

At Harper's Ferry

About five miles north of Harper's Ferry, on the Maryland side of the Potomac River, lay the Kennedy farm which John Brown and his sons Oliver and Watson, assuming the name of Smith, had rented in July, 1859. The "improvements" consisted of a large, two-story log cabin and another small log building capable of housing a number of men. A dense forest surrounded the place and the road which ran past was rarely travelled. To this secluded spot large stores of arms and ammunition were secretly brought from Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, and during the course of the summer Brown's "provisional army" quietly gathered by ones and twos.

The Kennedy Farm—Arsenal and Mountain Hideout

Harper's Weekly

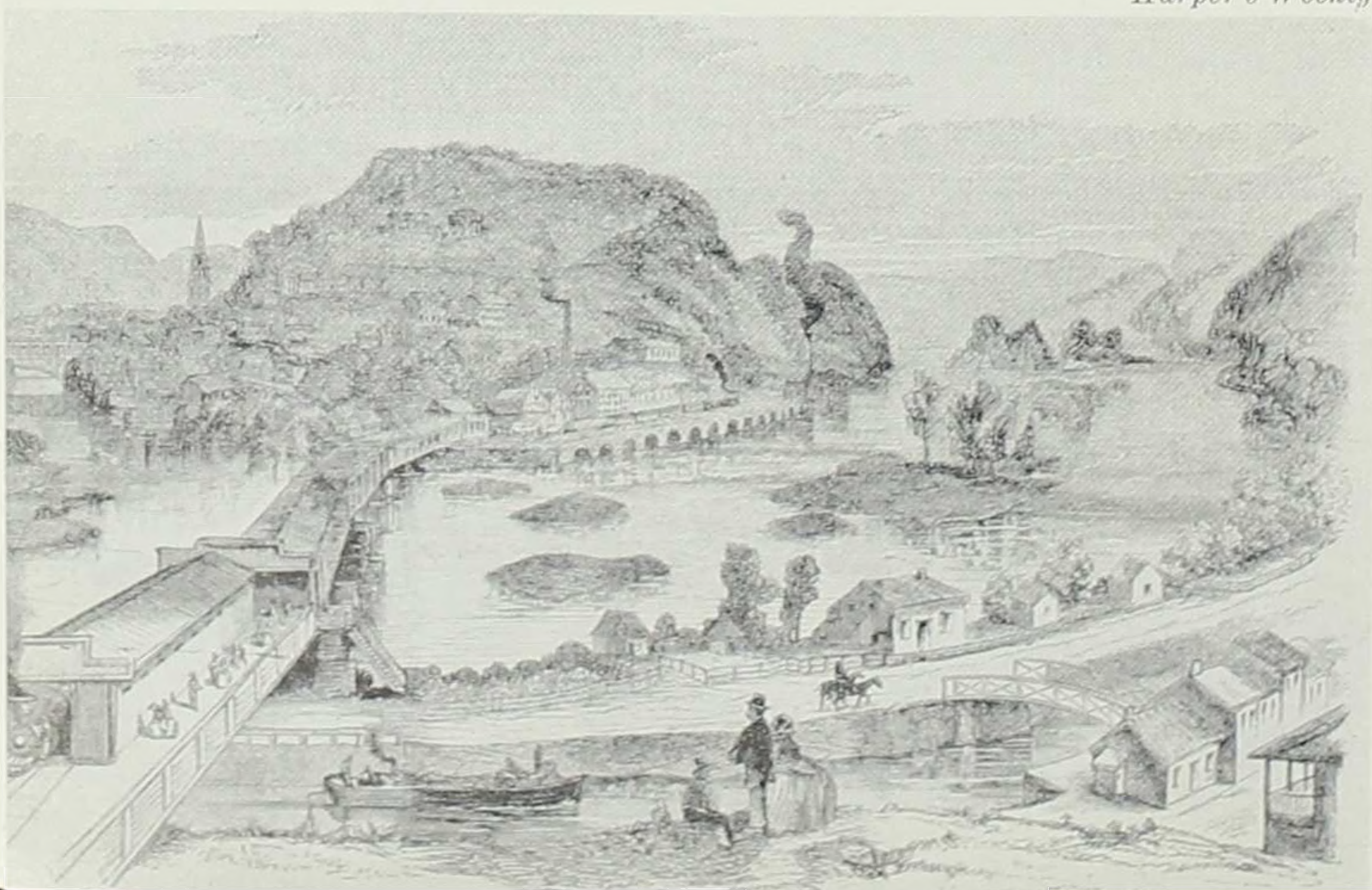


Toward this rendezvous the Coppoc boys made their way from Ohio, and were classed as "regular boarders" sometime during the first week in August. Life at the Kennedy farm was serene and pastoral, filled with discussions of religion and politics, games of checkers, and spirited "sings" of favorite hymns. John Brown often read the Bible to the company, sitting on a three-legged stool in the corner.

