

For Immediate Release

RE: John Brown a “heroic martyr” or a “terrorist”? 150th Anniversary Commemorated in 2009

When John Brown came to Harpers Ferry, Virginia in October 1859, his target was the federal arsenal. He was attempting to capture the guns made at the federal guns factory, to arm the slaves. His hope was to lead the slaves into the nearby mountains of Maryland and to freedom.

His plan failed. He was captured on October 18 by U.S. Army Brevet Colonel Robert E. Lee and a contingent of Marines from Washington. Brown and six of his men were tried for murder, inciting slaves to rebel, and treason in the Jefferson County Courthouse in nearby Charlestown, Virginia. They were all convicted and hanged in Charlestown.

Brown himself has been called a “heroic martyr” and a “terrorist”. Frederick Douglass said “If John Brown did not end the war that ended slavery, he did at least begin the war that ended slavery. If we look over the dates, places, and men, for which this honor is claimed, we shall find that not Carolina, but Virginia – not Fort Sumter, but Harpers Ferry and the arsenal – not Colonel Anderson, but John Brown, began the war that ended American slavery and made this a free Republic.”

Agree or disagree, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park is offering visitors a unique year-long opportunity in 2009 to find out in detail, the short and long-term affects of the raid at Harpers Ferry as they commemorate the 150th anniversary of events leading up to the John Brown raid.

The commemoration actually covers parts of four states, as Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania have joined forces to help tell the story of John Brown events in their area.

Those events will include the story of preparations for the raid, gathering of the men, and the shipping of supplies to Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. Events will also focus on help given to several raiders who escaped back to Chambersburg from Harpers Ferry.

In Hagerstown, Maryland, the commemorative activities will focus on the Kennedy Farm in the southern part of the county where John Brown and his men planned the raid. It was place the men walked from to get to Harpers Ferry on October 16, 1859, the first night of the raid.

Frederick, Maryland will have activities relating to three militia companies tied to their fire companies who were called out to Harpers Ferry to help quell the disturbance there.

Charles Town will help tell the story of the famous John Brown trial, held in the Jefferson County Courthouse in Charles Town, and the executions, held within walking distance of the town’s downtown. The story of the African American raiders and of local citizens involvement, including the friendship of John Blessing and John Brown will be told.

The Harpers Ferry Foundation will help depict the story of the affect the raid had on their town. They will place an exhibit at the train station to Fontaine Beckham, town mayor and one of the civilian casualties of the raid. And they will offer dramatic readings of “John Brown’s Body”.

The Harpers Ferry National Historical Park activities will cover most of the year, with “In John Brown’s Footsteps” walking tours, an academic symposium, re-enactors depicting Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, a teacher’s workshop, and a special commemoration to Luke Quinn, U.S. Marine and the only military casualty at the raid.

On October 16, people will follow the footsteps of the raiders by walking from the Kennedy Farm to Harpers Ferry. That weekend, there will be dramatic readings, special exhibits, discussions, book signings and more.

A special website has been developed to help visitors find events and event information for the 150th anniversary commemoration. Visit www.johnbrownhf.com for details. Or call the Jefferson County Convention and Visitors Bureau at 1-866-HELLO-WV.