



JOHN BROWN'S RAID, EDWARD SHRIVER, *and the* FREDERICK MILITIA

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On Monday morning, October 17, 1859, news began circulating that during the previous night "a body of armed insurgents had attacked Harpers Ferry, Virginia, threatening death to the citizens, destruction of their property, and the placing of arms in the hands of the slaves," and that aid from Frederick was urgently needed. Amid more news and conflicting stories, Colonel Edward Shriver and militia from Frederick responded to the Virginia emergency.¹

Frederick's home guard in 1859 was composed mostly of members of the three volunteer fire companies in town – the Independent Hose Company No. 1, the United Fire Company, and the Junior Fire Company.

Together they formed the Sixteenth Regiment of the Ninth Brigade of the Maryland Militia. The regiment was commanded by Colonel Edward Shriver, a prominent citizen of Frederick and a member of the Independent Hose Company.²

Shriver was born in 1812, the second son of Judge Abraham Shriver and Ann Margaret, and a grandson of

David Shriver, a member of the convention which framed the first constitution of Maryland in 1775. Trained for a career in the law, he served on the bar for many years, worked seven years in the Maryland House of Delegates, and was twice nominated for Congress, though not elected in either instance. On the state level, Shriver's name was twice tendered for secretary of state. In the years before the Civil War, Shriver was a member of the 1850 Maryland Constitutional Reform Convention and then clerk of the circuit court of Frederick County from 1851 to 1857. He was an early member of Independent Hose Company No. 1, and served as the fire company's president from 1845 to 1879.³

On October 17, 1859, learning that the telegraph wires



▲ Edward Shriver (1812-1896) in an undated photograph.

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◀ Harpers Ferry as it may have appeared in 1859, from a mural by Richard Schlecht.

had been cut between Harpers Ferry and Frederick, and knowing that the United States had an arsenal there, Colonel Shriver, without waiting for particulars, ordered the captains of the three companies of the Sixteenth Regiment to assemble their men and stand by while he investigated the rumors. In order to further prepare for the emergency, he instructed Captain John Ritchie to telegraph the president of the United States to offer their services and to seek authorization from the Frederick judiciary to take the militia out of the state if needed. Shriver scouted ahead by train and learned from people in the area that Harpers Ferry was "in possession of a band of outlaws alleged to number with the Negroes they had armed several hundred men." Fearing the worst, he returned to Frederick, where he learned that three Frederick judges had granted the necessary authorization and President Buchanan had accepted his offer of service. Colonel Shriver immediately loaded the companies, numbering 175 men, on a special train supplied by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and proceeded to Harpers Ferry. When the train reached Monocacy Junction, Shriver received "authenticated reports" that "the force of insurgents had been largely increased and then amounted to six hundred armed slaves." This news prompted him to order the cannon belonging to Frederick forwarded to him on the next available train.⁴

When the force from Frederick arrived at the Potomac River opposite Harpers Ferry shortly after dark, they found the bridge seemingly deserted. They crossed the covered railroad bridge with much trepidation, bayonets fixed, unsure of what to expect. It must have been a relief to find the town already in the hands of the Virginia militia, under the command of Colonel Robert W. Baylor. Baylor confirmed that the town had been attacked. Having offered the services of his regiment to Colonel Baylor, Shriver was asked to position his men around the perimeter of the United States armory buildings. While complying with this request, he learned that there were not six hundred, nor even two hundred insurgents, but instead only "twenty two desperadoes from other sections of the country," more than half of whom had already been neutralized in one manner or another. The remainder had sought shelter in the armory's fire-engine house after taking hostages,



▲ Shriver and the Frederick Militia left for Harpers Ferry from Frederick's Baltimore & Ohio Railroad station, shown here in 1862 when President Abraham Lincoln boarded a train to return to Washington after visiting General George McClellan in Sharpsburg after the Battle of Antietam from *Harper's Weekly* of October 25, 1862.

including a Frederick citizen by the name of George Shope.⁵

The duty of guarding the firehouse that night was "confided" to Shriver's command "together with a body of VA military." They were repeatedly fired on, but "without ... any injury being sustained." They also guarded the bridge they had crossed earlier in order to cut off any escape and to prevent the insurgents from receiving reinforcements. Shriver suggested storming the firehouse, but Baylor objected out of concern that a nighttime assault would increase the chances of harm to the hostages.⁶

Close to midnight, the barricaded men hailed Captain John Sinn of Shriver's command. Sinn, who would later testify at



▲ The covered railroad bridge leading from Maryland into Harpers Ferry.



