When Tidewater Invaded the Valley

A Tribute to the Men of Lower Virginia in the Days of The John Brown Raid.

By
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Scattered about in Charles Town there are still some interesting and tangible reminders of the John Brown Raid. The following pages tell their story, giving some side-lights, hitherto unpublished.

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Wednesday, October 17, will round out seventy-five years since that lover of bloodshed, John Brown, staged his drama in the Lower Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. To the majority of this generation his name arouses only the vaguest memories; like that of Blennerhassett, it is somewhere in American History, but in their hazy historical perspective, the dates might synchronize.

Two generations have grown up since then, but the dwellers in this beautiful and historic valley will never forget how Brown lit a firebrand, which smouldering, flamed later into The War Between the States. This article, however, is not meant to give a detailed history of that dramatic period; it simply gives some side-lights, derived from old letters and family traditions, which would interest especially those who may find among the dramatis personae the names of their ancestors who, perhaps unknown to them, played their part in historic events, later overshadowed by “The War.”
However, for the sake of a background, a brief outline of those stormy days is necessary. In Kansas, John Brown had already gained an unenviable notoriety as a man of blood by committing many murders and atrocities in a series of raids. Returning to the East, he gained the support of certain Abolitionists, who should have known better, and with their encouragement and money, laid his plans to foment an insurrection among the colored people of the South, not understanding them or the conditions under which they lived, slaves in law, but in most instances, happy and loved by their masters.

Harpers Ferry, so well known for its beautiful situation at the junction of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers, was at that time a prosperous town, the seat of a Government arsenal and armory. Brown determined to seize them both and take possession of all munitions and firearms, transport them to a base where he would rally the slaves of the neighborhood, arm them, and with the white followers he had gathered around him, make this the nucleus of an army to which the slaves of the whole South would rally. For months he and a little group, including his sons and a few adventurers, lived in the neighborhood, gaining under various pretexts knowledge of the people and topography, trying unsuccessfully to instill rebellion in the hearts of the loyal colored people.

Brown, under the name of Smith, leased a farm on Maryland Heights, across the Potomac from Harpers Ferry, for a base, and let it be known that he was a prospector for precious metals. One of his men, purporting to be a book agent, gained entrance into many houses. He was received courteously by Col. Lewis Washington, who showed him relics of the Revolutionary War, inherited by him from Gen. Washington. Among them were firearms given by LaFayette and a sword presented by Frederick the Great, on which
was engraved, "From the oldest general of the time
to the greatest." During these months of prepara-
tion, Brown collected from sympathizers in the North
firearms and stores of various descriptions, and had
made two thousand pikes to put into the hands of
the negroes to murder their masters.

At ten o'clock on that unforgettable night in Oc-
tober, 1859, Brown and his followers, fourteen white
and four colored men, left their mountain rendezvous
and crossed the B. & O. railway bridge over the
Potomac and ordered the watchman to surrender.
By a strange paradox, his first victim was a colored
man, Heyward Shepherd, a porter, who was an in-
ocent by-stander on the bridge. He was shot down
in cold blood. The party now entered the town, ar-
resting any unlucky wayfarers. The first move was
to seize the watchman at the rifle factory and armory
and in doing this mere spectators as well as those
who offered resistance were killed, for by this time,
the little village was aroused and the citizens knew
something was doing. In this way, Brown collected
about forty prisoners, whom he shut up in the fire-
engine house within the armory grounds. At the
same time, he sent out a small band to the homes
of some of the leading County citizens with commands
to capture them and bring them as hostages. One
of them was Col. Lewis Washington, who was roused
from sleep and carried as a prisoner to the engine
house. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that
Brown's dramatic fancy had been fired by the story
of Col. Washington's historic treasures, and he gave
orders that Gen. Washington's sword and LaFay-
ette's pistols should be brought to him as the first
spoils of war.

The mysterious happenings of Monday were never
forgotten by that generation in Jefferson County.
Rumors, true and false, began to fly as it became
known that Government property had been seized and
peaceable citizens had been dragged from their beds and imprisoned and that people, walking on the streets of Harpers Ferry had been shot and killed. The news spread that Col. George Turner, a retired West Pointer, had been shot and killed by a sniper as he rode in stately fashion down High Street. All that was certain was that these atrocities had been committed by an invading force of unknown number and origin, who had seized the United States armory and arsenal and were holding them against all attacks.

In Charles Town, eight miles away, when early in the morning the Court House bell rang wildly to arouse the people, rumors flew more wildly and it was even conjectured that it was the British who had seized Harpers Ferry. Immediately there was an exodus of the male population to the seat of war. Even in Harpers Ferry, it was many hours before the object of the raid was understood, as the prisoners were not allowed to communicate with their friends. To Col. Washington and his companions Brown revealed his identity and his intention of starting a servile insurrection, and it gradually became known that this was none other than John Brown of Ossawatomie, a name already infamous, and that for months he had been living in the neighborhood under an assumed name.

