

An Iowan's Death at Harpers Ferry

"The men in the ranks are too often forgotten in the adulation we give the leaders. Brown's memory will never be as sacred a thing to me as the memory of some who fell with him."

— George Gill (treasurer of John Brown's provisional government)

by Richard Acton

JOHN BROWN and his group of twenty-one men took and held the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), for thirty-six hours in October 1859. Much has been written about John Brown, little about his band. One of the most interesting characters among that colorful group was a young Iowan named Steward Taylor, who marched into Harpers Ferry utterly convinced he was going to die.

Militarily Harpers Ferry was an unqualified disaster. Ten of the men were killed. John Brown and six others were hanged. Only two of those involved in the fighting and the three rearguards escaped. But as antislavery propaganda, the insurrection was a brilliant success. The newspaper reports of the incident initially appalled most Northerners, but Brown's subsequent statements, letters, trial, hanging, and funeral stirred Northern admiration and con-

science, and the episode brought fears of future abolitionist and slave insurrections to the South.

Harpers Ferry is regarded by historians as a landmark on the road to the Civil War and hence the abolition of slavery. Few such tiny groups of men, however fanatical, however idealistic, have given such a jolt to history. A loathing of slavery — both fanatical and idealistic — drove Steward Taylor to leave Iowa and follow John Brown for two years before Harpers Ferry. Yet he has received scant historical attention.

STEWARD TAYLOR was born in Uxbridge, Canada, on October 29, 1836. His mother, Miss Jane Taylor, married a Mr. Foote some years after his birth. Taylor went to a local school, where (according to his brother) an American teacher



Steward Taylor came to Iowa as a seventeen-year-old wagonmaker. Two weeks before his twenty-third birthday he fought at Harpers Ferry. After Taylor's death, fellow spiritualist William Maxson had the young man's portrait painted and proudly displayed it in his Iowa home for decades after Harpers Ferry. (Here, another image of Taylor.)

instilled in him "the Spirit of Freedom." He went to work as a boy learning the trade of wagonmaking, while living with his mother's father, David Taylor. When he was seventeen, Taylor decided to immigrate to Iowa. After two years in eastern Iowa, he traveled in Missouri and Arkansas and for the first time saw slavery in practice. He returned to West Liberty, Iowa, and worked there making wagons.

John Brown — Taylor's future mentor and senior by thirty-six years — had spent his early years failing in farming and business, siring a vast family, and reading the Old Testament. He had decided to devote his life to fighting slavery and in 1856 ruthlessly battled proslavery forces in "bleeding Kansas." When Kansas

quieted down, Brown determined "to make an incursion into the Southern states, somewhere in the mountainous regions of the Blue Ridge and the Alleghenies," or so he told the group of young men he had gathered around him. He said that "God had created him to be the deliverer of slaves the same as Moses had delivered the children of Israel." Brown was extremely vague in explaining his plans to his followers, but he did discuss with John Kagi, his second in command, the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry as a possible target.

In December 1857, John Brown and his men planned a brief stay in the Quaker community of Springdale in eastern Iowa, confident of a sympathetic abolitionist welcome. In that



small village Brown knew there were many who supported his goal of abolishing slavery but not his means to achieve it. One Quaker summarized the village's ambivalence when he said to Brown, "Friend, I cannot give thee money to buy powder and lead, but here's twenty dollars towards thy expenses."

Steward Taylor's first contact with Brown occurred during the Springdale hiatus. Taylor's friend and former roommate George Gill, who lived at nearby West Liberty, had known Brown in Kansas and introduced Taylor to him. Apparently Taylor and Brown got on well from the outset. Gill wrote: "The old man's puritanical views and Steward's modern theology clasped most beautifully & often."

The original plan had been for the men to go on to Ohio for military training. Finding himself short of money Brown stayed briefly at the house of the Quaker John H. Painter and then went east in search of money to back his plan. He left his group of ten men quartered for the winter with a non-Quaker, William Maxson, who lived about three miles away. The men were drilled for the incursion by one of their own number, a former regular soldier in the United States Army. The weapons used were wooden swords, although some men had their

own guns, and much of the drill consisted of studying military manuals. Tuesday and Friday evenings were spent on formal debates. Maxson was an enthusiastic spiritualist, and when the weather was too bad to go out, the men, several of whom had been converted to spiritualism, spent much time spirit rapping. (They believed they could communicate with the spirit world by knocking on a table.) Singing was also a popular pastime, and some of the young men spent their leisure hours flirting with the Quaker girls. Several of the men were keen on literature — one Richard Realf was a poet.

