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Iowans and John Brown's Attack on Harpers Ferry

by Richard Acton

The zealotry of John Brown will always overshadow the men who followed him. Harpers Ferry is regarded by historians as a landmark on the road to the Civil War and hence the abolition of slavery. Seldom has a handful of men as those led by Brown delivered such a jolt to history. A few young Iowans played a part in that watershed event.

For most of December 1857, Brown had been trekking across Iowa with ten of his men, the nucleus of his invading army as he envisioned it. Some 50 miles short of the Mississippi, they stopped at the Quaker community of Springdale, confident of a sympathetic abolitionist welcome. Brown stayed briefly; the others

boarded until April in the home of William Maxson (*above*) just beyond the village. In those months, friendships developed with some of the Springdale residents, and some adopted Brown's cause.

One was Steward Taylor. Born in Canada, Taylor immigrated to Iowa at age 17. He settled in Springdale, where he repaired wagons. On travels in Missouri and Arkansas, he saw slavery in practice. He had a "wonderful tenacity in all things,



Steward Taylor

especially in regard to his concepts of right," wrote his friend George Gill (a follower of Brown though not to Harpers Ferry).

Taylor was dazzled by Brown's men—"those Glorious fellows," he later called them. By the time Brown returned to Springdale in April 1858, Taylor was committed and left Iowa with him. In Ohio Taylor waited a year and a half for instructions from his charismatic leader. A chronic shortage of money, suspicions of betrayal, and other factors delayed Brown's plans for an attack on the South.

Other Iowans "enlisted" in Brown's tiny army in the spring of 1858. They were George Gill, from nearby West Liberty; and two Quaker brothers from Springdale, Edwin and Barclay Coppoc (or Coppac). Jeremiah Anderson of Des Moines joined subsequently.

Brown's plan had slowly evolved to this: He and his men would attack Harpers Ferry, Virginia. There they would capture the federal armory, arsenal, and rifle works—thus acquiring the weapons necessary for the next phase. Armed, they would rapidly move south as dissident whites and slaves from plantations joined him in a massive insurrection.

Finally, in the late summer of 1859, Brown called Taylor and several others to a farm five miles from Harpers Ferry. They lay low until Brown was ready. More men gathered at the farm in the months ahead. On the night of October 16, Brown was ready to strike. To serve as a rearguard on the farm, he left behind Barclay Coppoc and two others.

Steward Taylor, Edwin Coppoc, and Jeremiah Anderson were among the 18 he led into Harpers Ferry.

Through the night, Brown and his men seized several hostages, one a prominent slaveholder. As word spread of the attack, armed farmers and militia poured into town, and a general battle commenced. Now on the defensive, Brown gathered his men and some of the hostages into the engine house (*right*). Dangerfield Newby, an ex-slave, was the first of Brown's men killed.

The next morning the U.S. Marines, led by Colonel Robert E. Lee, stormed the engine house. Brown had held the federal arsenal for 36 hours. When it was over, Iowans Steward Taylor, Jeremiah Anderson,

and eight others lay dead. Four local men from the town had been killed, including the unarmed mayor. Barclay Coppoc and the other two in the rearguard at the farm escaped to Canada.

John Brown, Edwin Coppoc, and five others were captured by Virginia authorities. They were to be tried for treason to Virginia, murder, and inciting slaves to revolt.

Back in Springdale, Edwin and Barclay Coppoc's mother, Ann Raley, mounted a fierce campaign in defense of Edwin. Her angry and articulate letters to Virginia authorities were picked up by national newspapers. Nevertheless, Edwin Coppoc was hanged with Brown and the others in mid-December.

Barclay Coppoc returned to Springdale the day after his brother's execution.

Ann Raley knew Barclay was being hunted. The governor of Virginia had sent an agent to Iowa to effect the arrest, and extradition papers would soon be sent. Raley picked up her pen again. She ar-



Jeremiah Anderson



Edwin Coppoc