But beneath this outward appearance of contentment ran a feeling of impatience. The men were abolitionists gathered to strike the "shackles of bondage" from the black man. As August passed, and then September, they grew more and more intolerant of delay. Would the time for action never come? The early days of October dragged by with leaden feet while, under the authority of the "Provisional Constitution" adopted a year before, the men were formed into a little

Harper's Ferry—Looking across Potomac from Maryland

Harper's Weekly

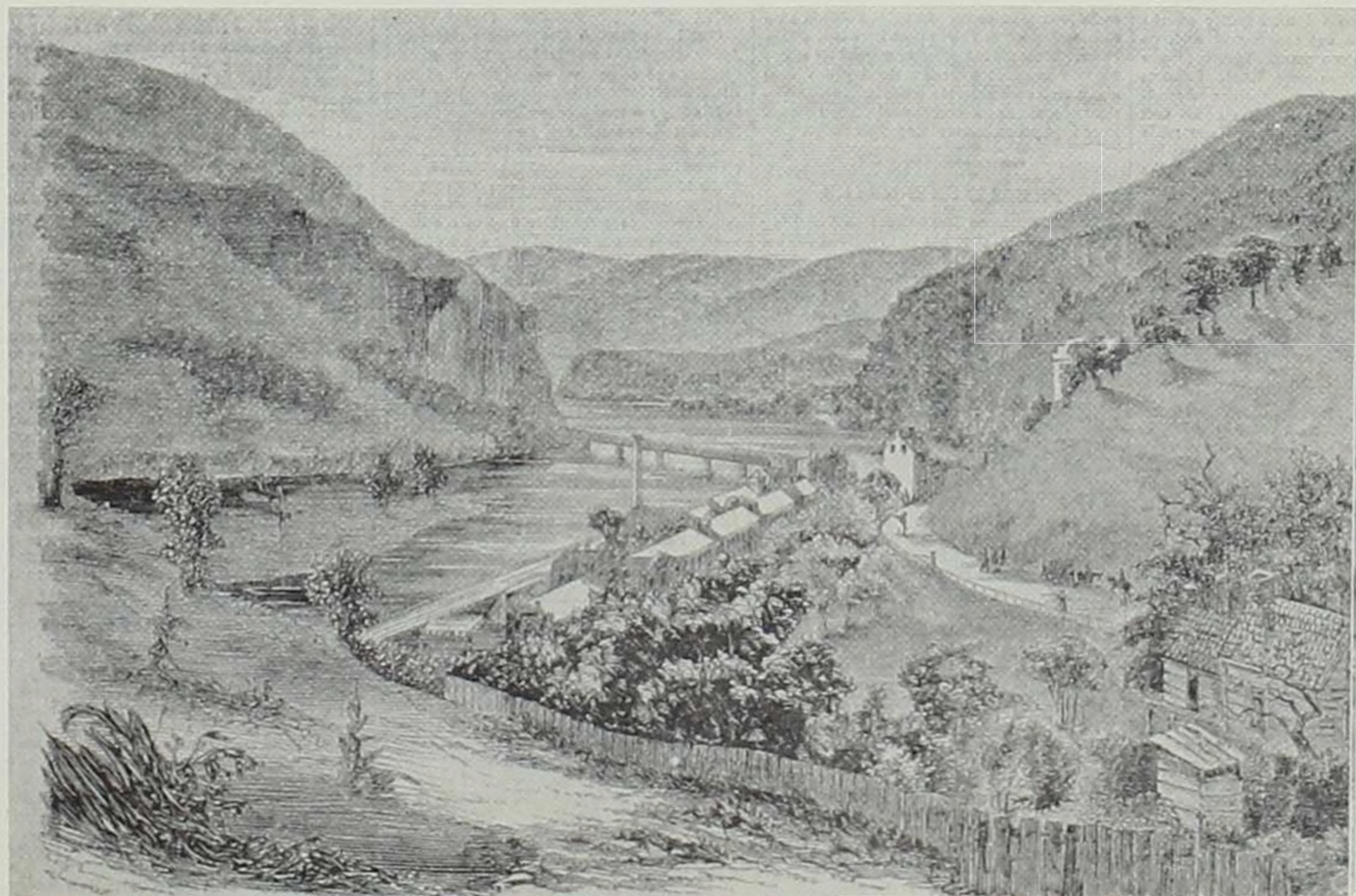


army, and most of them given commissions. John Brown was of course the "commander-in-chief" and Edwin Coppoc was made a "lieutenant." It did not seem odd at the time that the officers had no men to command. That detail would be taken care of later when slaves and sympathetic white men flocked to their standard in this modern crusade.

For many years John Brown had cherished the idea of abolishing slavery by making it "insecure" in the South through a predatory war in the States of Virginia, Tennessee, and Alabama. He looked upon Harper's Ferry as the strategic point at which to begin his operations. The reasons for this were three: the surrounding country had a large slave population; the wilderness of the Blue Ridge Mountains close at hand would offer comparative safety from pursuit; and the United States arsenal at the Ferry would furnish guns

Harper's Ferry—Looking down the Potomac Valley from Virginia side

Harper's Weekly



and ammunition which could be put to good use by the insurrectionists.