Clearly Taylor was dazzled by Brown's followers — "those Glorious fellows," he later called them. As Taylor was ardently antislavery, a spiritualist, and fond of literature, debate, and music, he had much in common with the group at Maxson's house. Apparently a gregarious young man, Taylor was described by his brother as having had "friends on every side," and he seems to have been popular in Springdale. He was on particularly warm terms with one Quaker couple, Moses and Charlotte Varney, and their daughters. Maxson, his fellow spiritualist, was especially fond of him.

By the time John Brown returned to Spring-



JEREMIAH G. ANDERSON.



EDWIN COPPOC



BARCLAY COPPOC.

Opposite: Steward Taylor's commitment to John Brown grew as ten of Brown's followers wintered over at the William Maxson home three miles outside Springdale in eastern Iowa. Above: After Brown returned in the spring of 1858, Jeremiah Anderson from Des Moines and brothers Edwin and Barclay Coppoc from Springdale joined the cause.

dale in April of 1858, Steward Taylor was a committed member of the group that had quartered at Maxson's for four months. Three other Iowans enlisted at the same time. They were Edwin and Barclay Coppoc (two Quaker brothers from Springdale) and Taylor's friend George Gill. Jeremiah Anderson of Des Moines joined subsequently.

STEWARD TAYLOR was among the twelve men who accompanied Brown in May to Chatham, Canada, forty-five miles east of Detroit. Brown had decided to call "a quiet Convention . . . of true friends of freedom," as he wrote in his letters of invitation. The purpose of the convention in Chatham was to set up a provisional government and to recruit men for an attack on the slave states. Brown hoped certain Eastern financial sympathizers would also attend. But the convention consisted only of John Brown, his twelve men, and thirty-three black residents of Canada.

Taylor and the others listened as Brown related how for years the idea of giving liberty to the slaves had possessed him "like a passion." He described how he had prepared himself by inspecting fortifications in Europe and by studying guerrilla warfare. Upon the first intimation of a plan of liberation, he explained,

the slaves would immediately rise up all over the South. Brown would set up a freed black state in the mountains and beat off state militias or the United States Army. This new state would proceed with education; there blacks would be taught "the useful and mechanical arts, and . . . be instructed in all the business of life." Brown was certain that a successful incursion could be made, and that the slave states could be forced to recognize the freedom of those who had formerly been slaves within their borders.

Brown presented a plan entitled "Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the people of the United States." Each member swore an oath of secrecy, and the constitution was unanimously adopted — Steward Taylor's signature is the eighteenth ratifying the document. Brown was elected commander-in-chief, John Kagi, secretary of war, George Gill, secretary of the treasury, and various other offices were filled. The position of president, however, was declined by both of the black men nominated. Before adjourning, a committee of fifteen was appointed to fill that vacancy and others.

The convention must have been a remarkably heady experience for twenty-one-year-old Steward Taylor, who found himself appointed to the committee to elect a president. Straight after the convention Brown and his men were to embark on the grand design. But Taylor's morale slumped when the invasion of the

Southern states did not take place immediately. In Ohio after the convention, Taylor wrote to Dr. H. C. Gill in Iowa of his discouragement over this "most critical point" in their endeavors. John Brown was chronically short of money, and his men had to fend for themselves as best they could until the call for insurrection. One of Brown's men wrote later that month: "Taylor [is] working among the Shakers for fifty cents a day. . . . Taylor told a hard story of suffering, privations and fatigue. He laid out one night with another poor devil like himself."

