry Johnson, Frederick Douglas, Fred C. Revels, and John Brown. Brown urged that a more temperate tone be used during speeches the next day, fearing that without secrecy and caution his plan would be doomed.⁴

Many white abolitionists doubted that blacks would fight for liberty, accepting racist notions that the slave's character was as "submissive as Uncle Tom."⁵ Brown, however, believed that it was necessary for both slave

¹ Frederick Douglass had escaped slavery via Baltimore, developed his speaking in the secret debating club called the East Baltimore Mental Improvement Society, and married a Baltimorean, Anna Murray. John Brown was a regular guest in the Douglass's Rochester, New York, home and "station" on the Underground Railroad throughout the 1850s.

² William H. Johnson, *Autobiography of Dr. William Henry Johnson* (Albany, N.Y., 1900), 194–95.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵ Tilden G. Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm: A Life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New York, 1970), 224–25, and Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (New York, 1972), as cited in Jeffrey Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators: John Brown, The Secret Six, and a Theory of Slave Violence* (Philadelphia, 1982), 8. Just before joining John Brown at the Kennedy

and free to fight for emancipation and rejected the all but universal belief in black submissiveness.⁶ Moreover, he was aware that northern free Africans, denied admission into state militias, had formed their own military organizations, groups like the "Massasoit Guards" of Massachusetts, the "Attucks Guards" of New York City and "Attucks Blues" of Cincinnati, the "Loguen Guards" of Binghamton, New York, and the "Henry Highland Garnet Guards" of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.⁷ Through information supplied by George G. Gill, Brown also knew of such organizations "in existence among the colored people . . . through most, or nearly all, of the slave states."⁸ After the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 became law, Brown himself had organized a self-defense group of forty-four black men known as the "League of Gileadites."⁹ He also had first-hand knowledge of other black self-help groups, including the "League of Freedom," the "Liberty League," the "American Mysteries," and in Canada, the "True Bands," each with several hundred members.¹⁰

As Brown was building alliances with radicalized free blacks, he was simultaneously working with allies to determine where military action would be most effective in weakening slavery and invigorating antislavery agitation.¹¹ He reasoned that if slavery could be driven out of a single county in one state then the whole system would be weakened in that state and in the country as a whole.¹² In determining which county would serve his purposes best, Brown studied census returns and the distribution of the black population. He made maps of fugitive slave routes. He knew about Denmark Vesey, insurrections in South Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee, and about Nat Turner.¹³ He studied the history of Haiti and Jamaica,

Farm, Frank J. Merriam visited Haiti to study the effects of its revolution on the "Negro character." Merriam returned to Haiti in the summer of 1860 with the hope that a revolution of American slaves and possibly a black nation in the Gulf States, the mid-continental islands, and portions of South America could be organized. Richard J. Hinton, *John Brown and His Men* (New York, 1968), 571, 575.

⁶ Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown* (New York, 1974), 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸ George G. Gill's statement, as reprinted in Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 710.

⁹ W. E. B. DuBois, *John Brown* (New York, 1962), 114.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 243-44; Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 171-72.

¹¹ Frederick Douglass, "John Brown and West Virginia," *West Virginia State College Bulletin*, ser. 40, no. 6 (November 1953), 20.

¹² Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 26, 31.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30.

reading everything he could on Toussaint L'Overture.¹⁴ He knew about the activities of the Underground Railroad and of organized resistance in Pennsylvania and Maryland to the Fugitive Slave Act.¹⁵

For many years, the mountains of Virginia had provided a comparatively safe route to freedom. Harriet Tubman, who participated in planning the Harper's Ferry raid, had used the Appalachian route, known as the Great Black Way, in her efforts to aid escaping slaves.¹⁶ John Brown knew this. Foremost and decisive for Brown was the knowledge that the safest natural entrance to the Great Black Way was Harper's Ferry in Jefferson County, Virginia (now West Virginia).

Jefferson County is where the North and South met. Across the Potomac River from Maryland, it was but a few miles south of the Pennsylvania boarder. It had a mixed population of black and white, enslaved and free; people who made their living on large and small farms, in mills and factories, with and without the use of slave labor. Jefferson County had been settled by two distinct waves of migrants—one from the tidewater region of Virginia, the other from Pennsylvania. Virginians began sending overseers and slaves west of the Shenandoah River as early as 1738.¹⁷ Starting in the 1730s and 1740s, Pennsylvania Quakers also began to make their way into the Shenandoah Valley.¹⁸ Free blacks and whites from Pennsylvania crossed the Potomac into western Virginia together following the route of the old Philadelphia Wagon Road. The first of the Pennsylvanians arrived in the county in the fall of 1731. They were Joist Hite, a German Quaker, and his family, accompanied by a free

¹⁴ William Fellows, Charles Town guard, to newspaper reporter, *New York Sun*, Feb. 13, 1898, as cited in Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown*, 111; Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 25, 183.

¹⁵ DuBois, *John Brown*, 97.

¹⁶ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 34, 172; Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown, Liberator of Kansas, and Martyr of Virginia* (Boston, 1885), 468, as cited in Jean Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry* (Berkeley, Calif., 1979), 147; and Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1968), 118.

¹⁷ Vernon F. Alers, *Alers History of Martinsburg and Berkeley County West Virginia* (Hagerstown, Md., 1888), 200.

