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“At All Times Ready...”

The Marines at Harpers Ferry, October 1859

October 2009 marked 150 years since the abolitionist John Brown perpetuated his raid against the town of Harpers Ferry, (West) Virginia , and the Federal Arsenal there. Today we can find little fault with John Brown’s motives, but controversy still rages as to his methods. Although the incident has made an indelible mark in history, many of the details and people involved are still shrouded in myth and conjecture.

Few people today realize that US Marines captured John Brown, ending his attempt to incite a slave revolt in Virginia. Fewer still grasp the military and political intrigue, beyond the issues of slavery, that surrounded the raid, nor the challenges that Army Lt..Col. Robert E. Lee and those Marines would face in resolving the issue. Their ability to improvise and adapt to the rapidly changing mission, and the courage and discipline that ultimately allowed them to defuse a very tense and explosive situation would directly reflect those operations that our Marines are dealing with today around the world.

On the night of 16 October 1859, the fanatical antislavery guerrilla John Brown of Kansas led a small group of followers in a raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia. His goal was to capture the federal arsenal there and provide the arms to a slave revolt that he anticipated would be inspired by his actions. He and his men had no difficulty seizing their objective from the lone, unarmed night watchman. Brown divided his men into small parties and dispersed them through the town and arsenal complex. During the course of the night they would kidnap over 40 locals as hostages. The following morning, after spotting one of Brown’s raiders, an armed black man, the town’s people were finally alerted to the situation. Throughout the morning armed local citizens attacked and scattered the raiders, freeing many of the captives. Casualties and desertions quickly reduced Brown’s force to just a few men, the number of which rumors had placed in the hundreds. When militia units from Maryland and Virginia converged on the scene Brown and five of his remaining men, four still unwounded and able to fire a rifle, along with 11 hostages were cornered in the arsenal’s fire-engine house. The fifth raider, Brown’s son Oliver lay mortally wounded and unable to take any further action.

The federal government in Washington first learned of the insurrection late on the morning of the 17th. Normally, this would have been considered a local problem, but since the raid involved the federal arsenal, President Buchanan assigned the Secretary of War John B. Floyd to handle the situation. He in turn assigned

