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Governor Wise's War: My Misconception (Part 1)

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Governor Wise's War: My Misconception (Part 1)

Abstract

I worked in the living history branch at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park for three years, wearing old timey clothing and talking to visitors about the meanings of John Brown. Harpers Ferry is where I began to understand what the concept of interpretation means, and how it is such a radically different concept from academic history. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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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

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THURSDAY, APRIL 7, 2011

I worked in the living history branch at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park for three years, wearing old timey clothing and talking to visitors about the meanings of John Brown. Harpers Ferry is where I began to understand what the concept of interpretation means, and how it is such a radically different concept from academic history.

I don't know how many Civil War tours I conducted of the "Point," Harpers Ferry's downtown. The climax of the tour's first major tale was the arrival of Alfred Barbour, Superintendent of the Federal Armory, fresh from the secession convention in Richmond heralding the news that the state had seceded from the Union. The entire event was usually summed up in three lines: "Virginia seceded from the Union. The Governor sent militia to Harpers Ferry to seize the armory. Roger Jones burned the armory to keep it from falling into enemy hands."

The story seems plausible enough. In fact, it is about the way that Robert Rowison sums up the events in an article in the [Southern Literary Messenger in July of 1862](#). Rowison points out Virginia's secession convention's plan to keep, "secret the passage of the ordinance," until they could, "secure for the State all the arms, munitions, ships, war stores, and military posts within her borders, which they had power to seize." One cache of those tools of war was, "Harpers' Ferry, in Jefferson County, on the Potomac river, with its Armory and Arsenal, containing about 10,000 muskets and 5,000 rifles, with machinery for the purpose of manufacturing arms, capable, with a sufficient force of workmen, of turning out 25,000 muskets a year."

The convention and Governor John Letcher worked in concert to seize the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, according to Rowison. The plan to seize the weapons was a measured and calculated move of consensus between the elected representatives of Virginia's citizenry. Letcher is credited with acting, "with great zeal and vigor." The Convention, for its part, appointed a committee of four to orchestrate the seizure of weapons from Harpers Ferry. Among these men appointed by the committee was Alfred Barbour, the Armory's own superintendent.

But Rowison's tale has very quickly ridden off the rails of truth and careened into a canyon of propaganda and imposed order. In actuality, the events of April 16th-18th, 1861 were far more complex and far less calculated. This becomes immediately clear when diving into [the proceedings of](#)



A photo of me in old timey clothing [taken by Raymond Fudge](#)

[the Virginia Secession Convention](#), newly digitized and available for free from the University of Richmond.

Rowison lists as one of Barbour's compatriots on the committee as John D. Imboden. A quick word search of the Convention records yields three references to Imboden, all pertaining to a perception that when the Convention met in February their first act would be to depose Governor Letcher. Imboden is never appointed to a committee by the secession convention. Imboden was not even a member of the secession convention, having lost his bid for a seat in the body.



Virginia Governor Henry Wise as he appeared in *Harpers Weekly*, August 1859

Indeed, there *was no committee* crafted by the convention. The truth is far weirder. The committee sent to Harpers Ferry on October 16th-17th 1861 was created by a governor of Virginia, but not the sitting governor. Henry A. Wise, former governor and delegate for Princess Anne County at the secession convention crafted the committee out of disgust with Virginian intransigence. John Imboden would later recall how Wise chaired the back room deal which led to Virginia's entry into the American Civil War.

Just a few short minutes of research can turn an entire interpretive product on its head. But where will delving further take us? How did the Civil War *really* start in Virginia? What is the definition of treason? And, most importantly, what does all this mean when the rubber hits the road and you need to interpret some of the most convoluted events on an historical landscape to a general audience?

Tune in next week, same bat-time, same bat-channel.

(To be Continued...)