¹⁸ Joint Committee of Hopewell Friends, *Hopewell Friends History, 1734-1934, Frederick County, Virginia* (Strasburg, Va., 1936), 12-98; Rufus M. Jones, *The Later Periods of Quakerism* (2 vols., London, 1921), 1:388, as cited in Larry D. Gragg, *Migration in Early America: The Virginia Quaker Experience* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1980), 4.

black family named Johnson.¹⁹ Since both southerners and northerners settled the area, Jefferson County reflected a wide range of social, political, and religious practices and alignments. The county was a microcosm of the experience of the nation as a whole and of the African American community in particular.

By 1760, the vast majority of settlers in the region were newcomers who had not been born in Virginia. German Quakers and Scots-Irish Presbyterians from Pennsylvania and Europe outnumbered the English slaveowning migrants from Virginia.²⁰ Consequently, the slave population was minimal through the 1750s, with fewer than a hundred slaves in the entire lower Shenandoah Valley.²¹ During the 1760s, the use of overseers expanded as absentee landowners sent slaves to develop western properties needed to support eastern tidewater holdings. By the end of the eighteenth century the institution of slavery had become well established in Jefferson County, with some slaveowners even moving from their homes in eastern Virginia. These Virginians included a number of prominent white southern families—the Pages, Lees, and Washingtons, for example. By 1800, there were 1,452 taxable slaves in what would become Jefferson County. At the same time the free black population had increased due to continued migration into the Shenandoah Valley and to manumissions that occurred during the Revolutionary War.

The ratio of whites to blacks in Jefferson County was about two to one by 1830 and remained relatively constant through 1860. At the start of the Civil War the free black and slave population combined represented approximately 31 percent of the total county population. Most of the enslaved were scattered in the rural sections of the county though some resided in the towns. The free African population was concentrated in small, self-contained rural black communities or towns like Johnstown, five miles northwest of Charles Town in the Leetown-Bardane area. Johnstown was a contained community of free blacks surrounded by white Quakers and Free Will Baptists. The white settlements provided an abolitionist buffer between the black community and the culture of slaveowning in the rest of the

¹⁹ Jerry M. Johnson III, *Johnstown, West Virginia, Heritage Year Book* (1987), 3.

²⁰ Robert D. Mitchel, "Content and Context: Tidewater Characteristics in the Early Shenandoah Valley," *Maryland Historian* 5 (1974), 82.

²¹ Mitchel, "Content and Context," 84, and Robert D. Mitchell, "The Shenandoah Valley Frontier," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 62, no. 3 (Sept. 1972), 479.

county.²²

Though slaves made up the vast majority of blacks, Jefferson County as a whole had a high percentage of both free Africans and nonslaveholding whites.²³ As early as the 1840s, there were as many free blacks as slaves in Harper's Ferry, Bolivar, and Virginius Island.²⁴ At the time of the raid, the total black population of these three Jefferson County communities was about two hundred.

Local Quakers and free blacks aided fugitive slaves along the Great Black Way, with help from Jefferson County slaves, who operated the ferries in Harper's Ferry and in nearby Shepherdstown.²⁵ Local people also knew places along the Potomac where fugitives could walk across the river. Local loss of slave property was so epidemic that slaveowners petitioned the Virginia state legislature requesting that a company be incorporated to insure them against such losses. The petition also urged that Pennsylvania be encouraged to pass laws that would make it possible to recapture fugitives within her borders.²⁶

As the number of Africans in Virginia increased, lawmakers tried to restrict their entrance into the state by placing heavy duties on them. After the revolution in Haiti in the 1790s, restrictions were placed on the importation of slaves born in Africa or in the Caribbean islands. Through the antebellum decades, enslaved and free blacks endured increasing levels of legal regulation and restraint. By 1850 free blacks without explicit permission from the state legislature to remain in Virginia faced being sold into slavery. It was illegal to teach slaves in Virginia to read or write, but most free blacks were literate, despite the restrictions. Travel by both free blacks and slaves required a pass. Africans were prohibited from owning weapons. Free blacks could not vote, yet

²² James Fisher, Shepherd College Oral History Project, #91-3, Shepherd College.

²³ In 1850, Jefferson County's population was 15,357 (10,476 white, 4341 slaves, and 540 free blacks). The county had four main towns: Harper's Ferry was the largest, followed by Shepherdstown, Charles Town, and Bolivar. Cassandra Smith-Parker, "Afro-American History Interpretation at Selected National Parks," "Harper's Ferry National Historic Park," p. 17, Department of History, Howard University, Sept. 1978, Joseph E. Harris, project director.

²⁴ Ibid., 17. In the Harper's Ferry-Bolivar area, whites outnumbered blacks nine to one with approximately two hundred people of color in the two towns. Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 87.

²⁵ Thomas Hahn, *Towpath Guide to the C & O Canal*, 5, as cited in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 93.

²⁶ *Shepherdstown Register*, Sept. 3, 1850. On March 10, 1835, the General Assembly incorporated the Virginia Slave Insurance Company at Charles Town (Legislative Petition B 308/10819). When the Fugitive Slave Bill was being debated in Congress a faithful synopsis was printed in the *Shepherdstown Register* because it was considered to be a matter of peculiar importance in this section of the state.

were required to pay taxes. Freed Africans were subject to special taxes in addition to property taxes; if they failed to pay, their property could be seized. If the value of the seized goods did not cover the delinquent tax bill, the sheriff could hire out a debtor until the debt was paid. Free blacks were also barred from organizing schools. No black or mulatto preacher—enslaved or free—could preside independently over a black congregation.

