



Thomas Jefferson wrote that this serene view was worth a trip across the Atlantic. During the Civil War, however, Harpers Ferry became one of the most turbulent settings in the nation. Photo by Steve Brightwell.

Harpers Ferry

The Power of Place

By Christine M. Kreiser

It's called The Point—the spit of land where the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers converge at Harpers Ferry, Jefferson County. An unremarkable geological feature that punches far above its weight in historical terms, it separates West Virginia from

Maryland and, for four bloody years, marked the boundary between the United States and the Confederate States of America.

Harpers Ferry sits just 247 feet above sea level, our state's lowest elevation. Three mountain peaks tower above

the town, creating a mini-canyon: Maryland Heights (across the Potomac), Loudoun Heights (across the Shenandoah), and Bolivar Heights (part of the same landmass as the town). Perhaps mini-canyon isn't the right description. It's more like

standing at the bottom of a beautiful bowl, with its sides decorated in lustrous shades of green (filled in with fiery shades of red and orange in the fall).

Harpers Ferry grew with the new federal government in the 1790s; George Washington selected the site for a national armory because of its “inexhaustible water supply.” The armory outfitted an early stage of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and perfected the process for manufacturing interchangeable parts. As canals and railroads made it easier to travel and transport goods through the region, the federal government greatly improved its armory and arsenal complex on the Potomac side of Harpers Ferry. On the Shenandoah side, a cotton mill, flour mill, sawmill, and carriage factory were just a few of the more than 40 commercial enterprises humming along in the mid-19th century.

Then came John Brown’s 1859 raid on the federal arsenal and his audacious dream of arming Southern slaves to crush the “peculiar institution.” Starting less than a year-and-a-half later, the Civil War turned the small but thriving industrial center into a ghost town, destroying homes, businesses, and the town’s economic driver: the armory and arsenal.

The rivers that attracted people to Harpers Ferry since well before recorded history

have been both promise and plague. Thomas Jefferson waxed poetic about their awesome power in his 1785 *Notes on the State of Virginia*: “On your right comes up the Shenandoah, having ranged along the foot of the mountain a hundred miles to seek a vent. On your left approaches the Patowmac [*sic*] in quest of a passage also. In the moment of their junction they rush together against the mountain, rend it asunder and pass off to the sea.”

A series of post-Civil War floods—in 1870, 1877, 1889, and 1896—inundated the town. A 1924 flood swept away a highway bridge across the Potomac and closed the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal (on the Maryland side of the Potomac) for good. The 1936 flood, with its record-setting crest of 36½ feet, more than 18 feet above flood stage, nearly obliterated the town in the midst of the Great Depression; six years later, in 1942, another flood reached within three feet of the 1936 crest, virtually destroying what’s known as the Lower Town.

Harpers Ferry seems to have nine lives, enduring the vagaries of politics, war, and even natural disaster. Why, after years of teetering on the precipice of oblivion, is it still here? Historian and preservationist Dennis Frye attributes its survival to the “power of place.”

“No book, no video, no game, no map, no movie can ever create the power of place,” says Dennis, who retired in May 2018 as chief historian of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. “When you stand on the ground where real history occurred, you feel it. The sole of your foot will connect with their souls, and you feel it within your own soul. That’s the power of place. That’s what inspires people to stand up and fight to preserve these locations.”

The park celebrates its 75th anniversary on June 30. Today, the park encompasses nearly 4,000 acres in West Virginia, Maryland, and Virginia, and visitors contribute to Jefferson County’s robust tourism industry, which brings in about \$900 million a year.

The park was created in 1944 as Harpers Ferry National Monument. Dennis says he’s amazed that just three weeks after the D-Day invasion of Europe, “We had so much faith in our future. We were so convinced that our democratic institutions and our Constitution and our nation would prevail that we created a national park that looked at our past to ensure its future.”

He credits the “real visionaries,” among them Dr. Henry McDonald and Congressman Jennings Randolph, for their tireless commitment. As president of Storer College—a historically



By the end of the Civil War, Harpers Ferry's once-thriving armory looked like ancient ruins, and 90% of its citizens had fled. Courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives (WVSA), Boyd B. Stutler Collection.

black college founded in Harpers Ferry in 1867 to train African-American teachers—McDonald organized local support. Randolph, representing West Virginia's 2nd Congressional District, lined up legislative allies and sponsored the 1944 bill, which President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law. In 1963, Harpers Ferry's designation was changed from a national monument to a national historical park.

It all could have ended so differently. Dennis cites a Works Progress Administration idea to dam the Potomac to supply ever-growing Washington,

D.C., with water. "A dam was proposed one mile downstream from here that would have placed virtually everything but the steeple of St. Peter's Catholic Church in a lake," he says. "We could have become an underwater archaeological preserve. But it would be hard to do John Brown's Raid in scuba gear."

