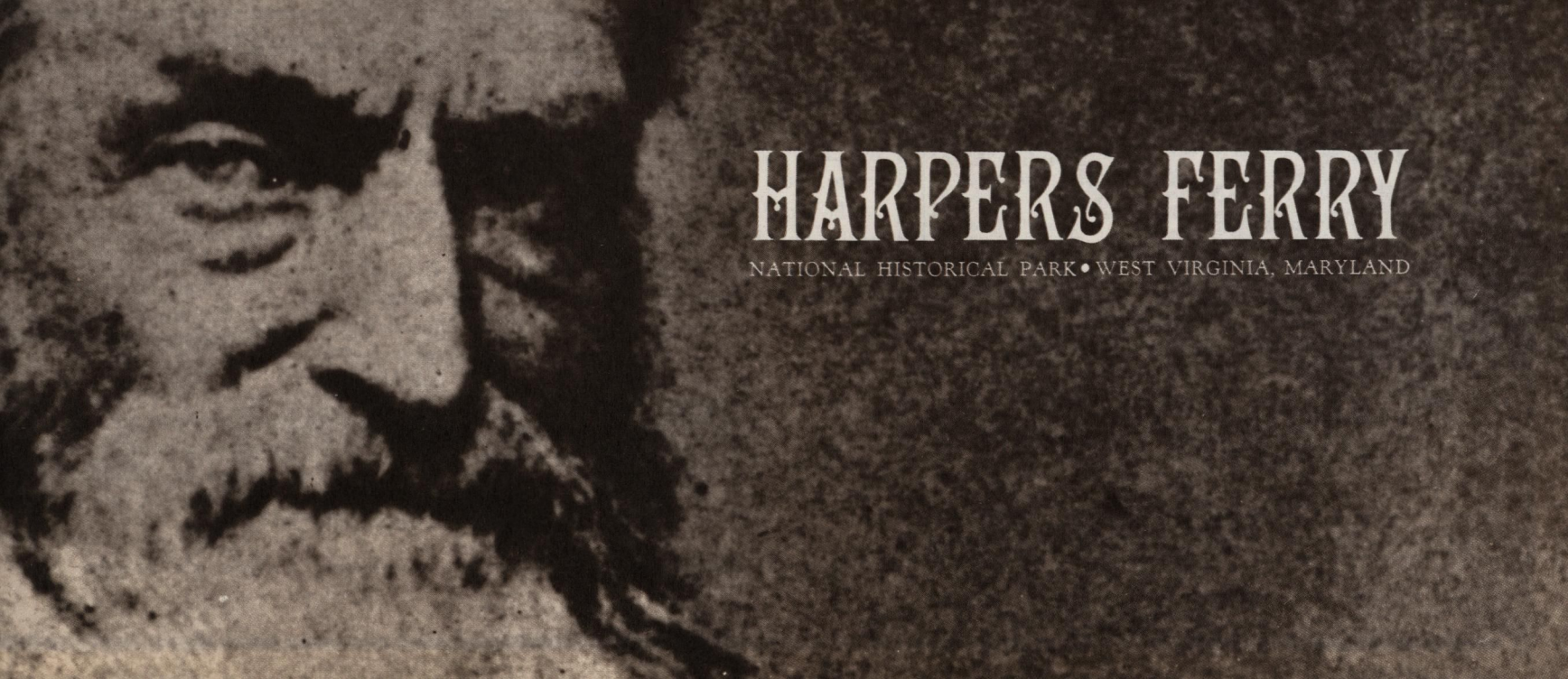

HARPERS FERRY

NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK • WEST VIRGINIA, MARYLAND

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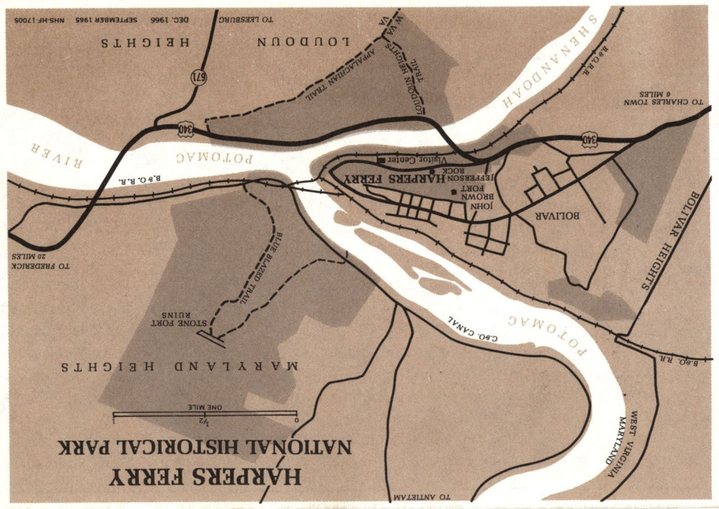

