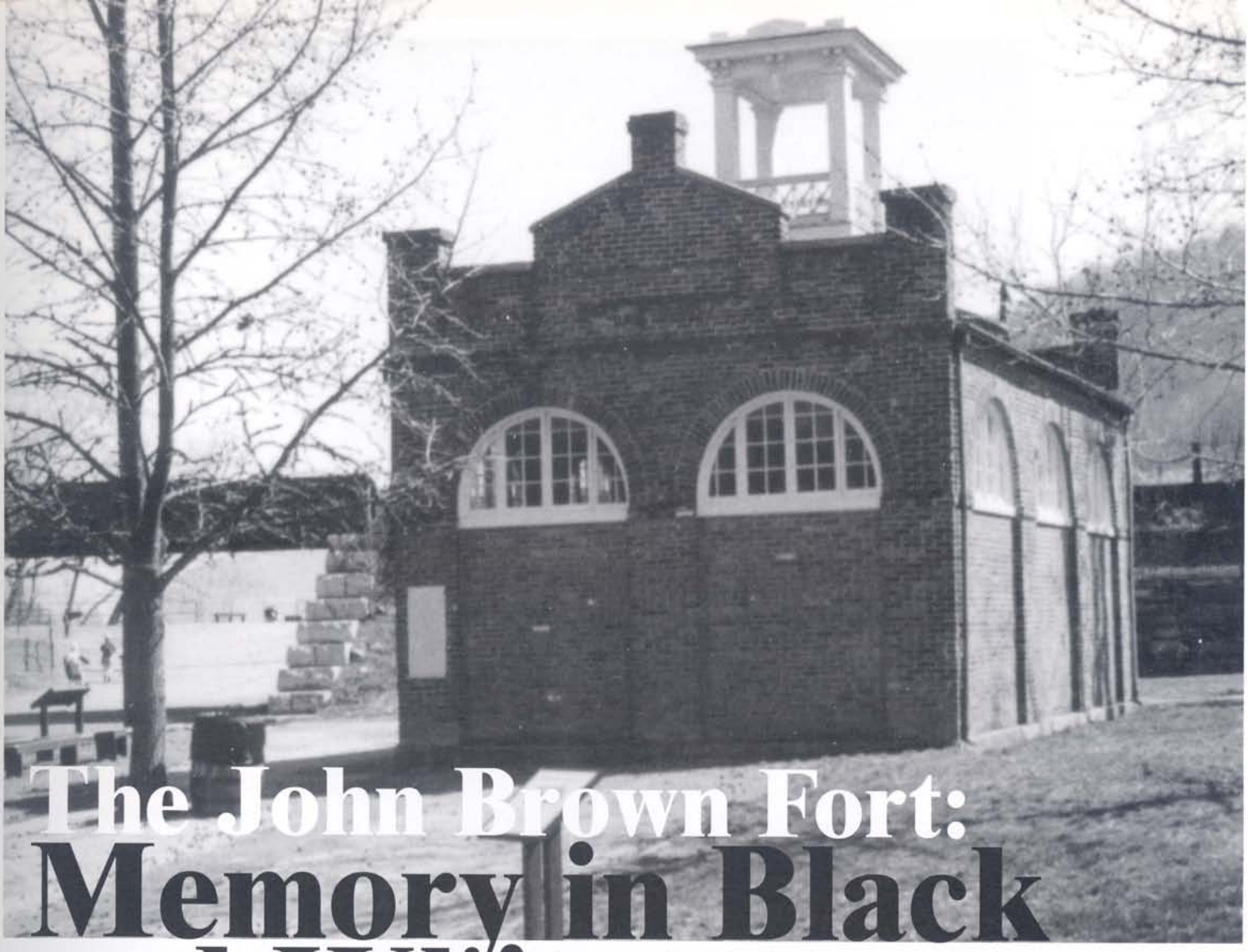


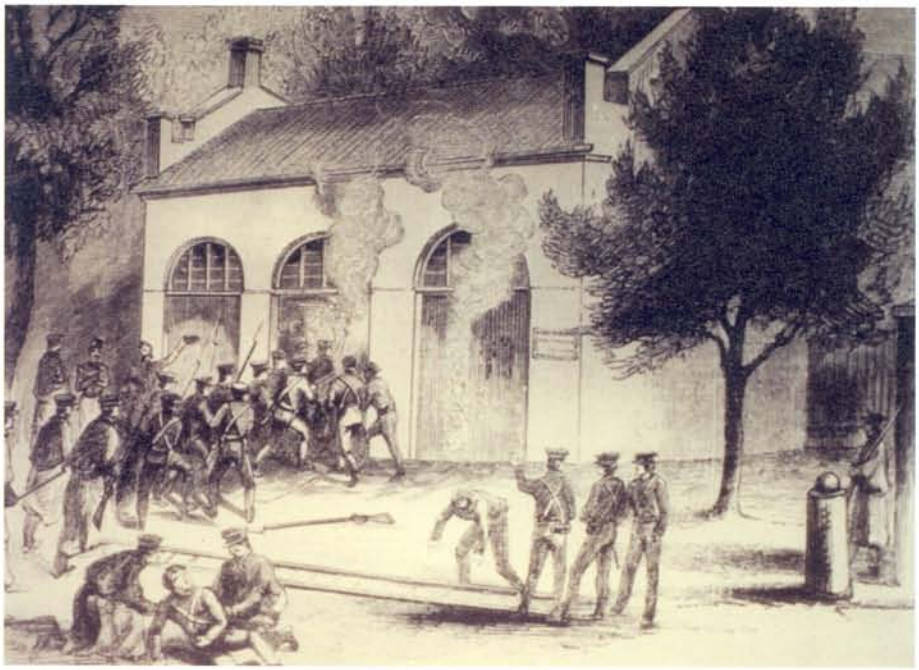
The John Brown Fort: Memory in Black and White

Paul A. Shackel

On the night of October 16, 1859, the abolitionist John Brown and twenty-one of his men captured the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in an effort to obtain the tens of thousands of guns in the complex of buildings lining the Potomac River. Brown wanted the guns to arm local enslaved African Americans, who he believed would revolt and join his cause. Brown planned to create a new state in the southern mountains, and continue liberating slaves throughout the South. Even if his plans failed, he believed it would serve to consolidate northern emotions and the hatred for slavery and thus promote a crisis.[1] The day after attacking the arsenal and taking hostages, Brown and his men were trapped in the armory with a growing and increasingly intoxicated crowd gathering around the complex. Brown, his volunteers, and the hostages took refuge in the armory's fire engine house, a small brick building located near the entrance to the armory grounds. A group of marines under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee finally overthrew Brown at the engine house.[2]

John Brown's Fort, the name by which the engine house quickly became known, now stands in Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, visited annually by 400,000 tourists. The building's placement seems natural as it is positioned in the midst of a historic and monumental landscape. Without knowing the fort's physical history one can easily believe that its appearance and symbolic meaning are timeless, rooted in the abolitionist cause for equal rights. But appearances can be deceiving. The fort has not always been revered by the majority of Americans, and much like the ark of the covenant, it has been moved from place to place, often honored only by a small and select group of people. It has taken refuge at several oases during its 150-year existence — displayed and revered only to be moved again. John Brown's Fort now rests only about one hundred feet from where it stood on that October night in 1859, but the distance has to be measured less in feet than in terms of an odyssey that lasted 1400 miles, more than one hundred years, and through several shifts in public perception.

