

ON THIS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY APRIL 18



On April 18, 1861, United States troops destroyed the United States Armory and Arsenal at Harpers Ferry shortly before the town was captured by Confederate troops.

CSO: SS.8.22, SS.8.13

Investigate the Document: (George Washington to Timothy Pickering, 1795, B W27 Coll; *Harper's Weekly*, Destruction of the Harpers Ferry Armory, May 11, 1861)

Document 1

1. Does this document provide any indication about why Harpers Ferry's location is ideal for a fortified arsenal? If so, why?
2. What two rivers meet at Harpers Ferry?

Document 2

3. "Harper's Ferry, which, eighteen months ago, was the centre of public interest..." What is this a reference to?
4. What value does eye-witness testimony provide toward the study of historical events? Is it reliable?
5. What did the Union troops destroy in the process of burning the arsenal?
6. Did the townspeople seem partisan to the Union troops or the incoming Confederate troops?

Think Critically: If you were in charge of the Confederate war effort, what strategy or strategies would you have pursued? Conversely, if you had to devise the Union strategy, what would you propose? How does your answer depend on your knowledge of how the war played out?

To THE SECRETARY OF WAR

Mount Vernon, September 16, 1795.

Sir: If, when this reaches your hands, there should be no contract or other obligation existing on behalf of the U. S. for the purchase of land on the Potomac, intended for the public Arsenal, I should wish all further negotiation in this business to be suspended until proper inquiries can be made and information obtained respecting the property at the junction of the Potomac and Shanandoah rivers in this State; for it has been represented to me, that this spot affords every advantage that could be wished for water works to any extent; and that no place is more capable of complete defence at a small expense. And I am also informed that from 800 to 1000 Acres of land might be obtained there on reasonable terms. The land at the junction of the two Rivers, including what is called Harper's ferry, has lately been leased for 7 years, and the lessee has the right of purchasing whenever it may be sold. Should this spot be fixed upon for the Arsenal, the Lessee will relinquish his title to the U. S. reserving only a small piece of the land for the purpose of building Stores and doing business. Six hundred Acres of land adjoining this tract is, I am told, offered for sale by Colo. Ball for fifteen hundred pounds Virga money. Colo. Ball has a lease of this tract for 70 years at £5 pr. 100 Acres, and a number of years have been already paid in the lease. The fee is in Genl. Henry Lee who I have no doubt will dispose of his right on very reasonable terms.

There is another small tract, with a saw mill upon it, adjoining the two foregoing, which I am told may be also purchased.

From my own knowledge, I can speak of the eligibility of this situation for a public Arsenal; but as I have never examined it very attentively, I am not able to speak so decidedly as to the advantages of erecting works there. These, however, I am told, are equal to any on the Potomac or its branches, having the advantage of a considerable fall in both Rivers, which may be brought to operate at this place. At any rate if the thing is open it may be well to have enquiry made and prices ascertained before it becomes known that this spot is in view. I am etc.⁵³

Destruction of the Harpers Ferry Armory*Harper's Weekly*

May 11, 1861

OUR WAR ILLUSTRATIONS.

We continue in this number the series of illustrations of the pending War which have formed so conspicuous a feature in *Harper's Weekly* for some months back.

Mr. Strother has sent us some sketches of the Harper's Ferry affair. On page 292 we give a picture of the GATHERING OF THE VIRGINIANS for the attack on the Arsenal; and on the following page the APPROACH, and the BURNING OF THE WORK-SHOPS. The following account is the

NARRATIVE OF AN EYE-WITNESS.

Harper's Ferry, which, eighteen months ago, was the centre of public interest, has again become the scene of historic events of more immediate political importance, but fortunately not of so tragic a character as those of October, 1859.

On Thursday, the 18th instant, private orders were brought from the authorities at Richmond commanding the seizure of the arms and public works at Harper's Ferry. Immediately on receiving the notice the Jefferson Battalion assembled at Charlestown, the county seat, and marched to the appointed rendezvous at Halltown, a small village situated midway between the Court House and Harper's Ferry, and about four miles from either point. Some three thousand men had been notified of the movement; but owing to the suddenness of the summons, and doubt as to its authenticity, only two hundred and fifty were on the ground by eight o'clock in the evening. As prompt action was deemed more important than numbers, Colonel Allen, who commanded the Jefferson troops, gave the order to march as soon as it was quite dark. The Infantry moved down the road in close column, followed by one piece of artillery and a squad of the Faquier Cavalry, led by Captain Ashby, numbering about twenty horses.