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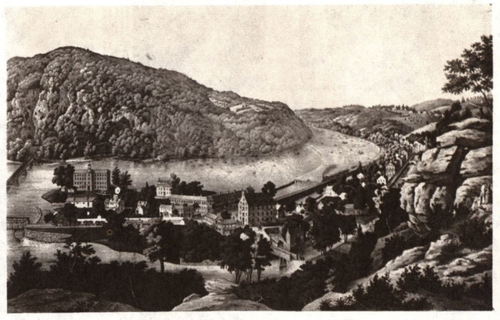

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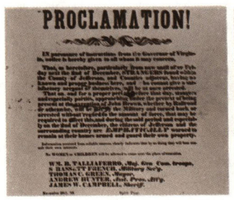

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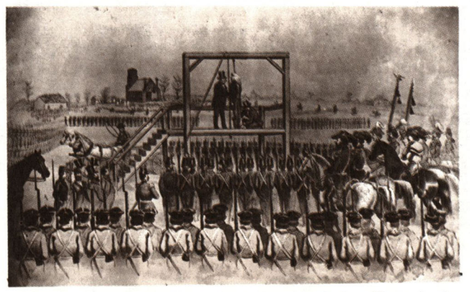

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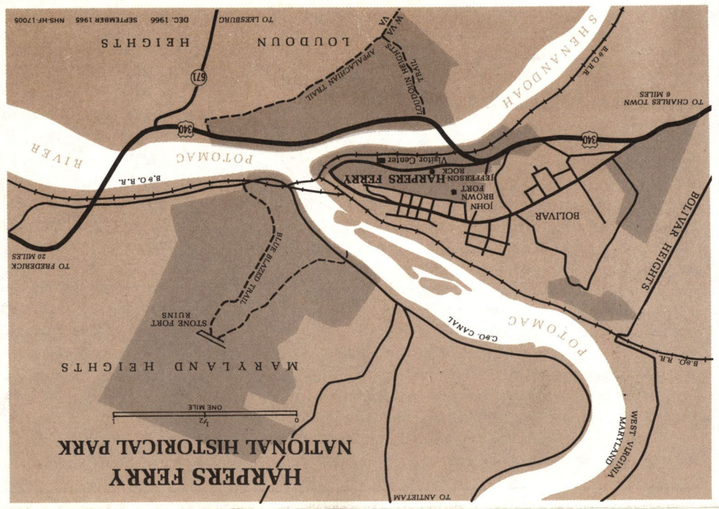

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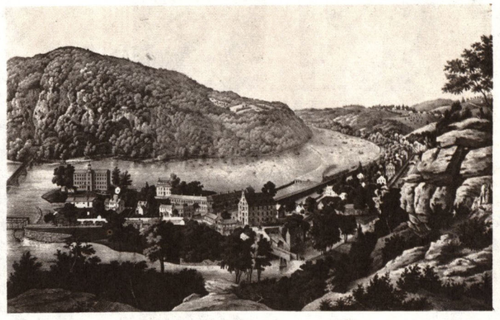

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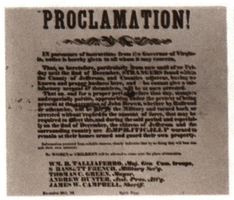

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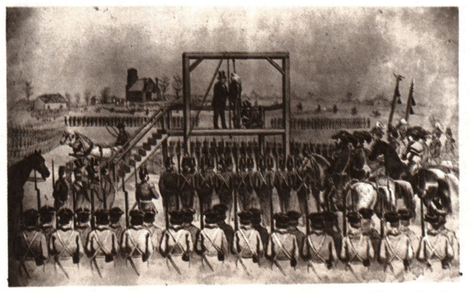

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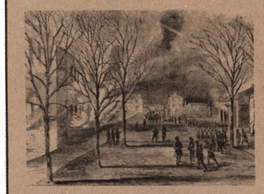
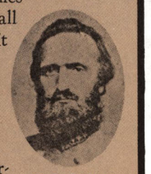
A STRATEGIC CROSSROADS, 1861-1865



Lt. Roger Jones, U.S. Army, burned the arsenals before evacuating the town in April 1861. Virginia militia fought the blaze with buckets of river water.

