An "Ever Present Bone of Contention": The Heyward Shepherd Memorial

By Mary Johnson

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On October 10, 1931, an estimated four to six hundred people gathered along Potomac Street in Harpers Ferry to watch the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) and the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) dedicate a memorial to Heyward Shepherd, a black man and the first person fatally injured during John Brown's raid on the town in 1859. On one side of Potomac Street, in a corner between two buildings, stood a simple, flag-covered granite boulder, approximately six feet in height, surrounded by green ivy. On the other side, a speakers' stand, draped in Confederate red and white bunting, stood along the retaining wall for three black men. The crowd listened to the usual litany of remarks made on such occasions and watched as a young girl drew the flag from the boulder and a member of the UDC placed a wreath upon the stone. Singers from the local black Storer College provided music.1

The UDC and SCV could be happy with the dedication, especially since it had taken more than a decade for these two organizations to secure a location for the Heyward Shepherd Memorial. Despite the participation of both whites and blacks, and representatives of North and South, in its dedication, the Heyward Shepherd Memorial became, as one opponent predicted in 1922, an "ever present bone of contention."2 The memorial recalls one of the most divisive periods in this country's history, the middle half of the nineteenth century, when fundamental differences over what the country was and what it should be culminated in a civil war that saved the Union and ended slavery but left many other issues unresolved. More specifically, the memorial recalls John Brown's raid, an event Brown biographer Stephen Oates observed "polarized the country as no other event had done . . . [and] set in motion a spiral of accusation and counteraccusation between North and South that bore the country irreversibly toward Civil War."3 The postwar years brought no consensus on Brown either. On the one hand, most blacks and some whites saw Brown as a hero because he opposed slavery not just by word but by deed. On the other hand, most Southern whites contended that Brown was a criminal whose actions at Harpers Ferry had forced them or their forebears to secede from the Union and take up arms against it in defense of their constitutional rights.4

Disagreement over Brown alone likely would have made the Heyward Shepherd Memorial controversial, but another message the memorial conveyed proved equally contentious. In part because of Brown's opposition to slavery, but also because of the monument's stated tribute to blacks who remained faithful to the South during the raid and the war that followed, race became inextricably linked to the memorial. To the thinking of some opponents, the memorial reflected this country's long history of racial injustice, visible first in the form of the enslavement of millions of blacks and later in the form of legalized segregation, disfranchisement, and other discriminatory practices. Such proscriptions were bolstered by an ideology that assumed white superiority and the inability of blacks ever to share fully in American society. One strain of thought in the postwar South emphasized the goodwill between slaves and masters in the antebellum period, the love and loyalty slaves felt for whites, and the beneficial training blacks on the battlefield helped promote reconciliation between North and South, but it also obscured the war's racial dimension. "The war became essentially a conflict between white men; both sides fought well, Americans against Americans, and there was glory enough to go around," David Blight has argued. "The great issues of the conflict—slavery, secession, emancipation, black equality, even disloyalty and treason-faded from national consciousness." Some blacks challenged this national forgetfulness, believing it reflected a growing American indifference toward both the wave of legal proscriptions undermining the limited successes blacks had achieved in the South under Reconstruction and the deteriorating condition of blacks in the North. They were determined to remember the Civil War in terms of emancipation and the commitments the country made to blacks during Reconstruction. They preferred to stress the fact that blacks had rebelled against slavery, that some slaves had secretly aided Union troops, and that both fugitive slaves and free blacks had served in the Union army. Therefore, it is not surprising that when the UDC and SCV dedicated the Heyward Shepherd Memorial in 1931, admirers of John Brown denounced its negative message about the man and his mission, and leaders of the struggle for black rights attacked the implied message that blacks enjoyed being slaves and did not fight for their own freedom.5

The Heyward Shepherd Memorial presents no such dark view of blacks, of course. On the contrary, the memorial reflects its sponsors' fond memories of loyal slaves, in particular those who did not flee or take up arms against the South during Brown's raid and the Civil War but remained in faithful service to their masters. Either out of loyalty or fear, many slaves did not flee from their masters during those turbulent years, and as one recent study of blacks in Civil War Virginia contends, a few blacks willingly assisted the Confederacy. But many blacks of later generations found such images offensive and harmful to their quest for equality. In the decades after the Civil War, the emphasis on the bravery and sacrifice of soldiers on the battlefield helped promote reconciliation between North and South, but it also obscured the war's racial dimension. "The war became essentially a conflict between white men; both sides fought well, Americans against Americans, and there was glory enough to go around," David Blight has argued. "The great issues of the conflict—slavery, secession, emancipation, black equality, even disloyalty and treason-faded from national consciousness." Some blacks challenged this national forgetfulness, believing it reflected a growing American indifference toward both the wave of legal proscriptions undermining the limited successes blacks had achieved in the South under Reconstruction and the deteriorating condition of blacks in the North. They were determined to remember the Civil War in terms of emancipation and the commitments the country made to blacks during Reconstruction. They preferred to stress the fact that blacks had rebelled against slavery, that some slaves had secretly aided Union troops, and that both fugitive slaves and free blacks had served in the Union army. Therefore, it is not surprising that when the UDC and SCV dedicated the Heyward Shepherd Memorial in 1931, admirers of John Brown denounced its negative message about the man and his mission, and leaders of the struggle for black rights attacked the implied message that blacks enjoyed being slaves and did not fight for their own freedom.6

To tell the story of the Heyward Shepherd Memorial is necessary to begin with the night of October 16, 1859, when John Brown and his followers made their way to Harpers Ferry, then part of Virginia, from a farm across the Potomac River in Maryland. Brown, already notorious for his violent acts against pro-slavery forces in Kansas several years earlier, planned to seize the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry and, with the anticipated support of thousands of slaves, wage a war on slavery. Moving quietly into town late that October night, Brown's men quickly took control of several strategic positions while most unsuspecting townspeople slumbered in their beds. Once roused to action, however, townspeople and local militia easily defeated several groups of raiders, and Brown, his surviving men, and some thirty hostages took refuge in the armory fire engine house. Brown was captured there when federal troops stormed the building on October 18. Thirty-six hours after it began, John Brown's raid was over.7