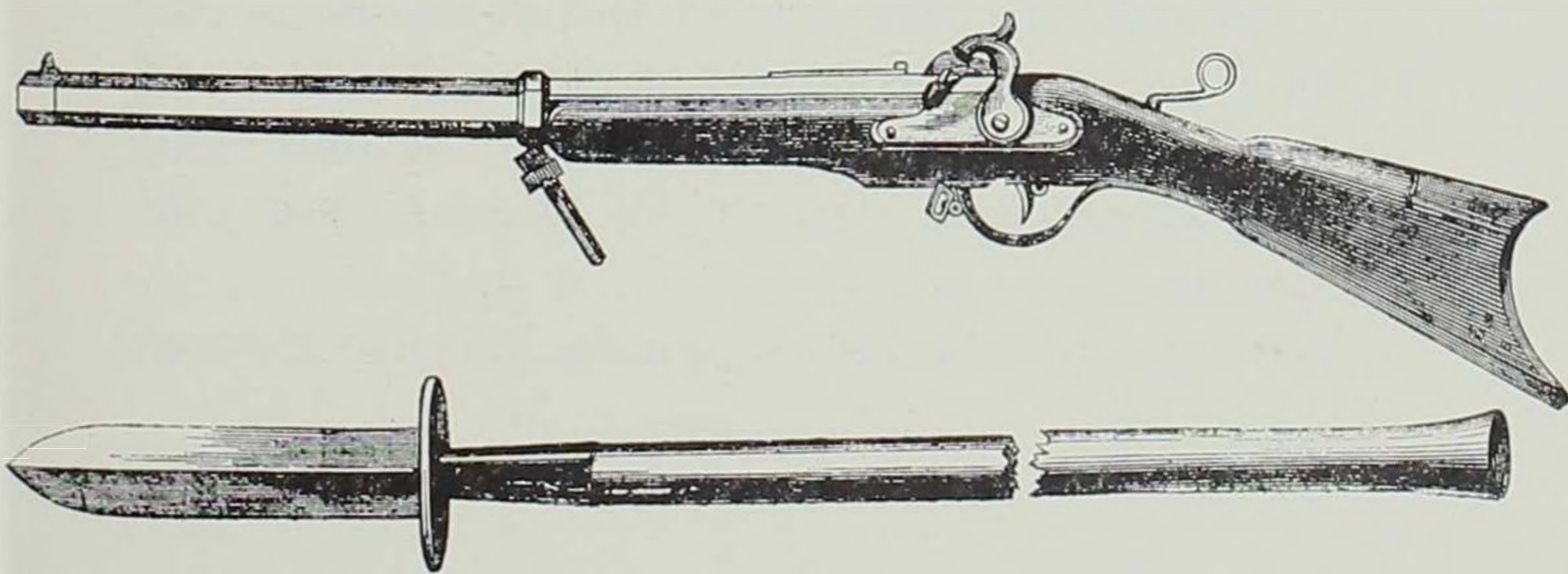
At this time Harper's Ferry was a town of about thirteen hundred inhabitants, situated on a high promontory at the juncture of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers, in a gap of the shaggy Blue Ridge Mountains, scarcely sixty miles from Washington and not over one hundred and seventy miles from Richmond. From the Maryland side of the Potomac River the arsenal and government buildings at the edge of town were in plain view. A combination railroad and wagon bridge afforded ready access from across the Potomac while a suspension bridge spanned the Shenandoah. Here was the Thermopylae of Virginia.

At last, on Sunday night, October 16, 1859, Brown said to his followers, "Come, men, get on your arms; we will proceed to the Ferry." The long-awaited time for action had come! Not a moment should be lost, for there was a rumor abroad that a search warrant had been issued for the Kennedy farm. Twenty-two men, five of them negroes, answered roll call on that Sunday evening. Of this number, Edwin Coppoc, Barclay Coppoc, Steward Taylor, Jeremiah G. Anderson, George B. Gill, and Charles W. Moffat were Iowans.

Owen Brown, Francis J. Merriam, and Barclay Coppoc were left at the farm as guards, while two others were stationed with supplies at a

schoolhouse about a mile and a half from the Ferry. The remaining number marched on toward the arsenal, taking with them a one-horse wagon containing pikes and other arms. The night was cold and dark. They moved forward stealthily and in silence, making numerous halts while one or two of the party scouted around each turn in the road to see that the way was clear.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when they crossed the Potomac and entered the town. John E. Cook and Charles P. Tidd cut the telegraph wires, while two more of the party were left to guard the bridge. The rest of the company proceeded with Brown to the gate of the United States armory which was not more than sixty yards away. The guard there did not comply with their orders to open the gate, so they forced their way in with a crowbar. In compliance with previous orders Edwin Coppoc and Albert Hazlett broke into the arsenal which was across the street outside of the armory enclosure, Oliver Brown and William Thompson occupied the Shenandoah bridge, and two more of the men took possession of the gov-



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Musket and Pike used by Brown's Men

ernment rifle works half a mile up the Shenandoah. By midnight all of the vantage points were in the hands of the raiders, while the sleeping town was unaware of any disturbance, so quietly had the coup been accomplished.

Brown's next step was to dispatch Cook, Stephens, and four other men into the country to seize Lewis W. Washington and two or three other prominent citizens, with as many of their slaves as could be found, and bring them to the Ferry as hostages. It was hoped that the negroes would join the insurrection. Colonel Washington was captured principally for the moral effect of having a prisoner of that name. The sword which had been presented to George Washington by Frederick the Great was also taken so that John Brown might be armed with that historic weapon in this new struggle for human liberty.