Despite these restrictions, black religious congregations existed in Jefferson County prior to the Civil War and reflect the ability of the Africans of the county to organize themselves and hold public gatherings. For example, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church of Shepherdstown, a slave congregation, was organized in 1859. Prior to that, in 1848, black Baptists had organized the Zion Baptist Church of Johnstown.²⁷ The Shepherdstown Black Baptist Church was meeting before the Civil War; its original log church was destroyed by fire during the war.²⁸

The vast majority of those enslaved, however, "sat in the galleries of where their masters went" to church.²⁹ Regardless of where people attended church though, after services blacks would gather. Sunday was the one day that those enslaved and those free could congregate together. Families who were separated during the week were united. These gatherings were both social and spiritual in nature. People would share a meal, catch-up on the news of the week, sing, and tell the children both African and Bible stories. The Old Testament stories of the children of Israel escaping from slavery took on special meaning. Information about escape routes, people who could be trusted, or advice like following the North Star could be exchanged, and news of an impending action against slavery could be disseminated under the cover of a religious meeting.

Virginia blacks also maintained commercial, social, and organizational ties to Pennsylvania and Maryland. The Underground Railroad of the region worked in concert through this complex network. Escaping slaves would be handed off from conductors in Jefferson County to Hagerstown, Maryland, on to conductors in Chambersburg, Harrisburg, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and from there on to New York and Canada.

Knowing the social and political realities of Jefferson County, John

²⁷ Kate J. Anthony, *Storer College, Harper's Ferry, West Virginia* (Boston, 1891), 7.

²⁸ Clifford S. Musser, *Two Hundred Years' History of Shepherdstown* (Shepherdstown, W.V., 1931), 14.

²⁹ Julia Davis, *The Shenandoah* (New York, 1945), 130.

Brown became convinced that slavery could be most effectively attacked there. Harper's Ferry would be seized but not held. After the first blow, local blacks and blacks from the North and Canada would join Brown, inspiring confidence and support among Virginia slaves. Escaping slaves would be funneled north to freedom along the Great Black Way, bleeding slavery out of Virginia, while a small cadre stayed with Brown making more raids and sending more fugitives north. The fight would be carried to the mountains of Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee and to the swamps of South Carolina.³⁰ But Virginia's mountains would be the best place to begin such a tactical guerilla war.

Before putting his plan into action, Brown had sought a "general convention or council" of free Africans to "aid and countenance" his activities. He traveled to Chatham, Ontario, to meet with Martin Delany, whom Brown believed would be able to orchestrate such a council.³¹ Brown's push to win the support of black leadership culminated in the Chatham Convention, arranged by Delany.³² The May 1858 convention was attended by forty-six people—twelve white, the rest black.³³ The main order of business was the adoption of Brown's "Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States."³⁴

It was not an accident that Brown sought out Delany. Martin Delany was a native of Jefferson County, born in 1812 in Charles Town, ironically just a few blocks away from where Brown would be tried for treason. In 1822, the Delany family had been forced to leave Charles Town after Martin's mother, Pati Delany, was accused of teaching her children to read. The family relocated to Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.³⁵

Also in Chambersburg, which would be the staging ground for the Harper's Ferry raid, was Henry Watson's barbershop, center of the area's Underground Railroad. Watson helped in preparations for the assault on

³⁰ James Redpath, *Public Life of Captain John Brown*, 203–5, as cited in DuBois, *John Brown*, 199–200.

³¹ Frank A. Rollins [Mrs. Whipple], *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany*, 85–90, as cited in DuBois *John Brown*, 254–55, and as reprinted in Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 715.

³² DuBois, *John Brown*, 205.

³³ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 178.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.

³⁵ James Surkamp [project director], *Delany: To Be More Than Equal* [teaching kit] (1989), 6, 12, and 13. The Delaney family was also in jeopardy because the eldest Delany son, Samuel Jr., was in the habit of forging passes for other family members.

Harper's Ferry, forwarding men, mail, and freight to the Kennedy Farm in Maryland.³⁶ Black members of Brown's army also boarded with Watson and his wife, Eliza.³⁷

On August 19, 1859, Henry Watson escorted Frederick Douglass to a meeting with John Brown, at which Brown made a final appeal for Douglass's support. Brown's constitution had been written at Douglass's home, but Douglass had not attended the Chatham Convention. The August meeting occurred in an abandoned stone quarry, a site arranged by a free black man, Joseph Richard Winters. The quarry was adjacent to Winters's property. Known as Indian Dick, Winters was a gunsmith born near Harper's Ferry, where his father made bricks for the arsenal.³⁸ Like Martin Delany and Henry Watson, Joe Winters was a member of the St. James A.M.E. Church of Chambersburg.

Brown believed that Douglass's support was the key to winning the assistance of large numbers of northern blacks and would give "the venture the air of credibility."³⁹ If Douglass, "the first great national Negro leader," would go to Harper's Ferry with him, others would follow.⁴⁰ Brown hoped that after he gained the confidence of the black community through an initial success at Harper's Ferry, more men would join him, and that the black militia and secret societies would supply aid and recruits.⁴¹ Brown wanted Douglass there to inspire others.

Brown had first disclosed his plan to Douglass in 1847, explaining that he was, "looking for colored men to whom he could safely reveal his secret." Although Douglass agreed with Brown's objective and rationale, he "could never quite believe that John Brown's tremendous plan was humanly possible." Douglass and other black leaders also knew that if the project failed, black men would pay the cost. Perhaps the Underground Railroad methods could be enlarged and systematized, Douglass argued; he believed "only national force could dislodge national slavery."⁴²

Also at the quarry meeting was Shields Green, whose nickname was

³⁶ DuBois, *John Brown*, 292.