Although the raid quickly ended, its impact was far reaching. Much has been written about the raid's cataclysmic effect on the country, but relatively little attention has been given to the raid's singular irony: in their mission to set blacks free, Brown and his men killed Heyward Shepherd, a free black man. Shepherd's home was in Winchester, about thirty miles away in Frederick County, Virginia, where he owned property and where his wife and children lived. Yet
much of Shepherd's time was spent in Harpers Ferry, where he worked as a porter in the local train station. In addition to handling baggage, Shepherd attended the station office when the railroad agent was absent. From all accounts, Shepherd was well regarded by those who knew him. One prominent county resident noted that Shepherd was "always remarkably civil" and "very trustworthy." Another man concurred, describing Shepherd as a "courteous, attentive, honest, and industrious" man who was "respected by all."  

Heyward Shepherd was at the train station when John Brown and his men approached Harpers Ferry the night of October 16. Accounts vary as to the precise details of how and why Shepherd's life crossed paths with those of the raiders. They agree, however, that about 1:30 A.M. on the seventeenth, shortly after the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) express train arrived from Wheeling, Virginia (now West Virginia), Shepherd walked to the Potomac River railroad bridge where he was confronted by two of Brown's men. Ignoring their order to halt, he turned and ran, but the armed raiders fired, striking Shepherd in the back just below the heart. Although seriously injured, Shepherd made his way back to the railroad office, where he lingered "in great agony" for nearly half a day before dying early on the afternoon of October 17.  

In the aftermath, some writers did not hesitate to speculate about or elaborate on Shepherd's role in the raid. Immediately after the raid, one newspaper reported Shepherd was told of John Brown's purpose but refused to join the raiders, thus suggesting his orders showed his opposition to their goals. In a different vein, years later, a former resident of Harpers Ferry suggested Shepherd may have helped the raiders initially but later changed his mind when the danger and likelihood of failure became clear. Shepherd's deathbed explanation that he went to the bridge in search of a missing railroad watchman suggests he was shot by men he did not recognize and whose purpose he did not know.  

Whether Shepherd knew who his attackers were, whether he conspired with them before the fact, or whether he was completely ignorant of their motives is less important than how Shepherd was perceived by those who kept his name from being forgotten after his death. When several militia groups and white citizens accompanied Shepherd's body through Wheeling to its burial place in October 1859, they no doubt did so because they wished to honor publicly a black man they believed had knowingly refused to join Brown's war on slavery. In reporting on the funeral, the local newspaper in Shepherd's hometown underscored Shepherd's race when it specifically reminded readers that Brown's first victim was a black man. After the Civil War, H. N. and William W. B. Gallaher, father and son editors of the Virginia Free Press, a weekly newspaper published in Charles Town, a few miles from Harpers Ferry, similarly recognized Shepherd's symbolic importance. For decades, the Virginia Free Press challenged favorable comments on Brown by reminding readers of the men killed at Harpers Ferry by Brown's raiders. The editors found Shepherd particularly appealing and periodically pointed out that a black man was the first casualty of the raid.  

At the same time, the Virginia Free Press's mention of Brown's first victim sometimes seemed to have less to do with Brown than with issues related to blacks in the postwar South. When Frederick Douglass delivered an oration on Brown at Harpers Ferry in 1881, the Virginia Free Press editors stated they would not let the "negro-worshippers" forget that "the first victim of the old murderer was an inoffensive, industrious and respected colored man, brutally shot down without provocation or excuse." In 1884, when blacks voted "almost to a man" for the Republican party, William Gallaher, now sole editor of the Virginia Free Press, gave notice that he would not let blacks forget who Brown's first victim was. More overtly, in a rare departure from his typical use of Shepherd to denounce Brown and his admirers, Gallaher raised Shepherd's name in an exchange in 1902 with the editor of the Pioneer Press, a black newspaper published in Martinsburg, who had attacked prominent Southern leaders for "respecting colored people." Gallaher suggested Shepherd, like other "respectable colored people," would have made such accommodations unnecessary because he never would have "obstructed himself" on the white passengers. Thus, Shepherd emerged not just as Brown's first victim but also as a hard-working black man who would not threaten prevailing social customs.  

Still, Shepherd was always most important to the Virginia Free Press editor as a symbol of the error of Brown's mission. Interestingly, it may have been William Gallaher who first raised the idea of memorializing Shepherd. In 1894, in response to news that blacks led by Frederick Douglass and several other prominent men planned to erect a monument in Harpers Ferry to John Brown, Gallaher suggested white people erect a monument there to Heyward Shepherd. While discussions about a monument to Brown continued, and an obelisk was erected in 1895 to mark the location of the armory fire engine house in which Brown made his last stand, the suggestion of a monument to Shepherd seems to have been nothing more than part of the editor's routine challenge to pro-Brown activities. It was from another direction that creation of a memorial to Shepherd emerged, one that shared Gallaher's desire to shape opinion on John Brown but also sought to pay tribute to faithful slaves.  