AT THE outset of the Civil War in April 1861, Virginia militia advanced on the town, eager to obtain the arms and machinery in the U.S. Armory. The handful of United States soldiers assigned to guard the Government property could not defend Harpers Ferry. But before they fled across the Potomac, they managed to fire the arsenal, destroying a stand of 15,000 muskets and rifles stored there. The Confederates salvaged all of the machinery possible and shipped it South—an important boost for the Confederacy's war effort. They then completed the destruction of the rifle and musket factories.

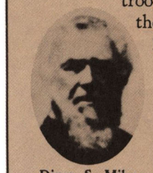


T. J. Jackson

In this early period of the war, Thomas J. Jackson, now a colonel, returned to Harpers Ferry to command a Confederate force for several weeks. On May 23, he seized 56 locomotives and more than 300 cars on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. Most of this equipment was taken to Martinsburg, only to be burned and destroyed the next month. Later, multihorse teams hauled 14 of the locomotives over the Valley Pike to Strasburg where they entered service in the South's straining railroad system.

Federal troops on review on Camp Hill in 1862. The building at top housed the armory superintendent.

The firebrands of war continued to sear once-peaceful Harpers Ferry. After Union troops removed a large supply of wheat from the flour mill on Virginius Island in autumn 1861, Confederate soldiers, dressed as civilians, crept into town under cover of darkness and burned the mill.



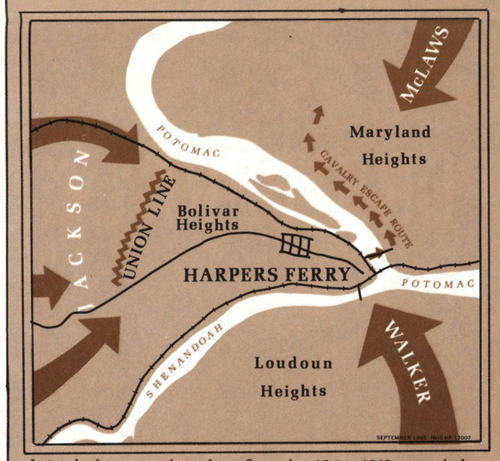
Dixon S. Miles

A few months later a sniper, firing from a building in the town, killed a Union scout. In retaliation, Union troops burned the entire "point" section of the waterfront.

The town was again caught between opposing armies in spring 1862 when "Stonewall" Jackson, as a climax to his brilliant Valley Campaign, threatened a northern invasion.

The Maryland Campaign. Immediately after the Battle of Second Manassas, Gen. Robert E. Lee led his victorious army across the Potomac into Maryland. Thus, in September 1862, began the first Confederate invasion of the North.

When he reached Frederick on his way toward Pennsylvania, Lee determined that he must secure his line of communications through the Shenandoah Valley by capturing the strong Union garrison at Harpers Ferry. To do this he evolved a daring plan: part of the army would swing southwest and attack Harpers Ferry; the remainder would press on toward Hagerstown. Success depended on the Confederates' ability to capture Harpers Ferry and reunite quickly. Delay would give Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan's Union army near Washington the opportunity to strike Lee's fragmented army and destroy it.



Jackson's three-pronged attack on September 12-15, 1862, trapped about 12,700 Federal troops under Col. Dixon S. Miles. Only 1,500 escaped.

The Confederates lagged behind Lee's timetable, and a fateful blunder threatened his plan.

On September 12 and 13, advance units of the pursuing Union army marched into Frederick, evacuated only hours before by the last Confederates. One of the Union soldiers, Pvt. B. W. Mitchell, was poking around his new bivouac where Confederates under Maj. Gen. D. H. Hill had been camped a few days previously. Mitchell discovered three cigars wrapped in a paper. The cigars were a good find. So was the paper. It was a stray copy of Lee's Special Order 191, and it gave every detail of the dangerous maneuver that had divided the Confederate army in the face of McClellan's rapidly advancing host.

Within the hour McClellan had the order. Immediately he saw the chance to destroy first one and then the other of the separated parts of Lee's army. McClellan's efforts to do this would lead to the Battle of Antietam at Sharpsburg, Md., on September 17.

The Confederates fired the B. & O. bridge before abandoning the town in June 1861.