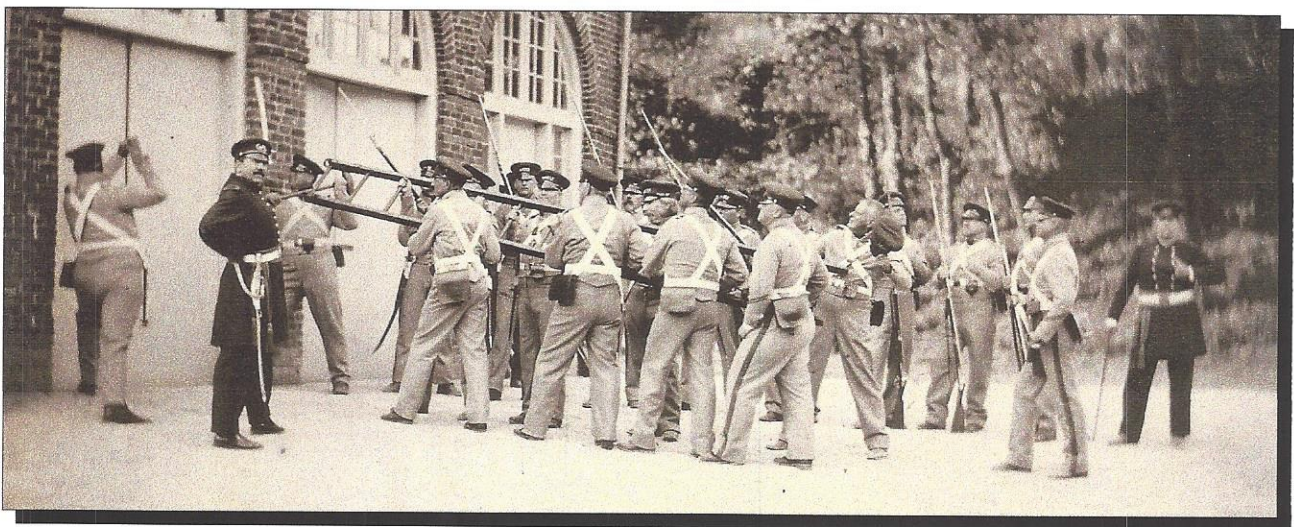


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command of the operation to Lt..Col. Robert E. Lee, who, by chance, was on leave at his home in Arlington, Virginia, and the only senior Army officer available. A young Lieutenant J.E.B. Stuart, also on leave, would deliver the orders to Lee and volunteered to accompany Lee as his aide. The nearest United States Army troops were at Fortress Monroe, two days away. With this in mind, the Secretary of War asked the Navy Department for assistance, bringing the Marine Corps into the picture. Secretary of the Navy Isaac Tousey sent a messenger to Colonel Commandant John Harris at the Marine Barracks, 8th and I streets, in Washington, D.C. Ordering him to send all available Marines to Harpers Ferry. The Officer of the Day, Lieutenant Israel Greene, drawing from both the Marine Barracks and the Detachment at the Washington Navy Yard, mustered all men fit for duty. Six Sergeants and 80 other men were armed and at the railroad station in time for the next train at 3:20 p.m., taking with them two 12 pound Dahlgren boat howitzers. Harris, wanting two officers to accompany the Marines but having no additional line officers available, dispatched the paymaster of the Marine Corps Major William Russell. Although Russell was a senior experienced Marine, as a staff officer he could provide only advice and support, but by law could not command troops.

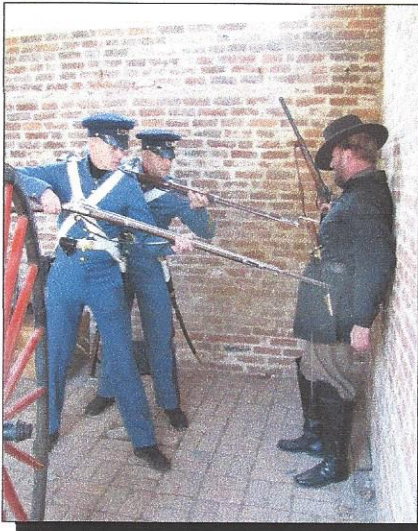
After having to change trains outside of Baltimore, the Marines reached Sandy Hook, Maryland just across the river from Harpers Ferry, in the evening of the 17th. There they waited for Lee and Stuart who arrived by special train some time after 10:30 p.m. The Army colonel led his small force across the railroad bridge into the town. Lee sized up the situation and quickly, but quietly had the Marines relieve the militiamen guarding the perimeter of the arsenal. Dealing with a difficult situation, both over jurisdiction, and wishing to avoid further bloodshed, especially among the hostages, Lee waited for daylight on the morning of the 18th before taking action. Because this was still considered a 'local' matter he offered the mission of attacking the firehouse to both state's militias, but their leaders declined. One of them is reputed to have remarked: "You are paid for doing this kind of work." Rescue of the hostages now fell to the Marines. Lieutenant Greene eagerly accepted the job and began planning the assault. The storming party would consist of Greene and 12 men, with an additional two Marines armed with sledgehammers to break down the door. Another 12 men would stand ready as a reserve. Lee feared that in the dim light of dawn, identifying friend from foe would be difficult and the chance of hostages being injured by "friendly fire" was too great. He therefore ordered the Marines to make the assault with muskets unloaded and rely solely on the bayonet. At daylight Stuart was to deliver a note from Lee to the leader of the guerilla force demanding his surrender. If the insurgent refused, Stuart was to wave his hat, signaling the Marines to launch an immediate assault.

At dawn, following a night of light rain, Stuart made his final attempt to obtain a peaceful end to the affair. They were still unsure at that time who the head of the raiders was. Although going by the name of Isaac Smith, rumors were spreading that it was, in fact, "Old Osawatomie" John Brown of Kansas. When Brown received the note he attempted to negotiate with Stuart. As ordered, the Dragoon officer would have no part of it, made his signal, and the Marines rushed forward.