Following the collapse of the Confederacy in 1865, most white Southerners accepted the demise of slavery and their dreams of an independent nation, but that acceptance did not mean an enthusiastic return to the Union. On the contrary, some Southerners were openly hostile to the North, and many vigorously defended the justness of secession and slavery while proclaiming their loyalty to the federal government. This viewpoint emerged at the end of the nineteenth century as the Lost Cause, a movement that defended and idealized the Confederacy and the antebellum South and involved large numbers of Southerners in the public celebration of the Confederate tradition. The United Confederate Veterans, organized in 1889, spearheaded the celebration through the 1890s and into the early twentieth century. Later, the UDC, founded in 1894, and, to a much lesser extent, the SCV, established in 1896, directed the Confederate celebration. Through the efforts of these organizations, the emphasis on honoring fallen warriors in Memorial Day observances and cemetery monuments, a form of remembrance that dominated the Confederate tradition in the years immediately following the war, gave way to activities that celebrated the Confederacy and afforded opportunities to inform the heroism and the "true" history of the South and the Confederacy prevailed, Confederate groups, in particular the UDC, supported educational programs, preserved Confederate records, and scrutinized textbooks and other publications for their interpretation of Southern history. The participation of veterans and members of the various Confederate organizations in annual reunions and the dedication of hundreds of monuments and memorials in courthouse yards, city streets, or other public venues throughout the South also reinforced the Confederate tradition.  

The monuments Confederate organizations erected typically honored soldiers and leaders or marked the sites of particular battles, but other monuments were considered as well. For example, around 1900 many UDC chapters began discussing the erection of a monument to faithful slaves. As one UDC member who favored the idea argued, such a monument would have a positive influence on present and future generations who could not learn of the "self-sacrifice and devotion" of slaves in any other way. It would "refute the slanders and falsehoods" in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and instead show "the traditions, romance, poetry, and picturesqueness of the South." Moreover, a monument to faithful slaves would show future generations white Southerners were the best friends blacks had during slavery and that they remained their best friends.  

Not everyone in the UDC shared this opinion. In a bitter letter to the Confederate Veteran, the official publication of the various Confederate organizations, one woman reported that every member of her UDC chapter, save one, rejected the idea. The "old, faithful mammy and uncle of slave times . . . were fully rewarded in heaven." The first UDC convention in 1894, a weekly newspaper published in Charles Town, a few miles from Harpers Ferry, similarly recognized Shepherd's symbolic importance. For decades, the Virginia Free Press challenged favorable comments on Brown by reminding readers of the men killed at Harpers Ferry by Brown's raiders. The editors found Shepherd particularly appealing and periodically pointed out that a black man was the first casualty of the raid.  

Excerpt from "An 'Ever Present Bone of Contention': The Heyward Shepherd Memorial file:///C:/Users/Walter Teague/Documents/POL/BLACK/Harpers Ferry..."
Andrews's suggestion so that "future generations may be impressed with the real truth" about Brown. McKinney told convention attendees that at Harpers Ferry Brown killed "a faithful slave" who "held too dear the lives of 'Ole Massa' and 'Ole Miss'us", to fulfill Brown's orders of rape and murder." She exhorted the UDC to tell "future listeners the story of this faithful slave, who stood between Southern womanhood and a renegade adventurer." The convention approved the monument and created a committee chaired by Mary Dowling Bond of Lawrenceburg, Kentucky, to act with the SCV, which had approved the memorial a month earlier at the annual reunion of Confederate veterans' organizations in Houston. The UDC and SCV each agreed to contribute five hundred dollars toward the monument, the total cost not to exceed one thousand dollars.

President-General McKinney asked Matthew Page Andrews to write the inscription for the "Faithful Slave Memorial," as the Heyward Shepherd Memorial was then known. Andrews originally proposed the memorial honor both Shepherd, "an industrious and respected negro man," and James, the hired slave of Colonel Lewis Washington. Shepherd was killed by Brown's men while James, who was taken hostage along with Washington, apparently drowned during the raid. Little of Andrews's early proposal would survive, however. He provided insight into the philosophy behind the memorial: "Dear Sir: I have not the least reason to doubt that this memorial, if erected near the site where Mr. Shepherd was killed, will be little less sacred than if it was the site where Brown had struck a blow against slavery. Mr. Shepherd was a faithful and industrious negro, and James, his hired slave, was a faithful negro. The monument would have the effect of showing that the negroes of this neighborhood, true to their Christian training, would have no part in the terrible servile insurrection and of all blacks who had refrained from violence during the raid and the Civil War. Additionally, Andrews hoped the memorial would inspire people "to prove themselves worthy" of a past that produced men like George Washington and Robert E. Lee, as well as the descendants of "once heathen Africans" whom whites had "faithfully" taught Christian principles.

During 1921 Andrews made nearly two dozen revisions to the inscription, substantially altering and shortening the text. Most significantly, when Andrews conducted additional research, the circumstances of James's death came into question. Harpers Ferry historian Joseph Barry, a resident of the town at the time of the raid, indicated James drowned while trying to escape from Brown's raiders. Brown biographer Oswald Garrison Villard noted, however, that while some people believed James was shot by raiders, others contended he drowned in an attempt to run away from townpeople. The latter scenario had been established by the Virginia Committee of Claims, which turned down the petition for compensation James's owner had filed after the raid. Following a visit to Harpers Ferry with Faithful Slave Memorial Committee members Colonel Braxton Gibson and Miss Ora Tomlinson of Charles Town, Andrews deleted reference to James in the inscription.

The Faithful Slave Memorial Committee originally hoped to dedicate the memorial in October but settled on September 9, 1921, after it became clear neither UDC president-general McKinney nor SCV commander-in-chief Nathan Bedford Forrest could attend on any day in October. The dedication plans were quickly canceled, however, because the committee found itself confronted with an unforeseen obstacle to the completion of its appointed task, its inability to find a home for the memorial in Harpers Ferry. Because Heyward Shepherd had worked for the railroad and had been shot while on duty, the UDC and SCV wished to erect the boulder on railroad property as near as possible to the site where he was shot. The committee sent a letter to Daniel Willard, president of the B&O Railroad, seeking permission to place the boulder "on a vacant triangular lot at the intersections of streets opposite the B. & O. Railroad Station" and "surrounded by a drive that is in front of the station." Significantly, the spot to which that description most likely refers was across the train station driveway from the John Brown Fort obelisk erected in 1895. Placement in that location would have made the Confederate memorial a visible counterpart to the monument marking the original location of the armory fire engine house made famous by Brown.