The National Park Service initially focused its interpretation of Harpers Ferry around the years 1859-1865, but the emphasis was always on John Brown. "Almost never were the words 'Civil War' mentioned when people thought of Harpers Ferry,"

says Dennis. "That part of the history had been erased and forgotten. Confederate veterans had planted monuments, almost 30 of them, in locations around Jefferson County identifying areas that were important to the county's Civil War history. No one paid attention to them; no one gave them any regard. It's as if the history had just been erased."

The Battle of Harpers Ferry

Harpers Ferry saw five significant actions during the war, including the largest battle in what's now West Virginia. In September 1862, fresh from victory at the Battle of Second



During the 1862 battle, Union commander Dixon Miles made his last stand here on Bolivar Heights. His position became untenable after being surrounded by Confederates on Maryland Heights (far left), Loudoun Heights (far right), and Schoolhouse Ridge (to the rear). Courtesy of the National Park Service.

Manassas (Bull Run), Gen. Robert E. Lee planned to take the war north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

He divided his Army of Northern Virginia into four columns, sending three of them to surround Harpers Ferry. Union commander Col. Dixon Miles placed the bulk of his artillery on Bolivar Heights—the lowest of the three peaks encircling the town—and stationed other troops at an even lower elevation known as Camp Hill, rather than seize a more defensible position on Maryland Heights. When Confederate commander Gen. Stonewall Jackson arrived, he dispatched his 30,000 battle-

tested men to take Maryland Heights, Loudoun Heights, and Schoolhouse Ridge—just west of Bolivar Heights—encircling the Federals' 12,000 raw recruits. On September 15, after a prolonged Confederate artillery barrage, Miles surrendered, but slightly too late for his own sake. Just after the white flag was raised, Miles' life was cut short by an exploding shell.

It was the largest surrender of a U.S. army during the entire Civil War and still ranks as the third largest in history, behind only Bataan and Corregidor in World War II. Jackson's victory allowed Lee to take a stand two days later behind Antietam Creek,

near Sharpsburg, Maryland. The Battle of Antietam, which likely wouldn't have happened without the capture of Harpers Ferry, would become the bloodiest single day on record in North America.

Saving the Battlefield

Despite the Battle of Harpers Ferry's importance, it's always been overshadowed by Antietam. As such, Antietam became one of America's better-preserved battlefields, while Harpers Ferry, and other key battle sites in the area, were all but forgotten. Making it worse from a preservation standpoint, key parts of the Harpers Ferry battlefield

weren't inside the park's boundaries, and in the go-go 1980s, people who worked in Baltimore and Washington, D.C., began pouring in to live in the Eastern Panhandle. The pressure to develop land in Jefferson County was intense.

But Harpers Ferry had a couple of aces up its sleeve. Just about the time Jefferson County was becoming a bedroom community for D.C.-Baltimore metro workers, private developers launched plans to build a massive shopping mall adjacent to Manassas National Battlefield Park, near Washington. Much of the public, including many who wouldn't be considered preservationists, saw this as a step too far. The project grabbed national headlines, and an acrimonious "Don't Mall the Battlefield" campaign eventually landed in Congress, which derailed the development in 1988. The threat to Manassas, and the daily loss of other historic sites, caught the attention of a powerful ally, Senator Robert C. Byrd, who obtained funding to study historic sites outside Harpers Ferry's park boundaries.

The senator, says Dennis, understood the significance of the battlefields and wanted the land to be part of the park. But "he wanted us to ensure that we had the support of local county government, local county business, and local citizens." On a cold



After Robert E. Lee's Maryland Campaign, Northern forces retook Harpers Ferry. Here, troops are lined up on Camp Hill. The Methodist church in the distance is still standing, scarred by shell marks from the 1862 battle. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

night in December 1988, park Superintendent Don Campbell and Dennis organized a meeting with the Jefferson County Commission and other elected officials. The meeting included a field trip to the only part of the battlefield that was then on public property—Shipley Elementary School on Schoolhouse Ridge, the low-lying crest where Jackson completed his entrapment of Dixon.

Dennis found himself in a van with all five of the county commissioners, who unanimously opposed expanding the park boundaries to include the battle sites. "As we were pulling into the Shipley school parking lot, I pointed out to them the Confederate monument placed on that property in 1912 on Schoolhouse Ridge to

indicate Stonewall Jackson's positions. I said, 'You've seen monuments like this throughout Jefferson County. They're everywhere. Here's the one that deals with this battle. This ridgetop was Stonewall Jackson's line.'"

The history lesson was met with stony silence. But when they all got out of the van, Dennis was suddenly surrounded. "The president of the county commission at that time, Charlie Clendening, brings his finger almost to my nose, not quite touching it. He's taller than I am. He's looking down on me and he says—and this is an exact quote—'Nothing happened here. Do you understand me? Nothing happened here, *boy*.' That's where we started. That was my baseline. Nothing happened here."

For decades, longtime Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Historian Dennis Frye (now retired) has helped drive a public-private effort to preserve more battle sites in the area. Photo by our author.



