



Potomac River rocks harbor smallmouth. They stand like sentinels above Harpers Ferry and have seen a lot of history go by. Photo by King Montgomery

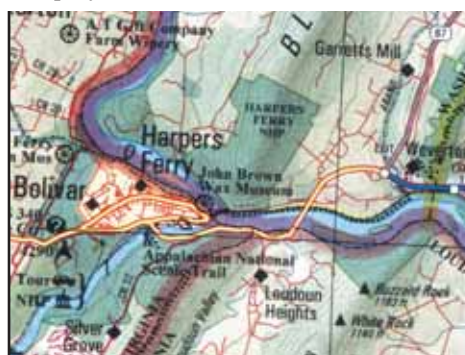
Harpers Ferry

Crossroads of History

By King Montgomery

Harpers Ferry, West Virginia used to belong to the Old Dominion, but the American Civil War changed all that. Now the scenic village sits peacefully at the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers, where Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland all come together. Much of Harpers Ferry is in the National Historic Park, which also includes the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and attendant locks. Harpers Ferry also is home to quaint shops, restaurants, bed & breakfast estab-

Virginia, Maryland, and West Virginia converge at Harpers Ferry. Courtesy of DeLorme Mapping Company



lishments, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, and some pretty good fishing opportunities. It truly sits at the crossroads of American history.

A Place with a Past

Harpers Ferry is the lowest point in the Mountain State at 247 feet above sea level on the Potomac River. The area first was settled by Native Americans thousands of years before Europeans moved westward from the Atlantic



View of Harpers Ferry from the Maryland Heights. The Potomac River is to the right and the Shenandoah River comes in from the left. Photo by Steve Probasco.

Coast. First occupied in 1732, one Robert Harper purchased the land in 1747, built a settlement, and operated ferries across the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers.

In 1785, George Washington, in his capacity as president of the Potowmack Company, traveled to Harper's Ferry—the apostrophe was dropped some years later—to determine the need for bypass canals in the scheme of the C & O Canal system then being considered. In 1794 President George Washington asked Congress to establish a new federal armory and arsenal at Harpers Ferry, and in 1796 construction began on 125 acres along the rivers. In a few years, the United States Armory and Arsenal at Harpers Ferry joined the armory at Springfield, Massachusetts as the sources of small arms and other weapons for the US Army. In the years between 1801 and its

A Daguerreotype of John Brown by the African-American artist Augustus Washington. This previously unpublished image remained in a family for five generations before it was discovered. It sold in the Cowan Auctions December 2007 Historic Americana Sale for \$97,750. (Photo courtesy of Cowan Auction)



destruction in 1861 to prevent its capture in the Civil War, the armory produced over 600,000 muskets, rifles, and pistols.

A little known fact is that members of George Washington's family moved to Harpers Ferry, and Washington's great-great nephew, Colonel Lewis Washington, was a hostage during the infamous raid by John Brown in 1859.

His Soul is Marching On

On October 18, 1859 in the early morning hours, the radical and violent abolitionist John Brown led a group of 21 men, five of whom were black, in a raid on the weapons and ammunition complex at Harpers Ferry. Brown's followers killed a baggage porter for the B&O Railroad that ran near the armory and captured several buildings. Brown's goal was to capture weapons to



A view down Washington Street. Photo by Hay Hardy

give to slaves he could lead in an armed rebellion against the government.

Local militia responded to the attack, and Brown's men were pinned down in a small, brick fire station that came to be called John Brown's Fort. (A replica of the original stands at Harpers Ferry today.) Soon, a contingent of 86 US Marines arrived by train; they were led by Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee, accompanied by an aide, Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart. Poor Lee had been on leave and was the nearest senior officer to be found to quell the uprising.

Negotiations with the firebrand Brown failed, so Lee, never one to hesitate to attack as the Union would later learn, ordered the Marines to storm the station, and the raiders were either killed or captured. Brown soon was tried for treason, convicted, and hanged. His ill-fated raid was a significant catalyst for the brutal and deadly American Civil War, which began a year later.

The War Between the States

Quiet little Harpers Ferry changed hands at least six times between 1861 and 1865. When Virginia seceded from the Union in April 1861, the US Army garrison tried to destroy the weapons-making machinery and the arsenal, but was only partially successful. The surviving equipment was taken to Richmond where arms were produced to support the Confederacy; the production of weapons never returned to Harpers Ferry.

In September 1862, General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia crossed the Potomac River into Maryland. He sent General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson to neutralize the Union garrison at Harpers Ferry. Since Harpers Ferry is surrounded by high ground, it isn't a very defensible place. Within a few days, Jackson's artillery rained fire from the heights, and the Union force surrendered.

Over 12,000 men and large stores of supplies were captured.

Jackson moved the bulk of his force to join Lee's main body just to the north near Sharpsburg, Maryland at Antietam Creek. He left Major General A. P. Hill and his troops to secure Harpers Ferry. The bloody battle at Antietam almost was a resounding victory for the Union forces under General George B. McClellan, but Hill quickly brought his men up from Harpers Ferry to stabilize the battlefield and allow the Southerners to retreat back over the Potomac River into Virginia. The battlefield at Sharpsburg and Harpers Ferry were in Union hands.