Before granting permission, the B&O decided to determine the sentiment at Harpers Ferry. Late in May 1922 an assistant to President Willard discussed the matter with Henry McDonald, town recorder for Harpers Ferry. McDonald was also the white president of Storer College, a now-defunct black school established by the Freedmen's Bureau in 1867. He was an extension of the UDC in Harpers Ferry because it was the site where Brown had struck a blow against slavery. McDonald understood the importance of Brown's memory to the college; he lectured on the man, largely as a fund-raising measure, and in 1909, during his presidency, Storer College purchased the armory fire engine house and moved it to the college campus. McDonald also saw the connection between Brown's memory and race relations. By his own account, when the town council considered the memorial to Heyward Shepherd at its June 1, 1922 meeting, McDonald "saw to it that the offer was rejected." The following day, in his capacity as town recorder, McDonald wrote Willard of the council opposition and noted the monument as proposed was "likely to occasion [sic] unpleasant racial feeling in a community where we are so entirely free from it." McDonald had just learned Shepherd was a free man, and he saw the memorial as an attempt on the part of the UDC and SCV to "bolster John Brown and his men to magnify the Confederacy through the subtle tribute to one they supposed was a slave." When the railroad company informed the memorial committee of the town council's objection, the committee apparently took it to mean opposition primarily from McDonald. Committee members informed the UDC that McDonald was a Northerner and the head of Storer College, and they decried the mention of race as a "partisan appeal." The committee took no action over the next few months, as members hoped the municipal election the following January would bring favorable political change to Harpers Ferry. Unfortunately for the UDC and SCV, the 1923 election merely brought a "rotation in office" whereby McDonald became mayor.

At the New Orleans Reunion in April 1923, the president of the Virginia Division UDC volunteered to seek a place for the memorial on Capitol Square in Richmond if the memorial committee wished. As Mary Dowling Bond noted, if placed there, the Faithful Slave Memorial would sit near monuments to George Washington and Robert E. Lee and "other excellent negroes and heroes who knew and appreciated the Southern negro and often tested the faithfulness of such men as Heyward Shepherd and the dear 'Black Mammy'." Soon thereafter, Colonel Gibson reported the Harpers Ferry town council wanted the memorial if the committee changed one sentence of the inscription from "The negroes of this neighborhood, true to their Christian training, would have no part in the terrible servile insurrection and of all blacks who had refrained from violence during the raid and the Civil War." Additionally, Andrews hoped the memorial would inspire people "to prove themselves worthy" of a past that produced men like George Washington and Robert E. Lee, as well as the descendants of "once heathen Africans" whom whites had "faithfully" taught Christian principles.

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Not for another six years did the UDC secure a place for the memorial at Harpers Ferry. When Elizabeth Bashinsky became president-general of the UDC in 1930, she committed the organization to erecting the boulder at Harpers Ferry, "but not until the inscription should be changed omitting every word of bitterness, since we wished it to perpetuate loyalty & truth rather than any word that might suggest any bitterness or reflect upon the cruelty of others." In light of this new spirit of compromise, Matthew Page Andrews now deleted the sentence the town council had wanted revised in the early 1920s, inserted the word "freeman" and made other minor revisions.46

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These revisions, coupled with new town leadership, brought a change of heart in Harpers Ferry. James Ranson, son of a Confederate veteran, became town mayor in 1930. Correspondence between Ranson and Bashinsky ensued, and in mid-1931 the town council unanimously approved erection of the Faithful Slave Memorial. Bashinsky already met with B&O, who represented the railroad property but, as Bashinsky approached, she had not yet received the necessary permission from the B&O. Consequently, Matthew Page Andrews and Ranson looked for an appropriate location in Harpers Ferry. At Ranson’s suggestion, a local druggist gave the UDC permission to place the boulder on his property located across Potomac Street from the John Brown Fort obelisk and not far from the spot where Heyward Shepherd was shot.

With a site in Harpers Ferry finally secured, the UDC and the SCV dedicated the Faithful Slave Memorial on the afternoon of October 10, 1931. Participants and guests included a relative of John Brown captive Colonel Lewis Washington; UDC president-general Elizabeth Bashinsky; memorial committee chairwoman Mary Dowling Bond; Colonel Braxton Gibson and Matthew Page Andrews, representing the SCV; the Storer College Singers; local committee chairman James Ranson and his father B. B. Ranson, a Confederate veteran who was a member of a militia company present at Brown’s execution in 1859; Heyward Shepherd relative James Walker; James Moten, a black man holding the same job as Heyward Shepherd once held at the train station; and Storer College president Henry McDonald, who despite his early opposition had introduced the resolution at the town council meeting in 1931 in favor of the memorial and now was a speaker at a gathering he believed would “voice the spirit of fellowship and enduring good will.”

The ceremony included an invocation, welcoming address, greetings, introduction of speakers, two principal addresses, and benediction. Of the shorter remarks, only the text of the welcoming address by Henry McDonald is available. McDonald characterized the event not as a day to “remember discord and a past, however memorable and glorious,” but as “a day to look into the future with “the spirit of peace” inspired by the memorial. He emphasized the memorial’s tribute to “fidelity to duty, faithfulness in times of stress, vigorous defense of honor, . . . [and] high resolution to do the right, as one is given to see the right.” McDonald expressed the hope that black men and women who would see whites were sharing their advantages with all races who were faithful.