National and community groups have always used and manipulated histories about the past for various social and political reasons and the stories associated with the John Brown Fort are no exception. Preservation of public symbols and interpretation of past events in civic arenas influence people's beliefs about historic myths and the current attitudes they serve. Historic sites help affirm Americans' connection with a particular heritage and purvey messages such as an "American founding myth." These historical presentations can be understood in the context of the changing perceptions of history. During the early twentieth century, for example, historians created an image of Abraham



Col. Robert E. Lee's troops storming the engine house in Harpers Ferry to capture John Brown and his men on October 18, 1859. (Harpers Ferry National Historical Park)

Lincoln as the savior of the Union and the Lincoln Memorial was erected under this pretense. By the 1930s, some historians of the period rejected the notion that Lincoln was an emancipator, and they claimed that any such notion was "unhistorical" and unsupported by fact. Through the 1940s and 1950s African Americans and others united at the Lincoln Memorial to stage civil rights protests. It became a place to legitimate black voices in national politics. But by 1964 many African Americans became disenchanted with Lincoln as a symbol. Novelist John Oliver Killens wrote, "You give us moody Abraham Lincoln, but many of us prefer John Brown, whom most of you hold in contempt and regard as fanatic."[3] At that point in time the radical and forceful tendencies of John Brown became increasingly popular among social activists for their crusades against social and political injustice. Much like other national icons, the histories of John Brown and the John Brown Fort have been contested, changed, and used to foster a political ideology.[4]

