

The Mystery of John Brown's Cave, Harpers Ferry West Virginia: A True Story

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John Brown was an abolitionist and a fighter. After making his reputation between 1855 and 1858 in the Missouri and Kansas territorial wars, he traveled nearly 2,000 miles on what some say was a suicidal mission to attack the U.S. Armory in Harper's Ferry, Virginia. He was accompanied by a rag-tag group of 22 persons, including white men, several sons, and negro Freemen. To this day, no one knows why he pressed the attack on the Harpers Ferry Amory in 1859. Speculation was that he wanted to arm his men and others who believed in his ideological cause, with the 100,000 Sharps Rifles that were stored in the building. Some believe that he simply wanted to bathe the U.S. in blood, just to make an *ideological point*. But that would come later, when 650,000 men died in the Civil War between 1861 and 1865.

The U.S. Armory siege was easy. All they did was break the locks on the main doors and enter. John Brown himself was certain that when the word got out about the rebellion at Harpers Ferry, slaves on nearby farms and plantations would come running. Those slaves never came to the fight.

The siege lasted three days. On the fourth day, federal troops and town vigilantes broke down the doors and overwhelmed the men inside, including John Brown. Both before and after the siege, some of Brown's followers left the field. Some escaped through the back of the Armory under the cover of night; some, including his son Owen Brown, escaped by swimming across the nearby Potomac River. As the smoke cleared, commander Robert E. Lee and his first Lieutenant J.E.B. Stuart rounded up all the dead and counted the missing. *History tells us that not all of John Brown's men were found.* When the dust cleared only 17 men, white and Freemen were accounted for out of the 22 original followers. *At least 5 men escaped.*

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When my friend Tom Enlow and I first traveled to Harpers Ferry, we were on a schoolboy adventure. Each of us had lied to our parents, saying that we were spending the weekend at a friend's house. When we left home that Friday afternoon, we had no idea what this particular adventure would bring. Like most adolescents, we had to learn about the Civil War in American History class. To us, John Brown's raid on the Harpers Ferry Armory was a moment in History, at the beginning of the Civil War, just like the John Wilkes Booth assassination of Lincoln at Fords Theatre was another moment in History. Each of these events were like bookends to the Civil War; the greatest loss of human life that the U.S. had ever experienced...

It was a grey and misty morning when Tom and I awoke. As the locomotive slowed to a slow crawl along the curve of the ancient trestle bridge, the train wheels began to squeal and rattle. The locomotive crossed over the Potomac River from Maryland into the West Virginia town of Harpers Ferry. The year was 1965, and we had hopped a ride in the open boxcar the night before, at the freight yard at Union

Station in Washington D.C. As soon as we jumped into the boxcar, we had pushed some hay into a corner for a makeshift resting place and also to protect us from the cold wind that blew in through the permanently open door. We settled in for what was going to be a long night's ride.

The next morning, clouds began to clear as the sunlight streamed through the wooden slats of the boxcar, forecasting a sunny day. I rolled out of my wool blanket and shook Tom's shoulder. But he burrowed deeper into the hay. So I stripped the wool blanket from his back. He jumped up and shivered, "Damn cold! I never could get warm. Besides the constant rocking of the train and all the noise, I don't think I slept at all last night."

I had known Tom since our boyhood days at Grace Episcopal Church in Silver Spring. The first time I met him, I was reminded of a young Paul Newman, with the sparkling blue eyes and short-cropped hair.

"I don't know about you but I sure could use a cup of coffee," I said. "Let's get the hell off of this rattletrap, and go find a warm place in town for some eggs and grits."

So we rolled up the wool blankets, and tied them to our backs with clothesline cord. I followed Tom, jumping out of the slow-moving boxcar to walk the short distance into town. As we ambled along the riverside near the old iron bridge, we could smell the organic matter from the water and the honey-suckle vines that grew wild along the track. It was a clear, late April morning. Back in 1965, Harpers Ferry had not yet succumbed to becoming the tourist trap that it is today. The town still showed some vestiges of commercial life in the flood plain just west of the train station. I had a feeling that there was something in the air that April morning. It smelled like adventure...

We gobbled down some scrambled eggs, grits and coffee at a breakfast place called **Mom's**, located in the center of town. We met a friendly waitress, who kept batting her blue eyes at Tom.