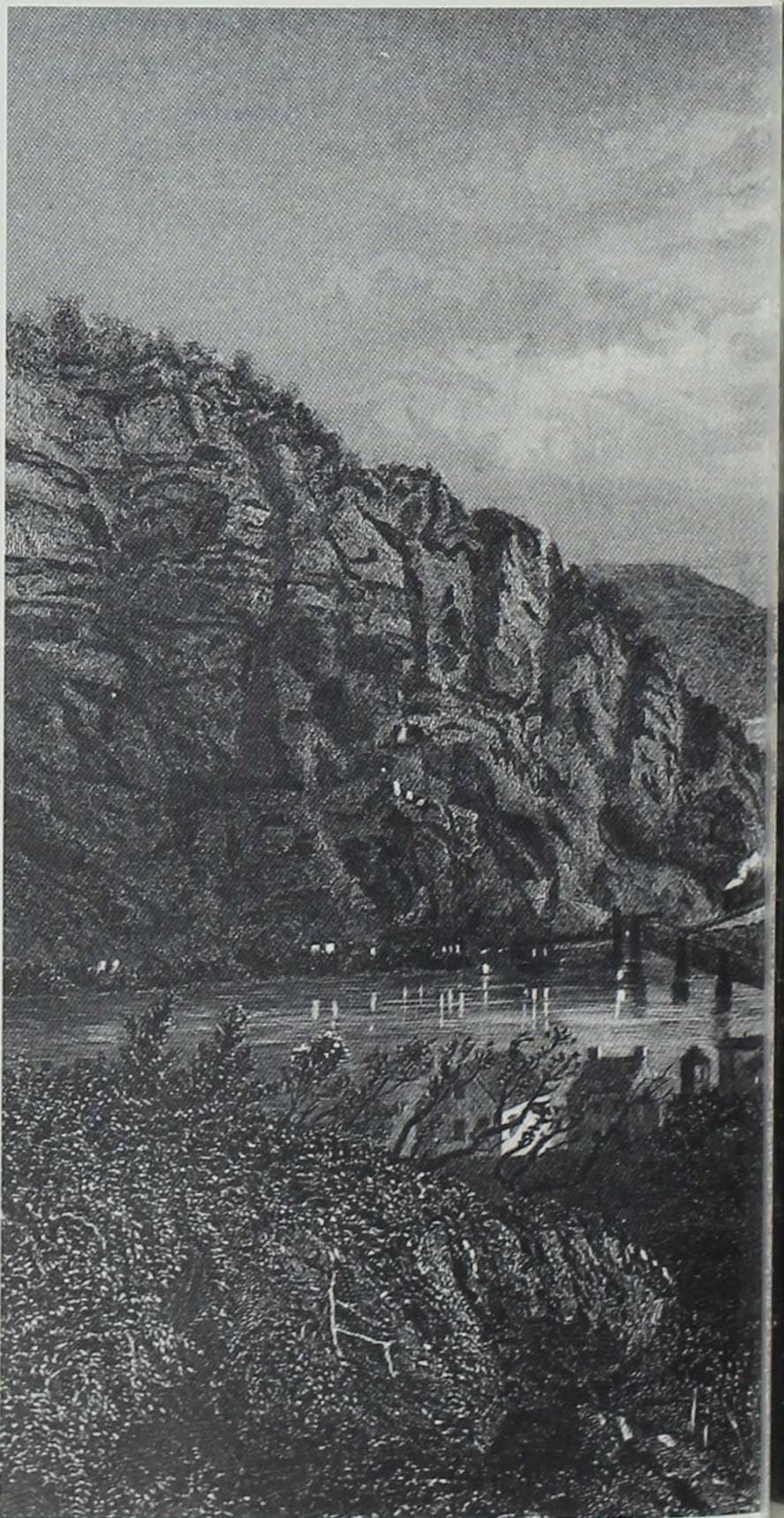
Taylor had the dogged commitment to his cause to wait out Brown's early delays. Those who have commented on him emphasize his self-discipline. George Gill, for example, wrote that Taylor had "wonderful tenacity in all things, especially in regard to his conceptions of right. He was essentially practical. Moral in thought or practice, he was thoroughly reliable. A vegetarian at one time [he] would eat but one meal a day." Certainly the attributes of self-discipline and willpower appear in his intellectual pursuits — studying, successfully learning the violin (for which he had no aptitude), and teaching himself to be a first-class stenographer. But Steward Taylor had little tolerance for physical discomfort. Gill described a journey he made with Taylor: "I concluded to take a little trip up to Sandusky city. . . . I persuaded Steward Taylor to accompany me. The trip and style of travelling was too much for Steward; after walking half-way and lying out one night he took the back track, and arrived at Cleveland worn out in body and spirit."

Taylor and the other men converged on Cleveland to meet John Brown on June 21, 1858. Brown explained that because of the treachery of a former colleague, his financial backers had decided to delay the proposed invasion. He handed out small sums of money to Taylor and the others and bade them be true to their cause, once more leaving them to support themselves and await instructions. The men scattered, and Taylor went to work in Ohio.