Soon after daylight people began to appear on the streets, going about their business in the lower part of town near the government buildings. Most of them were summarily taken prisoners, and by seven o'clock there were thirty or forty confined in a building in the armory yard. Those who escaped quickly spread the news of the attack. An east-bound passenger train was allowed to proceed after being detained several hours and so the alarm was carried to Washington and Baltimore.

Within a few hours the whole countryside was

aroused. Armed with whatever weapons they could find, the citizens hurried to the scene of conflict. Toward the middle of the forenoon two militia companies arrived from neighboring towns, but the desultory firing of Brown's men stationed at strategic points kept the citizens at bay and gave the impression that the government buildings were held by a large force. Militiamen were sent across the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers where they could command the two bridges and return the fire of the raiders. By the middle of the morning Brown's men had been driven from both bridges and thus retreat to the mountains was cut off. Harper's Ferry had become a trap and all but five of Brown's band — Owen Brown, Barclay Coppoc, and Merriam, who had been left at the Kennedy farm, and Cook and Tidd, who had been sent to the schoolhouse for more arms and ammunition — were in it.

Early in the afternoon there was lively skirmishing in all directions. Citizens and militiamen occupied every vantage spot from which they could get a shot at the insurgents. One of the Potomac bridge guards was captured; Newby, a negro, was killed in the street beside Edwin Coppoc while they were running to the aid of some of their friends who were surrounded by the enemy; Watson Brown, Stephens, and Oliver Brown were wounded; Kagi and his party routed out of the rifle works, where all of them but one negro

lost their lives in the river; a group of Virginians in a house overlooking the armory yard opened fire and drove the men from their posts to the shelter of the engine-house; and finally the upper end of the armory grounds was taken and most of the prisoners released. Though the bullets rained about him, Edwin Coppoc was unharmed.

The sturdy, brick engine-house was the scene of Brown's last stand. He barricaded the door, knocked loopholes in the walls, and opened fire upon every one who came within range. The defense was gallant, but the men were literally trapped. By evening only six of the little band remained, and two of them were wounded.

After dusk a detachment of United States marines arrived and Colonel Robert E. Lee took command. Fear of injuring the "hostages" prevented an attack that night, but early Tuesday morning Brown was summoned to surrender with a guarantee of protection awaiting the orders of the President. In reply he demanded the privilege of withdrawing to Maryland unmolested. There was a curt refusal, and the assault upon the engine-house began.

Just before this encounter Robert E. Lee narrowly escaped death at the hands of Edwin Coppoc. A captive in the engine-house, Jesse W. Graham, relates:

Early on Tuesday morning, I peeped out of a hole and saw Colonel Lee, whom I had seen before at the Ferry,

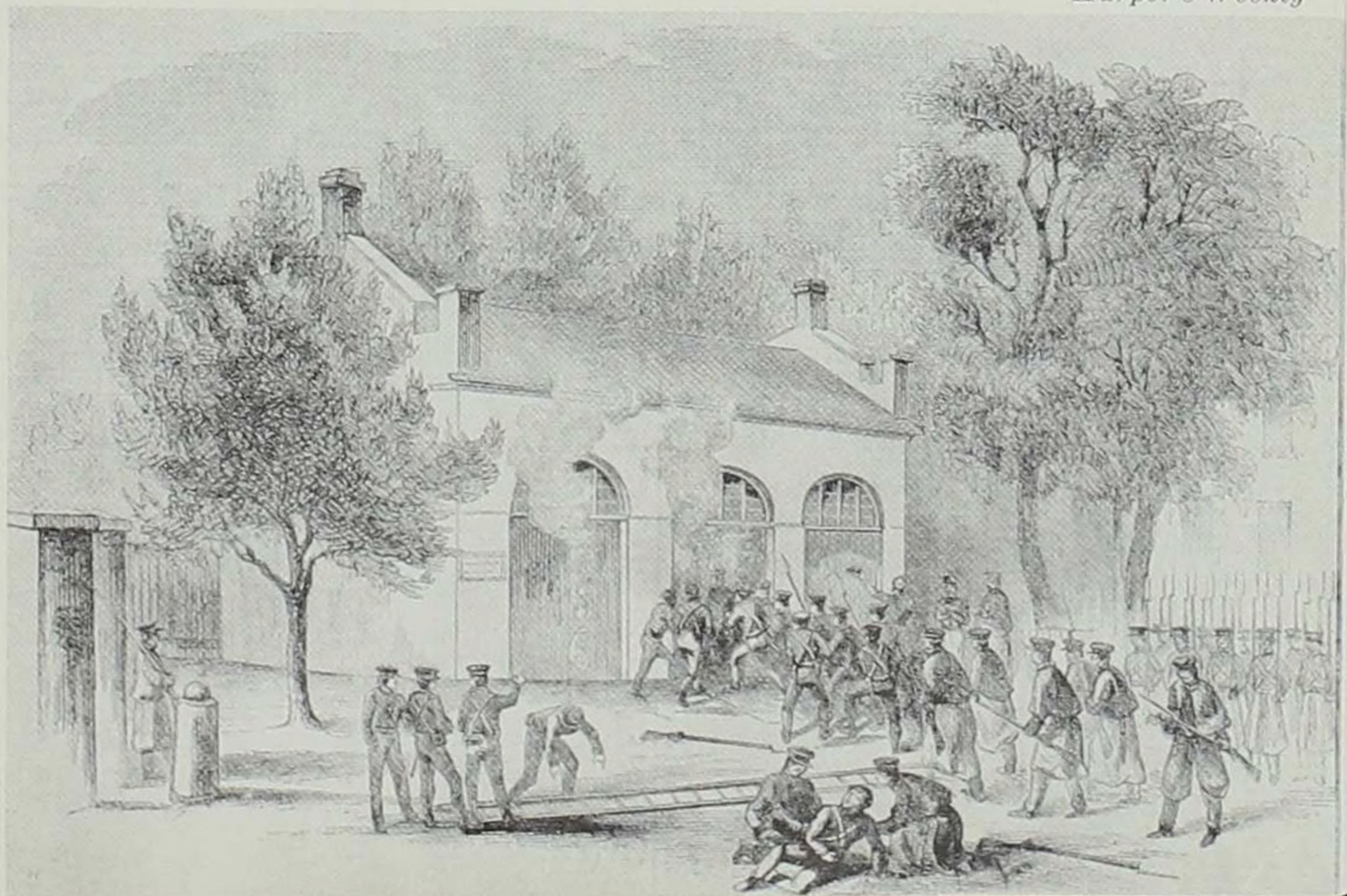
standing close by with the troops behind him. Just then Edwin Coppoc pushed me aside, and thrust the muzzle of his gun into the hole, drawing a bead on Lee. I interposed, putting my hand on the rifle and begging the man not to shoot, as that was Colonel Lee, of the United States army, and if he were hurt the building would be torn down and they'd all be killed. During the momentary altercation, Lee stepped aside, and thus his life was saved.