³⁷ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 249.

³⁸ Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 75.

³⁹ Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown*, 76.

⁴⁰ DuBois *John Brown*, 295.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 247-48; Hinton, *John Brown and his Men*, 673, 674, 675; Redpath, *The Public Life of John Brown*, 203, 204, 205, as cited in Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom*, 167.

⁴² DuBois, *John Brown*, 109-10, 344.

"Emperor." About twenty-four and a widower, Green had escaped slavery in South Carolina but had left a son behind.⁴³ Brown had asked Douglass to bring Green, having previously met him at Douglass's home.⁴⁴ As Douglass and Brown argued the merits of Brown's plan, Shields Green sat and listened. When the meeting was over Douglass asked Green if he were coming. The Emperor responded, "No, I guess I'll go with the old man."⁴⁵

Four other named Africans were known to have joined John Brown at Harper's Ferry.⁴⁶ Osborne Perry Anderson, twenty-four, was a free-born Pennsylvanian. A printer by trade, he met Brown in Canada. John A. Copeland Jr., twenty-two, was born free in Raleigh, North Carolina, reared in Oberlin, Ohio, and educated at Oberlin College.⁴⁷ Lewis S. Leary, a harness-maker and Copeland's uncle, was born enslaved in North Carolina and reared in Oberlin.⁴⁸ Dangerfield Newby was a freeman from the Shenandoah Valley with ties to the region. Newby's wife and six children lived in slavery about thirty miles south of Harper's Ferry in Warrenton, Virginia. Harriet Newby, a seamstress, was pregnant and about to be sold to a New Orleans trader.⁴⁹ Because of his familiarity with the area, Newby lived within the community until the night of the raid, supplying Brown with information.⁵⁰

How much local blacks knew about the timing of the raid is uncertain. Benjamin A. Matthews, a Storer College student who lived a generation after the raid, said the local population believed the raid was to be on October 24, but that the date had been changed after a "council by the

⁴³ Ibid., 280; Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 505.

⁴⁴ Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown*, 76-77.

⁴⁵ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 507-8.

⁴⁶ DuBois, *John Brown*, 282; Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 267-68. Six men of color were recruited by Lewis Hayden in Boston; but only one, John Anderson, a free man, reached Harper's Ferry. Whether he took part in the fight or returned to Boston or was killed at Harper's Ferry is unclear. The local Colored Elks suggest that John Anderson was killed at the rifle works battle. His name, however, is listed on the memorial to John Brown's men at the family farm in North Elba, as a Negro raider who escaped.

⁴⁷ DuBois, *John Brown*, 280, 281.

⁴⁸ Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown*, 6; DuBois *John Brown*, 282; Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 505.

⁴⁹ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 266, 310. Dangerfield Newby had attempted to buy her from her owner, Jesse Jennings. Jennings had promised to sell her and one child for \$1,000 but then refused. Immediately after the raid, Harriet was sold and sent to Louisiana.

⁵⁰ DuBois, *John Brown*, 281.

raiders.⁵¹ During the initial phase of the raid, Brown's men armed twenty-five to fifty black men.⁵² Osborne Anderson distributed pikes to slaves who came with Brown's men from the surrounding plantations, and others who came forward without having had communication with the raiders, leading to early reports that the commander of the raid was a "colored man named Anderson." John Edwin Cook and Charles Tidd also armed slaves, among whom were several farmhands who had come after hearing of the raid from "underground wires."⁵³ Eyewitness accounts tell of considerable local black activity—"Negroes" in the early hours of the fight in and around "John Brown's Fort" and slaves with spears in their hands near the engine-house.⁵⁴ One hostage said Harper's Ferry "looked like war—Negroes armed with pikes, and sentinels with muskets all around."⁵⁵

At least fourteen black men assisted at the schoolhouse and protected the weapons; others guarded prisoners.⁵⁶ They transported arms from the Kennedy Farm to the schoolhouse.⁵⁷ Other blacks acted as messengers among Brown's men and spread news of the raid to the local community.⁵⁸ The result was that many Africans "gathered to the scene of action."⁵⁹

The hillsides around Harper's Ferry became congested with frightened white people seeking refuge, and for a time, armed Africans were seen in some numbers. "Armed and unarmed blacks and whites" came to see what was happening.⁶⁰ The engineer of a train stopped by the raiders took parti-

⁵¹ Benjamin A. Matthews, "Harper's Ferry and John Brown," *Storer Sentinel* (1909), as cited in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 101.

⁵² DuBois, *John Brown*, 314.

⁵³ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 294–95. John E. Cook's statement as reprinted in Hinton, 713–14; Osborne P. Anderson, *A Voice from Harper's Ferry: A Narrative of the Events at Harper's Ferry* (Boston, 1861), as reprinted in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 37.

⁵⁴ Elijah Avey, *The Capture and Execution of John Brown*, as cited in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 102; interview with Mr. Graham by Dr. Featherstonehaugh, 1892, as cited in Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 305; John E. Cook's statement, as cited in Hinton, 713.

⁵⁵ John E. R. Dangerfield, "John Brown at Harper's Ferry," *Century Magazine* 30, no. 2 (June 1885), as cited in Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 300.