◀ The engine house in which John Brown and his men barricaded themselves, shown c. 1860.

The reason for the change was not explained. At daylight, after Shriver again positioned his men around the perimeter of the armory buildings and assigned his company surgeons to provide medical assistance as needed, the Marines led by Colonel Green stormed the engine house, and "in a very short time, all [the insurgents] were killed, badly wounded or made prisoners."⁹

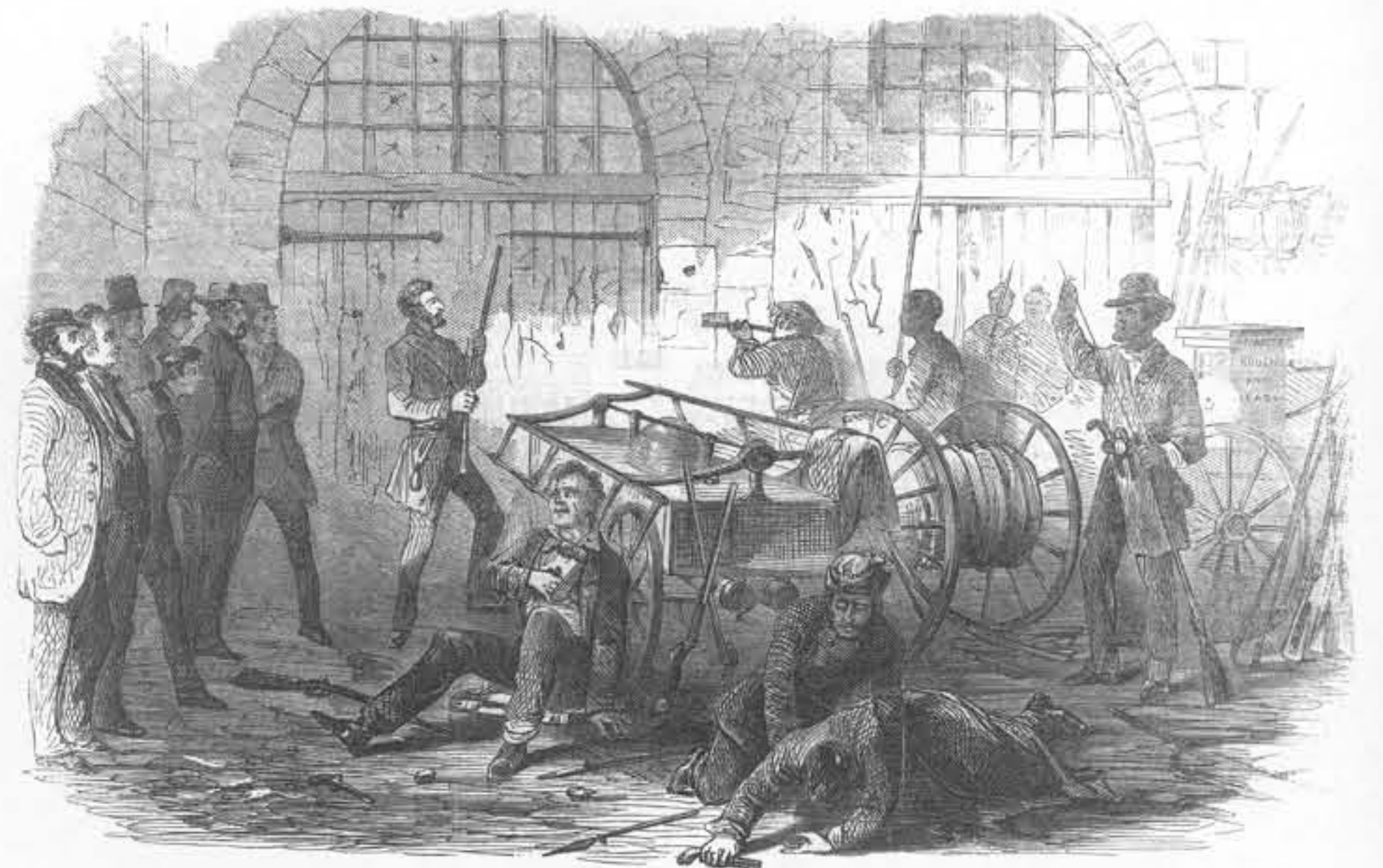
Thus the outcome of the Harpers Ferry incident passed into history, although not exactly as outlined above. The preceding account is based mostly on Colonel Edward Shriver's official report, written four days after these events. After Governor Thomas Hicks of Maryland received Shriver's report, however, it was lost and remained unnoticed in the Maryland State Archives until 1990, when a staff member rediscovered it. With the report unavailable to historians for