The John Brown myth building began in Kansas in the 1850s. An east coast newspaper correspondent, James Redpath, went to Kansas in search of stories of the Kansan civil war. He sensationalized Brown's efforts and began calling John Brown a "warrior saint." Redpath wrote that he had "seen the predestined leader of the second and the holier American Revolution."[5] His reputation as a great abolitionist grew tremendously and he sought council with other major abolitionist figures, such as Frederick Douglass and Franklin Sanborn. Brown revealed to them his secret plan to attack the south, choosing the queen of the slave states, Virginia, as his first target.[6]

Northerners received news of the Harpers Ferry raid with varying degrees of condemnation and approval. Between Brown's capture and his hanging for treason on December 2, 1859, northern abolitionists intensified the John Brown martyr myth. Wendell Philips wrote that Harpers Ferry "...is the Lexington of today....Virginia is a pirate ship, and John Brown sails the sea a Lord High Admiral of the Almighty...."[7] Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed him to be a saint and "if he shall suffer, it will make the gallows glorious like the cross."[8] John Brown also participated in the creation of his own martyrdom. While awaiting his execution he wrote his brother Jeremiah that he was worth "inconceivably more to hang than for any other purpose."[9]

Influential intellectual centers in the northern states quickly used John Brown as a rallying point for their antislavery cause. For instance, John Brown's death was continually described as martyrdom and James Redpath asserted "History will place John Brown, in her American Pantheon, not among Virginia's culprits, but as high, at least, as Virginia's greatest chiefs."[10]

The condition of the engine house during the Union's early occupation during the Civil War was described by Robert Gould Shaw, later known for leading the Massachusetts 54th Volunteer Infantry, the first northern organized African-American regiment, in a letter to his sister Susie: "There are three or four loopholes which he made to fire through, and marks of musket balls on the walls inside. It seems the worst place he could have chosen to defend against an attack; for when the doors are shut, it is like a brick box, as all the windows are high up, and the loopholes are so small that they give no range at all to the men firing through them." The engine house became a rallying point for northern troops and several accounts chronicle the singing of the familiar tune "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave" as troops marched passed the fort.[11] While other armory buildings were damaged or destroyed during the Civil War, the John Brown Fort stood throughout the fighting.

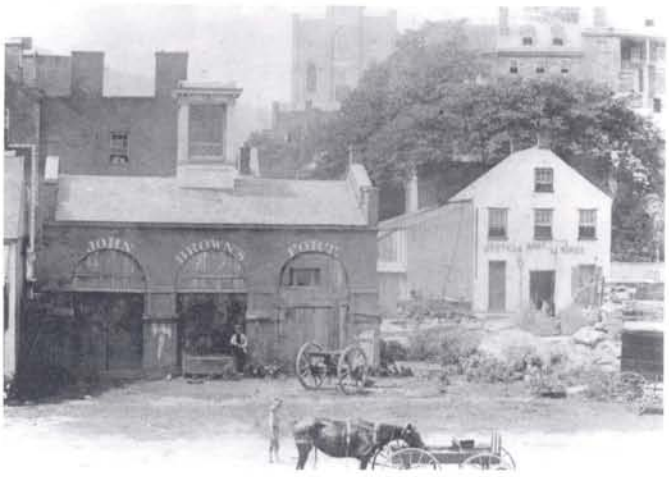
Immediately after the war the John Brown Fort stood neglected. The U.S. Government sold the fort along with other government property in an 1869 Harpers Ferry auction. From the 1870s to 1890, during the martyr-building years of John Brown, Harpers Ferry became a Mecca for summer tourists and curiosity seekers. The fort received little care in private ownership, although the words "John Brown's Fort" were painted on the engine house. Advertisements often ran in Washington and Baltimore papers for special excursions on both the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to Harpers Ferry. Summer homes sprang up as it became fashionable to visit Civil War sites.[12]

During the 1880s writers increasingly opposed some of John Brown's abolitionist deeds and many northerners found it difficult to justify his acts during the mending years between the north and the south. As John Brown's reputation diminished, little was done to enhance the integrity of the fort that had earlier been an important symbol.

Townspeople also felt threatened by the possibility of an influx of African Americans coming into town to pay homage to the fort. Solomon

Brown, a long time employee of the Smithsonian Institution, was a leading preservationist in the Washington, D.C. black community, especially in the Anacostia area. Active in African-American literature and historical societies he was "renowned in the 1880s and 1890s for organizing annual trips to Harpers Ferry on the anniversary of John Brown's 1859 raid."[13] Because of this interest in the John Brown Fort within the African-American community, some Harpers Ferry residents wanted to rid the town of the fort.

