

# *The Dispatch*

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## **Remembering the Raid on Harpers Ferry**



The U.S. Marines storming the engine house, Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper; Library of Congress

## OCTOBER MEETING

Friday, October 11, 2024

AT THE WATERVLIET

SENIOR CENTER

Derek Maxwell

Social Hour	6:00 p.m.
Business Meeting	7:00 p.m.
Presentation	7:00 – 8:00 p.m.

A twenty-year veteran of higher education, Derek Maxfield has been a history professor at Genesee Community College since 2009. During his tenure, he has been twice honored by SUNY – in 2013, Maxfield was awarded the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Scholarship and Creative Activities and in 2019, the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Invited to write for *Emerging Civil War*, Maxfield became a regular contributor. Soon after he was invited to write a book for the ECW series which became his first book *Hellmira: The Union's Most Infamous Civil War Prison Camp – Elmira, NY* (Savas Beatie, 2020). After the success of *Hellmira*, he finally got the opportunity to write a volume on William Tecumseh Sherman - *Man of Fire: William Tecumseh Sherman in the Civil War* (Savas Beatie, 2023).

Inspired by living history events during the Civil War sesquicentennial, he came up with the idea of dramatizing conversations between historic figures as a way to teach history. This led to a partnership with colleague Tracy Ford, who would go on to portray Gen. Sherman. Maxfield, who would portray

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Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, wrote a script which became "*Now We Stand By Each Other Always*." The play toured the country for several years before the pandemic suspended performances. Once the pandemic began to wane, Maxfield developed a new play – "*Grant on the Eve of Victory*" – which he performs with his spouse Jess.

When he is not teaching, writing, or performing, Maxfield can be found at his home in Churchville, NY with a cat in his lap while working on genealogy. He and his spouse Jess enjoy a quiet life with five cats and a python.

## UPCOMING EVENTS:

November 8: documentary on the sinking of the *Sultana*

December 13: TBD

## BOARD UPDATES

The Executive Board met via Zoom on September 16. The Operating Account balance was \$2,792.02. This is the account into which the dues are paid, and from which the Round Tables pays for newsletters, the website, and programming. Recently, expenses from this account have surpassed the account's income.

The Preservation Account balance was \$3,997.42. This account is funded through raffles, sales, and donations, and from it we pay for the storage shed (which holds most of our saleable items) and insurance, and make donations, usually to the American Battlefield Trust. Funds in this account are balanced by deciding how much to donate to the ABT each year.

A significant portion of the meeting was spent discussing the Round Table's

future. I (Erin) shared with the Board that I will be stepping down from the presidency at the end of the year (eight years were enough for George Washington, they are enough for me). We need new people to step into Board positions and take a more active role in the organization. Our plan for the November meeting is to watch a documentary on the *Sultana*, have a discussion of the film, and then discuss the Round Table's future, especially its expenses. We hope a good number of local members will attend the November 8 meeting to discuss and make plans for the new year.

## JOHN BROWN'S RAID ON HARPERS FERRY

On three days in October 1859, 165 years ago, John Brown and 21 of his adherents attacked the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. The raid was easily suppressed by Robert E. Lee and a group of Marines but it rang like an alarm bell in the night throughout the entire United States. Brown added his inflammatory bit to the seething cauldron of inter-sectional animus that was rising to a boil between the North and South.

This article from the National Park Service webpage sets out a concise timetable of Brown's doomed attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry.

*"Slavery is a state of war."* --John Brown

### Preparing for War

On July 3, 1859, Brown arrived in Harpers Ferry, accompanied by his sons, Oliver and Owen, and Jeremiah Anderson. In the preceding months,

Brown raised money from other abolitionists and ordered weapons — pikes and guns — to be used in his war against slavery. Using the alias Isaac Smith, Brown rented the Kennedy Farm about five miles from Harpers Ferry, on the Maryland side of the Potomac River. Throughout the summer Brown's Army gathered at the farmhouse. Numbering twenty-one at the time of the raid, these men stayed hidden in the attic by day, reading, writing letters, polishing their rifles and playing checkers. To avoid being seen by curious neighbors, they could only come out at night. To keep up the appearance of a normal household, Brown sent for his daughter, 15-year-old Annie, and Oliver's wife, 17-year-old Martha. The teens prepared meals, washed clothes and kept nosy neighbors at a distance. Brown studied maps and conferred with John Cook (his advance man in Harpers Ferry) about the town, armory operations, train schedules and any other information deemed valuable to his plan. On September 30, Brown sent Martha and Annie home to New York. The time was near. On Sunday, October 16, Brown called his men together. Following a prayer, he outlined his battle plans and instructed them, "Men get on your arms; we will proceed to the Ferry."

### Striking a Blow for Freedom October 16, 1859

- 8:00 pm Brown and 18 of his men advance towards Harpers Ferry.
- 10:00 pm The men take both bridges, the U.S. Armory and Arsenal and the U.S. Rifle Works on Hall's Island.
- 12:00 am Enslavers Lewis Washington and John Allstadt are taken hostage and the people they enslaved are freed.

*"I came here from Kansas and this is a slave state; I want to free all the negroes in this*

*state; I have possession now of the United States armory, and if the citizens interfere with me, I must only burn the town and have blood."*

--John Brown to the armory watchman

#### October 17

- **1:25 am** A Baltimore & Ohio passenger train stops at the bridge. Heyward Shepherd, a free African American and railroad employee, is shot and mortally wounded as he investigates the train's delay.
- **4 - 5 am** Hostages are held in the Armory fire engine house.
- **Daylight** Messengers carry the alarm of slave revolt to nearby towns. Brown seizes armory employees as they report to work.
- **7:00 am** Townspeople begin firing on the raiders. Groceryman Thomas Boerly is killed by return fire.
- **10:00 am** Local militia units take positions surrounding Brown's men, cutting off escape routes. Dangerfield Newby is shot - the raider to die. Raider William Thompson is captured under a white flag when Brown asks for a truce.