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When the sledgehammers proved incapable of doing the job, Greene ordered his men to grab a nearby heavy ladder. Two blows from this makeshift battering ram broke an upper door hinge causing the door to pivot inward creating a triangular opening. The Lieutenant was the first man through, followed by Maj. Russell carrying only a rattan switch. Behind them the Marines “came rushing in like tigers.” The first figure Greene encountered as he rushed in was Lewis Washington, one of the hostages and an acquaintance of the lieutenant. He quickly pointed out Brown. Greene stuck down with his sword disabling Brown, but failed to kill him when his sword bent attempting a second blow. The Marines bayoneted two other insurrectionists, but not before two of their own were shot. Private Luke Quinn, while attempting to break down the door, was shot in the groin and died of his wound soon after (he is buried in the cemetery on Camp Hill overlooking Harpers Ferry). Pvt. Matthew Ruppert was shot through the cheek, but would recover. Green, seeing that the remaining insurrectionists had surrendered, called a halt to the onslaught. The entire action was over in less the three minutes. A correspondent of the *Richmond Daily Dispatch* who was an eyewitness to the assault would report:



“Immediately the signal for the attack was given, and the Marines... advanced in two lines on each side of the door. Two powerful fellows sprang between the lines, and with heavy sledge hammers attempted to batter down the door. The door swung and swayed, but appeared to be secured with a rope, the spring of which deadened the effect of the blows. Failing thus to obtain a breach, the Marines were ordered to fall back, and a [dozen] of them took hold of a ladder, some [twenty feet] long, and advancing at a run, brought it with tremendous power against the door. At the second blow it gave way, one leaf falling inward in a slanting position. The Marines immediately advanced to the breach, Major Russell and Lieutenant Greene leading the way. A Marine in front fell; the firing from the interior is rapid and sharp, they fire with deliberate aim, and for the moment the resistance is serious and desperate enough to excite the spectators to something like a pitch frenzy. The next moment the Marines pour in, the firing ceases, and the work was done, whilst the cheers rang from every side, the general feeling being that the Marines had done their part admirably.”

After freeing the hostages the Marines (the lead of which was purportedly Drum Major John Roach of the Marine Band) removed Brown, who had been wounded in the neck by Greene’s saber blow, and two other surviving raiders from the engine house. They now had to assume the job of safeguarding the men they had just captured from an angry lynch mob. The Marines would retain control of the prisoners, holding them in a house across the street from the Armory. Four hours after the assault Pvt. Quinn died of his wounds in the room next to where Brown was being interrogated by Lee and Greene. The Marines would escort Brown and fellow conspirators to Charles Town, VA., at about noon on the 19th, and turn them over to civilian authorities for incarceration and trial. That evening Marines were sent to Pleasant Valley, Maryland following a rumor of further insurrection. The rumors proved false and Marines returned to Washington on the 20th of October. Brown was hanged a few weeks later after being convicted by the State of Virginia for the crime of inciting servile insurrection.



Colonel Lee would officially praise the Marines in his report when he wrote *“the conduct of the detachment of Marines, who were at all times ready and prompt in the execution of any duty.”* Lt.. Stuart agreed that Green *“did his duty handsomely.”* Lee subsequently sent a personal note to Commandant Harris commenting: *“Your Corps has captivated so many hearts in Virginia.”*

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The Marine Uniform at Harpers Ferry during the John Brown Raid.

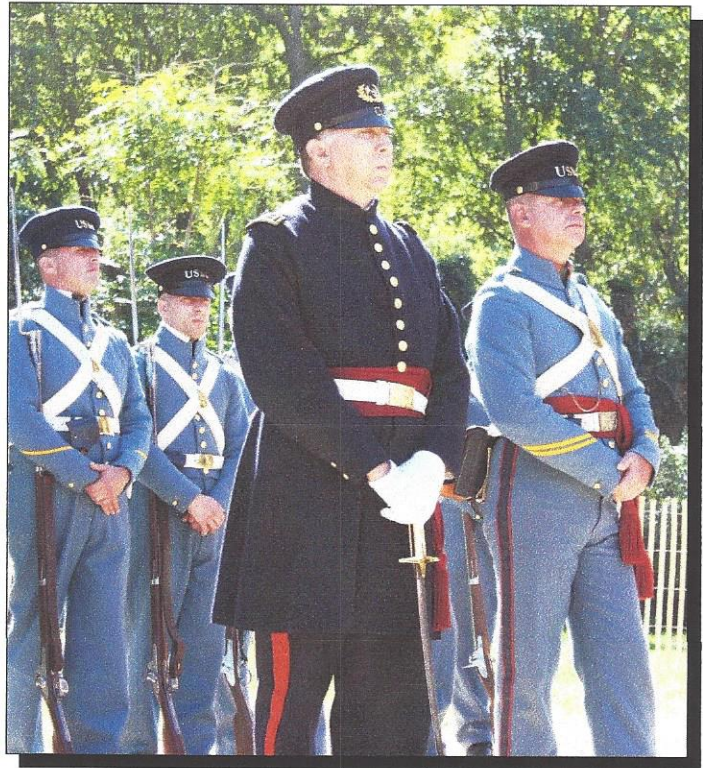
There has been some speculation over the years as to what uniforms the Marines were wearing at Harpers Ferry in 1859. Research has established that the enlisted Marines were in fact dressed in the M1852 fatigue uniform, but even today there remains some discussion as to the officer's dress.