Gov. Wise of Virginia was notified of the disturbance and he ordered the local volunteer companies to Harpers Ferry at once, which order was eagerly obeyed. As it was Government property that had been seized, President Buchanan was informed and he ordered Col. Robert E. Lee of the U. S. army, Lt. J. E. B. Stuart and Lt. Green to proceed, with a detachment of marines, to Harpers Ferry to arrest the offenders. They arrived Monday night, too late to make an attack, but Col. Lee ordered the arsenal and armory to be surrounded. The next morning, finding Brown and his party and his prisoners shut
up in the engine house, Col. Lee ordered him to surrender and, upon his refusal, gave command to Lt. Green to batter down the door and seize the insurgents. As the prisoners were placed in front, the marines had to proceed with caution but finally succeeded in breaking in the door. Brown was pointed out by Col. Washington to Lt. Green and, in resisting arrest, was wounded. In the short struggle that followed, one marine and a half dozen of Brown's men were killed. Brown and four of his company were delivered to the sheriff of Jefferson County and placed in the jail in Charles Town to await trial; later two others were captured. The marines, having carried out their orders, returned to Washington.

Thus, apparently, ended Brown's expedition, but it really was the prelude to the War, as the sympathy and support he received in the North engendered bitterness in the South and fanned the flames of resentment through the country and in Congress. Reports were rife of parties from the West and North who were planning a descent on Charles Town to rescue their hero. Although Brown's offense was treason against the United States, as he had seized its property and had written a constitution for a provisional government, Virginia claimed the right to try him, as he had invaded her territory, and her claim was allowed. Thus it was that his trial was held in the old Court House, still standing in Charles Town, Judge Richard Parker presiding. He was found guilty and sentenced to be hung on December 2, 1859.

It is at this point that the interest of readers in Richmond and Petersburg will be aroused when they see that their fathers took part in spectacular events preceding the War. Excitement in Jefferson County was so intense and rumors of impending attacks flew so fast that Gov. Wise deemed it necessary to give the people military protection, as well as the prisoners,
and also to guard against the latter being rescued by friends; so he ordered troops to the scene. It must be owned that the young people experienced a series of delightful thrills when they heard that an invading force of the flower of Virginia chivalry was about to be quartered among them. Some quotations from the letters of one of the village belles tell the story best. “Sunday was just like a weekday; except for morning service you would not have known it was Sunday. At two o’clock a dispatch announced that Gov. Wise and five hundred men would soon arrive, so the Jefferson Guards and Alexandria Riflemen and Continentals marched out to meet them.” The letter does not mention it, but it is safe to hazard a guess that every young woman of the neighborhood was at the station unless restrained by parental authority. The letter proceeds; “The Governor arrived with two hundred and fifty men; he left the same number at Harpers Ferry. He brought the Richmond Grays, a beautiful company and the best drilled in the state, the Young Guards and a German company, all of them under Col. Wyatt Elliott. At five a company from Newton arrived and volunteer companies from Fauquier and Page counties, who came on their own account, having heard a false rumor that there was fighting here. The others were ordered here because a gentleman from the West had come to say there was an armed force in Ohio on their way to attack us. Dispatches from the Governor and Marshal of Ohio to Gov. Wise confirmed this. Gov. Wise reviewed the troops this evening and while he was doing it, the Petersburg Artillery arrived. They only stayed a while and went back to the Ferry. The Petersburg Grays and City Guard are also here and they are all under Col. Weisiger. The hotels are crowded and all vacant houses are appropriated for barracks and a great many are quartered on private families. Tonight, just as I had finished supper, the bell rang and an officer of the Newton cavalry presented himself, a friend of mine,
Brown was executed on December the second and, later four white men and two colored followed him to the scaffold, the executions all taking place in Charles Town. During this period, excitement waxed hotter as reports of intended violence to the citizens flowed in. Among the many letters Gov. Wise received, I quote one from Vermont; "Just as sure as John Brown swings from the scaffold or is in any way injured, so help me God, in a moment, when you think not you will be hurled into eternity. I will not rest day or night until I have taken the lives of four of your associates. At the same time I will assist, even to lighting the matches and placing the fuse, in carrying out a favorite and well matured plan here in the North, which is this of burning Harpers Ferry, Charles Town and a few other places, which I am bound by an oath not to reveal, down to the ground; and also to set on fire every town and city south of Mason and Dixon’s Line as soon as practicable after the execution.” Superintendent Barber at Harpers Ferry received a letter from New York stating, "I would not be surprised from what I have heard, that there will be an attempt made by the Abolitionists of the North to release Brown and his associates from the Charles Town jail. I do not desire to add to the excitement already great, but write to caution you. If the attempt is made, it will be a hidden movement by a party of armed desperadoes, employed by leaders in the Free States.”