*"Dear Husband, Master is in want of money ... he may sell me ... come this fall money or no money."*

--Harriet Newby, enslaved person, in a letter to her husband, Dangerfield Newby

- **Noon** Raiders Watson Brown and Aaron Stevens are shot while carrying a second flag of truce.
- **1:00 pm** Raider William Leeman is killed as he attempts to escape across the Potomac River.
- **2:00 pm** Citizens storm the U.S. Rifle Works. Raider John Kagi and Jim — a formerly enslaved person — are killed and Raider Lewis Leary is mortally wounded as they try to escape across the Shenandoah River. Raider John Copeland and Ben — a formerly enslaved person — are

captured. At the Armory, Fontaine Beckham, mayor of Harpers Ferry, is shot and killed as he ventures, unarmed, too close to the fighting. A drunken mob, enraged by the mayor's death, murders William Thompson and tosses his body into the Potomac River.

- **3:00 pm** At the Armory, militiamen free most of the hostages and force Brown and his men into the engine house.
- **Dark** Hundreds of excited militiamen and townspeople jam the streets of Harpers Ferry. Raiders Albert Hazlett and Osborne Anderson, overlooked by townspeople, leave the Arsenal and escape across the Potomac River. Raider Stewart Taylor is shot and killed. Raiders Owen Brown, John Cook, Barclay Coppoc, Francis Meriam, and Charles Tidd, guarding supplies in Maryland, escape into the hills.
- **11:00 pm** Colonel Robert E. Lee and 90 U.S. Marines arrive by train from Washington, D.C.

*"But for fear of sacrificing the lives of some of the gentlemen held by them as prisoners in a midnight assault, I should have ordered the attack at once."*

--Col. Robert E. Lee

#### October 18

- **Early** Oliver Brown dies.
- **7:00 am** Brown refuses to surrender to Lt. J.E.B. Stuart. A Marine storming party breaks into the engine house. One Marine is killed and another wounded. Lt. Israel Green beats Brown with his sword. Raiders Dauphin Thompson and Jeremiah Anderson are killed. Raiders Edwin Coppoc and Shields Green surrender. Wounded raiders Aaron Stevens and Watson Brown are captured. No hostages are injured. Watson Brown

dies the next day.

*"If you die, you die in a good cause, fighting for liberty. If you must die, die like a man."*

--John Brown to his son, Oliver

## **The Aftermath**

Sixteen people were killed in the raid, including ten of Brown's men. John Brown, Aaron Stevens, Edwin Coppoc, Shields Green, and John Copeland were taken to jail in Charles Town, Virginia, on October 19. Albert Hazlett and John Cook were subsequently captured and jailed with the others.

Faced with charges of murder, conspiring with enslaved people to rebel and treason against the state of Virginia, John Brown's trial began October 27 and lasted just five days. Jurors took only 45 minutes to reach a decision — guilty of all charges. On November 2 Brown was sentenced to hang on the gallows. All six of Brown's captured men were tried and hanged. Five escaped.

Brown was executed December 2, 1859. Brown's wife, Mary, took his body home to North Elba, New York, for burial.

A contemporary newspaper account foretold a grim future: *"The Harpers Ferry invasion has advanced the cause of disunion more than any other event that has happened since the formation of the Government."*

Hope of compromise between the North and South slipped. Civil War seemed inevitable.

*"I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had, as I now think, vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done."*

--John Brown, December 2, 1859

## **Buford's View** **by Matt George**

It is possible that our December speaker will be a local author named Scott Burke. However, while historical in nature, it is definitely outside the confines of the 19th century Civil War era of our history. The title of his book is *"Tales from the Arsenal City and Beyond."* While this does not have anything to do with Civil War history, it is an effort to offer a topic of a historical nature and which would be of interest since we meet in the city of Watervliet. More information will be forthcoming.

Since our November topic deals with the sinking of the steamboat *Sultana*, it is coincidental that the new book has come out on the tragedy. I ordered one through Barnes and Noble and it will be put up for raffle at the meeting. The book is entitled the *"Destruction of the Steamboat Sultana – The Worst Maritime Disaster in American History"* by Gene Eric Salecker. Hopefully it will be the major book in our book raffle that month. Almost 1200 people were killed including many survivors of Andersonville Prison. Although our previous speaker Phil Vitiello said the cause was a boiler explosion, there has been conjecture that it was an explosive mine disguised as a lump of coal. Perhaps this new book will solve this mystery.

In mid-September, I attended the N.Y.S. Writer's Institute (book fair) at the State University at Albany. I talked to a representative of the SUNY press and he gave a contact at SUNY Press where I could get a list of local and semi local authors writing on topics from the Civil War era. Hopefully this will provide me with more possibilities for speakers.

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*Created in 1984, the Capital District Civil War Round Table is an incorporated non-profit educational organization. Meetings are held monthly in various locations in the Capital District. This newsletter is published eleven times per year. Annual dues are \$35. The purpose of the organization is to promote, educate, and further stimulate interest in, and discussion of, all aspects of the Civil War period.*

Contact the Capital District Civil War Round Table through  
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