Shortly after the Civil War, Harpers Ferry, along with Berkeley and Jefferson Counties, was separated from Virginia and incorporated into West Virginia forming the panhandle of West Virginia that we know today.

Since 1944, most of Harpers Ferry, the battlegrounds, and the surrounding heights in West Virginia, Virginia, and Maryland as well as the remnants of the C & O Canal belong to the Harpers Ferry National Historic Park, a part of the US National Park Service.

History All Around

The Armory buildings along the Potomac River are mostly gone, and a replica of John Brown's Fort, the old pumping station, sits closer to the confluence of the rivers. Many of the historical buildings in the lower town are restored, and park rangers take visitors on tours showing life as it was in the past. Ranger tours take from one to three hours, so plan on spending a few days in Harpers Ferry to see it all. Day trippers, however, can see most of the main sites and enjoy a nice lunch at the town's restaurants or a picnic on the banks of the rivers.

Trails lead to the major high ground above Harpers Ferry, and visitors can stand where cannon once poured death and destruction on to the town from the Maryland, Loudon, and Bolivar Heights.

The Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, conceived by George Washington and others of his time, was constructed from 1828 to 1850 and remained in use for 74 years. Originally designed to stretch from Georgetown in the District of Columbia to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the canal never made it beyond Cumberland, Maryland. By the time it reached Cumberland, the canal was already obsolete—railroads across the new country grew by leaps and bounds during the 22 years it took the canal to reach its terminus—and America's goods and passengers traveled on the rails. Today, tourists can see surviving sections of the canal and several of the 74 locks that raised and lowered canal boats as they progressed up or down canal.

Almost (Fishing) Heaven

The Upper Potomac River—the portion

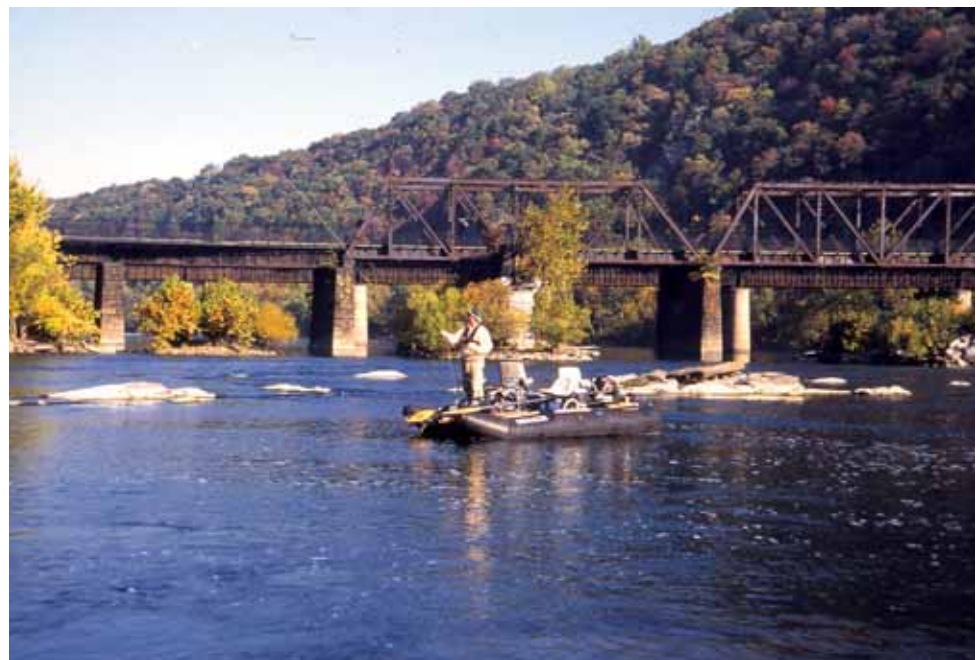
of the river above Great Falls and distinct from the tidal river—is a fertile fish factory that can yield some pretty good fishing, particularly for smallmouth bass and sunfish. The area around Harpers Ferry is excellent in habitat and water quality. It is strewn with large rocks and terraced with rock ledges. This geological factor severely hindered the digging of the C&O Canal, but today it constitutes the main natural structure that smallmouth bass seek. Find the rocks in either river, preferably with deeper water nearby, and you've found the fish.

Water stargrass and other aquatic vegetation is another fish attracter on the rivers,

sunfishes hunt and hide here. Look for trees adjacent to drop offs into deeper water.

Man-made structure consists mostly of bridge pilings that support the road and rail bridges across the rivers. The various sunfishes—primarily bluegill, redbreast sunfish, and crappie—congregate along the pilings on the down current side. Trees invariably hang up on the abutments during high water, and this marriage of natural and man-made structure makes an unbeatable combination for holding fish.