With such threats in the air it was considered necessary to hold troops in readiness to enforce order, so for many weeks Charles Town was turned into a military camp. One fancies that life for the young ladies was very much as in one of Miss Austen’s
stories when a regiment was quartered in the village. Whether there were enough vacant houses for the troops or whether they lived in tents in those chilly autumn days is lost in mystery. The officers, however, were received as honored guests in the homes of the town, and imagination runs riot in thinking of the balls and parties that must have filled the days and nights. A distinguished member of the Richmond Grays was John Wilkes Booth, and he furnished his share of entertainment by giving readings from Shakespeare. Here he formed a friendship with John Yates Beall, whose tragic death, some have thought, was in Booth's mind, avenged by his later desperate act. Of the romances of those six weeks we have no record, though rumors have reached this generation of one between a doughty colonel and a modest black haired maiden. Why it was nipped in the bud was kept secret from the prying questions of young relatives. Perhaps it was an exacting and rather severe mother who interfered; at any rate the maiden became an old maid; the subject must never be broached.

It is unfortunate that there is a gap in the correspondence of the young lady we have been quoting. Her next letter is dated January, 1860, and is as follows: "I reckon you will think that I have entirely deserted you since the war was concluded, but really there is nothing to interest and amuse since the soldiers left. Numbers of presents have arrived from the officers of the Richmond, Petersburg and Fincastle companies to their hosts and hostesses. Mrs. Aisquith, daughter of the cashier, received a tea service of plate from the Richmond Grays who stayed there. The Richmond men who stayed with Mrs. Keyes sent her a Sheffield tray and ice pitcher with solid silver goblets. The Petersburg Grays at Mr. Craighill's sent him a cheque for a hundred and ten dollars. The same company sent Jane Beall, sister of the editor, an elegant gold watch and chain. The Fin-
castle company sent Mrs. Beard a superb silver goblet, lined with gold. From Richmond, Mrs. White received a set of plate, coffee pot, tea pot, water jug, cream jug, sugar bowl, and slop bowl. Mrs. Ruth­er­ford also received an ice-water set. Sallie Brown had sent to her an elegant papier-mache Chinese cabinet, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, beautifully fitted, and one of the Grays who has gone to New York, sent Mrs. Brown a gold lined berry spoon and sugar sifter. Twelve Petersburg Grays sent Mrs. Brown a beautiful solid silver flagon with gold lined goblets on a large tray.”

The present of the twelve Petersburg Grays deserves more than this passing mention; the flagon of “pure coin” is of beautiful design and workmanship, made by Thomas Nowlan, and with the goblets and tray made a most distinguished gift. However its value is immeasurably greater because of the touching and graceful inscription engraved upon the flagon.

“PRESENTED TO MRS. ROBERT T. BROWN, A MEMENTO OF THE SOLDIER’S GRATITUDE FOR WOMAN’S WELCOME DEC. 1859.” Around the base is inscribed,

Lt. Col. E. L. Brackett
Major Joseph J. Macklin
Captain Henry Stratton
Captain Joseph V. Scott
Lt. J. G. Traylor
Lt. C. E. Waddell
Lt. R. R. Bowden
George L. Simpson
R. L. Judkins
James E. Nash
R. R. Collier
J. S. Epes, M. D.
The following letter, which accompanied the gift of five officers of the Richmond Grays, shows their gallantry and courtesy so perfectly that it cannot be omitted.

Richmond, December 22, 1859

Dear Madam,

Recollecting with the liveliest gratitude the graceful and cordial hospitality extended to us beneath your roof, during our recent sojourn in Charlestown we beg you to accept the accompanying plate as expressing our appreciation of kindness so generously bestowed.

As soldiers it was a pleasing duty assigned us to march to the protection of your beautiful town against threatened violence, and be assured, should danger ever again menace your household, we should consider the obligation doubly sacred to guard it from the possibility of outrage.

We have returned from Charlestown, bringing with us memories of a charming and cultivated family which shall not soon be effaced, and we venture to hope that as often as you may use a piece of the service we now send you, it may be with a kindly remembrance of "The Grays."

With a "Merry Christmas" and our kindest regards to all within your family circle, we remain. Madam,

Very truly and gratefully yours,

Louis I. Bossieux
E. W. Branch
I. W. Valentine
James W. Pegrim
Edward M. Alfriend."
The gathering war clouds made the promise of protection no idle gallantry. Two years later the Grays and all the men of Virginia sprang to arms to protect their state from an invading army. As Charlestown was on the border-land, the opposing armies surged through its streets for four years and once it was set on fire in nearly a score of places by the Northern army. However the women and children, (the able-bodied men were in the Southern army) never waited long for succor, for the promise of protection was kept. At the sound of galloping horses the invaders would decamp without the formality of folding their tents.

Three quarters of a century,—and such a century! —, and two wars have blurred the memories of those far off days, yet there are many still living in Charlestown who remember with gratitude the story of how the men of Lower Virginia protected her in her hour of need, and they value as priceless the gifts of those men which they have inherited. Charlestown was torn from Virginia in war time by an unparralleled act of injustice when her citizens were disfranchised, and so cherishes all the more every tie that binds her to the Mother State. This little town can never forget the men of Lower Virginia who came to her rescue, and holds their gifts as priceless, a link with a past when Charles Town was a part of The Old Dominion.

Postscrips:

Since this sketch was written, twenty-five years have passed, and we have had a third war.

October 1959—This year marks the centennial of John Brown's Raid.