"Where are y'all boys from?" she said, with a strong Virginia drawl.

"I don't think I've ever seen you here before."

Her name was Sherry. She probably was not much older than us, shapely enough to be attractive, particularly to a couple of young guys like us, who had trouble keeping their peckers in their pockets.

No doubt, I speculated to myself, she was married, with three kids at 16. (At the time, I believe that laws of West Virginia allowed marriage of a man and a woman at the tender age of 13.)

"We're from Takoma Park, Sherry, just passing through," I said flashing my best smile.

"We're looking for adventure!" Tom volunteered. "Perhaps you could point us in the right direction for hiking?"

Sherry looked at me, and then again at Tom, quizzical-like, still flirting, putting her hand on one hip, and moving her butt in Tom's direction, while she stared at the ceiling; meanwhile, sliding the pencil in her hair, back and forth. Finally she batted her eyes at Tom again.

"I don't know of any hiking trails, but there's a trail alongside the old railroad grade as it climbs the hill going north along the river. If you want to climb Market Street, you should be able to see the Train Depot, from high on the cliff at the end of town."

Afterwards, we walked up the hillside, commenting on the finer physical attributes of the waitress. We noticed that the higher we walked along Market Street's steep incline, the more the dilapidation and ruin increased. Commercial enterprises that had once been thriving in 1859 when John Brown came into town were now vacant. Since the late 1700's, some of the first settlers had cut small caves directly into the soft limestone rock, which they covered with cottonwood tree-poles for rafters, and evergreen boughs, to keep the moisture out. These caves had been early residential dwellings, then later, commercial stores. The higher we walked, the more notable the ruins. At the top of Market Street, we had a view of the Potomac River from an elevation of about 100 feet above the old iron trestle bridge. We could see the small building that served as the Train Depot, down below, about a half-mile away. Just beyond the Depot, we saw the railroad tracks cut into the cliffs rising northward, along the river.

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As we walked back down off the hillside, we stopped to load up with provisions for the day. In the last building at the foot of Market Street, we found a General Store, where we purchased some chocolate bars and sodas, before heading for the railroad tracks. After walking up the railroad tracks for about an hour, we noticed that the grade was getting steeper. Nevertheless, we labored to keep up our pace. Sweating hard, we stopped to drink from a spring, running out of the face of the cliff. The water was good and cold. It ran through the gravel beds in the railroad ties, between tracks, before washing down about 150 feet below, into the broad wetlands that ran alongside the bottom of the cliff.

"You can't even see the town from here," I said. "What if a train comes through here while we're on this narrow ledge, and there's nowhere for us to go? And the steep cliff rising 100 feet above us is not safe to climb."

Tom got up and walked across the 6-foot wide expanse of track to look over the drop below. He spoke as he peered over the edge, "Not a lot to hold onto from this ledge, and it's a 150 foot drop to the bottom." Then he leaned down and put his ear to the track. "What in God's name are you doing?" I yelled.

Tom smiled at me and said, "It's an old hobo trick. The rails start to "sing" when a train is coming, even if the train is more than a half-mile away."

Then he got up and started to shuffle-dance while singing a Johnny Cash tune. "I hear the train a-coming. It's coming down the track..."

Tom laughed, and I laughed too.

"Well, we'd better be sure to stop every once in a while and listen to the rails for the song of the train coming."

"You betcha we will!" he reassured me.

Some time later, we heard a train whistle behind us. Tom and I looked at each other and yelled, "RUN!", both at the same time. We could see that the locomotive was gaining on us, as we frantically looked for a place to shelter from the oncoming train. The engineer, meanwhile, leaned on the whistle.

"Why doesn't he stop?" I yelled at Tom.

In about 30 seconds, I looked back. Sure enough, the train was steadily gaining on us.

Tom was running on the cliff side, looking for anything: a bush or a low-hanging spar, something that we could hang onto while the engine passed by. He jumped up to grab a spar. It held briefly, then, broke off. Meanwhile, I kept running.

Suddenly on the cliff-side of the tracks, I spotted a narrow opening in the cliff. I turned around and yelled.

"Tom, I've found something! Run! Run!"

Meanwhile, the locomotive was about 50 yards behind Tom and closing fast. My heart was pounding. *I pictured myself in a black suit at Tom's memorial service trying to explain to Tom's parents that I had done everything possible to save their only son.*

At that moment, Tom ran off the track and bowled me over, just as the train passed. We shielded our eyes as the train passed, covering us with fine dust—and then it was over.

