

by Christopher Murphy

Harpers Ferry and Haiti

ON A COLD NOVEMBER DAY THIS FALL, I stood before a small, brick building located on a narrow strip of land at the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers. The structure, known today as the “John Brown Fort,” is actually the old firehouse that once served the U.S. Armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. The building’s namesake, the abolitionist firebrand who led a famous raid on this little industrial town, is also the namesake of one of the most important streets in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. The street, Avenue John Brown, commemorates Brown’s attempt to foment a slave insurrection at Harpers Ferry in 1859. Although the raid was a failure—a detachment of Marines sent from Washington, DC, under the temporary command of Robert E. Lee and Jeb Stuart quickly quelled it—the attempt to stir a slave rebellion made Brown a hero among Haitians.

This is not surprising, as it was the Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint L’Ouverture that Brown credited as a significant inspiration for his actions in Virginia. Brown believed Toussaint, a man born in slavery, to be one of the truly great men of the age of revolution that swept the Atlantic world in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Toussaint’s successful struggle to free Haiti from European rule helped motivate Brown to attempt to free Virginia’s slaves through armed insurrection.

Indeed, the Haitian people were so impressed with Brown that despite the island nation’s chronic poverty they raised a large sum of money to send to Brown’s widow after he was hung on December 2, 1859, for leading the attack on the federal armory.

Both Brown and Toussaint are highly controversial historical figures, as each advocated violent means to expunge a terrible social evil. But, their radical efforts bore much fruit—Brown’s raid is credited as a significant step in hastening the American Civil War which ended slavery in the United States, and Toussaint’s revolution established Haiti as the only modern nation where a slave revolt resulted in independent nation run by former slaves. Although their methods were at times unquestionably extreme, both men dramatically influenced the Western Hemisphere we know today.

In our cover story, *International Educator* examines how our neighbors in Haiti are faring one year after the major earthquake that devastated their nation. Many colleges and universities in the United States, Canada and elsewhere have been at the forefront of looking for ways to assist the Haitians in developing sustainable solutions to the crisis.

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