The final combat lasted but a few minutes. Upon a given signal a picked squad of marines battered down the doors of the engine-house and plunged into the room. There was a volley from within and two soldiers fell, but the rest pressed forward. John Brown was cut down by the savage thrusts of the marine lieutenant's sword, Anderson and Thompson were bayoneted, and the others were quickly overpowered.

According to Edwin Coppoc, both Anderson and Thompson "had surrendered after the first charge, which was repulsed, but, owing to the

Robert E. Lee leads U.S. Marine Attack Against Brick Engine House

Harper's Weekly



noise and confusion, they were not heard. Captain Brown and I were the only ones that fought to the last. The negro Green, after I had stationed him behind one of the engines, the safest place in the house, laid down his rifle and pulled off his cartridge-box, and passed himself off for one of the prisoners. He and I were the only ones not wounded."

After the fight, John Brown was taken to a room in an adjoining building while Coppoc, Watson Brown, and Green were confined in the watch-house at the armory. There they remained until noon on Wednesday before being taken to the jail in Charlestown, Virginia. One of the first newspaper reporters to arrive at the Ferry was astonished at the youthful appearance and open countenance of Coppoc.

"My God, boy, what are you doing at a place like this?" he asked.

"I believe in the principles that we are trying to advance," Edwin replied coolly, "and I have no apologies for being here. I think it is a good place to be."

Governor Henry A. Wise of Virginia, who was on the train that conveyed the prisoners to Charlestown, was also impressed with the boy's courage and candor.

"You look like too honest a man to be found with a band of robbers," he observed, addressing Coppoc.