It was a short train with a locomotive and just a couple of boxcars. We sat still for I don't know how long to let the gravity of the situation sink in. Then we jumped up and hugged each other before we fell down again, laughing at our dumb luck of finding this gash in the cliff-side.

Finally, we stood up and took a good look at the gash. It was a narrow opening in the side of the limestone cliff that looked like it might lead to something more...

Now consider what had just happened. We hopped a freight to get to the Virginia town of Harpers Ferry. We had breakfast, were waited on by a good-looking waitress—just about our age; walked about a mile up a narrow grade cut into the cliff; and nearly got killed by a train.

I ask you. Be honest now. Would this be enough for you to just call it a day? Pack up your tents, and go home? Yes, you say!

Well, for us, the show was just getting started.

"Let's go in," I said to Tom. "I want to see where this goes."

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Luckily, we both had Zippo lighters for smoking “Rum River” cigars, starting fires, and other juvenile nonsense. I pulled my lighter out and crawled on my hands and knees into the opening. After about 50 feet on our hands and knees, we found the narrow passageway opened up to one that we could duck-waddle through. The narrow passageway looked like it continued further into the cave. When both of us sat down to rest, I said to Tom,

“What do you think, should we go further? My Zippo lighter is almost out of fuel.”
“What’s plan B?” Tom asked, knowing that with me, there was always a plan B. I thought for a moment and then said,
“Let’s go outside and see if there’s something laying around for us to make a torch.”
So we duck waddled and crawled back through the opening in the cliff. As we stood up outside and looked around, I knew what we could do. The sun was directly overhead. Because the sunlight reflected off the cut limestone, it was hotter than usual--about 80 degrees. We found some sticks along the cliff side that could be used as mounting for the torches. The only thing left was to find fuel that would be slow burning. We found a small tar pit along the rails, left over from the repairs on the railroad. Each of us took off one of our socks and rolled the socks in the tar until they were covered with the gooey stuff.
“Perfect!” marveled Tom, as both of us, with torches lit, crawled back through the opening and moved forward on hands and knees. About 100 yards in, we found a narrow passageway, spiraling downward into the belly of the mountain. We made our way down. At the bottom, we found ourselves in a small chamber with a domed roof surrounding an aquamarine colored pool of water. It was a slow-moving underground river, flowing underneath the limestone walls surrounding the pool. As we looked closer, we saw movement in the water. A school of albino catfish—a school that had probably never seen the sunlight, darted out of the small openings in the limestone to float, lazily in the slow moving underground river.

Back up at the top of the spiral passageway, we could see to the left, a dim light that was the opening to the cave entrance. To our right was nothing but darkness; black as obsidian.

Looking at Tom as we squatted in the dark, I asked,
“Well what you want to do?”

“Well, I think we need to re-fuel.” He nodded at the torch in my hand,
“Yours seems like it’s running low, and mine has about a half-hour on it.”

“I say that we duck-waddle back outside and take our remaining socks, roll them in the tar-pit and then come back, and explore the rest of this cave.”

“Ok Hewett, let’s do it!” said Tom.

This was the one thing I remember about Tom, and probably the main reason he was my best friend. He was always *ready to rise to the challenge*.

Ten minutes later we had duck waddled to the same spot, only this time we went deeper into the cavern, beyond the spiral passageway, further into the mountain.

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After another 100 feet of doing the duck-waddle, the narrow passageway opened up. We stepped out into an enormous cavern. The floor was scattered with stalagmites, limestone formations that had formed over hundreds of years ago or more. These stalagmites were caused by other limestone formations; icicle shaped stalactites, hanging over 100 feet above us in the giant cavern.

We marveled at the breadth and depth of this giant cavern. Tom waved his torch, high above his head.

“Do you see that?” He waved the torch again.

“Looks like some kind of growth on the ceiling, like maybe moss or lichen?”

“Those are bats,” he said, “Thousands of them, hanging from the ceiling.”

“We’d better avoid exiting this cavern at sundown.” When darkness falls, bats fly out into the night. I wouldn’t want to be in the narrow entrance to this cave when they feel “the call of the night.”