That winter Taylor visited his family in Canada. There he helped establish a literary association and took a leading part in its debates.

He delivered a lecture on "Man's rights to Man," which was warmly applauded by a large audience. Shortly before leaving Canada, he indiscreetly told some friends of his plans. They remonstrated with him. He replied, a cousin later recalled, that "his country called aloud for him, to take . . . his life in his hands and go forth to fight for the slave."

From Canada Taylor went to Chicago and subsequently got a job working on a farm near Bloomington, Illinois. According to his brother, Taylor "was overcome with distress" when he lost contact with the John Brown





CHARLES PLUMMER TIDD



JOHN HENRI KAGI.

Of Brown's followers, only John Kagi, Brown's secretary of war, knew that a possible target was the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, at the fork of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers. When Brown finally disclosed the details, Charles Tidd and Brown's sons branded the plan an act of suicide. Steward Taylor and others joined the dissidents—but Brown's charisma quickly pulled the group together again. They waited out the final months before the attack in a farmhouse five miles from the small Virginia bordertown of Harpers Ferry (below).



PICTURESQUE AMERICA, WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT, ED. (1872)



DANGERFIELD NEWBY.



WATSON BROWN.

Left: Ex-slave Dangerfield Newby was the first killed as farmers and militia tried to regain their town from Brown and his twenty-one men. With the rifle works lost, and besieged in the engine house, Brown sent his son Watson out under a white flag. Watson returned, wounded.

Opposite: From the engine house, John Brown and his remaining men tried to defend their final post as more armed troops surrounded them, "firing volley after volley." Brown's men returned a "brisk fire . . ." to keep them from charging upon us."

movement and "thought for a time that he was to be left out." Taylor wrote to a friend in Springdale, "I expected momentarily I would be relieved of my doubts, which arose from my losing communication with my friends. I [kept] waiting day after day for word and at last gave it up. Then my hopes were partly crushed, I felt as though I was deprived of my chief object in life. I could imagine no other cause than want of ability or confidence."

John Brown was not worried about Taylor's ability or self-confidence — he would have taken anybody to swell the tiny army of his Provisional Government. One man he recruited was described as "frail, one-eyed, and either emotionally unbalanced or mentally retarded." Taylor, in contrast, was "of medium height, stout and stocky in form. . . . Very quiet in his ways, helpful, a good comrade, always even tempered."

Brown had been purposely delaying for more than a year as he awaited financial support. During this time he diverted attention from his proposed invasion of Virginia by a dramatic slave-freeing raid on Missouri in December 1858, in which he took eleven slaves through Iowa and thence to Canada. At last, his backers provided over two thousand dollars for his enterprise. The necessary weapons for his army — 198 Sharp's rifles and 200 revolvers (at one time stored in Iowa) — were waiting to be delivered. Furthermore, a thousand pikes to arm the risen slaves were being constructed. Brown decided that this was the time to call the men.

NOW, MORE THAN A YEAR after he had seen anything of John Brown or "those Glorious fellows," Taylor received a letter from John Kagi on July 3, 1859. Taylor wrote back from Bloomington that same day: "The pleasure that it affords me in receiving your token is unbounded, it has removed the cloak of suspense and doubts with bright hopes of cherishing my young and seemingly long desires that the object is within my reach. It is my chief desire to add fuel to the fire. The amount may be small, 'but every little helps.' My ardent passion for the gold field [to free slaves] is my thoughts by day and my dreams by night," Taylor continued. "I often think I am with you. Bringing it [freed slaves] forth in masses that surprises the world and moving it with all sweetness and holiness adds still another determination. . . . Please let me know as soon as possible. For, if it was very sudden, I might be some troubled to get my money, as it is very scarce stuff here."

Despite his joy, Taylor ended the letter with a characteristic complaint about walking. "I must go to town this afternoon; quite a walk — 5 miles — but if [this letter] is as long going to you as that was coming to me, I must not delay a minute."

During the next month John Brown rented the Kennedy farm, five miles from Harpers Ferry. To give a semblance of normality to the farmhouse, he installed one of his daughters-in-law and his sixteen-year-old daughter, Annie, there. Kagi, his secretary of war, was



posted at the rail head at Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, near Harpers Ferry, to receive the men and arms.