From that inauspicious beginning, Dennis embarked on a crusade (his term) to spread the word about Harpers Ferry in the Civil War. By May 1989, the National Park Service had set up the Schoolhouse Ridge Educational Program. “We had every fourth and fifth grader in the county bused to Schoolhouse Ridge, and the Park Service presented program after program to the kids,” Dennis explains. “We fired the artillery. We did infantry maneuvers. It was very popular. . . . Every group showed up with their own battle flag. . . . They took ownership in the program. There was an excitement because this had never been offered before, and it was in their county, their home.”

Dennis Frye has three books detailing Lee’s Maryland Campaign, including the battles of Harpers Ferry and Antietam. In his most recent work, *Antietam Shadows: Mystery, Myth & Machination*, Dennis tears down some of the legends about the campaign (many perpetuated by Civil War historians). He even gives some due to much-maligned Union Gen. George McClellan (while still comparing “Little Mac” to Linus with his security blanket). In this excerpt, Dennis explains the Battle of Harpers Ferry’s significance:



“For General Lee, the Federal force at Harpers Ferry was not inconvenient—it was dangerous. It presented a serious obstacle, not before him, but from behind. Worst case scenarios disquieted Lee’s mind. The Harpers Ferry garrison could interfere with, or even interrupt, his supply and communications lines to and from Virginia. . . . Most troubling, perhaps, was the prospect of the Harpers Ferry contingent following Lee northward, pestering him habitually like a swarm of mosquitoes.”

The momentum started to build for Jefferson County's history, and so did the pressure to develop the area. As more and more people fled the higher cost of living in neighboring Maryland and Virginia, the county's population nearly doubled between 1970 and 2000. In 2003, Senator Byrd introduced legislation to expand the park boundaries—provided the county commission supported the plan. Fifteen years after the commissioners had declared Schoolhouse Ridge a historical nonentity, a remarkable thing happened. "The Jefferson County Commission in 2003 voted unanimously in favor of battlefield expansion," says Dennis. "That is the power of education. It's one of the greatest [preservation] success stories in United States history. We utilized the educational system and kids to change attitudes ultimately from one extreme to the other."

It was another battle won, but the preservation war wasn't over. In 2006, a developer proposed 2.3 million square feet of commercial development on 400 acres of battlefield land on Bolivar Heights—an area left out of the recent boundary expansion. To put that figure into perspective, Dennis contacted Walmart headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas, and asked about the size of Walmart Supercenters. The answer was 160,000 square feet. The prospect of a commercial footprint the size

John Brown's Fort

Dennis Frye deserves the lion's share of credit for helping preserve the Harpers Ferry Battlefield. He worked tirelessly to save key sites, although he'll be the first to tell you that a lot of work remains. After retiring in 2018, he still has one major preservation regret. John Brown's Fort, where the abolitionist and his men staged their final stand and were captured in 1859, is in the wrong location. After the Civil War, the building—originally the armory engine house—fell into disrepair. In 1891, an investor bought it for display at the 1894 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Then, journalist Kate Field started a campaign that brought it

to the Murphy Farm on the outskirts of Harpers Ferry; the farm also had played a key role in the battle. In 1909, Storer College acquired the fort and relocated it to the school's campus because John Brown was, and still is, an inspirational figure to many African-Americans. In 1968, the building was moved back to its original site—or at least as close as the Park Service could get to it. The actual historical site is under a railroad embankment built in the 1890s and now owned by the Park Service. So, John Brown's Fort is within sight of its original location but off by about 100 feet. —Christine M. Kreiser

of more than 14 Super Walmarts on the site where Union troops made their final stand against Stonewall Jackson pushed preservationists into action.

It was, Dennis says, "a collective of public-private partners. The public sector is the National Park Service. The private partners are a multitude of preservation organizations and citizens. National organizations, regional organizations, local organizations, and hundreds and hundreds of citizens all combined to raise our voices against this development and to defeat it. It was a very arduous and brutal

struggle. Ultimately, the economic crash of 2008 bankrupted the developers. . . . We had in the meantime won numerous administrative and legal actions against them, which bought us time." A local developer with an interest in the battlefield eventually purchased and placed perpetual easements on the property to ensure its preservation.

Apart from the battle sites, Harpers Ferry's very location makes it unique. "Harpers Ferry is not a day in the life of the American Civil War," says Dennis. "Antietam is one day of the Civil War. Gettysburg



Abolitionist John Brown and his men were captured in this building, the former armory engine house. John Brown's Fort has been moved several times and hasn't been on its original location since the 1890s. Photo by our author.

is three days of battle and one day of Abraham Lincoln and his famous address. Harpers Ferry is 1,400 consecutive days of the Civil War. You could not escape the war any day because of Harpers Ferry's location on the border. Most of the town will be destroyed. Virtually all of the industry will be wiped out. And 90% of the town's citizens will move out."

But the power of place kept drawing people back, people who collaborated on ways to protect this resource. "I'll be absolutely adamant," says Dennis. "The National Park Service by itself never would have succeeded in any preservation here. This is an example of national, regional, and local support. It goes back to the grassroots development of a preservation ethic. People

say, 'We must protect it because that is our story. That's *my* story.'" 🍁

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