In 1888 the editor of the local Harpers Ferry newspaper wrote in favor of moving the fort to New York and exclaimed "[and] joy go with it."[14] In 1891 the Fort was sold again, this time to the John Brown Fort Company, a group founded by several government officials who wanted to exhibit the building at 1341 Washburn Street, close to the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The John Brown Fort Company dismantled the structure and shipped it to Chicago by rail. It was said to have been reconstructed carefully and the "slightest differences can not be found in the construction of the building."[15]



Harpers Ferry became a popular destination for summer tourists and curiosity seekers after the Civil War, and many came to see both the Civil War ruins as well as the John Brown Fort. (Harpers Ferry National Historical Park)

Unfortunately, the fort was not rebuilt until October, the last month of the Columbian Exposition. Poor weather kept many visitors away from the exhibit. Collecting only eleven paid admissions at fifty cents each, the John Brown Fort Company lost about $60,000, the cost of moving and rebuilding the structure in Chicago. The John Brown Fort Company abandoned the structure and in 1895 *The Chicago Tribune* published the "Ignoble use of John Brown's Fort," stating that the fort was being moved so that it could become part of a stable for delivery wagons for a new department store.[16]

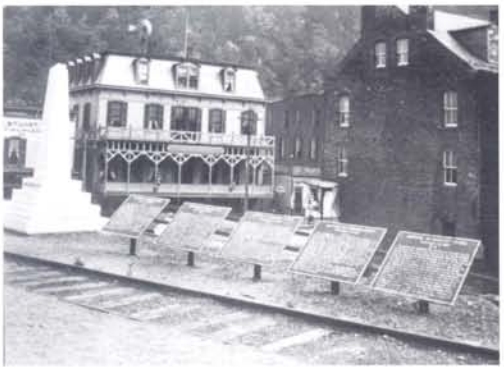
Kate Field, a newspaper reporter from Washington, D.C., was concerned with the problems of post Civil War African Americans. One of her missions included raising funds in the late 1860s to purchase the John Brown farm and grave at North Elba, near Lake Placid in New York, in order to save the site from ruin and decay. Field successfully used her column as a vehicle to solicit funds for the restoration. She also campaigned for donations to move John Brown's Fort from Chicago back to Harpers Ferry to be close to Storer College, a school established after the Civil War primarily for the education of newly freed African Americans. The fort could not be placed at its original location since the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad's tracks had been realigned and about nine feet of fill lay on top of the original foundations. An obelisk was eventually placed on the railroad berm, above its former location. In 1895 Field contracted a West Virginia farmer, Alexander Murphy, to deed five acres of his farm for the placement of the fort several miles from its original location. Apparently rumors also developed about reburying John Brown's remains at Harpers Ferry. The editor of the local newspaper proclaimed he was against disinterring John Brown's remains and erecting a monument, although the paper favored the return of the fort "where Robert E. Lee captured the old villain"[17]

The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad agreed to ship the building's bricks to Harpers Ferry at no cost. While all of the bricks from the fort were on the grounds of the Murphy farm in November 1895, an additional 8000 bricks were purchased in Charles Town in order to rebuild the structure close to its original dimension. This means that about a third of the bricks in the fort today date to 1895, and thus never witnessed the John Brown raid.[18]

While the fort was a rallying point for federal troops during the war, and many middle class tourists visited the building through Reconstruction, the structure's meaning transformed during the Jim Crow era around the turn of the century, when African Americans were subjected to new forms of racist restrictions and abuses. While African Americans may have implicitly revered the John Brown Fort as a symbol of their abolitionist struggle, the structure became an explicit and prominent symbol among African Americans from this point. For instance, in July 1896, the first national convention of the National League of Colored Women met in Washington, D.C. and took a day trip to the John Brown Fort on the Murphy Farm. This meeting, led by Mary Church Terrell, is the first known event of African Americans explicitly embracing the fort as a symbol of their struggle for freedom and equality.[19]