By August 3 Steward Taylor had arrived at Chambersburg. Thence he moved to the Kennedy farm. There he and the other young men hid in a loft by day while the young women cooked, washed, and fended off inquisitive neighbors.

John Brown made endless trips to Chambersburg to collect the arms as they arrived. In mid-August, for the first time, Brown told his men the details of the final plan: Attack Harpers Ferry and capture the federal government armory, arsenal, and rifle works — thus acquiring the arms necessary for the next phase. Slaves and dissident whites alike would join them. Then with the guns from the arsenal they would rapidly move south, and more slaves would flock to them from the plantations. Continuing south, they would raid more arsenals, and yet more slaves would join them — until slavery was at an end.

Mutiny rumbled among some of the young men, led by Brown's sons and another man called Charles Tidd. Steward Taylor was among those who feared that they would be trapped in Harpers Ferry — it would be suicide for their small number to try to hold the town against militia and federal troops. There was tremendous argument; Brown resigned his command. Within five minutes his resignation was refused, the men were all on his side, his plan was accepted. Life at the Kennedy farm returned to hiding and waiting for more men to arrive.

Annie Brown is the main source of information about events at the Kennedy farm, and her comments about Taylor in her letters are enlightening. She thought him a "very peculiar person" and emphasized his belief in spiritualism, though his "belief was more in theory than in practice." Taylor was "nearer to a 'born crank'" than the other men, and he "believed in dreams and all sorts of the 'isms'" of the day. Neither she nor any of the others could shake

him of his fixed belief that he was going to be one of the first killed at Harpers Ferry. He predicted his own death, and described it to Annie. She said that he "talked as coolly about it as if he were going into another room."

Annie wrote that Taylor spent his time at the Kennedy farm studying and "improving his mind," as he called it. He was constantly the victim of jokes by the others, which he "always took good naturedly." Believing he was destined to die, he sent farewell letters to his friends and relatives. To a young woman cousin he wrote: "I . . . hope to occupy a place in your memory." Annie recalled that after writing these letters, Taylor was as "calm and content as ever." One of the men found him writing one day and called out, "Boys, Steward is writing his will!" Taylor just laughed.

During these two months, John Brown kept hoping that more men would arrive to swell his army — especially the blacks who had attended his convention in Canada. But of these only one came to Harpers Ferry, making five blacks all told. Various men who had promised to come did not. All the weapons arrived, however, and at the end of September the two young women were sent back to the Brown farm at North Elba, New York.

On October 15 three more men arrived. Now there were twenty-two men mustered at the Kennedy farm, and Brown decided the time had come to make his move. He left three as a rearguard at the Kennedy farm and led his other eighteen followers into Harpers Ferry on the night of Sunday, October 16, 1859.

SORTING THROUGH the many detailed accounts of that night, it appears that Steward Taylor was first ordered to guard the covered bridge leading across the Potomac. After he and the other raiders secured the bridges, they took possession of the arsenal, armory building, and rifle works. The next move was to seize slave-owning hostages. A party of six men was sent on this expedition.

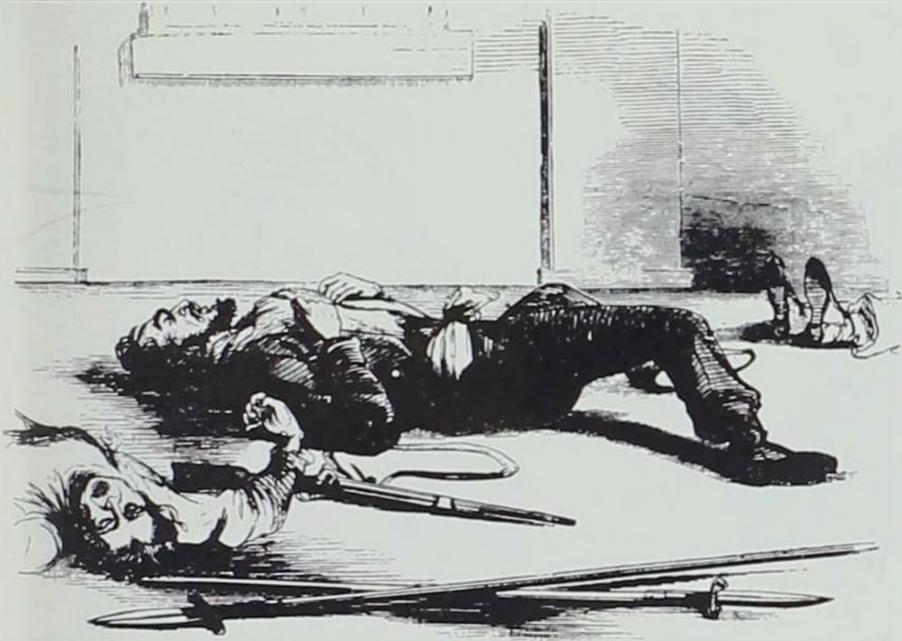
The prime target was Colonel Lewis Washington, a prosperous slaveholder, great-grand-

