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Governor Wise's War: Loose Lips (Part 2)

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Governor Wise's War: Loose Lips (Part 2)

Abstract

When last we left Ex-Governor Henry Wise, he was exceedingly impatient at the Virginia secession convention's failure to act immediately and swiftly after the firing on Fort Sumter. The power broker who had stared down John Brown now called upon personal loyalties to get the job done where politics had failed. [An account by John Imboden](#) has the Governor querying the future Brigadier General, asking whether he remembered the charge Wise made upon presenting two brass cannon to a Staunton militia unit. Imboden recalled the Governor had told him, "he was bound to obey the call of Wise for those guns whenever made." Admitting the remark a joke then, the former Governor assured Imboden that he spoke in, "earnest now." "I want those guns," the former Governor continued, "to aid in the immediate capture of the United States Arsenal at Harper's Ferry." [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Harpers Ferry

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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

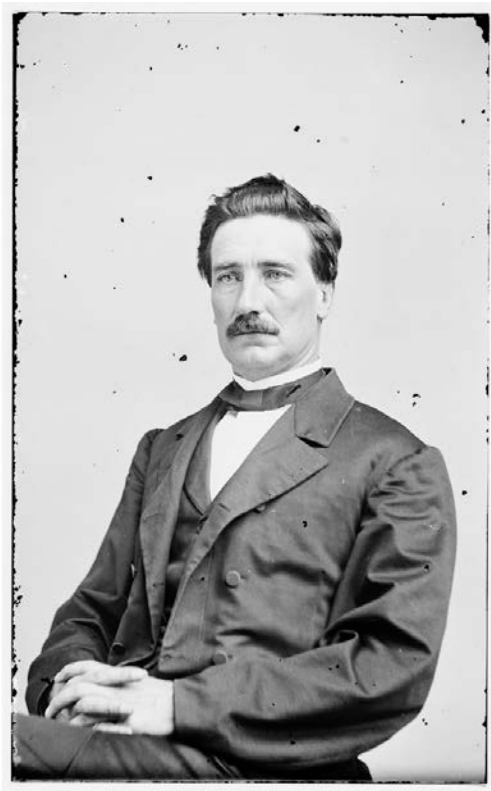
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TUESDAY, APRIL 16, 2011

[\(See Part 1\)](#)



John Imboden as he appeared during the war / [Library of Congress Prints and Photographs](#)

When last we left Ex-Governor Henry Wise, he was exceedingly impatient at the Virginia secession convention's failure to act immediately and swiftly after the firing on Fort Sumter. The power broker who had stared down John Brown now called upon personal loyalties to get the job done where politics had failed. [An account by John Imboden](#) has the Governor querying the future Brigadier General, asking whether he remembered the charge Wise made upon presenting two brass cannon to a Staunton militia unit. Imboden recalled the Governor had told him, "he was bound to obey the call of Wise for those guns whenever made." Admitting the remark a joke then, the former Governor assured Imboden that he spoke in, "earnest now." "I want those guns," the former Governor continued, "to aid in the immediate capture of the United States Arsenal at Harper's Ferry."

As the sun was setting on Richmond on the night of April 16th, a clandestine group met in the Exchange Hotel in Wise's chambers. After the group had assembled, keen on their planned actions, they resolved to get the permission of the sitting Governor. Three of the men, including Alfred Barbour, Superintendent of the armory at

Harper's Ferry, roused the State's Executive from bed and, in his night clothes, "laid the scheme before him." Governor Letcher would take, "no step till officially informed that the ordinance of secession was passed by the convention." The convention assuredly would vote for secession the following day. Letcher assured them that there would be plenty of time to act.

The small impromptu committee's response to the governor's entirety of patience: march on Harper's Ferry themselves if the Governor would take no action. There would be no need for secrecy

among the members of the secession convention, simply because they knew nothing of the plot that night. Militia men began to form around the northern quadrant of the state with no real authority from the state's elected bodies. The only secrecy would need to be among the small group of plotters on the night of the 16th, scheming to force Virginia's hand into war.

And yet, the plan almost slipped their grasp. Alfred Barbour could not keep his mouth shut. Imboden recalled that on the train, "just before we moved out of the depot," the Armory's superintendent, "made an unguarded remark in the car." The plan to assault Federal property and seize Federal assets, hatched in part by the Federal official Barbour, was, "overheard by a Northern traveler, who immediately wrote a message to President Lincoln and paid a negro a dollar to take to the telegraph office." The black man, springing toward the telegraph office to forewarn Washington, was apprehended by the crew and the plot remained under wraps, but only barely.

On the same journey escaping Richmond, on their way north and west, were some of the western Virginian contingent of the secession convention. Reading the writing on the wall, [John S. Burdett of Taylor County boarded a train to Washington](#), and thence up the Baltimore and Ohio railroad to western Virginia. Just up the car on the way from Washington were Alfred Barbour and another member of the Convention, "plenty of whiskey bottles in front of them." The train pulled into Harpers Ferry.



"The platform was black with a frenzied crowd," Burdett recalled. Barbour recognized Burdett. Chiding the delegate that his vote mattered not, the pair said, "Burdett, you seceded."

"Well," Burdett replied to the drunken pair, "what about the injunction of secrecy?" The convention at Richmond had entered a closed session, and the news of the secession vote was to be kept quiet. The two did not respond.



The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad opposite Harpers Ferry / [LOC Prints & Photos](#)

When the Armory's Superintendent reached the platform at Harpers Ferry, he, "stepped off the train and said something and up went a tumultuous shout." The crowd erupted into bedlam. Burdett surmised exactly what the drunken official had returned from Richmond to do. He, "guessed he was there to grab the arsenal and steal all its valuable and costly machinery. It turned out that way." "Revolutionary devilment," Burdett concluded as the train pulled away from the station, along with a good dose of whiskey, "took the locks off [their] mouths."

To be concluded...