Lee had sent three columns against Harpers Ferry: "Stonewall" Jackson approached Bolivar Heights from the west; Maj. Gen. Lafayette McLaws invested Maryland Heights from the north; and Brig. Gen. John G. Walker secured Loudoun Heights from the east. Thus, by September 13, Col. Dixon S. Miles, commanding the Harpers Ferry garrison, found himself surrounded by Confederates. Posted on dominating ground, they overlooked Union positions at Camp Hill and Bolivar Heights.

Miles and his men withstood Confederate artillery fire from the heights across the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers for 2 days, almost preventing Lee from reconcentrating his army. Although Union casualties were not heavy, Miles surrendered his garrison on the 15th, not knowing that if he had held out a little longer a rescue force would have arrived. A cannon shot mortally wounded Miles at the very end of the action.

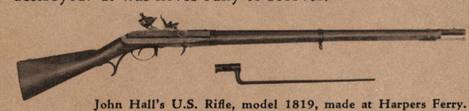
Approximately 12,700 men of the Harpers Ferry garrison were captured, the largest bag of Union prisoners during the war. Casualties included 44 killed and 173 wounded. Confederate casualties in the action were slightly higher, 39 killed and 247 wounded. A sidelight of the surrender was the desperate escape engineered by Col. B. P. Davis. The night before the surrender, he led a Union cavalry force of 1,500 over a pontoon bridge across the Potomac and made his way through the Confederate army into Pennsylvania.

Immediately after Miles capitulated, Jackson hurried off toward Sharpsburg to reinforce Lee. Maj. Gen. A. P. Hill stayed behind to arrange parole for the Union prisoners. Having quickly done that, Hill, in turn, rushed to Sharpsburg with his men and reached there at a critical moment in time to save Lee's army from disaster.

The Gettysburg Campaign. When Lee invaded the North a second time—in the 1863 campaign that led to Gettysburg—a Union garrison evacuated Harpers Ferry and the strong system of fortifications that had been built on Maryland Heights that year. The Confederates held Harpers Ferry briefly for the last time when Jubal A. Early raided Washington in the summer of 1864.

Yet once more, in late 1864 and early 1865, Harpers Ferry played an important military role. This time it served the Union as a supply base for Philip Sheridan's devasting campaign through the Shenandoah Valley.

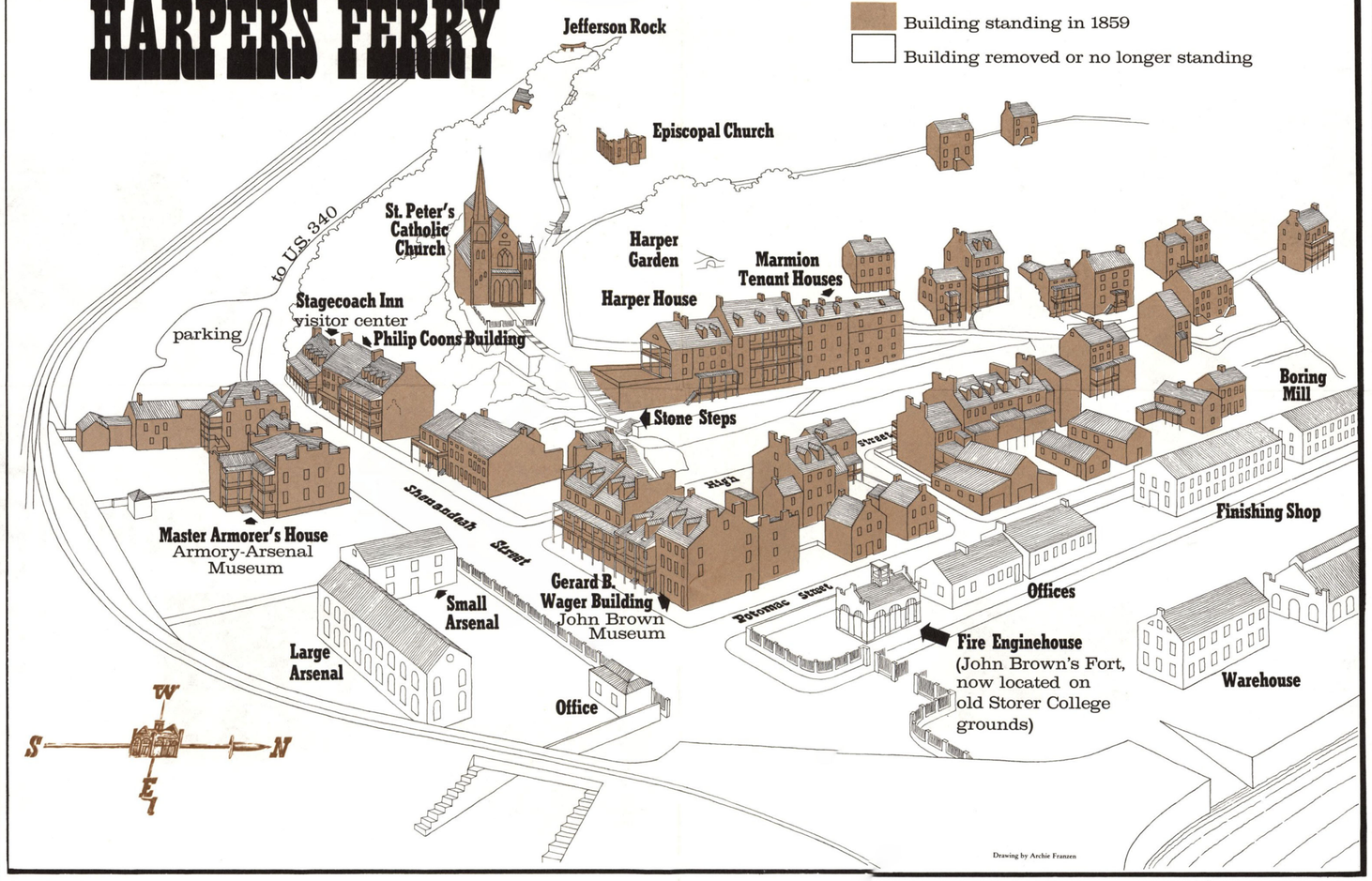
At the end of the war Harpers Ferry was a ghost town with mills, armory, arsenal, and many other buildings destroyed. It was never fully to recover.