John Brown's trial that he regarded Brown a brave man, held a conference with the leader of the insurgents where surrender terms were discussed. Afterwards he met with Shriver, who in turn spoke with Brown. Brown suggested that if he and his men were allowed a head start to get away, he would release the hostages. Shriver replied that his only logical option was to surrender because he was surrounded, to which Brown refused. Colonel Shriver then conferred with the other militia officers to devise a plan of action deciding that "at daylight the position of the insurgents should be assaulted and taken with the Bayonet, in order to secure as far as possible the safety of the prisoners." The Maryland and Virginia militias would conduct a joint assault.⁷

These plans were changed slightly with the arrival of the United States Marines commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee. Accompanied by Lieutenant J.E.B. Stuart, Lee arrived at Harpers Ferry with the company of Marines about 2:00 a.m. on October 18, some six hours after the Frederick militia, and took immediate command of all military activities. Lee met with the other officers, including Colonel Shriver, and approved the assault plan. He considered it due to the diligence of the militia present that the situation was under control and decided they "should have the privilege of conducting the operations."⁸

Lee requested that each militia company contribute two men to the storming party. However, for some reason, after the men had been selected and were waiting "to discharge the duty of making the assault," Lee changed his mind. Instead, it was announced to the militia officers that "Col Lee had determined to storm the position with Marines alone."

131 years, most histories of the Harpers Ferry raid, including biographies of Robert E. Lee and John Brown, hardly mention Edward Shriver or the movements of the Frederick Militia. If Shriver was discussed at all, he was portrayed quite differently with regard to the preparation for the assault on the Armory engine house. According to the biography of John Brown written by Oswald G. Villard, when Lee "offered the honor of storming the engine house to the volunteer soldiery," Colonel Shriver turned it down, citing as his reason: "These men of mine have wives and children at home. I will not expose them to such risks." Shriver is further said to have stated that Lee is "paid for doing this kind of work," implying that he was not. Villard's book



▲ The interior of the engine house showing the raiders along with their hostages, one of whom was a Frederick resident by the name of George Shope from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* of November 5, 1859.

attributed these purported statements of Edward Shriver to his daughter, Mrs. John A. Tompkins, and her husband during an interview on February 24, 1908.¹⁰