Bryan and Debbie Kelly run their Angler's Inn bed & breakfast year round



Virginia guide John Hayes fishes below the Potomac River rail bridge at Harpers Ferry. Photo by King Montgomery

particularly where it grows near rocks or ledges. The heavy floods a few years ago scoured the bottom clean of most vegetation, but the last several years of low rainfall and clear water have stimulated a resurgence of aquatic plant growth—in some places too much so.

Periodic high water and floods also deposit uprooted trees in the rivers and drop hundreds along the banks. The tangled branches in the water provide food and cover for many creatures on the lower end of the food chain, and the bass and other

and cater to visitors, tourists, and fishermen. From spring through fall for the past dozen years, Bryan has guided light tackle and fly anglers in his handmade drift boat on the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers. He knows the waters and can put anglers onto fish. Other guests at the Angler's Inn take advantage of the sites in the Harpers Ferry National Historic Park; the fine shops, taverns, and restaurants; and the hiking, kayaking, and tubing available in the area.

Marylander Mark Kovach has guided in



Remains of the old Shenandoah River bridge at the confluence with the Potomac. Photo by Beau Beasley

A reproduction of John Brown's fort sits near the confluence of the rivers. Photo by Beau Beasley.

this region in his rubber rafts for over a quarter of a century, and he had known these waters through good times and bad. With his trademark hat (if it hasn't fallen apart since last I fished with him) and brushy moustache, Kovach is an institution nearing legend on the upper Potomac River. He is a superb angler, a fine guide, and a knowledgeable and entertaining gentleman. He has several guides working for his Mark Kovach Fishing Services.

Virginian John B. Hayes, who was mentored by his friend Mark Kovach, is another excellent float guide who can put smallmouth bass in the raft with spinning or fly tackle. He also has a little kicker motor so he can go back upstream a ways to fish in the spot where bass were just caught. And his shore lunches, as those of Kovach,

are works of culinary art.

These three guides—Kelly, Kovach, and Hayes—are from the three states that converge at the meeting of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers at Harpers Ferry. They work together on and off the river, sharing information and helping each other out when needed. You simply can't go wrong with these guys.

This part of the beautiful Mountain State around Harpers Ferry, Shepherdstown, and Charles Town is full of neat things to do in the outdoors, and it is very family friendly. It's a great place for history buffs, naturalists, photographers, birdwatchers, kayakers, boaters, rafters, hikers (the headquarters of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy is in Harpers Ferry), hunters, and anglers. There are charming towns and villages all around,

Harpers Ferry Information

Harpers Ferry National Historic Park, 304-535-6298, www.nps.gov/hafe.

Harpers Ferry Historic Town Foundation, 304-535-2030, www.harpersferryfoundation.org.

Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce, Inc., 800-624-0577, www.JeffersonCounty.com.

The Angler's Inn, Bryan & Debbie Kelly, 304-535-1239, www.theanglersinn.com.

White Fly Shoppe in nearby Shepherdstown, WV, 304-876-8030. (Owned by Bryan Kelly.)

Mark Kovach Fishing Services, 301-588-8742, www.mkfs.com.

John B. Hayes Guide Service, 703-402-4837.

River & Trail Outfitters in Knoxville, MD, rents canoes and arranges shuttles for rafters/boaters, (301) 695-5177.

Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 304-535-6331, www.appalachiantrail.org.

BSR, Inc., offers driving courses on and off road, 304-725-6512, www.bsr-inc.com.

Maps: *DeLorme Maryland, Virginia, or West Virginia Atlas & Gazetteer* show the Harpers Ferry area. Call (207) 846-7000 or see www.delorme.com for more information. *GMCO* (1-800-420-6277) has waterproof maps of the rivers. The *Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin* has a 5 sheet map set that shows historic sites along the Potomac River. Write them for information at Suite 300, 6110 Executive Blvd., Rockville, MD 20852.



Harpers Ferry

Join us for an angling experience you'll never forget. Drift boat fishing in the Harpers Ferry National Park area. Smallmouth bass in the Potomac & Shenandoah and native Appalachian brook trout in the tributaries. Your guides will share with you rich national history, while pointing out local wildlife. More than just fishing. It's your vacation. Make it special at "The Angler's Inn". We're are closer than you think.


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many with great antique shops. Or you can head to Summit Point to the BSR high performance driving school and put your car, or one of their cars, on a track and do things you never thought possible. I took one of their driving courses over 20 years ago and have never forgotten the exhilarating experience.

When you fish the upper Potomac River and the Shenandoah near Harpers Ferry, pause now and then. Take in the sights and sounds of nature in its glory, and see the story of America written on the waters. Picture the barges along the C&O Canal, which closely follows the Potomac. Listen for the sounds of the cannon that belched fire and lead, the beating hooves of horses, and the cries of men from both sides as they fought and died here during the Civil War. These are the Nation's Rivers, and the songs of nature are all around, in the forests, on the Blue Ridge, and on the water where they mingle with the echoes of history as they flow along their courses.

Award-winning outdoor writer King Montgomery is a former light tackle and fly angling guide on the tidal Potomac River. A retired Army officer, he is a student of the Civil War. He lives in Burke, Virginia.