With the advent of the Jim Crow era and the southern revisionist movement in history and American literature, many writers perceived John Brown as a villain and a murderer. For instance, in the 1920s Edgar Lee Masters wrote *Lee, A Dramatic Poem*, in which John Brown plays the role of a spectator and vengeful instigator of the downfall of General Lee, who had commanded the troops that captured Brown in October 1859. Hill Preeble Wilson's 1913 work was not very sympathetic to his character and Robert Penn Warren's *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929) interpreted the last letters of John Brown as a need for self justification and claimed that Brown was a courageous common thief. James Malin in *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six* (1942) claimed that Brown was "more vile than anything his worst enemies have pictured him." Later, C. Van Woodward emphasized the case for Brown's insanity as nineteen affidavits claimed that insanity was inherited from his mother's family.[20]

In the midst of the southern revisionist movement there were prominent voices who resisted this new paradigm. A major John Brown biography written in 1909 by W.E.B. Du Bois, an African-American activist, recaptured and reinforced the sympathy for John Brown much in the way James Redpath had fifty years before. Calling John Brown a prophet, Du Bois claimed that Brown was justified in his actions at Harpers Ferry.[21] Of particular importance in demonstrating the struggle for human rights was John Steuart Curry's "The Tragic Prelude," a mural painted in the late 1930s in the Kansas State House. While Curry was criticized for his treatment of John Brown and the slavery issue, some art historians claim he was as "socially committed as anything one was likely to see at the time."[22] In the mural proslavery and freesoil forces face each other with the dead of the Civil War at their feet. The immediate background depicts the suffering and humiliation of slaves. In the rear is a tornado with settlers moving westward. John Brown dominates the foreground, clutching a bible and a rifle. He is portrayed as a man possessed, a man of action and commitment, willing to use force



The original location of the John Brown Fort was buried underneath a berm carrying the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad's realigned tracks. An obelisk marking the site of the engine house was eventually placed on the berm in the 1890s, alongside markers that described events of the Civil War in Harpers Ferry. (Harpers Ferry National Historical Park)

The National Park Service moved the John Brown Fort back to Harpers Ferry in 1968, to a location near the building's original site. (Harpers Ferry National Historical Park)

for a cause and the bible to justify his action.

While the fort stood on the Murphy Farm in the early 1900s it served as a place of homage for people who immortalized John Brown. The Niagara Movement, predecessor to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), used the fort as a central focus during its meeting in Harpers Ferry. In August 1906 the Second Niagara Movement Convention was held in Harpers Ferry and members visited the John Brown Fort on the Murphy farm. The Niagara Movement was founded in Fort Erie, Ontario, Canada, in July 1905 with fifty-four members from eighteen states.[23] Nearly one hundred visitors came to Harpers Ferry for the second meeting of the Niagara Movement. While in town they celebrated John Brown's Day and came to the fort on August 17, 1906 to commemorate John Brown's 100th birthday and the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Osawatomie in Kansas. (In actuality John Brown's 100th birthday would have been in 1900.) At six o'clock in the morning the conference participants left the convention site, Storer College, and started their journey to the fort, about a mile away. As they approached the fort they formed a single-file procession, "took off their shoes and socks, and walked barefoot as if treading on holy ground." [24] Following a speech the group marched around the fort and sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," with supplemental verses of the John Brown song. They then entered the fort and climbed the wooden bell tower to view the Shenandoah Valley.[25] The participants also listened to a prayer led by Richard T. Greener. He offered personal recollections of John Brown and told the crowd that when he served as consul at Vladivostok he heard Russian troops burst into song: "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave."[26]

Max Barber, one of the founders of the Niagara Movement, wrote in *The Voice of the Negro* about his experience at Harpers Ferry and the John Brown Fort:

> I have heard men speak of the peculiar sensation, the thrill which comes to one as he stands in the shadow of some mighty structure or on a spot where some great deed was wrought that perceptibly advanced the world. Men have journeyed to the other side of the world to drink a draught of air that played around a Calvary, Trafalgar, or a Runnymede, and they have felt well paid for their trouble. I too have known what it meant to meditate at Valley Forge, Queenstown, and Gettysburg. But I must confess that I had never yet felt as I felt at Harpers Ferry.[27]

Later that day W.E.B. Du Bois read the Niagara Address to the delegation. Max Barber remarked that the address "was profound and scholarly and claimed the intellectual admiration of the entire convention."[28] Du Bois' tone allowed others in the press to label him as a militant and agitator. He told the congregation of the increasing loss of political and social rights for African Americans. "We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a freeborn American, political, civil, and social; and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America."[29] He continued:

> The battle we wage is not for ourselves alone but for all true Americans. It is a fight for ideals, lest this, our common fatherland, false in founding, become in truth the land of the thief and the home of the slave — a byword and a hissing among the nations for its sounding pretensions and pitiful accomplishments.[30]