⁵⁶ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 550; Anderson, *A Voice from Harper's Ferry*, as reprinted in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 60.

⁵⁷ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 288; statement by John Edwin Cook in Hinton, *John Brown and His Men* (1894), 700–18, as cited in DuBois *John Brown*, 314–15; Anderson, *A Voice from Harper's Ferry*, as reprinted in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 37.

⁵⁸ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 293; John E. Cook's statement, *ibid.*, 710.

⁵⁹ Anderson, *A Voice from Harper's Ferry*, as reprinted in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 34.

⁶⁰ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 298.

cular notice of a crowd of at least three hundred persons among whom were black men shouting that they "longed for liberty, as they had been in bondage long enough."⁶¹ A letter, written the day after the raid, stated that, "news had come from the Ferry, that about 300 armed men, with blackened faces, had taken possession of the Armory. . . ."⁶²

Troops fired across the Potomac to the Maryland side at black men who had been armed the day before at the Kennedy Farm.⁶³ Forced to retreat, the armed black men scattered, as troops crossed the bridge in pursuit.⁶⁴ As late as 1887, Andrew Hunter, John Brown's prosecutor, asserted that the mountains and woods were full of Brown's men.⁶⁵

Hostages were taken, among them Lewis Washington (great grand-nephew of George Washington) and John Allstadt. Washington's slaves—Jim, Sam, Mason, and Catesby—and Allstadt's slaves—Henry, Levi, Ben, Phil, George, and Bill—also were taken to Harper's Ferry.⁶⁶

Washington's coachman Jim willingly accepted a pistol and a supply of ball cartridges. Jim was said to be one of the boldest combatants, fighting "like a tiger." When the engine house fell, Jim fled. He succeeded in reaching the Shenandoah River only to drown near Hall's Rifle Works. He had "joined the rebels with a good will," reported the Virginia Committee of Claims in turning down Washington's petition for compensation for his lost slave property.⁶⁷ Another Washington slave, Mason, loaded weapons all day. Later he convinced Virginia authorities that he and the group with him returned to their masters as soon as they could escape.⁶⁸

Allstadt's slave Phil Luckum knocked holes in the engine house wall to

⁶¹ Thomas Drew, comp., *The John Brown Invasion* (1892; reprint, Freeport, N.Y., 1972), 6, as cited in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 104–5.

⁶² Letter from George L. Douglass to Kearsely Carter, Oct. 1859, Hannah N. Geffert, ed., "When The Raiders Came," *Columbiad* 4 (Spring 2000), 111.

⁶³ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 516.

⁶⁴ Anderson, *A Voice from Harper's Ferry*, as reprinted in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 52.

⁶⁵ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 291; Letter from George L. Douglass to Kearsely Carter, 114.

⁶⁶ *Baltimore Weekly Sun*, Oct. 22, 1859, as cited in Millard Kessler Bushong, *Historic Jefferson County* (Boyce, Va., 1972), 187.

⁶⁷ Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown*, 100–1; Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 295, 511, 530.

⁶⁸ Letter from D. E. Henderson, as cited in Libby, *Black Voices from Harpers*, 138; Thomas Higginson, *Cheerful Yesterday* (1889; reprint, New York, 1968), 229.

shoot through until he was mortally wounded.⁶⁹ Phil's brother Ben, who helped guard the Rifle Works, was arrested and died in jail.⁷⁰ Upon hearing of the raid, some black men immediately agreed to join, saying that they "had been long waiting for an opportunity of this kind."⁷¹ Others, like a house slave of Washington, firmly refused to take part, declining to accept a pike.⁷²

Black men participated in the killing and the dying at Harper's Ferry. In the early morning, William Leeman gave a double-barreled shotgun to an elderly slave. When a white townsman ignored the slave's order to halt, the elderly slave discharged his weapon's "terrible load." The townsman "fell, and expired without a struggle." When Dangerfield Newby was shot in the head, his "death was promptly avenged by Shields Green. . . ."⁷³ Of the men shot on the rocks, when John Henri Kagi's party retreated to the river, some were slaves.⁷⁴ Mill workers poured "several hundred rounds of ammunition into three of Brown's men and three local slaves at the Hall's Rifle Works."⁷⁵

There is no agreement on how many men died fighting with Brown. Reports vary from seventeen to twenty-seven, only ten of whom were with Brown at the Kennedy Farm. The others, between seven and seventeen, were blacks who joined Brown.⁷⁶

Some of Brown's men fled. Five managed to escape, including Osborne Anderson. William C. Goodridge, a wealthy black man in York, Pennsylvania, gave Anderson shelter during his escape and also assisted Francis J.

⁶⁹ "Phil Luckum": Jennie Chambers, "What a School-Girl Saw of John Brown's Raid," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 104 (Jan. 1902); "Phil Lucker": Reminiscence of Thomas Allstadt, *Springfield Sunday Republican*, Boyd Stutler Collection, West Virginia State Archives, as cited in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 121-22.

⁷⁰ Anderson, *A Voice from Harper's Ferry*, as reprinted in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 60.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷² *Shepherdstown Register*, Nov. 12, 1859, as cited in Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown*, 100.

⁷³ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 298; Anderson, *A Voice from Harper's Ferry*, as reprinted in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 38, 40.

⁷⁴ Anderson, *A Voice from Harper's Ferry* as reprinted in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 60.

⁷⁵ Hu Maxwell and Thomas Miller, *West Virginia and Its People*, 307, as cited in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 94.