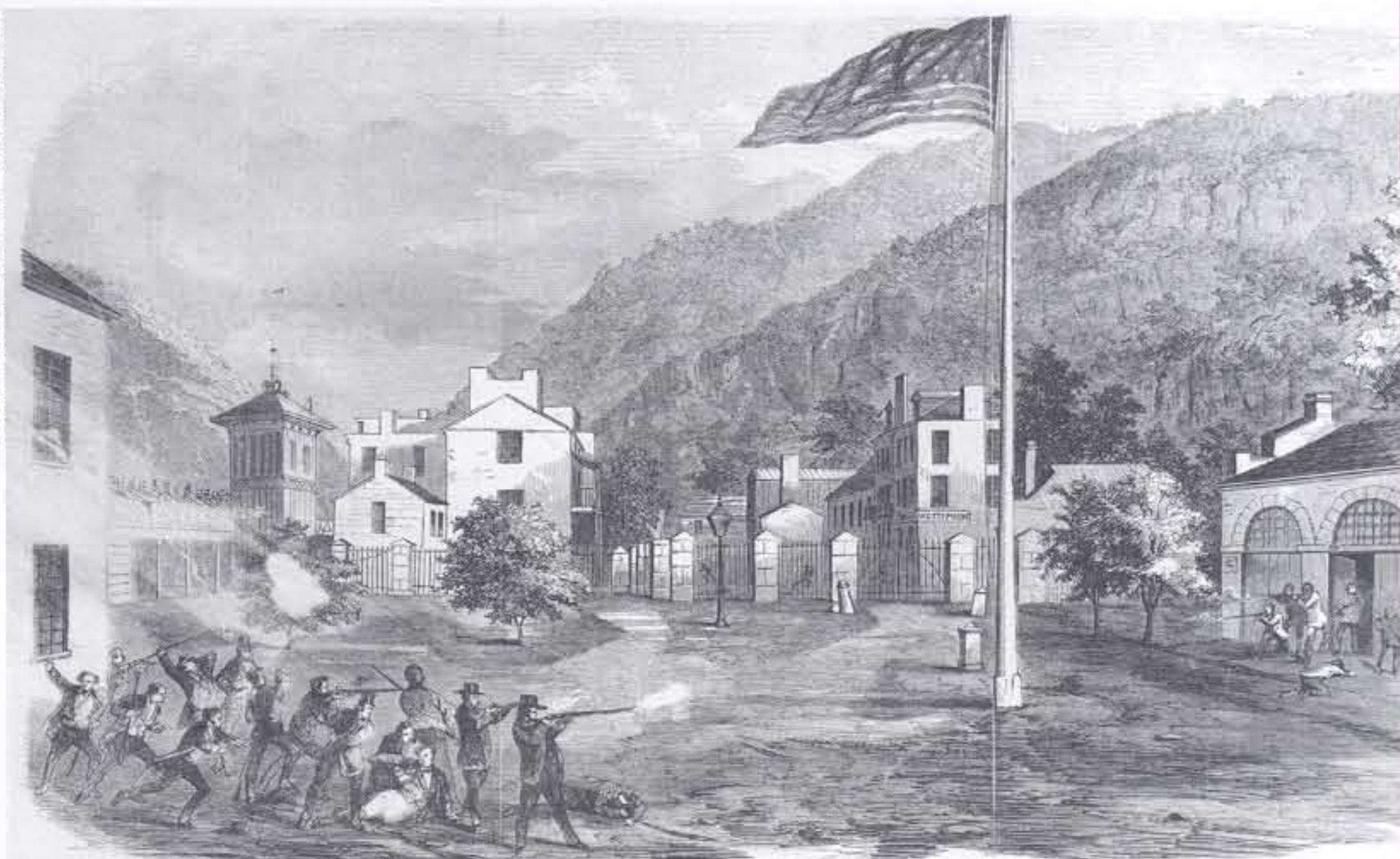
How do we reconcile these two different accounts, particularly when Lee's official report is silent on this issue? Most histories of this event, including Douglas Freeman's *R. E. Lee*, quote from Villard's book. But statements made fifty years after an incident might be considered suspect, as stories can change and grow with the retelling. Given that Villard appears, until recently, to be the only available source for the Shriver statements, it is not surprising that his version of the story has been perpetuated.¹¹

Of course, even if Shriver really had made the statements related by his daughter, they might be understandable. As the militia's role was to protect the home state, the Maryland militia was under no obligation to help any other state and voluntarily went to Virginia solely to assist in the immediate emergency. When Shriver saw that the emergency was over and that the insurgents were confined in the engine house, he may have concluded that his duty had been fulfilled.

Shriver's Harpers Ferry report leaves the modern reader with no sense that Shriver thought himself involved in some great historical event. He was only doing his duty. Yet, over the course of the next six years, what thoughts did he have about those two days at Harpers Ferry? Staunchly pro-Union during the Civil War, Shriver supported the efforts to preserve Maryland as a northern state and, promoted to Brigadier General of the Ninth Brigade in February 1860, assisted in the raising of Union troops from Maryland.¹² As Robert E. Lee and J. E. B. Stuart retreated from Gettysburg in July 1863, did he think about their brief encounter four years earlier?

