

MHAA To Kick Off Civil War Commemoration

By Margaret Morton

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If it's Civil War skullduggery and mayhem you want to learn more about, the Mosby Heritage Area Association has just the weekend for you coming up Nov. 7 and 8.

The association hopes to steep Civil War buffs in a two-day immersion in the stirring events of 1859 when anti-slavery reformer John Brown raided the U.S. Arsenal at Harpers Ferry, leading to panic throughout northern Virginia.

The field workshop is designed to commemorate the opening blast of America's most terrible war, one that often pitted brother against brother, and father against son.

However, Mosby Heritage Area Association Director of Education Rich Gillespie said he needs an accurate head count for the workshop for the event to go forward as planned. Those interested are asked to register via the MHAA Web site at www.mosbyheritagearea.org immediately or telephone 540-687-6681.



If all goes to plan, the interactive workshop on John Brown will be the kick-off for Loudoun's commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, and has been endorsed by the Loudoun Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee.

When John Brown led his band of 22 abolitionists to seize the federal armory at Harpers Ferry in October 1859, "his goal was to arm area slaves for a massive run-off to freedom in Canada," according to Gillespie.

Brown's mission misfired. Instead of slaves, Brown got unwelcome attention from the militia and Marines, resulting in the death or capture of all but five of his supporters. Brown also was captured.

After scaring the region's population with his plan to start armed insurrection as a means to end slavery, retribution was swift. Brown was tried for treason against Virginia and subsequently hanged in nearby Charles Town in December, 1859.

While his death was hailed with rejoicing by southerners, to millions of others, Brown was a hero. Most historians agree that Brown's Harpers Ferry raid can be taken as the seminal event that led a year later to secession and the Civil War.

Gillespie said the Nov. 7 and 8 event will take place "in the field" at different locations in Loudoun, Maryland (from where Brown launched his attack) and in Harpers Ferry.

As they go through the two days, workshop participants will move through the tumultuous events of 1860 that led to the eventual dissolution of the Union, Gillespie said. They will discover, despite Brown's death, the "firestorm of anger and gnawing fear" that ensued in the South, particularly in the area covered by MHAA, that abuts Harpers Ferry. That firestorm occurred on the eve of the presidential election of 1860, in which Abraham Lincoln was elected.

John Brown's Raid is both a singular event in the region's history and gripping still controversial, according

to Gillespie.

Those who sign up for the experience will be immersed in the issues that surrounded the institution of slavery just prior to the outbreak of war, and allow debate on the political options that existed in the late 1850s.

Each participant will take on the persona of one of the raiders and follow John Brown as shadow reenactors as he pursues his dangerous mission. At the same time, they will be exposed to the reactions of Northern Virginians to the seizure of the armory and its implications.

Gillespie warns that some walking will be involved, including a night trek as participants get to reenact the experience of being a slave sneaking to safety at a station on the Underground Railroad along Loudoun's back roads, or as a raider making his way along the Potomac River into Harpers Ferry.

Costumed members of Gillespie's Gray Ghost Interpretive Group will help conduct the program, presenting sketches of events concerning the raid.

The workshop will begin at 6:45 p.m. Friday, Nov. 7, at Morven Park, one of Loudoun's largest plantations in 1859. It will end Saturday night inside the Engine House at Harpers Ferry, where Brown was holed up and eventually captured.

Participants are responsible for their own lodgings both nights. For information, visit the Loudoun Convention and Visitors Association at www.visitloudoun.org or telephone 800-752-6118, ext. 11, or contact the MHAA at 540-687-6681. Cost of the program is \$120 per person. Registration forms and a detailed itinerary are available at the MHAA Web site.