nephew of the first president, and an aide to the Governor of Virginia. His name and job alone were worthy of great propaganda value, and in addition Washington owned a sword that had allegedly belonged to Frederick the Great and had been presented to George Washington. The raiders duly took Washington hostage, liberated four of his slaves, and seized the famous sword. (Washington identified Steward Taylor as having been one of his captors.) A local farmer and his son were also captured, and six more slaves added to the party. The raiders returned with their hostages and armed the ten slaves with pikes. Taylor's dreams appeared to be coming true — armed slaves stood in Harpers Ferry.

During the night Brown's men took more hostages. The first fatality was tragically ironic. In the darkness one of Brown's men killed the baggage master at the railway station — a free black man. A passenger and mail train was halted for some time and then allowed to go on its way. With gunfire in the town the Lutheran church bell was soon tolling an alarm. Two villagers spread the word in neighboring towns. News of a major abolitionist and black insurrection was sent to the president of the United States and the governor of Virginia. Soon the alarm was spreading across the nation. "Fire and Rapine on the Virginia Border," newspaper headlines would scream.

As morning dawned and workers arrived at their jobs, more hostages were taken. One of them was Jesse W. Graham, an armory workman. Held with the other prisoners in front of the fire-engine house, he begged the raider in charge to allow him to go home and tell his family. The raider yielded, and "a small man" believed to have been Steward Taylor escorted Graham to see his family and brought him back again.

John Kagi, in charge of the detachment holding the rifle works, sent messages to John Brown that they all must move out immediately. Brown inexplicably hesitated, perhaps awaiting slave reinforcements. Soon all was militarily lost. Armed farmers and militia poured into the town, and a general battle commenced. The militia known as the Jefferson Guards drove the raiders from the bridges. Dangerfield Newby, an ex-slave in John