The two principal speeches given by Matthew Page Andrews and Elizabeth Bashinsky set a somewhat different tone. Although entitled “Heyward Shepherd: Victim of Violence,” Andrews’s historical address included little on the man Heyward Shepherd. Andrews indicated that information on Shepherd was limited although “distinctly credible.” But if Andrews had little to report on Shepherd, he had much to say about John Brown and slavery. Andrews challenged the “monstrous delusion” of a heroic Brown and portrayed him as a crazed criminal attempting to overthrow the government. Andrews further denounced Brown’s goal of abolitionism, the immediate end of slavery, and argued that changes in the economy would have brought emancipation, a gradual freeing of the slaves. In a clear attempt to show this opinion crossed racial and geographic lines, Andrews informed his listeners that Abraham Lincoln was an emancipator rather than an abolitionist and noted that free blacks in Baltimore had condemned inflammatory abolitionist appeals in the wake of Brown’s raid. Andrews also contended that blacks had benefited from “the period of their indenture” or “racial apprenticeship.”

In her address, Elizabeth Bashinsky fondly recalled relations between blacks and Southern whites during slavery and argued that slaves in the United States, unlike those in Haiti, had not violently risen against their masters because they were well clothed, fed, and housed, treated kindly, and taught Christianity. She voiced the concern that the progress made in the advancement of blacks and the advancement of Hampton, the agricultural and vocational college, and Tuskegees and Howard would be destroyed if blacks were not “more in an in a more intimate sense and closer to our hearts remains the old negro ‘Mammy,’ who with her humility and sweet decorum has become the real institution.” While affirming allegiance to the national flag, she also spoke of devotion to the Confederate flag, comparing that sentiment to the oft-unsung but nonetheless unceasing love of a mother for her dead child. Returning to the occasion at hand, Elizabeth Bashinsky summed up its purpose to commemorate in stone “the loyalty, courage, and self-sacrifice of Heyward Shepherd and thousands of others of his race who would, like him, have lived death rather than betray their masters or to be false to a trust.”

One area newspaper reported Bashinsky “was loudly applauded, for every word that she uttered could be distinctly heard and was heartily approved.”

Shortly after Bashinsky concluded her remarks, the Storer College Singers rose to provide music. Pearl Tatten, music director at the college, apparently incensed at the tone of the event which differed from the “celebration of interracial good-will” she had expected, took occasion to respond. She informed the crowd she was the light-skinned daughter of a black father and African mother, had witnessed the discrimination whites practiced, and never saw blacks not looking backward but “pushing forward to a larger freedom, not in the spirit of the black mammy but in the spirit of new freedom and rising youth.”

Tatten’s remarks neither began nor ended reaction to the Faithful Slave or Heyward Shepherd Memorial. As it now became commonly known. Before the dedication of the memorial, Henry McDonald received inquiries from the Afro-American, a black newspaper published in Baltimore, and from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) seeking verification of his participation in its unveiling. The former simply sent a telegram asking for confirmation that McDonald would make an address at the dedication of an “UNCLE TOM, ANTI JOHN BROWN MONUMENT.” NAACP executive secretary Walter White questioned the involvement of the president of a black school in the dedication of a memorial White understood “all true slaves who remained faithful during the raid,” viliﬁed John Brown as a criminal, and promoted the idea that blacks did not participate in the struggle for their own freedom.

After its dedication, the black press strongly condemned the Heyward Shepherd Memorial. The Pittsburgh Courier ran an editorial by columnist Max Barber, president of the Brown Memorial Association, denouncing the entire idea of erecting a memorial to Shepherd, who “did not do a single thing to merit a monument,” who fled when ordered to stop by Brown’s men, who “could not have worshipped slavery,” and who probably did not know Brown’s purpose. Barber challenged the comments made on Brown and slave attitudes and accused the South of “still hankering[ing] for the filthy institution of slavery.” The Afro-American praised Pearl Tatten for her comments but denounced McDonald and the Reverend George Bragg, a black minister from Baltimore, for their participation. In its October 17 issue, the newspaper carried an article refuting attempts to characterize Brown as a criminal. The same issue reported speeches at the dedication were met with laughter from B&O railroad porters on a train near the platform and noted dissatisfaction with the ceremony among Storer College students.

Some blacks took an opposing position. Among them was James Walker, Shepherd’s relative, who occupied a seat on the platform during the ceremony and later wrote an open letter to Pearl Tatten expressing his displeasure with her remarks. According to Walker, the event attempted to bridge sectionalism by having the descendants of those who fought for North and South come together in tribute to a loyal and trustworthy man. Accusing Tatten of giving way to prejudice, Walker claimed her “untimely blow-out might have wrecked the car of racial progress.” The Reverend Bragg believed the memorial and ceremony an attempt to effect good interracial relations and characterized Andrews’s address as “simply magnificent.” Furthermore, a member of the Charles Town UDC chapter reported that “leading colored men” found Andrews’s address “so instructive” that they requested it be printed and sold in pamphlet form.

Still, the furor over the memorial continued for months, with McDonald as a particular target. Emphasizing the condition of blacks in the South—especially disfranchisement, segregation, and lynching—Storer College graduate Charles Hill called McDonald’s participation a “colossal blunder.” In a letter to the Afro-American, Hill charged that by participating in the dedication of a monument that was “a symbol of that inferiority complex which the slaves could not evade,” McDonald was “creating an attitude of servility in the students’ minds.” In the Crisis, the NAACP magazine, editor W. E. B. Du Bois called the dedication a “pro-slavery celebration” and termed the participation of McDonald and Bragg “disgraceful.” Even Max Barber, who knew McDonald as a fellow member of the John Brown Memorial Association, must have had “shocked and disgusted” at the statements made during the ceremony and concluded McDonald erred in participating in an event concocted by “a bunch of unregenerate rebels.”

