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The Accidental Martyr

Hayward Shepherd, a black railroad porter in Harper's Ferry, was the first man killed in John Brown's raid, an insurrection intended to free Shepherd's own race from the grips of slavery. Many Democratic newspapers in both the North and South initially reported that Brown's men shot Shepherd specifically because he refused to take up arms on the side of the abolitionists. Republican presses instead tended to use passive phrases when describing Shepherd's death, suggesting that they did not want to report the fact that an anti-slavery group had killed a free black man. These moderate presses remained far less opinionated about John Brown and Hayward Shepherd than the extremist presses on both sides of the slavery debate. Differing portrayals of Shepherd's in newspapers throughout the country suggests that the details of John Brown's raid were divided more ideologically than regionally. Rumored statements from unreliable sources likely found their way into the press, causing newspapers to relay untrustworthy information about the raid in a variety of articles. The unreliability of the newspaper sources is evident in articles such as an October 19, 1859 report in the *New York Herald* which stated that "it is true that the negro Haywood, a porter, was shot, but was not killed, as stated by telegraph."¹ The fact that the deceased was named and renamed so many times – Hayward, Haywood, Heyward, and even Hayard – is also suggestive of the lack of

¹ "Abolition Outbreak in Virginia," *New York Herald*, October 19, 1859.

reliable communication between sources. The truth behind Shepherd's death, though, seems to be most in line with the conclusion proposed by historian Tony Horowitz in his book *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid that Sparked the Civil War*. Horowitz asserts that regardless of who shot Hayward, "the reason was almost certainly skittishness."² While this conclusion is still unflattering to Brown's cause, it also does not provide evidence for the southern propaganda that Brown and his followers were reckless killers. Although the likely conclusion behind Shepherd's death is relatively neutral, the extremist newspapers shaped such details of the raid to further their own specific agendas.

Paul A. Shackel, professor of anthropology at the University of Maryland, argues in his book *Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape* that the southern newspapers' "use of the image of Shepherd to justify the existing social system and to demonize John Brown began almost immediately after his death."³ Shackel bases his argument on the particularly opinionated language of two articles from late October 1859 in the emphatically pro-slavery, pro-secession newspaper the *Virginia Free Press*. Although the two articles do aim to glorify Shepherd's character and loyalty to his position in society and to discredit Brown, this particular newspaper represents an extreme position in the debate over slavery. The two articles analyzed in Shackel's argument only show that Shepherd's death was used as propaganda just twice in a span of ten days after the insurrection. The *Virginia Free Press* does not begin using his name again until 1867, suggesting that his pre-war position in the press was not as influential as Shackel claims.⁴ The opinions of a fire-eater newspaper like the

² Tony Horowitz, *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid that Sparked the Civil War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011), 139.

³ Paul A. Shackel, *Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2003), 83.

⁴ Shackel is correct in arguing that the *Virginia Free Press* did speak highly of Shepherd in the weeks after the raid to discredit the Abolitionists. The flaw in his argument is that Shepherd's pre-war prevalence in the press was

Virginia Free Press about an abolitionist insurrection cannot be effectively used to analyze the overall function of Hayward Shepherd's death in the final months of 1859. Shackel fails to take into consideration the moderate portrayal of Shepherd's death in other newspapers, and what these other news sources reveal about the ideological conflict surrounding John Brown's raid.

Most major press coverage of the John Brown raid took place in moderate pro-slavery Democratic newspapers that failed to take a strong stance on Hayward Shepherd's death. These newspapers, such as *Raleigh Weekly Standard*, *Washington D.C. National Era*, and *Pennsylvania Bedford Gazette*, all shared pro-slavery sympathies despite their varying geographic positions. When reporting about the John Brown raid, these moderate pro-slavery papers tended to mention Shepherd's death in passing, often including that Brown's men "endeavored to induce Hayward, the free colored watchman [...] to take up arms," but "upon his refusing to do so, they immediately shot him."⁵ In comparison to Republican media sources, the Democratic papers, both in the North and South, tended to report more frequently that Shepherd was shot because he "had refused to be armed."⁶ This line of reporting – that the abolitionists simply killed those who refused their movement – would support Shackel's argument that the southern press wished to vilify John Brown through Shepherd's death. There are two flaws in this conclusion, though. First, the reports of Shepherd being killed for his refusal to join Brown's men were not limited to the southern states as Shackel has claimed. The *New Hampshire Patriot*, a northern Democratic newspaper publishing in the heartland of New England liberalism, reported that "in fact, one of the first victims was a colored man, shot by insurgents because he refused to join them."⁷

fleeting. The *VFP* only mentioned Hayward twice in 1859, and did not begin to use his name again until an article in 1867.

⁵ "Daring Abolition Foray. Outrageous Attempt to Abduct Slaves from Jefferson County, Virginia", *Independent Democrat* (Mississippi), October 25, 1859.

⁶ "The Town of Harper's Ferry," *The Daily Exchange* (Maryland), October 20, 1859.

⁷ "The Harper's Ferry Affair," *New Hampshire Patriot*, October 26, 1859.

Likewise, another northern Democratic paper, the *New York Daily Tribune* reported that “the colored man, Hayward, a railroad porter, was shot early in the morning for refusing to join the movement.”⁸ The reports of these and other northern Democratic papers demonstrate that it was not simply the southern states saying that Shepherd was intentionally shot, but the Democratic newspapers, regardless of region. These reports suggest that perhaps the Democrats were doctoring their facts to support a certain agenda as Shackel claims, yet these moderate Democratic papers are much less opinionated than the reports in the *Virginia Free Press*. For this reason, Shackel’s claim is flawed because it relies only on an extremist opinion while failing to consider the information from the majority newspapers. More likely than Shackel’s conclusion is that the varying portrayals of Hayward Shepherd were more ideological than regional, and the motive behind his death was accidental and frequently misinterpreted.