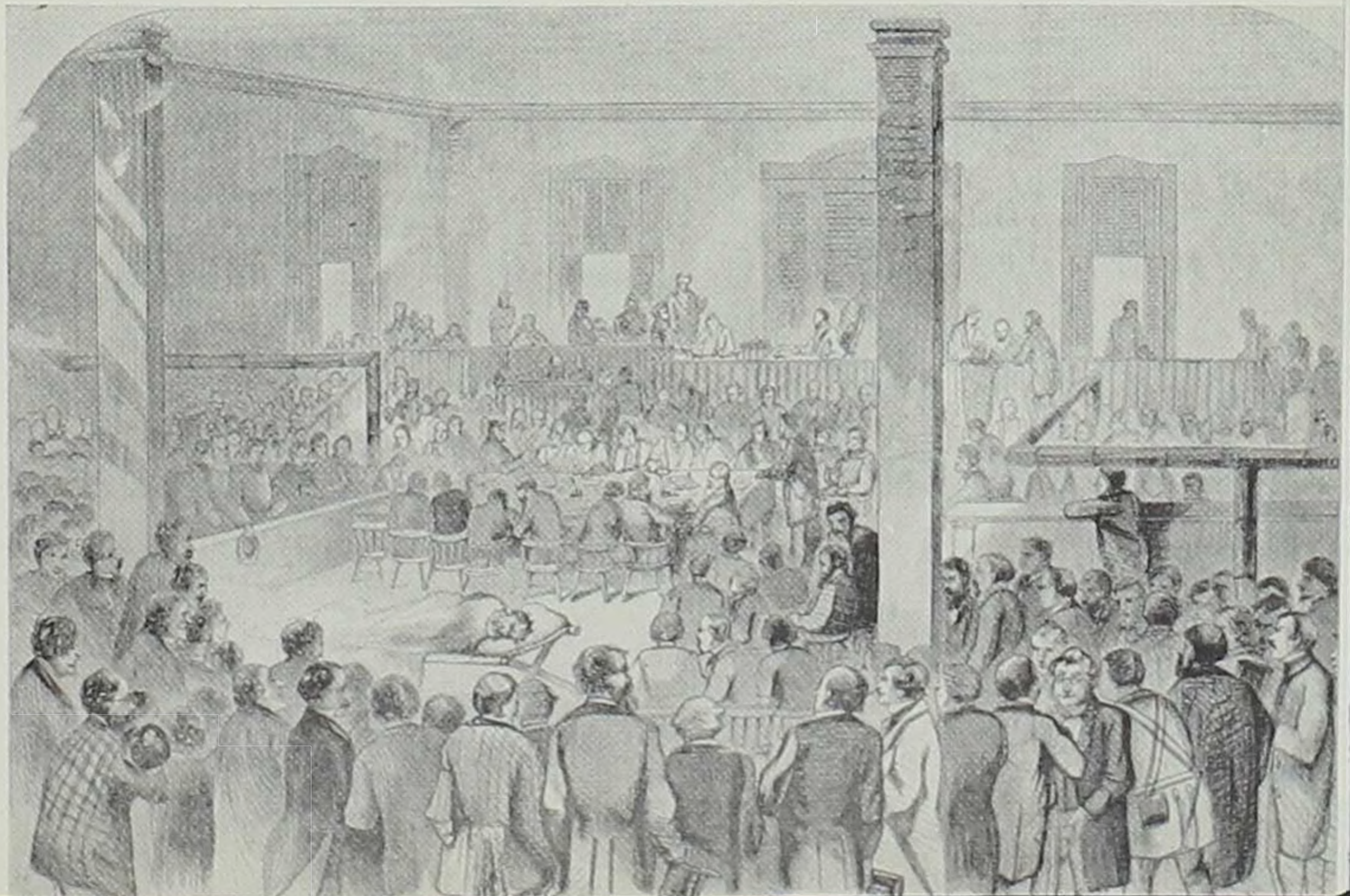
"But Governor," retorted Coppoc, "we look upon you as the robbers."

The judicial machinery of Virginia moved swiftly. Just nine days from the time he was captured, Edwin Coppoc was brought into court for arraignment, chained to his old leader. His trial, which followed immediately after the conviction of John Brown, began on the afternoon of November 1st and ended the next day with the sentence that he should be hanged on December 16th. When asked if he had anything to say why sentence should not be pronounced, Edwin Coppoc calmly declared:

The charges that have been made against me are not true. I never committed any treason against the State of Virginia. I never made war upon it. I never conspired with anybody to induce your slaves to rebel and I never even exchanged a word with any of your servants. What I came here for I always told you. It was to run off slaves to a free State and liberate them. This is an offense

The Trial of John Brown—Brown Lies on Cot in Courtroom

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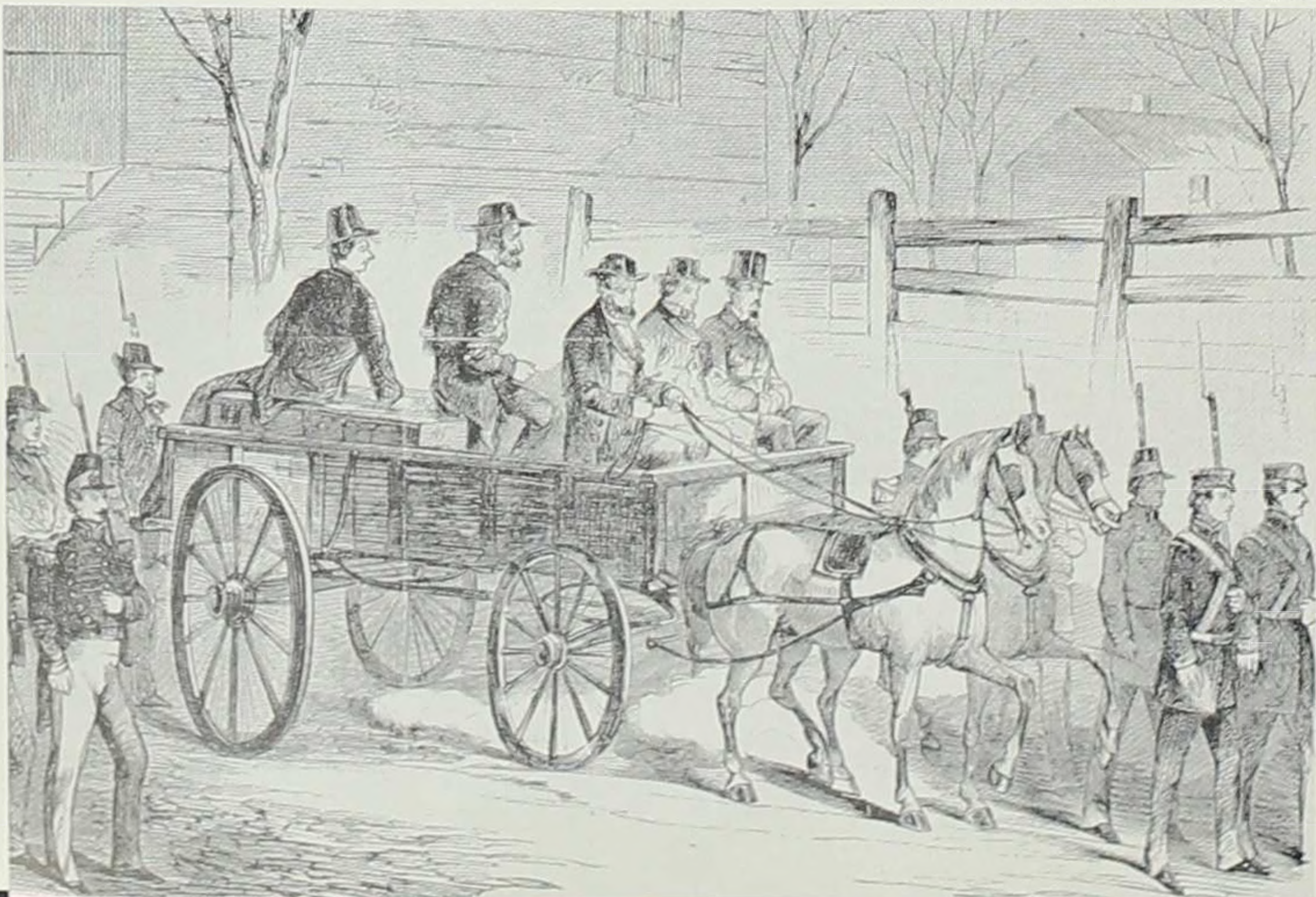
against your laws, I admit, but I never committed murder. When I escaped to the engine-house and found the captain and his prisoners surrounded there, I saw no way of deliverance but by fighting a little. If any one was killed on that occasion it was in a fair fight. I have, as I said, committed an offense against your laws, but the punishment for that offense would be very different from what you are going to inflict now. I have no more to say.