⁷⁶ Anderson, *A Voice from Harper's Ferry*, as reprinted in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 61; Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 388. Colonel Robert Baylor, the local commander, cited five more deaths on Brown's side at the end of Monday's fighting than can be accounted for, or four if one counts John Anderson as being present.

Merriam, delivering him to William Still in Philadelphia.⁷⁷ Richard Hinton, who had been waiting in Chambersburg to join the raiders, escaped with help from local blacks.⁷⁸

Several local blacks are known to have escaped slavery at the time of the raid and local folklore maintains that Harriet Tubman returned to the area to help. Reginald Ross's father escaped then, returning after the Civil War. Charles Williams, who worked at the hotel, was not seen after the raid and presumably escaped.⁷⁹ A slave, "direct from Harper's Ferry—passed through Syracuse on the Underground Railroad," announcing that others would follow.⁸⁰ A fugitive slave from Harper's Ferry came into Auburn, New York, on his way to Canada. Reportedly, he was "the slave who guided John Brown into the arsenal. . . ."⁸¹ Following the Chatham Convention, Mary Ellen Pleasant, who was one of Brown's African American financial backers, disguised herself as a jockey and disseminated information in the Roanoke River area and other parts of the South about Brown's approaching assault. After the raid she too was forced to flee Virginia.⁸²

Despite the massive presence of military force present in Jefferson County after the raid, black guerilla activity persisted. A series of fires swept the region. "[T]he heavens are illuminated by the lurid glare of burning property," reported a Richmond daily.⁸³ Crops, stockyards, stables, hayracks, agricultural implements, and barns of slaveholders in Jefferson and Berkeley Counties were set afire. Farmers, fearing crop fires, threshed wheat earlier than usual.⁸⁴

On October 31, 1859, the *Virginia Free Press* reported the burning of the barn and stable of George Fole as the "work of a Negro boy." On November 10, 1859, "three large straw ricks belonging to John LeRue" and "the granary and carriage house of Dr. Stephenson" were destroyed by fire. Wheatland,

⁷⁷ I. H. Betz, "Some Historic Houses of York County," *York (Pa.) Gazette*, Oct. 5, 1912, as cited in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 170–71.

⁷⁸ Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 177.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 140–41.

⁸⁰ *Virginia Free Press*, Jan. 19, 1860, as cited in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 141.

⁸¹ *Shepherdstown Register*, Jan. 28, 1860, reprint from *Auburn (N.Y.) Advance*, Jan. 18, 1860, as cited in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 141.

⁸² Mary Ellen Pleasant, statement to newspaper editor (1901), as cited in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 102; Manuscript, West Virginia University Archives, as cited in Frederick Douglass, "John Brown and West Virginia," II.

⁸³ Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown*, 108.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

the farm of George Turner, a slaveowner who was killed during the raid, was reported burning in the *New York Times* of December 3, 1859.⁸⁵ His brother, William F. Turner, had horses and sheep die suddenly as if by poison.⁸⁶ Property of John Burns, Walter Shirley, and George H. Tate—all of whom served on juries that convicted John Brown's men—was destroyed within the same week.⁸⁷ A January 12, 1860, petition sent to the General Assembly of Virginia from the citizens of Jefferson County asked that Walter Shirley, the foreman of the jury that convicted Brown, be compensated for losses. The petition stated that "there is not the shadow of a doubt but that the fire grew out of his connection with the trials."⁸⁸ Additional attempts were made on the premises of John Burns. Local whites believed the fires were being set "by the Abolition confederates of Brown & Co."⁸⁹ One victim of the guerilla arsonists stated: "three stockyards have been burnt in this county alone since their capture and since their trial—last night one of mine was burned destroying not less than \$2000 worth of property . . . we can only account for it on the grounds that it is Cook's instructions to our Negroes. . . ."⁹⁰ Colonel J. Lucius Davis wired Governor Henry A. Wise in Richmond on November 19 that the fires were being set by Negroes and asked for reinforcements.⁹¹ The governor sent five hundred more troops to Charles Town, but the fires continued.⁹²

Conventional histories of the raid have ignored this information, arguing that accounts by black men or abolitionists could not be trusted or that white eyewitnesses were exaggerating. However, with mounting evidence that blacks had been much more involved with the raid than conventional

⁸⁵ Correspondence of the *Baltimore American*, as cited in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry* 176; Oswald Villard, *John Brown, 1800–1859* (Boston, 1910), 520, as cited in Robert L. Bates, *The Story of Smithfield (Middleway), Jefferson County, West Virginia* (Lexington, Va., 1958), 135–36.

⁸⁶ Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown*, 108.

⁸⁷ Correspondence of the *Baltimore American* as cited in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 176; Villard, *John Brown*, 520, as cited in Bates, *The Story of Smithfield*, 135–36.

⁸⁸ Archives of Virginia, Legislative Petitions, B 468/19846, Jefferson County, Jan. 12, 1860.

⁸⁹ Correspondence of the *Baltimore American*, printed in the (*Philadelphia*) *Dollar Pennsylvanian*, Nov. 26, 1859, as cited in Libby, *Black Voices from Harper's Ferry*, 176.

⁹⁰ Letter from J. W. Ware to Governor Wise, Nov. 13, 1859, (MS10-0074 AB) Boyd Stutler Collection, West Virginia State Archives.

⁹¹ Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown*, 108.