The NAACP decided to take action to counter the impression created by the memorial. In March 1932 a local member wrote McDonald requesting permission for the NAACP to hold a meeting on the Storer College campus to honor John Brown. McDonald replied favorably but requested a place on the program “because some have misunderstood my attitude in respect to the Heyward Shepherd Memorial.” That same month, Walter White wrote McDonald to ask if the NAACP might place a tablet on John Brown’s Fort. Again McDonald replied favorably, although he requested further information on the tablet’s inscription. Nearly a month later, White forwarded a copy of the inscription in which its author W. E. B. Du Bois characterized Brown’s raid as a blow against slavery that “woke a guilty nation,” noted that several of Brown’s raiders were black, and stated two hundred thousand black soldiers and four million freed blacks had marched over Brown’s “crucified corpse.”

McDonald opposed its “ill-advised and historically inaccurate” language. He solicited the opinion of college trustees but in so doing reminded them of the college’s long history of promoting interracial goodwill and cautioned that “the result of placing a tablet with such an inscription upon the historic fort . . . would be an
unhappy thing." In general, those trustees who replied to McDonald's inquiry agreed with his assessment. McDonald informed White the proposed inscription would not do and enclosed the suggestion of trustee Thomas Robertson for the simple statement, "JOHN BROWN 1800-1859 'HIS SOUL GOES MARCHING ON.'" While acknowledging for McDonald's and the trustees' point of view, White emphasized that McDonald indicated the controversy, "for the major part, [was] a past issue" by September of that year. Besides, McDonald's ouster in 1944 certainly involved other issues. His age-he would turn seventy-two in 1944-was a factor, and the college board of trustees had already considered the advisability of engaging an assistant/understudy for the president. Storer College also faced serious challenges to its long-term survival in the form of inadequate financial resources and declining enrollment. McDonald pointed to the determination of some blacks to wrest control of Storer College from its white leadership as the primary motivation of those seeking his removal. This push was not restricted to Storer College, of course, as blacks had been fighting for control of heretofore white-run black schools for several decades. Yet the fact that Carter Woodson's call for McDonald's ouster in 1932 was squarely placed within the context of blacks taking charge of such schools raises the possibility that McDonald's participation in the dedication of the Heyward Shepherd Memorial and his subsequent refusal to allow the Du Bois tablet on John Brown's Fort could have precipitated such a campaign at Storer College. If so, it apparently was not until several like-minded people became members of the college board of trustees around 1940 that a "whispering campaign" for black leadership at Storer began among those individuals who actually had the power to replace McDonald.

Storer College got its first black president in 1944 but closed its doors little more than a decade later. The NAACP tablet honoring John Brown never returned to Harpers Ferry. The Heyward Shepherd Memorial/NAACP tablet debacle played in his forced retirement in 1944. The public furor seems to have subsided after the initial outburst against McDonald during the summer of 1932; and while he sensed that strong feelings still existed beneath the surface, McDonald indicated the controversy, "for the major part, [was] a past issue" by September of that year. Besides, McDonald's ouster in 1944 certainly involved other issues. His age-he would turn seventy-two in 1944-was a factor, and the college board of trustees had already considered the advisability of engaging an assistant/understudy for the president. Storer College also faced serious challenges to its long-term survival in the form of inadequate financial resources and declining enrollment. McDonald pointed to the determination of some blacks to wrest control of Storer College from its white leadership as the primary motivation of those seeking his removal. This push was not restricted to Storer College, of course, as blacks had been fighting for control of heretofore white-run black schools for several decades. Yet the fact that Carter Woodson's call for McDonald's ouster in 1932 was squarely placed within the context of blacks taking charge of such schools raises the possibility that McDonald's participation in the dedication of the Heyward Shepherd Memorial and his subsequent refusal to allow the Du Bois tablet on John Brown's Fort could have precipitated such a campaign at Storer College. If so, it apparently was not until several like-minded people became members of the college board of trustees around 1940 that a "whispering campaign" for black leadership at Storer began among those individuals who actually had the power to replace McDonald.

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an "Ever Present Bone of Contention": The Heyward Shepherd Memorial file:///C:/Users/Walter Teague/Documents/POL/BLACK/Harpers Ferry...
An "Ever Present Bone of Contention": The Heyward Shepherd Memorial

208.

35. The physical appearance of downtown Harpers Ferry has changed considerably since the 1920s. Based on the town's appearance at the time, the two descriptions suggest a small piece of land on top of the railroad embankment formed into a triangle by the intersection of Potomac and Shenandoah streets and the drive up the embankment to the station, then located at the east end of Shenandoah Street.

36. President [Henry T. McDonald] to Rev. J. J. Turner, 1 June 1932, Reel 123, Flash 9; and President of Storer College Alumni Association to Associated Negro Press, 30 May 1932, Reel 115, Flash 9, HFNHP. McDonald, a native of Blue Earth, Minnesota, and a graduate of Hillsdale College in Michigan, became president in 1899 and remained in that position until 1944. The college closed its doors in 1955 when the implementation of desegregation compounded the college's enrollment and financial problems. Available sources on the early history of Storer College, particularly its founding, include Kate J. Anthony, Storer College

37. [McDonald] note on typescript of letter from Julian S. Carr to Daniel Willard, 12 May 1922; and Willard to Henry McDonald, 27 June 1922, Storer College "Package 119, Park Buildings 56 (Lockwood House), 57 (Brackett House), and 58 (Morrell House), Fillmore Street, Camp Hill, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park (1796 to 1962)" (Historic Structures Report, History Section, National Park Service/University of Maryland Cooperative Agreement, 6 December 1995). The college identified McDonald as a native of Massachusetts.