John Hall's U.S. Rifle, model 1819, made at Harpers Ferry.

A VISITOR'S GUIDE TO

HARPERS FERRY

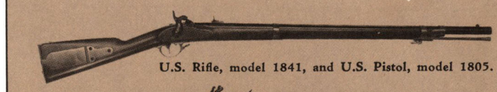


ROBERT HARPER'S FERRY

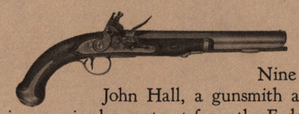
PETER STEPHENS, a trader, was the first settler at the site of the future Harpers Ferry. The date was 1733. Fourteen years later a millwright named Robert Harper purchased "Peter's Hole," as the place was called, and established a ferry. He saw the possibilities of waterpower and built a mill. Around these enterprises grew a small village that later adopted Harper's name.

During the Presidency of George Washington, Congress authorized establishment of a gun factory at Harpers Ferry. The President had often visited the place and thought it "the most eligible spot on the river" for a Federal armory. Its location promised waterpower, supplies of iron, hardwood forests for making charcoal to fuel the forges, and a watercourse on which to ship finished products to the future national capital in the District of Columbia. The gun factory completed its first arms in 1801 and was turning out 10,000 muskets a year by 1810.

Rushing waters and sharp hills: a bucolic view of Harpers Ferry in 1803. In the foreground is the U.S. Arsenal.



U.S. Rifle, model 1841, and U.S. Pistol, model 1805.



Nine years later, John Hall, a gunsmith and inventor from Maine, received a contract from the Federal Government to manufacture 1,000 unique, breech-loading flintlock rifles—Hall's own invention. These guns were made on so exact a scale that all the parts were interchangeable. This was the first completely successful application of the principle that led to modern mass production.

Two buildings on Virginius Island were assigned for Hall's use, and his rifle proved successful enough that the contract was repeatedly renewed and thousands were produced at Hall's Rifle Works in the ensuing years.

The fire enginehouse (seen at left) originally stood in the armory yard, amid shops and offices.

As one of the few water-level gateways through the Blue Ridge Mountains, Harpers Ferry gap early attracted the attention of transportation interests. The 1830's brought a spirited race between the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, being built from Washington, D.C., and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which started at Baltimore, Md. Their goal was Cumberland, Md., and after that the Ohio Valley. The canal reached Harpers Ferry in November 1833, more than a year ahead of its rival. But only the railroad pushed on to the Ohio Valley; the canal stopped at Cumberland.