For most if its existence up to 1859 the enlisted Marines, like their Army counterparts, had two basic levels of uniforms, *Service Dress* or *Dress*, and *Fatigue Dress*. The Service Dress uniform was the more ornate uniform for regular duty and combat use. The fatigue uniform was of a much simpler design intended for work and "fatigue" duties that would soil and put undue wear on the more expensive Service Dress. The idea of a work or fatigue uniform worn to preserve the dress uniform had been a long-standing practice, and by the Mexican War the Marines had adopted this fatigue uniform for field operations because of its simplicity and comfort. The uniforms the Marines were wearing in 1859 were first adopted in 1839. The Service Dress consisted of a tailed coat of dark blue wool edged in red with yellow worsted trim. It was topped by shoulder epaulets, and a leather shako nicknamed the "tar bucket." They strongly reflected European influence and had changed little from their predecessors. The Fatigue dress changed from gray to a "sky blue" wool, with the fatigue cap going from leather to a more practical leather brimmed wool cap. These uniforms were modified slightly with the uniform regulations of 1852, but in general appearance little changed. Though both officer and enlisted uniforms also had white linen variations for summer or hot weather use, that would have no bearing on the uniforms that went to Harpers Ferry. By 1859 military fashion had evolved and new radically different uniform designs were under review, and would be implemented in the new Uniform Regulations of 1859 posted in October of that year. However the old 1839/1852 fatigue uniform would see one last action before its demise.

The Marine Enlisted Fatigue Uniform

The "fatigue" uniform had changed little since 1839. The coat was a plain unlined waist length jacket closed with nine Marine buttons evenly spaced down the front, and with narrow cut sleeves, following the fashion of the day. The design was almost identical to its army counterpart of the Mexican War, but without any trim. The pattern included shoulder epaulets, a 2 ¾ inch stand up collar, two interior hung pockets near the waist, and functional cuffs. Noncommissioned officer (NCO) rank would be indicated by half inch yellow worsted 'half chevrons' on each lower sleeve. Following French influence, sergeants would have two chevrons per sleeve, and corporals would have only one. "Orderly" Sergeants (the equivalent of First Sergeants of later periods) would also wear a red sash around the waist. Private's and Musician's fatigue uniform coats would have no markings.

The trousers, also of sky blue wool, are a standard high-waisted design rising slightly higher in the back, with a split and tie to allow for minor waist adjustment. They were a single fly front, replacing the older broad fall pattern. The left and right front pockets are believed to be of an interior hung top entry "French" pattern, as



Corporal, Private, Lieutenant, Orderly Sergeant
M1839/52 Fatigue Dress circa 1859

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Front and back views of Marine Privates in the Marine M1839/52 Fatigue Dress uniform as would have appeared at Harpers Ferry

prescribed in Marine Corps uniform regulations of the era. As was common for the period, the cuffs are split about 1 ½ inches on the outside seam to allow the trouser to spread properly over the boot. Sergeants would have the addition of a 1 ¼ inch dark blue strip edged in scarlet along the outer seam of each leg. Corporals, Privates, and Musicians would wear a plain trouser. This same design and color trouser was also worn with the Service Dress uniform.