⁹² Millard Kessler Bushong, *Historic Jefferson County*, 197. Edmund Ruffin wrote in his diary of the fears because Col. Smith "thinks that if any rescue [of Brown] is attempted, it will begin by setting fire to the town." William K. Scarborough, ed. *The Diary of Edmund Ruffin* (Baton Rouge, La., 1972), 363.

wisdom asserted, the patterns and meanings of these deliberate fires and other scattered pieces of evidence need to be reconsidered. With their lives at stake, no one would have gone out of their way publicly to claim affiliation with the raid. Secret revolutionary groups rarely keep records. But involvement in the raid was whispered to those who could be trusted, so scattered bits and pieces of stories survive. It is the job of historians to consider whether they add up to a coherent, persuasive picture.

Moreover, new evidence can become visible just by posing new questions about black support for the raid. In the 1990s, for instance, Charles Cephas of Catonsville, Maryland, found five antique guns while renovating the family home, two of which were stamped with the words "Harper's Ferry." Mr. Cephas and his mother, Mrs. Lucille Woodland Cephas, agreed to be interviewed to help researchers determine whether the antique guns were another link in the chain of evidence connecting John Brown with African American allies.⁹³

Mr. Cephas had found the weapons in the attic of his maternal great-grandfather's home on historic Winters Lane. Mr. Cephas's great grandfather was Philip Woodland, a coachman for wealthy whites in Baltimore and Catonsville. The family had no ties to the Jefferson County area, but Mr. Cephas noted that Philip Woodland had been among the founders of the Grace African Methodist Episcopal Church of Catonsville. The Woodland family had also routinely given shelter to traveling A.M.E. ministers.

This tie to the Grace A.M.E. Church has enormous significance. When John Brown was arrested, in his captured trunk was a handwritten letter stating, "Mr. Thomas Henrie, a colored man formerly of Hagers-town, was a trusted man." Thomas W. Henry was an itinerant minister and twice pastor of St. James A.M.E. Church of Chambersburg, the home church of Martin Delany, Joe Winters, and Henry Watson.⁹⁴ Thomas Henry's son, Reverend John R. Henry, served as the first minister of Catonsville's Grace A.M.E. congregation, founded originally as St. John's

⁹³ John Cook, captured in Pennsylvania after the raid, stated in his "Confession" that local blacks had been armed. This "Confession" greatly angered John Brown, who feared reprisals against local participants and other Africans.

⁹⁴ Rev. Thomas Henry had also been pastor of the antecedent congregation of Grace A.M.E., Mt. Gilboa (which is located on the historic property of Benjamin Banneker).

in 1868.⁹⁵ Although John Henry was suspected of conspiring with Brown, he did not have to flee Maryland as his father did. Rev. Thomas Henry escaped arrest with the assistance from A.M.E. ministers in Baltimore and from a white Mason who fronted for him at the railway, buying him a ticket to Philadelphia.⁹⁶ Finally, both Rev. Thomas Henry and the Woodland family, many of whom were Civil War veterans as well as members of the A.M.E. Church, were originally from St. Mary's County, Maryland.

Other things about the Woodland family fit a pattern of African supporters of the raid. Brown had built his alliances through the independent black churches, the Underground Railroad, and the Prince Hall Masons. Philip Woodland was a Prince Hall Mason, as were Rev. Thomas Henry and Martin Delany. So was Reverend Hiram Rhoads Revels, who had lived in Baltimore and would become the first United States senator of known African ancestry in 1870. Revels was first cousin to Lewis Leary, and second cousin to John Copeland, both of whom died fighting against slavery with Brown.

Were the five guns—four long guns and a pistol—rediscovered in Catonsville therefore connected to the raid? The curator at the National Rifle Association's firearms museum explained that the 1858-model Harper's Ferry rifles were made in 1860—just months too late to have been taken from the arsenal during the raid. But the rifles were of a kind often issued to United States Colored Troops, and they had rack numbers in close sequence, indicating they had been issued to members of the same military unit. The Remington pistol was a standard army issue of the same vintage.

The other two long guns were also of interest. One was an antebellum, double-barreled shotgun of foreign make and average quality. The other was an unusual fowling piece (bird gun) of pre-war vintage and foreign make. It was a very expensive, top-of-the-line weapon. On the stock of the gun were carved initials that could be either "G. W." or "J. W." Another interesting marking was a small brass plate with an elegantly engraved initial—"W"—indicating the original owner.

Although the Harper's Ferry rifles and the Remington pistol could not have been given to Africans during the raid since they were manufactured

⁹⁵ "Rev. John Henry held services in a small school house until the church was built and called St. Johns A.M.E., 1868 to 1879," Mrs. Mary Frances Williams, the only living charter member of the congregation, told WPA interviewer Frank Rothbarth in 1939.

⁹⁶ At that time, it was illegal for blacks to purchase railroad tickets.

later, there is much documented evidence that similar weapons were distributed, especially in Maryland. However, it is very likely that these weapons were issued to U.S. Colored Troops during the war. A search of the soldiers and sailors database and pension files turned up several Woodlands linked to Mr. Cephas's great grandfather Philip. Twenty-three Woodlands served with the United States Colored Troops, six of them in the 19th U.S.C.T. The 19th regiment was composed of Africans from Maryland and had been garrisoned in Harper's Ferry to recruit slaves into army service.

