

This Day in History... September 12, 1862

Civil War Battle for Harpers Ferry

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Nestled between the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers in eastern West Virginia, Harpers Ferry was named after one of its earliest settlers, Robert Harper. He built a ferry to cross the Potomac, opening a passage to the Shenandoah Valley and travels further west.

Years later, George Washington came to survey the Potomac for bypass canal suitability. The experience prompted him to propose Harpers Ferry as the site for a national armory. Constructed on land purchased from the heirs of Robert Harper, the US Armory and Arsenal at Harpers Ferry brought industry to the area. The population in the small town exploded as business boomed.

One of the town's most famous events occurred in 1859, when abolitionist John Brown plotted a rebellion to free Virginia slaves. His plan was to raid the arsenal, arm his followers, and lead a revolt that would end slavery in the state. On October 16, along with 21 other men, both black and white, Brown attacked the arsenal. A witness to the commotion alerted townsfolk in and around Harpers Ferry. In a short time, local militia, as well as the US Navy, had responded.

Based on a portrait by Charles P. Polk.



Brown and his men, who were underarmed and lacking adequate ammunition, retreated to an old engine house to seek cover. A force of Marines led by Colonel Robert E. Lee quickly subdued the uprising. Brown was tried and hanged for treason against the State of Virginia. He became a martyr in the North and a villain in the South. His death inspired the marching song "John Brown's Body," a predecessor to the still famous "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Before his execution, it has been said that Brown predicted a civil war in the near future. And some believe that John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry was a catalyst to the Civil War that followed only two years later.

Following Virginia's vote to secede from the Union on April 18, 1861, Roger Jones, a federal officer at Harpers Ferry, sent an urgent message to Washington that the armory was in danger. He said thousands of troops would be needed to defend it, but no one answered him. Since the South did not have the means to produce weapons on the scale that the armory could, he decided it was best to burn it. In doing so, he and his men destroyed over 15,000 weapons before retreating. However, the damage to the arsenal was not significant. The Confederates that arrived took the remaining 4,000 weapons and shipped the functioning machinery South.

Even without the armory, control of Harpers Ferry was still important to the war effort. It was a crucial transportation hub on both the Union and the Confederate supply lines. Both sides had a vested interest in controlling the town. But its location, in a valley surrounded by high ridges and water, made Harpers Ferry an easy target. It was almost indefensible.

Within 10 days, Colonel Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson arrived and took command of the Confederate forces there. He remained for two months, drilling his men and building fortifications. However, in June, his successor, Joseph E. Johnson, abandoned Harpers Ferry for Winchester, which he believed to be more important. Union forces then took over Harpers Ferry in July. They managed to fight off a few smaller

Stamp pictures Lee, Jackson, and Stratford Hall.



attacks until the Battle of Harpers Ferry, which began on September 12, 1862.

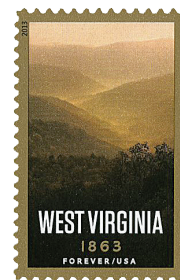
Robert E. Lee was planning his first invasion of the North, known as the Maryland Campaign, which included an assault on Harpers Ferry. He sent Jackson, who split the army into three parts. Each attacked the town and armory from a different direction, taking advantage of the neighboring heights. They successfully surrounded the Union troops and rained down artillery fire for three days. Though about 1,500 Northern soldiers escaped, the majority of the Union soldiers – over 12,700 – surrendered. It was the largest single capture of Union troops during the whole war.

Though the attack on Harpers Ferry was successful, Lee's invasion of the North was not. When it failed, the Confederates again abandoned Harpers Ferry, and Union troops reoccupied it. The town and armory changed hands several more times between then and August 1864, when Union General Philip Sheridan took it for the last time and made it his base of operations for the Valley Campaign.

During Sheridan's time at Harpers Ferry, he and his men discovered an interesting Confederate secret. For some time, they had been confused at how Confederate ranger John S. Mosby was able to avoid capture every time they pursued him. While searching for guerrillas, one of Sheridan's men fell through a trapdoor in an abandoned building. Following the underground tunnel, they discovered a huge cavern that could hold 300 horses, uncovering Mosby's secret.

The area was designated a national monument in 1944 before it was made into a national historic park in 1963.

Stamp pictures Sheridan along with Grant and Sherman.



Issued for the 150th anniversary of West Virginia's statehood, which occurred during the Civil War.



Rushed to the scene of the raid without his uniform, Lee led the Marines wearing civilian clothes.



From the 1995 Civil War Sheet

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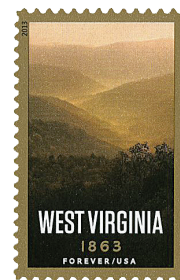
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