44. "Report of the Faithful Slave Memorial Committee," Minutes of the Thirty-First Annual Convention of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Savannah, Georgia, November 18-22, 1924, 228; and David M. Chalmers, "Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan, 3d ed. (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1987), 9-10, 30, 201-15. The KKK's presence was felt in the Harpers Ferry area at this time. In November 1922 a parent of one Storer College student wrote that his son had left school because "the Ku Klux Klan together with trouble at the college made him feel it wasn't safe for him to stay there." Lee R. Taylor to McDonald, 16 November 1922, Reel 113, Flash 4, HFNHP. The following August, about forty Klansmen and another forty or fifty men marched from downtown Harpers Ferry to Bolivar Heights for a "conference." Farmers Advocate, 1 September 1923.

45. "Report of the Faithful Slave Memorial Committee," Minutes of the Thirty-Second Annual Convention, 225-27. Henry McDonald wrote the inscription for the Storer College Alumni Tablet in 1917. See Storer Record, December 1918, Reel 122, Flash 30; and President to Rev. J. J. Turner, 1 June 1932, Reel 123, Flash 9, HFNHP.


48. These changes were determined by comparing the inscription on the memorial to that printed in "Report of the Faithful Slave Memorial Committee," Minutes of the Thirtieth Annual Convention, 218-19.


51. Afro-American, 17 October 1931, Martinsburg Journal, 12 October 1931, and Shepherdstown Register, 15 October 1931, clippings in Heyward Shepherd Memorial Binder; Spirit of Jefferson, 30 September 1931, clipping, McDonald Collection; Matthew Page Andrews, Heyward Shepherd: Victim of Violence (Heyward Shepherd Memorial Association, n.d.), 6; "Report of the Faithful Slave Memorial Committee," Minutes of the Thirty-Eighth Annual Convention, 299; [McDonald] to Afro-American, 6 October 1931, Heyward Shepherd Memorial Binder. Why McDonald changed his opinion about the memorial is not clear. Perhaps he believed the inscription was acceptable in its revised form, which was considerably less harsh in its rhetoric about John Brown than the one settled on in 1921. Or perhaps he saw the inevitability of the event and hoped to moderate its tone through his participation. Given the economic depression gripping the country and the financial difficulties facing the college due both to that event and to an ongoing decline in support from traditional philanthropic sources, it is also possible that McDonald hoped participation would benefit the college by creating interest in the college's welfare by Southern whites.

52. [McDonald] "Remarks at the Unveiling of the Heyward Shepherd Marker," 10 October 1931, McDonald Collection.

53. Andrews, Heyward Shepherd, 10-11, 15-17, 19, 25-27, 32. It is interesting to note that Andrews informed Henry McDonald that "all" his ancestors were connected to either the abolitionist or emancipationist causes. Whether there were any abolitionists in Andrews's family is not known, but several members of his father's family supported American black colonization in Africa as an emancipatory measure and freed some of their slaves for transport to Liberia. Andrews's great-grandmother Ann Page of Clarke County, Virginia, began sending willing slaves to Liberia in 1832, and her daughter Sarah and son-in-law Charles W. Andrews continued this endeavor after her death in 1838. Despite the good intentions of some colonizationists toward blacks, the colonization movement arose from the almost universally held premise that blacks could never live in a state of equality with whites and that it was unacceptable and dangerous to perpetuate a degraded free black population within the United States. The Jeffersonian belief that the black family did not free all their slaves and that certain records as late as 1860 list five slaves under Charles Andrews's name and fourteen slaves under the name of Ann Robinson, Matthew Page Andrews's maternal grandmother. Matthew Page Andrews contended that the "hysterical intemperance" of his abolitionist relations in the North had hindered the efforts of his emancipationist antecedents in the South. See Andrews to McDonald, 14 November 1931, Heyward Shepherd Memorial Binder; A. D. Kenamond, Prominent Men of Shepherdstown Made Its First 200 Years (Shepherdstown, West Virginia, 1933); and Mary F. Goodwin, "A Liberian Packett," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 59(January 1915): 73; 1860 Census, Jefferson County, Virginia, 871, 949; and 1860 Census, Jefferson County Slave Schedule, 150B, 159. For information on the colonization movement see P. J. Staudenraus, The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865 (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1961).


55. Shepherdstown Register, 15 October 1931, clipping in Heyward Shepherd Memorial Binder.
56. Quoted in Afro-American, 17 October 1931, ibid.

57. Quoted in Pittsburgh Courier, 24 October 1931, ibid.

58. Afro-American to McDonald, 6 October 1931, telegram in ibid.

59. White to McDonald, 6 October 1931, ibid.

60. Pittsburgh Courier, 24 October 1931. See also Chicago Defender 16 October 1931 and Pittsburgh Courier, 17 October 1931, clippings in ibid. Organized in 1924, the John Brown Memorial Association had several goals: to conduct annual pilgrimages to Brown’s grave in New York, to “rescue John Brown’s name and the names of his followers from the obloquy and ignominy that American historians have heaped upon them,” and to erect a monument to Brown. The association erected a monument at North Elba, New York, in 1933. John Brown Memorial Association Brochure, Brackett, Newcomer, McDonald Papers Binder, vol. 2, HFNHP; and Lake Placid News, 3 and 10 May 1935; clippings, McDonald Collection.

61. Various clippings from Afro-American, 10, 17, and 31 October 1931 in Heyward Shepherd Binder; and 17 October 1931 clipping, McDonald Collection.

62. Walker to Pearl Tatum [Tatten], undated typescript, Reel 117, Flash 9, HFNHP.

63. Bragg to James M. Ranson, printed in Andrews, Heyward Shepherd. Bragg also wrote of his concern for interracial relations in a letter to McDonald, 22 October 1931, Heyward Shepherd Memorial Binder.