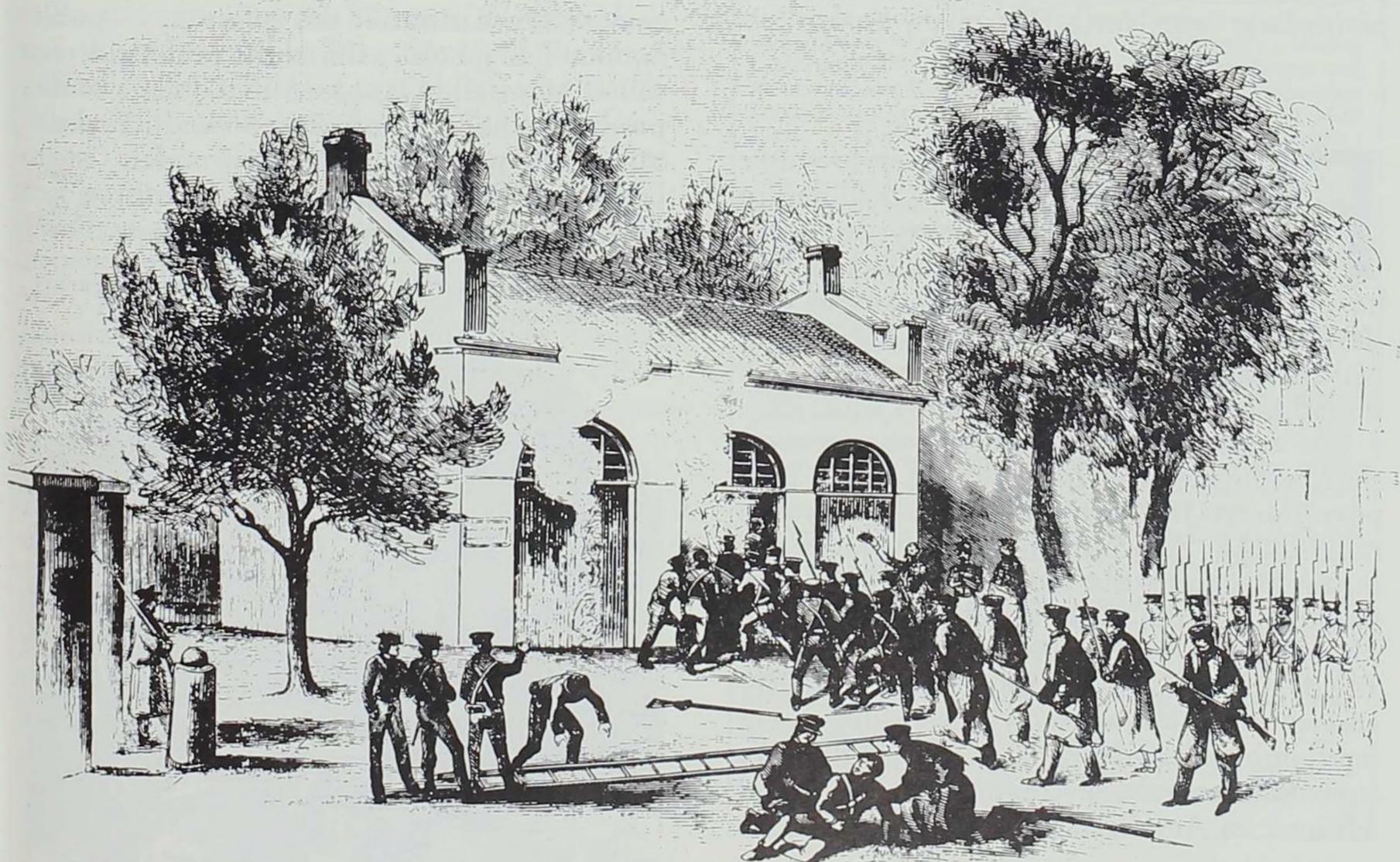


Brown's band, was the first raider killed. Brown gathered his men and his eleven most valuable hostages into the engine house. He sent his son Watson and Stevens, another of his men, out under a white flag. Both were badly wounded. Watson crawled back; Stevens was taken prisoner. The youngest raider, twenty-

Below and above: Robert E. Lee led the U.S. Marines in a final attack. Inside the engine house the few left were either killed, wounded, or captured. Brown's insurrection had reached its end.

year-old William Leeman, was shot down trying to escape into the Potomac. Kagi's party was driven from the rifle works; two were killed, one taken prisoner. The raiders in the engine house killed the mayor of Harpers Ferry and two other men.

Steward Taylor was in the engine house with John Brown, his remaining men, and the hostages. According to hostage accounts, the raiders fired through loopholes in the walls and out of the partly open door. Iowan Edwin Coppoc (who was captured unharmed and later hanged) described Taylor's end: Taylor and Oliver Brown "fell by the engine-house. Taylor lived about three hours after he was shot; he suffered very much and begged of us to kill him. . . . During these last moments we could not administer to their wants such as they deserved, for we were surrounded by the troops who were firing volley after volley, so that we had to keep up a brisk fire in return to keep them from charging upon us." So Steward Taylor died as he had predicted — though his dream of ending slavery would not come true



Youthfulness marked Brown's followers. William Leeman was twenty when he was killed; Annie Brown wrote of him, "He was only a boy." Brown's young and devoted neighbor from North Elba, Dauphin Thompson, was twenty-one when he died in the engine house; Steward Taylor, twenty-three. Except for John Brown and two others, all were under the age of thirty.



WILLIAM HENRY LEEMAN.



DAUPHIN ADOLPHUS THOMPSON.

until the next decade brought the Civil War.

The following morning the United States Marines under Colonel Robert E. Lee stormed the engine house, killing two more raiders, wounding John Brown, and capturing the remaining two. John Brown's attack was over. In all, ten of his men had been killed; five had escaped — among them Taylor's fellow Iowan, Barclay Coppoc. Seven, including Brown, fell into the hands of the Virginia authorities and were tried and executed for treason to Virginia, murder, and other crimes. Brown was the first hanged, on December 2, 1859. He was buried on his farm near North Elba, New York.

FROM HIS VERY FIRST interview after his capture John Brown — madman to some, villain to some, martyr to others — clung to his messianic conviction that he was right. His sole purpose was to end slavery, and his interviews, letters, speeches at his trial, and demeanor at his execution continued to carry this message across America.