The troops marched in silence, and about a mile from the starting-point the column was challenged by sentries posted in the road. They halted, loaded with ball-cartridge, and advanced with fixed bayonets until they reached the brow of the hill overlooking the town and at the outskirts of the village of Bolivar. Here the advance was again challenged, and the column halted. As these sentries were known to be employes of the armories, and as it was thought probable from the temper manifested during the day that the whole body of workmen had united with the Government troops, thus giving them four hundred effective men, with full preparation and choice of position, it was thought proper to send a flag into the town to ascertain how matters stood. An influential gentleman accompanying the troops offered his services to execute this delicate duty, and to dissuade the citizens, if possible, from taking part in the contest. From after-knowledge it was ascertained that this precaution was unnecessary, as the mass of the inhabitants were loyal to soil where they lived, and such as might have entertained different sentiments were silenced by the reports of the imposing force which was supposed to be at hand.

While the Virginia officers were in consultation there was seen in the direction of the armory a flash, accompanied by a report like the discharge of a cannon, followed by a number of other flashes in quick succession, and then the sky and surrounding mountains were lighted with the steady glare of ascending flames. Captain Ashby, with his squad, immediately rode down into the town, and in a short time returned with the report that the troops had fired the public buildings and retreated across the Potomac bridge, taking the mountain road toward Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania.

On our way down we met a long line of men, women, and boys, carrying loads of muskets, bayonets, and other military equipments. The streets at the confluence of the two rivers were brilliantly illuminated by the flames from the Old Arsenal, which burned like a furnace. The inclosure around these buildings was covered with splintered glass, which had been blown out by the explosion of the powder train. A few arm-boxes, open and empty, lay near the entrance; but nearly all the muskets in this building, fifteen thousand as stated, were destroyed.

Of the Armory buildings on Potomac Street one large work-shop was in a light blaze, and two others on fire. Alarmed by the first explosions, the citizens hesitated to approach the work-shops, and warned the Virginia troops not to do so, supposing them to be mined; but presently becoming reassured on that subject, they went to work with the engines, extinguished some of the fires, and prevented its extension to the town and railroad bridges.

The total destruction of property, therefore, is confined to the old Arsenal, with its contents; the carpenter's-shop on Potomac Street totally destroyed; with slight injury to the stock-turner's shop. At the remaining shops on Potomac Street, with their fine machinery, and all the establishment on the Shenandoah, known as Hall's Rifle-works, are uninjured and complete. There were saved, also - complete and nearly completed - about two thousand first-class Minie muskets in the shops and packing-rooms, together with a quantity of material, iron and wood, in progress of manufacture. I have been informed that a room full of packed arms, numbering five or six thousand, has been discovered since by the troops in occupation.

There were very few persons about the streets, and comparatively little excitement manifested during the conflagration. Those seen were chiefly engaged in extinguishing the fire and removing arms and provisions from the adjacent buildings. Some savage temper was manifested against the Government which gave, and the officer who executed the order for destruction; and some of the citizens talked of organizing parties to pursue the retreating troops, but he more considerate advised against it. I do not believe that any pursuit was undertaken, for soon after Lieutenant Jones left several deserters from his party returned to the town and reported no firing; and it is to be hoped that he was mistaken in supposing his missing men to be killed.

Indeed, up to the date of the burning the best felling existed between the soldiers and the people; and even after that event, all better-thinking people exculpated the instruments of the devastation, and threw the responsibility where it properly belonged.

The estimate of the force advancing upon the town was based upon information given as to the numbers expected, and the report of videttes, who, in the darkness, could not tell the weight of the



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column, or possibly thought it only the avant-guard of a larger force. The attacking party was only two hundred and fifty strong. The conduct of the Virginians throughout was quiet and determined, there being no exhibition of vindictiveness, triumph, or excitement of any kind.