65. Hill to McDonald, 15 November 1931, Heyward Shepherd Memorial Binder.


68. Pittsburgh Courier, 24 October 1931, clipping in Heyward Shepherd Memorial Binder.

69. President to J. R. Clifford, Esq., 17 March 1932; and Clifford to McDonald, 14 March 1932, Reel 123, Flash 9, HFNHP.

70. White to McDonald, 23 March 1932; President to White, 25 March 1932; and White to McDonald, 16 April 1932, Reel 123, Flash 9, HFNHP. The inscription White provided reads as follows: Here / John Brown / Aimed at human slavery / A Blow / That woke a guilty nation. / With him fought / Seven slaves and sons of slaves. / Over his crucified corpse / Marched 200,000 black soldiers / And 4,000,000 freedmen / Singing / ’John Brown’s body lies a mouldering in the grave / But his Soul goes marching on!’ / In Gratitude this Tablet is Erected / The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People / May 21, 1932.

71. McDonald to Trustees of Storer College, 19 April 1932, Reel 123, Flash 9, HFNHP.

72. President to White, 26 April 1932, ibid. McDonald indicated he had heard from half the trustees. Letters from Alfred Williams Anthony, Thomas Robertson, Harry Myers, Howard Grose, John Fletcher, Katherine S. Westfall, and S. B. Stillman appear on Reel 123. In particular, see 25 April 1932 letter from Thomas E. Robertson.

73. White to McDonald, 2 May 1932, ibid.

74. McDonald to White, 3 May 1932, ibid.

75. Washington Tribune, 27 May 1932; Afro-American, 28 May 1932; Pittsburgh Courier, 28 May 1932; and NAACP statement, all on Reel 123, Flash 10, HFNHP; and Quarles, Allies for Freedom, 181-82.

76. Pittsburgh Courier, 4 June 1932. The comment on Du Bois’s “very extreme views” reflects the fact that Du Bois was increasingly out of step with mainstream black opinion by the 1930s. Du Bois, like growing numbers of blacks, saw accommodation as a failed means to black advancement, and he was one of the most outspoken proponents of militant protest. Few shared his interest in Marxist tactics, however, and few agreed with him when he resurrected an old idea of voluntary black segregation in a separate black cooperative economy. Advocating that idea brought Du Bois into conflict with several important members of the NAACP, intensified long-standing differences between Du Bois and Walter White, and culminated in Du Bois’s resignation as Crisis editor in 1934. Elliott Rudwick, “W. E. B. Du Bois: Protagonist of the Afro-American Protest” in Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century, eds. John Hope Franklin and August Meier (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1982), 77, 81-82.

77. Washington Tribune, 27 May 1932, Reel 123, Flash 10, HFNHP.

78. The reference is to Senators Cole Blease and Ben Tillman of South Carolina and J. Thomas Heflin of Alabama, who not only championed black disfranchisement and segregation but in general fueled white hatred of blacks for political gain.

79. Afro-American, 28 May 1932, Reel 123, Flash 9, HFNHP.

80. C. G. Woodson, “Exploitation is Not Education,” release, 8 June 1932, ibid.

81. President to Channing B. King, 23 September 1932, ibid. Trustee Harry Myers expressed a similar opinion when he advised against publication of the college alumni resolutions approved in June in support of McDonald and the trustees. Harry to McDonald, 20 October 1932, ibid.

82. Storer College Trustees Minute Book (1913-1944), 247, 277-78, 303, 330, 338, Reel 130; McDonald to Dr. Alfred Williams Anthony, 10 November 1927, Anthony to McDonald, 13 April 1929, and Anthony to Hon. Harry P. Henshaw, 8 February 1929, Reel 118, Flash 1; McDonald to Dr. Harry S. Myers, 20 July 1940, and Myers to McDonald, 12 August 1942, Reel 117; and McDonald to Mr. Hudson, 21 September [1943], Reel 117, Flash 16, HFNHP. 83. McDonald to Mr. Hudson, 29 April 1943, Reel 116, Flash 5; McDonald to Dr. Beall, 15 March 1943, 16 June 1943, and 31 January 1944, Reel 117, Flash 5; McDonald to Harry [Myers], 29 February 1944, Reel 117, Flash 18, HFNHP. For information on the push for black leadership at several schools see Raymond Wolters, The New Negro on Campus: Black College Rebellions of the 1920s (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975).

84. McDonald to Dr. Beall, 16 June 1943, Reel 117, Flash 5, HFNHP.

85. Since the 1950s, the memorial site has been within the boundaries of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. The NAACP continues to oppose its display, while Confederate groups support the memorial. Washington Post, 10 July 1995, metro section; Martinsburg Journal, 3 October 1995; and Charleston Daily Mail, 28 November 1995.
An "Ever Present Bone of Contention": The Heyward Shepherd Memorial
The first shot mortally wounded Heyward Shepherd [http://www.wvculture.org/history/journal_wvh/wvh56-1.html; An "Ever Present Bone of Contention": The Heyward Shepherd Memorial; accessed 2008-02-24]. Shepherd was a free black man that was a night baggage porter for the B&O Railroad that ran through Harpers Ferry near the armory. The noise from that shot roused Dr. John Starry from his sleep shortly after 1:00 a.m. He walked from his nearby home to investigate the shooting and was confronted by Brown's men. Starry stated that he was a doctor but could do nothing more for Shepherd, and Brown's The Heyward Shepherd Memorial finally was sited near the scene of Shepherdâ€™s fatal wounding and dedicated on October 10, 1931. The event drew a sharp reaction from W.E.B. DuBois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and proved divisive at Black Storer College, whose administration participated in the dedication. This Article was written by Mary Johnson. Last Revised on April 23, 2021.Â Johnson, Mary. An 'Ever Present Bone of Contention': The Heyward Shepherd Memorial. West Virginia History, (1997). Cite This Article. Johnson, Mary "Heyward Shepherd." e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia. 23 April 2021. Web. The Heyward Shepherd Monument still stands in the national park and the National Park Service sees itself as the custodian of this cultural resource. While the UDC and the SCV see the monument as an important symbol of Southern heritage, the NAACP has lobbied to have it removed from the landscape. Discover the world's research. 17+ million members.