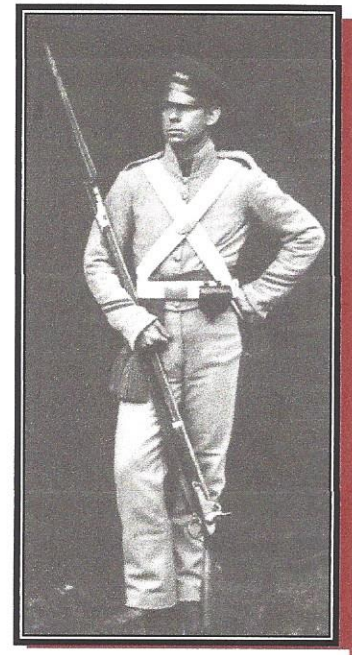
The fatigue cap, commonly referred to as a "wheel hat," was also adopted in 1839. It is made of dark blue wool cloth with a steep slightly pointed leather visor. The chin strap, made of the same leather, is affixed on either side by a small Marine Corps button over the ear. The letters *USM* in brass are worn on the front. There has been some debate as to whether these letters were in scrip, but recent research has concluded that they were in fact a one inch Roman block style. Further, the Marine pattern cap did not have the folding neck cape of its army counterpart.

A red flannel shirt of the common military pattern of the period was prescribed for wear under the coat, with a leather stock worn around the neck (although there is some debate as how often the stock was worn with the fatigue uniform). The tradition of the stock dates back to the beginning of the Corps, but contrary to the common myths, its purpose was merely to make the Marine hold his head straight. The boots, referred to as the "Ankle" or "Jefferson" pattern then in issue to all the services, are of a common ankle high black leather design often nicknamed "brogans."

Weapon and Equipment:

The equipment carried by the Marines at Harpers Ferry had remained consistent for over 30 years. The accouterment belts are of white "buff" leather. The shoulder carriage, which holds the bayonet and scabbard suspended on the left hip, had changed little from the adoption of its first variation in 1808. It had an oval plain brass plate, which allows for adjustment of the belt. Even as late as 1859 much of the Marine Corps was still using the model 1839 (late pattern non-embossed) cartridge box. This black leather cartridge box, designed to carry forty .69 caliber cartridges, was carried suspended from the right hip by a white buff leather sling. The waist belt, of a pattern first authorized by the Corps in 1822, is 1 ¾ inches wide and closed by a plain rectangular brass buckle. This same basic design belt and buckle, in appearance, is still being used with the Marine Dress Blue uniform today. A Model 1855 "shield front" pattern cap pouch designed to hold the percussion caps for the musket, would be carried on the waist belt.

The "service rifle" is the Model 1842. The issue being carried by the Marines sent to Harpers Ferry, coincidentally, had been produced by the Federal Arsenal there. While the weapon had a percussion lock, its basic design can be traced back to the Charleville flintlock muskets first purchased from France and copied by the U.S., starting in the late 1700's. The M1842 would be the last of a long line of the French influenced design. The version carried by the Marines was a .69 caliber smooth bore with a 42 inch barrel to which an 18 inch triangular



This (reversed) image, taken using vintage 1800s photographic equipment, shows a Marine uniformed in the 1852 fatigue dress of an Orderly (First) Sergeant as he would have appeared at Harpers Ferry in October of 1859.

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socket bayonet could be attached. The Marines were well trained in the use of the bayonet and it would be used as the principle weapon in the final assault to capture John Brown.

It is believed that the Marines may have also taken field equipment for water and rations with them to Harpers Ferry. The canteen would have been the same as that being issued to the US Army. Round smooth-sided tin with a cork stopper, the quart canteen was commonly covered in a gray wool. The strap, three-quarter inch wide, was of natural oiled leather with an iron "roller buckle" for adjustment. The haversack, used for carrying rations, was also the same as Army issue. Made of "tarred" canvas (including the sling), the bag was approximately 12 x 12 inches with a single leather strap and buckle closure.

It is also well documented that the Marines took their Overcoats with them to Harpers Ferry. At the time the military overcoat was issued as a utilitarian item for protection against the elements, and would have routinely been worn or carried on field operations. The Marine overcoat of the period is a caped coat of blue gray wool mixture, commonly referred to as cadet gray, with a standup collar. The coat is single breasted closed with seven large Marine buttons down the front. The sleeves are loose with five inch deep turned up cuffs. The cape is separate, having a circular cut, reaching to the upper edge of the cuff when the arm is extended, closing down the front with five small Marine buttons, and attached by buttons at the base of the collar.

The Marine Officer's Uniform at Harpers Ferry:



Marine Staff and Line Officers in the M1852 Undress uniform.