He claimed that he did not believe in obtaining equal rights through violence, but,

> We do believe in John Brown, in that incarnate spirit of justice, that hatred of a lie, the willingness to sacrifice money, reputation, and life itself on the altar of right. And here on the scene of John Brown's martyrdom we reconsecrate ourselves, our honor, our property to final emancipation of the race which John Brown died to make free.... Thank God for John Brown! Thank God for Garrison and Douglass! Sumner and Philips, Nat Turner and Robert Gould Shaw... [31]

Three years later, in 1909, the College Trustees of Storer College voted to buy the building. Dismantled in 1910, the John Brown Fort was rebuilt near Lincoln Hall on campus grounds. Even with the southern revisionist movement in full force, blacks continued to use the fort as a symbol of their cause for social justice. Storer College struggled financially through most of its existence, however, and after the Supreme Court decision on desegregation the college closed in 1955. The National Park Service eventually acquired the grounds of the college, including John Brown's Fort.[32]

The fort remained on the grounds of the former college after it closed, far from the mainstream of tourists who increasingly visited the town after the Civil War centennial. It was finally moved again in 1968, this time by the National Park Service. Unable to place the fort upon its original foundations because of the railroad tracks' realignment, the National Park Service relocated the fort to the old arsenal square that Brown had captured over 100 years before. It sits in lower town Harpers Ferry, about 100 feet from its original location.[33]

The move occurred during the height of social upheaval and racial strife in the 1960s, and in the same year that Detroit and Newark burned and brought international attention to racial inequalities in the United States. That same year Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were

assassinated and President Lyndon Johnson's "new society," based on the social reform policies of John F. Kennedy, continued to be implemented. Today, Harpers Ferry is a highly visited national park, and John Brown and the John Brown Fort contribute significantly to visitors' recognition of the place. The fort is surrounded by a nicely manicured lawn that contributes to the creation of a monumental landscape that commemorates the deeds of the abolitionist and his men. It is once again easily accessible and part of the national historical consciousness. While the fort is accessible to all Americans, it still remains an important symbol to the African-American community. In fact, in September of 1994 the West Virginia chapter of the NAACP held a ceremony at the fort as it celebrated its 50th anniversary.[34]

The John Brown Fort is a monument that has physically changed through its 150-year existence. What has not changed significantly is how the fort has been embraced by a large portion of the African-American community. The John Brown Fort serves as one of the few Civil War shrines/monuments claimed by the African-American community. After the Civil War, the nation constructed many monuments, as both testimony to moral reformation and justification of the most violent epoch in American history. Monuments were placed throughout the American landscape with uncontroversial inscriptions. These inscriptions do not mention slavery or African-Americans, and they generally justify the "Lost Cause" or "state sovereignty." The common soldier portrayed in these monuments is always understood to be white Anglo-Saxon.[35]

Among the thousands of Civil War monuments, only a few have African-American representation. Two monuments show a single black surrounded by other white soldiers, and the third is the Shaw memorial in Boston, a local white hero who led the first black troops, the 54th Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, into battle. This memorial shows an image of Shaw elevated on horseback, adjacent to marching African-American troops. The monument can be interpreted as more of a monument to Shaw than the infantry.[36] A fourth one was recently dedicated in the Shaw neighborhood in Washington, D.C. to commemorate the black Civil War soldiers and sailors. The introduction of African-American troops into the Civil War played an influential role in changing the tide of the war. Yet the lack of African-American representation among Civil War monuments is noticeable. As the historian Kirk Savage writes, "public monuments do not arise as if by natural law to celebrate the deserving; they are built by people with sufficient power to marshal (or impose) public consent for their erection."[37]

There are few memorials that the African-American community can embrace that relate to the moral struggles of the Civil War. The John Brown Fort is one such memorial that symbolizes the fight against inequality and whites and blacks in varying degrees have embraced it. The histories of John Brown have changed among whites along with the political climate of this country. But the John Brown Fort has always been revered by the black community as well as by other minority groups. Many leading African-American citizens visited it on the Murphy farm for fifteen years, and it even found a home on an African-American college campus for over fifty years.

The story of John Brown and the John Brown Fort is more than simply an examination of one person or an analysis of a historic site. It is a symbol of resistance of the oppressed for various ethnic groups. Interpretations of America's pasts continually change based on present values and social and political strategies. As the social and political atmosphere changes in this country, so too will the histories of John Brown and many of America's other national heroes and historic sites.

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