Philip and Sarah Woodland had sons or other relations of service age who might have enlisted in the 19th U.S.C.T. Before moving to Catonsville, the couple had lived at 38 Orchard Street in Baltimore.⁹⁷ Orchard Street was the "black Fifth Avenue of Baltimore." When the Fifteenth Amendment, guaranteeing universal manhood suffrage, became part of the Constitution, the largest celebration in the nation took place in Baltimore with over twenty thousand people participating. As part of the celebration, a grand parade marched through the city. The route chosen included Orchard Street because so many politically active African Americans lived there. Among the stated reasons that the celebration happened in Baltimore was that "Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, and Hiram Revels were all prominent blacks who had a legacy in Baltimore."⁹⁸ All three men were closely connected with John Brown.

Wood's Baltimore City Directory of 1868–69 reported several adults besides Philip and Sarah living in the Woodland home, among them Henry Woodland, who, like Philip, was a coachman. Henry Woodland and Austin Woodland both served in Company I of the 19th regiment, and could be the owners therefore of the Harper's Ferry rifles. It may never be definitively proven, but that is the most likely explanation of the presence of the rifles in Mr. Cephas's home.

Which leads us to the last gun—the fowling piece. During the raid, on the night of October 17, 1859, Osborne Anderson and Charles Tidd were in the party assigned to capture Lewis Washington. By Brown's order, Anderson "representing the African race" received the sword that had been presented to George Washington by Frederick the Great. The group also

⁹⁷ *Wood's Baltimore City Directory* for 1868–69.

⁹⁸ "Celebrating Rights and Responsibilities: Baltimore and the Fifteenth Amendment, May 19, 1870"—an interactive historical investigation by David Trey, 1996. <<www.toad.net/~dave/project/story.html#celeb>>

confiscated a pair of pistols presented to George Washington by Lafayette, a wagon, a carriage, and two guns—a double-barreled shotgun and a foreign-made, high quality fowling piece. The wagon had been taken to Maryland, then returned after the raid. Six months after the raid, Lewis Washington told a Senate committee that his double-barreled shotgun had been buried by a slave and then recovered, but that his fowling piece had never been found. According to testimony during the Senate hearings, Washington's Belgian-made fowling piece was last seen "in the hands of a Negro" on the Maryland side of the river.

Like the missing fowling piece, the one found in Catonsville was of Belgian manufacture. The presence of an initial "W" on a brass plate to indicate ownership is consistent with the practice of some of the Washingtons in Jefferson County. And it is highly unlikely that the Woodlands would have been able to afford to purchase such an expensive weapon. There is one other figure in the story who might provide a key link. Among the Woodlands in the U.S.C.T. was a John C. Woodland (1839–1917), who enlisted in St. Mary's County. Although John Woodland was not directly related to Philip Woodland, he lived in Catonsville for a time, and in Baltimore as well, where he was the head of a branch of the Grand Army of the Republic. He was also associated with an entrepreneurial Christian lodge-based organization called the United Galilean League of Fishermen. One of the few other locations where the Galilean Fisherman had a chapter was Charles Town, West Virginia. John C. Woodland's signature, which appears twice in his pension documents, was compared with the initials carved on the stock of the fowling gun, and both the "J" and the "W" are similar. While the Catonsville fowling piece may never definitively be proven to be the Washington fowling piece, there is reason to believe it is.

When interviewed about the guns, Lucille Woodland Cephas was apologetic that she could not remember more. The old folks did not talk too much about those days, she explained, and she had been one of the youngest in her family. If her older brother were alive, she affirmed, he could have told more. But she did remember that even though travel was expensive and difficult for African Americans when she was a child, there was one place that her parents felt was imperative for the family to visit: Harper's Ferry.

Historians conventionally consider Brown's raid a failure, but in fact he did manage to accomplish some of what he had set out to do. He had identified and made common cause with active black abolitionists and had

found a location for his raid where the attack would have a significant impact on the institution of slavery. For many southerners, the raid on Harper's Ferry epitomized abolitionism and the North. Terrified both by the raid and by the adulation heaped on Brown after his execution, southern leaders came to believe that they had to resort to extreme measures to stave off further aggression.⁹⁹ As Frederick Douglass said in a stirring speech given at Harper's Ferry twenty-two years after the raid, "If John Brown did not end the war that ended slavery, he did, at least, begin the war that ended slavery."¹⁰⁰

The significance of John Brown's raid should be analyzed not as an isolated event but in the context of the struggle for freedom that black America engaged in throughout the nineteenth century. Brown had found black allies in the region of Jefferson County who were willing both to stand with him at Harper's Ferry and to continue the struggle through the war and beyond. He and his black allies insisted that it was vital for African Americans to fight for their freedom and that they had the right to do so; Harper's Ferry showed, again, that they would. When war broke out, Frederick Douglass continually and successfully urged President Lincoln to use black troops. Before the war ended, one in ten Union troops was black. The enlistment of black soldiers gives a perfect symmetry to this story because the first field commission awarded to a black man was presented, on direct orders from President Lincoln, to Jefferson County native Martin Delany.¹⁰¹ It was not by coincidence that African American troops went to war singing "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave but his soul goes marching on."

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⁹⁹ DuBois, *John Brown*, 355.

¹⁰⁰ Frederick Douglass, Speech at Storer College at Harper's Ferry, May 30, 1882, as cited in DuBois, *John Brown*, 353. Douglass's speech was given outside of Lincoln Hall as part of the festivities celebrating the fourteenth anniversary of Storer College.

¹⁰¹ James Surkamp, Project Director, *Delany: To Be More Than Equal* [Teaching Kit] (1989), 9.