The zealotry of Brown will always overshadow the men who had followed him to Harpers Ferry. But without those twenty-one individuals, he would never have had the means to ignite the nation's wrath or conscience. George Gill, a follower of Brown (though not to Harpers Ferry) and a friend of Taylor's, said of Brown: "[He was] very selfish, and very intolerant, with great self-esteem [and] immense egotism. . . . And yet the very concentration on self commanded the grand advance on American slavery." Of Taylor he

wrote: "He gave promise of being a great man."

In considering Steward Taylor's place in history, perhaps the best epitaph is the contrast of his two burials. After the battle, the bodies of all the dead raiders were gathered up from the various parts of Harpers Ferry and the rivers in which they lay. Taylor's body was carried out of the engine house and laid on the grass in front of it. The bodies of Iowan Jeremiah Anderson and John Brown's son Watson were given to a Virginia medical school. The difficulty was what to do with the remains of Steward Taylor and others. Burial in one of the Harpers Ferry cemeteries was out of the question — public opinion had quickly vilified the raiders. A man called Mansfield was given five dollars to dispose of the bodies, including Steward Taylor's. Mansfield put them in two wooden "store boxes" and buried them unmarked three feet down, about half a mile from Harpers Ferry

Taylor and seven others were buried in a common grave, unmarked on the riverbank of the Shenandoah.





John Brown's home in North Elba, New York. His grave is enclosed by the picket fence in the foreground.

along the Shenandoah River, near the water's edge.

Forty years after the Harpers Ferry raid — and thirty-four years after the Civil War had ended — a Dr. Thomas Featherstonhaugh exhumed the bones of Steward Taylor and the seven others. He found them wrapped in the rotting threads of their great blanket shawls. The bodies were taken to North Elba, John Brown's grave site in New York. There they were placed in a handsome casket with silver handles and a silver plate bearing their names, presented by the townspeople of North Elba. The bodies of two of the hanged raiders were also brought to North Elba from New Jersey.

On August 30 a funeral service was held. Fifteen hundred people attended, and eulogies were read of each of the men. The same clergyman who had performed the last rites over the grave of John Brown now conducted the funeral service for ten of his men.

In 1859 Steward Taylor and the others had been outcasts unworthy of decent burial. In 1899 the wheel of history had turned. A detachment of the Twenty-sixth United States Infantry fired a volley over the open grave. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Particular thanks are due to Pat Michaelif of the Kansas State Historical Society for locating and forwarding copies of correspondence concerning Taylor in the society's Hinton Collection. The correspondence comprises four notes and memoranda by George Gill, two letters from Taylor's brother Jacob, and a biographical sketch by Taylor's cousin Miss Lizzie P. Hughes. There are various spellings of Taylor's christian name. "Steward" was used by his friends and relatives and has been adopted throughout this article. The only book which contains much information on Taylor is Richard J. Hinton, *John Brown and His Men With Some Account of the Roads They Traveled To Reach Harper's Ferry* (rev. ed. 1894). The two general books most related are Oswald G. Villard, *John Brown: A Biography Fifty Years After* (rev. ed. 1943); and Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (1970). A large number of secondary sources have been used, too numerous to be listed. (An annotated copy of the original manuscript is in the *Palimpsest* production files, Special Collections, SHSI-Iowa City.) Special mention must be made of the "Mason Report," *U.S. Senate Committee Report* (1859-60) sec. II; *Calendar of Virginia State Papers* 11 (1893); L. R. Witherell, "Old John Brown," *Davenport Daily Gazette* (1877 and 1878); Irving B. Richman, *John Brown Among the Quakers and Other Sketches* (1894); Thomas Featherstonhaugh, "John Brown's Men: The Lives of Those Killed at Harper's Ferry," *Publication of the Southern History Association* 3 (1899), 290-91; "The Burial of the Followers of John Brown," *New England Magazine* n.s. 24 (1901), 128-34; and C. P. Galbreath, "Edwin Coppoc," *Ohio Archeological and Historical Quarterly* 30 (1921), 414-15. Several Iowa historians have stated that Iowans George Gill and Charles Moffett went to Harpers Ferry with John Brown. They did not go.

My heartfelt thanks go to my wife, Patricia, and to my editor, Ginalie Swaim. Their help and patience made this article possible.