We made our way forward for several hundred yards. Then we could go no further. At the far end of the cavern was a narrow hole in the floor. It looked open, but I hesitated to go further. The hole looked wet.

When I waved my torch to see how high the ceiling was on this side of the cavern, I spotted what appeared to be a narrow room at the top of a shear wall about 75 feet high. I wasn’t sure, but I thought I saw a dim light emanating from the small room.

“Tom, I am going to put my torch out. Just walk to the center of the cavern—back the way we came about 150 feet.” I reached inside my jeans just to make certain the Zippo lighter was there. It was there in my pocket. I spun the wheel against the flint. Sure enough, the spark from the flint combusted to light a flame from the lighter fluid.

“Ok, I am going to rub out my torch in the moisture from this rabbit hole. You move back into the center of the cavern.” Sure enough, when I put out my torch and Tom moved away to the center of the cavern, I spotted a dim light at the top of the shear wall. When Tom came back, I told him that I had seen a light.

“I am going to try to climb up to the domed room at the top of the shear wall,” I said. “Are you crazy!” he said. “What if you fall?”

I knew that I wouldn’t fall. I was a wrestler, with good upper body strength. I was confident that I would make the climb.

“I’ll be all right,” I said.

First, we needed to re-light my torch. This was harder than you might imagine.

We had to heat the partially burned sock with Tom’s lighter. Then finally the soggy sock, with the tar on it, lighted up again. I lifted it high above my head. At the heel of

the shear wall was a large pile of huge limestone pieces with cave moss growing on the surface. The pieces looked like they been there for one hundred years.

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When I began the climb, without the torch, I had no negative thoughts. Truth is that I was fueled with adolescent adrenalin. Looking back on this adventure, I now know that I might have fallen, but there was no way I had any doubts that I would ultimately make the climb. Hell, at 15 years old, we all have a certain amount of adrenalin—making us do whatever we do. At that age, we all think that we are “bulletproof” until we discover that we’re not.

Every year, in the fall, when I started back to public school, I felt as if I had learned a great deal by the experiences that I had over summer vacation. I knew I had matured by putting myself at risk, in a way that other juveniles probably wouldn’t. Knowing that if taking the risk did not kill me, surviving made me stronger and wiser.

As I climbed farther up the shear wall, I began to feel the hair stand up on the back of my neck. There seemed to be an *unseen presence lifting me up*, guiding me towards the dim light. Tom’s light from below got smaller and smaller. I knew that I had my lighter. That would have to be my main source of light, when I reached the round room at the top. Although I didn’t think about it at the time, I am amazed that I was able to climb up, with little or no light. The shoes on my feet were “Chuck Taylors”. Because I was now in the dark, I relied on my other senses. I could feel the wall against my shoes.

I didn’t slip. Not once.

When I reached the small domed room, my eyes had adjusted to the dark. Not that I am nocturnal or anything like that. There was definitely a source of light in the room. I felt a slight ledge at the opening to the room, pulled myself through, and rested.

“Tom, I’m in!” I leaned over the ledge and called back to my friend.

After resting, I reached into my pocket for the Zippo Lighter, spun the wheel and it lighted up. As I held the lighter over my head, I could make out the rough dimensions of the room. It was about 30 feet in diameter. The domed ceiling was at about 8 feet high. I noticed that again, *an unseen presence was guiding me* toward what appeared to be a pile of rubble toward the back of the room. Gingerly, I walked over to the pile of rubble and distinctly saw that the pile was positioned underneath a small shaft of light. As I walked around the rough-hewn pile, I could see that the boulders were arranged into the shape of a chair. For the first time, I realized that I could close my lighter. I looked up to the source of light. The light came into the room from a small, cylindrical shaft, about 3 inches in diameter and approximately 30 feet in height, going up through the roof of the domed room to the outside world.

I could see daylight. It was a robin's egg colored blue sky.

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Looking down at the footprint of light, I noticed that the pile of rubble was directly below the reflection of light. Curious, I began to probe the detritus in the pile of rubble, within the footprint of light. As I hurriedly clawed my way through the detritus, a human skull revealed itself. Shocked at the sight, I yelled, fell down, then ran away from the pile, breathing heavily.

"Everything all right up there? Tom yelled from below.
"You're scaring me! Is everything all right?"

"No worries," I lied. "Just tripped is all."