When the doors of the prison had closed upon him there were doubtless many dreary hours for pondering and regret. Young blood coursed through his veins and he found that it was going to be hard to give up life, even for a noble cause. There were periods of sadness when he reflected upon the way he had violated the faith of his childhood and borne arms against his fellowmen. In one of these moods he wrote to his mother:

It is with much sorrow that I now address you, and under very different circumstances than I ever expected to be placed, but I have seen my folly too late and must

John Brown Rides to Execution Sitting on His Coffin

Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper



now suffer the consequences, which I suppose will be death, but which I shall try and bear as every man should; though it would be a source of much comfort to me to have died at home.

Yet he could not refrain from trying to justify himself in her opinion.

I hope you will not reflect on me for what I have done, for I am not at fault, at least my conscience tells me so, and there are others that feel as I do. . . . Our leader would not surrender and there seemed to be no other resort than to fight, though I am happy to say that no one fell by my hand, and am sorry to say that I was ever induced to raise a gun.

At the end of his letter there was a touch of boyish homesickness when he asked for some sweet cakes from home. "We get plenty to eat here, but *it is not from home*. It is not baked by the hands of those we love at home, or by those whom I never expect to see."

In the meantime, Edwin's Springdale friends were busy trying to save his life. Many of them wrote letters to Virginia authorities, and Thomas Winn, the postmaster at Springdale, succeeded in gaining the attention and respect of Governor Wise.

I feel encouraged to invoke thy friendly offices in his behalf, on the score of his youth and inexperience. I believe Edwin to be incapable of doing, intentionally, a mean or unworthy action. Indeed there is a native nobility of character about him which I think must have been ob-

served by those who have been brought into contact with him since the sad event which we all deplore. I fervently hope, therefore, that his life may not be taken.

This plea, and others in the same vein, had a powerful influence upon Governor Wise. Edwin wrote that many of the hundreds who came to see him exhibited sympathy. After a thorough investigation of the case the Governor recommended the commutation of Coppoc's sentence to life imprisonment. But the committee of the legislature to which he appealed was in no mood for clemency. The relations between the North and South were then so strained that under no circumstances would quarter be given. The "irrepressible conflict" had already begun and the legislature of Virginia was resolved that no guilty man from the North should escape.

But as the fatal day of December 16th drew nearer, Coppoc was planning his own method of