Ironically, although perhaps not surprisingly considering Maryland's border state status, Shriver's committed Unionist views were not shared by all members of his family. His four nephews all fought for the southern cause – one, who was seventeen years old, rode with Mosby's Rangers and was killed during a skirmish near Washington; another fought with

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▲ A Virginia militia company drives Brown and his men into the engine house on the afternoon of October 17th from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* of November 5, 1859.

the 1st Virginia Cavalry at Gettysburg, where he was wounded twice and captured. His daughter married a Confederate lieutenant she had met at a prisoner of war camp in Frederick.

After the war, Shriver's public service continued, including such positions as postmaster of Baltimore and president of Frederick College. He was also part of the Maryland delegation on the funeral train carrying the body of Abraham Lincoln back to Illinois and was involved with the development and maintenance of what would become Antietam National Cemetery.¹³

For more information on John Brown's Harpers Ferry Raid, see the following *Catoctin History* articles from past issues: *The John Brown Fort: Memory in Black and White*, *The Life and Legend of John Brown*, and *The John Brown Trail*.¹⁴

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- 1 Gregory A. Stiverson, ed., *In Readiness To Do Every Duty Assigned: The Frederick Militia and John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry, October 17–18, 1859* (Annapolis: Maryland State Archives, 1991), 1.
- 2 Clarence "Chip" Jewell and Warren W. Jenkins, *Firefighting in Frederick* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 8; Paul and Rita Gordon, *A Playground of the Civil War* (Frederick, MD: The Heritage Partnership, 1994), 7.
- 3 Thomas J. C. Williams, *The History of Frederick County, Maryland* (1910; reprint, Baltimore: Regional Publishing Co., 1967), 288; William R. Quynn, ed., *The Diary of Jacob Engelbrecht, 1818–1878* (Frederick, MD.: Historical Society of Frederick Co., Maryland, 1976), vol. 3, 262, 323; Samuel S. Shriver, *History of the Shriver Family and Their Connections 1684–1888*. (Baltimore: privately published, 1888), 119–120; "The Work Of Death: General Edward Shriver," *The Daily News* (Frederick, MD.), Obituary, February 25, 1896, 4; and David Shriver Lovelace, *The Shrivvers: Under Two Flags* (Westminster, MD.: Union Mills Homestead, 2008), 2.
- 4 Stiverson, 1, 2.
- 5 Ibid, 4.
- 6 Ibid, 4, 5.
- 7 Ibid, 7.

- 8 Ibid, 8.
- 9 Ibid, 8, 10.
- 10 Oswald G. Villard, *John Brown 1800–1859, a Biography after 50 Years*, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943).
- 11 U.S. Congress. Senate. Select Committee Report No. 278 [Mason Report], 36th Congress, 1st session, June 15, 1860.
- 12 Office of the Adjutant General, *Militia Appointments, 1794–1910*, vol. 7, 1822–1862 (Annapolis: Maryland State Archives), 4B, 20.
- 13 Williams, 288; Quynn, vol. 3, 262, 323; Shriver, 119–120; and "The Work Of Death: General Edward Shriver," *The Daily News* (Frederick, MD.), Obituary, February 25, 1896, 4; and "The Funeral Train Along the Route," *New York Herald*, April 22, 1865.
- 14 Paul A. Shackel, "The John Brown Fort: Memory in Black and White," *Catoctin History*, Issue No. 1 (Frederick, MD: The Catoctin Center for Regional Studies, 2002), 29; Rusty Monhollon, "The Life and Legend of John Brown," *Catoctin History*, Issue No. 8, (Frederick, MD: The Catoctin Center for Regional Studies, 2008), 27; Anna Pritt, "The John Brown Trail," *Catoctin History*, Issue No. 8, (Frederick, MD: The Catoctin Center for Regional Studies, 2008), 42.