As I picked through the detritus, a whole skeleton emerged. The hat and clothes were long-since rotted off the person whose bones I was examining. But my feeling of fear faded, replaced with a distinct calm. It was almost as if the skeleton wanted me there, wanted to be discovered, wanted someone, finally, to be present, to participate in whatever last rites had been denied this poor fellow at the time of his death. Honestly, I felt that I had been guided to this chamber, deep in the mountain, for a reason. With my lighter flickering for lack of butane, I dusted the skeleton off and propped him up on the makeshift throne, and then said a prayer to guide his tortured soul on its way. That's when I noticed a leather saddlebag, on the floor, to the side of the human skeleton. The leather was weathered, but unlike the clothes, not fully destroyed. It was covered with dust, and dirt. As I picked it up and held it to the light, I read the words "U.S. Armory" written on the front of bag.

Then suddenly, everything made sense, it all fell into place. I knew then, just as I know to this day, the man that the skeleton belonged to was one of the survivors from John Brown's Raid at the Harpers Ferry Armory.

My Zippo lighter was no longer working, so I would have to climb down in the dark. But I knew, when I left the skeleton, and backed carefully across the ledge from the opening to the domed room, the same *unseen presence* that guided me up the shear wall in the dark would guide me safely back down to the floor of the cavern. When I got to the bottom of the shear wall, Tom was there with one torch. I told him what I had found in the small room. He listened and laughed, incredulous that we had stumbled onto what would shed new light, and a final chapter in the John Brown story.

Always thinking ahead, Tom re-lit the spare torch that he had extinguished after I crawled into the domed room. He handed me the torch, and we made our way toward the entrance of the cave that was at least ¼ mile away.

As we approached the narrow passageway where we would have to duck-waddle toward the entrance, we rested. It had been a long day. Both of us were silent, as we thought about what we had experienced this day. As we looked toward the entrance, we could see the orange glow of the setting sun, just as it dropped over the horizon.

Then we heard a frightening sound, like the rush of water. It got louder and louder before we realized that it was the bats, dropping from their silent roost to venture out into the dark to hunt for food. They were coming directly toward us.

“Look out! Tom yelled as he pushed me down into the muddy path. It was a horribly dangerous situation; about one thousand bats pushing into the narrow passageway, where we were already taking up space. We were directly in the path between the bats and their next meal. All I remember, as I lay facedown in the mud, was that I wanted this experience to end... But it didn’t end. The bats kept coming -- hundreds of them. It was the battle of the cave bats. Their wings brushed our hair, and eventually some of the bats landed on us. Tom quickly pulled some of the bats off me, and I picked some off of him. Eventually we beat the bats with our torch sticks. The torches went out. Then finally it was over. We duck-waddled through the dead bats that had run into us, out into the night.

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Epilogue

Tom and I slept that night on our wool blankets on benches in the train depot. Miraculously the building was left open, even after railroad personnel left for the evening. The next morning after getting breakfast at **Mom’s** again, we headed for home, hitchhiking this time. It took us a little over 6 hours.

John Brown’s Cave was for us a wonderland of exploration. We found that the narrow limestone cavern was about 4,000 feet long, with a dozen rabbit holes, with more large Caverns and all sorts of passageways. All through High School, the Cavern was our playground. During senior year, we even brought girls to the Cave and told the story about the skeleton in the doomed room. The girls always squealed when we told them about the bats. John Brown’s Cave was our secret, and we reveled in the knowledge that we had been the ones to find it.

We never went up again to the domed room. And as far as I know—no one did. Forty years later, when my wife and I were driving to Delaware from California, we walked up the same railroad tracks, on the grade north of town. We found that the entrance to the Cavern had been blocked off with concrete.

Truth be told, I don’t really know who the man was before he was the skeleton, sitting on the boulder seat positioned directly under the shaft of light at the back of the doomed room. I knew in my heart that he was a survivor from the Battle of the

Harpers Ferry Amory. Possibly, he was one of the whites or Freemen that escaped in the heat of the battle. It was a miracle that he was able to scale up that rock face leading up into the small, domed room at the top. If he had been a religious man, I am certain that he would have felt closer to God, as he looked up at the stars in the obsidian night.

Whoever he was, when he breathed his last, he might have been gazing up at that black hole about 30 feet above his head. At that moment, I am sure he was thanking God for eternal peace at last.

The End

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