Edwin Coppoc and John Cook Escape from Jail down Rainspout

Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

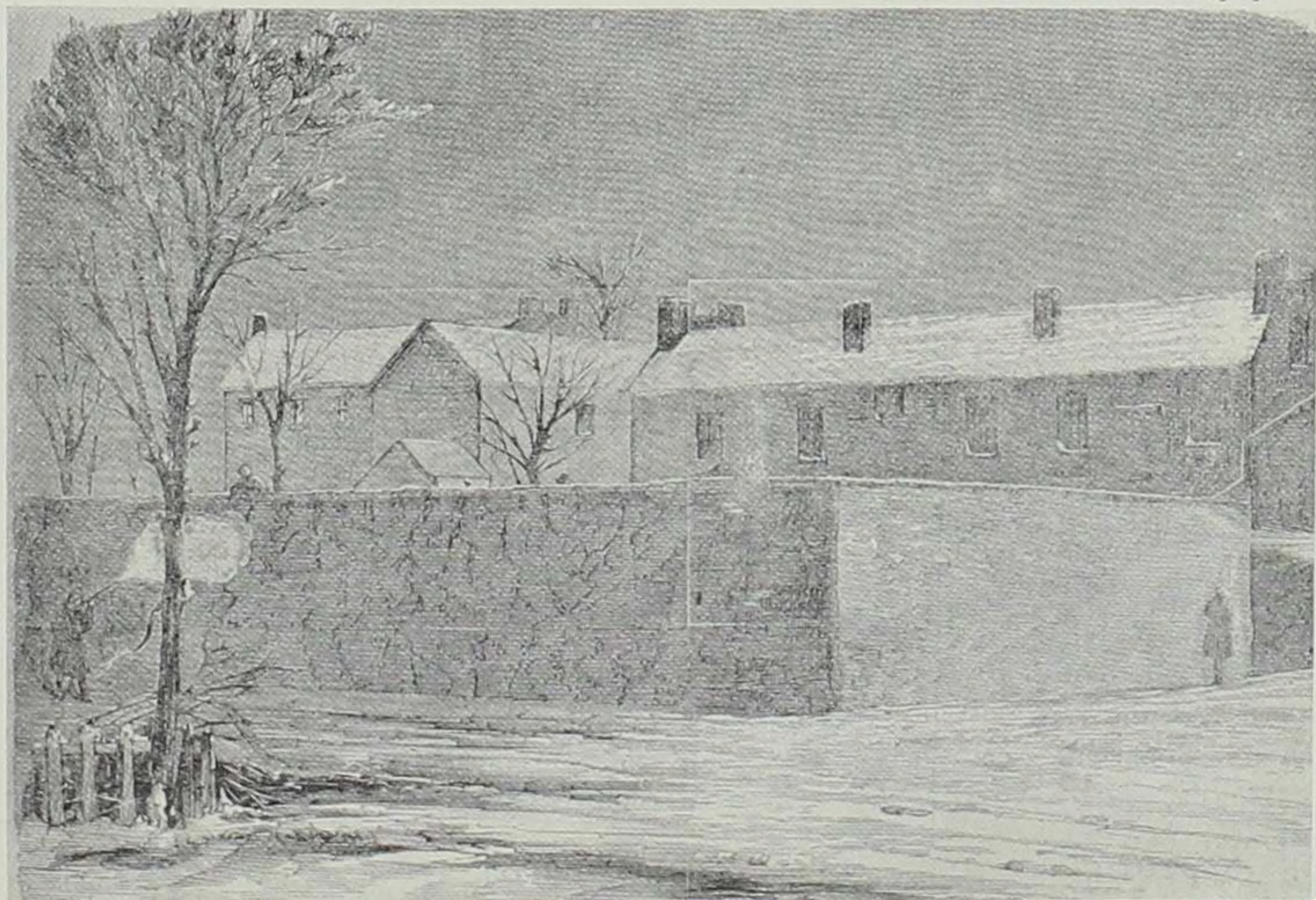


escape. He and his fellow prisoner, John E. Cook, had noticed that along one side of their cell there was a heavy plank, held in place by screws. They loosened this with a Barlow knife and a long screw taken from the bed, and carefully began to take the bricks from the jail wall. The outer layer they left intact, to be removed on the night of their flight. A friend, who had enlisted in the Virginia militia, was to be on guard duty the night of December 14th. He would neglect to see them as they climbed over the wall and escaped to the mountains. It seemed like a pretty plan.

But on the day of December 14th Cook's sister and brother-in-law, the Governor of Indiana, had come to Charlestown to bid him good-bye, and as they were to be in town that night Cook refused to leave the jail, for fear that they would be accused of complicity in the escape. He urged Edwin to go alone, but Coppoc would not desert his

Armed Guard Firing on Coppoc and Cook as they attempt to escape

Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper



friend. Accordingly, they decided to try the venture the next night, but an unfriendly guard discovered them in the act of scaling the wall and they gave themselves up without a struggle.

Early the next morning the prisoners were prepared for execution. Seated upon their coffins, they rode in a farm wagon to the stubble field where the scaffold stood. Several military companies paraded in a hollow square as the men mounted to their doom. The whole countryside had been aroused by the news of the attempted escape and there was some concern lest the furious citizens should not be satisfied with legal execution.

In contrast to the confusion about them the "calm and collected manner" of Coppoc and Cook "was very marked." Both "exhibited the most unflinching firmness, saying nothing, with the exception of bidding farewell to the ministers and sheriff." After the caps had been placed on their heads, they clasped hands in a last farewell.

Joshua Coppoc and Thomas Winn took Edwin's body back to Salem, Ohio, and there arrangements were made for a quiet Quaker funeral. On December 18th hundreds of people came to participate in the simple rites and pay their respects to one of the heroes of Harper's Ferry. Until late in the afternoon the saddened crowd continued to file past the coffin. At sunset the body was lowered into its grave.

To-day a monument marks the spot to which his body was removed, in Hope Cemetery, Salem, Ohio, and the name of Edwin Coppoc lives among those who died in the great struggle for the abolition of slavery.

PAULINE GRAHAME