Far more debate and controversy revolves around the attire of the two Marine officers that were dispatched to Harpers Ferry. 1stLt. Israel Green, a line officer who was acting commanding officer of the Marine Barracks in Washington at the time, and Maj. William Russell, a Staff Officer holding the position of Pay Master of the Marine Corps.

Traditionally, it has been believed that both officers were wearing the officers "Undress" uniform, a category that had not yet been implemented for the enlisted ranks. This can best be described as an intermediate duty uniform (fatigue dress for officers). Replacing the dress coat was a "Frock-Coat" of navy blue cloth (wool). The frock is a plain garment, with a fully lined skirt extending to just above the knee. For Field Officers, Staff (such as Maj. Russell), and Captains of the line the coat was double breasted with two rows of ten Marine buttons each. Subaltern Officers coats (Lieutenants of the line like 1stLt. Greene) were to be single breasted. The 1852 regulations called for a "rolling collar" to button close up at the throat, two small Marine buttons at the fastening of the cuff, and three large buttons in the folds behind the skirt. The rank of the commissioned officers on these undress coats was designated by a blue cloth shoulder strap four inches long and one inch wide on each shoulder. These straps were edged with a one-eighth inch gold embroidered border.

Specific rank was indicated by the appropriate ornament being embroidered on both ends of each strap. Staff Officers, like Major Russell, were to wear the same strap as the Staff of the army. Further indication of rank was a crimson silk net sash worn round the waist.

An officer's version of the Fatigue cap would be worn, but with the USM being replaced by an embroidered gold wreath with a diagonal silver anchor at its center. There is some discussion, based on drawings of the actions at Harpers Ferry, that Lt. Greene and/or Major Russell may have been wearing the new French pattern Kepi described in the Marine Uniform Regulations of 1859. Although these Regulations were not officially posted until October, it is theorized that, with Russell and Green both being at Headquarters, in anticipation of the posting of the new uniform regulations, may have had at least the new caps made (if not complete uniforms).

The officer's trousers were of dark blue cloth with a scarlet stripe one and three-fourth inches wide down the outer seams. The regulations further state that, when in "Undress" similar pants without the stripe were to be worn. Whether this practice was actually followed is open to speculation. The officers were prescribed a "half-boot" to be worn under the trousers.

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Both Lt. Greene and Maj. Russell would have worn a sword belt to complete the uniform. The prescribed belt for Marine officers at that time was of white leather, two inches wide, with a sliding frog to hold the sword (although it is believed that a version sporting two straps or slings which attached to the scabbard, following the army mounted service pattern, were used as well). The belt was clasp in front with the “prescribed” brass rectangular plate. In 1840 an alternate undress belt was authorized. It was made of black patent leather, with the sword to be suspended from black patent leather straps with brass swivel hooks to attach the scabbard. Officers of the era had a tendency to mix and match, and we may never know exactly what belts the two officers at Harpers Ferry were wearing at the time.

The regulation Marine officer’s sword of the period was a variation of the now famous marmaluke hilt sword in use today. It had white ivory grips, and a brass scabbard. The blade, just over 32 inches in length, was slightly curved. Swords of the time were intended to be functional combat weapons, but it appears that many officers, such as Lt. Greene, purchased cheaper versions to use for ceremonies and other non-combat related duties. Personal accounts state that, in his haste to depart the Marine Barracks in Washington, 1stLt. Israel Greene took his “ceremonial” sword which he had been wearing while standing duty, with him. This would prove a notable factor when, during the assault, Greene’s sword failed to stand up to the rigors of combat, and bent as he attempted a thrust against John Brown. As to Maj. Russell, we do not know if, as a staff officer, he carried a sword with him to Harpers Ferry. The only description of his arms states that he entered the engine house “carrying only a rattan switch.”

With photography in its infancy, and artists, although they may have eye-witnessed the incidents, frequently took license with content and filled in the details after the fact or from second hand accounts, visual records of the Marine actions at Harpers Ferry are cursory at best. Written accounts of witnesses are often conflicting as to details as well. We may never know for sure the specific details of what the Marines were wearing at Harpers Ferry. We are forced to make our best interpretation based on painstaking review of all the available evidence. However, there is no doubt of what those Marines accomplished, and how their actions impacted future events. While the materiel history is important, the actions and conduct of the Marines that used the equipment is what made the history, and is the principle story that needs to be told.