Republican newspapers largely reported Shepherd’s death with vague details, suggesting that these anti-slavery presses were hesitant to report that a black man was killed at the hands of abolitionists. The *American Lancaster Gazette*, a Republican paper, reported that “one of the railroad hands, a negro, was killed while trying to get the train through town,” and later “the colored assistent [*sic*] master on the train was shot and mortally wounded.”⁹ The *Cleveland Morning Leader*, also Republican, reported that Shepherd was killed as “he was active in his efforts to secure a passage for the express train of cars which had been stopped.”¹⁰ Even vaguer still, the Republican *Western Reserve Chronicle* reported that “about three o’clock Hayward Sheppard, the colored man they shot in the morning, died.”¹¹ Many Republican papers simply

⁸ “The Virginia Insurrection. Quiet Restored. Storming of the Armory,” *New York Daily Tribune*, October 19, 1859.

⁹ “The Mob at Harper’s Ferry,” *American Lancaster Gazette* (Ohio), October 20, 1859.

¹⁰ “The Citizens of Virginia Who Were Killed at Harper’s Ferry,” *Cleveland Morning Leader* (Ohio), October 26, 1859.

¹¹ “The Incident of the Rebellion,” *Western Reserve Chronicle* (Ohio), November 23, 1859.

listed Shepherd's name among the other victims without any detail, writing, "Haywood, a negro porter at the railroad station."¹² The lack of clarity in the Republican papers can be attributed to their effort to avoid admitting the death of a black man at the hands of abolitionists. Even though many of these Republican presses were not necessarily abolitionist papers, they were certainly anti-slavery. For this reason, it is possible that northern newspapers wished to use language that mitigated the role of Brown's men in Shepherd's death.

Newspapers inspired by William Lloyd Garrison's staunch anti-slavery position lacked even more details about Shepherd's death than the mainstream anti-slavery Republican newspapers. The *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, a newspaper published in New Lisbon, Ohio, held the phrase "No Union with Slaveholders" as its motto, printed at the top of every edition.¹³ This radical press, which believed that even Republican ideology was a disgrace to the nation, never specifically mention Shepherd's name when reporting of his death. While moderate anti-slavery newspapers tended to mention Shepherd's name multiple times in the weeks after the attack, the *Bugle* left Shepherd unnamed, and only mentioned his death once. The October 29 edition of the weekly newspaper reported that "the express train running east was fired into twice, and one of the railroad hands, a negro, was killed while trying to get the train through town."¹⁴ The *Liberator*, Garrison's own newspaper, used similarly passive language to describe Shepherd's death, saying "one of the railroad hands and a negro killed while they were trying to get the train through town."¹⁵ Although these report uses undetailed language like of some less radical anti-slavery papers, the brevity of the reports and the lack of Shepherd's name supports a more specific and extreme abolitionist agenda, differentiating from main-stream Republican papers.

¹² "Great Insurrection at Harper's Ferry," *Orleans Independent Standard* (Vermont), October 28, 1859.

¹³ *Anti-Slavery Bugle* (Ohio).

¹⁴ "The Attempt to Establish Freedom," *Anti-Slavery Bugle* (Ohio), October 29, 1859.

¹⁵ "Attempted Insurrection in Virginia," *The Liberator* (Massachusetts), October 21, 1859.

Also, other Republican papers that reported limited details of Shepherd's death did not openly praise Brown's movements right away, even initially calling him "perfectly unreasonable, wild and insane."¹⁶ In comparison, the *Bugle* and *Liberator* were immediately favorable towards Brown. Even the title of the October 29 article, "The Attempt to Establish Freedom," suggests an approving tone toward Brown and his efforts.¹⁷ Garrison himself wrote an editorial for the *Liberator*, saying that he and all his supporters "are united in the conviction that a more honest, conscientious, truthful, brave, disinterested man [than John Brown] [...] does not exist."¹⁸ Because the radical anti-slavery positions of the *Bugle* and *Liberator* had specific agendas, it is likely that the writers intentionally skimmed over the details of Shepherd's death to paint a more favorable picture of abolitionist efforts. Had Shackel based his argument only on the articles from the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* and the *Liberator* instead of the *Virginia Free Press*, he likely would have concluded that the death of an unnamed black railroad porter was an insignificant detail after John Brown's raid. For this reason, neither extremist position is a true representative of Shepherd's death, and therefore cannot stand alone as evidence for a conclusion on the overall portrayal of Hayward Shepherd as a detail of John Brown's raid.

The *Virginia Free Press* reported just days after the insurrection that Hayward "was a valuable fellow, whose life was worth more than all the bandit, as he was trusted with every thing in the depot."¹⁹ The paper went on to report a week later that "trust-worthy free negro man Hayward Sheppard [...] had the confidence and regard not only of his employers, but of every one who knew him."²⁰ The paper continued in a lengthy editorial, lamenting over the loss of "an

¹⁶ "Who is Brown, the Leader!" *The Penny Press* (Ohio), October 21, 1859.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ William Lloyd Garrison, "The Tragedy at Harper's Ferry," *The Liberator* (Massachusetts), October 28, 1859.

¹⁹ "Harper's Ferry Great Excitement," *Virginia Free Press*, October 20, 1859.

²⁰ "A Matter for Reflection," *Virginia Free Press*, October 27, 1859.

unoffending trust worthy free negro man,” and vilifying the “bigotry” and “miserable failure” of the abolitionists.”²¹ While the *Virginia Free Press* was almost certainly wallowing in Shepherd’s death to discredit the abolitionists, it is quite possible that Shepherd was in fact a respected member of the Harper’s Ferry community, and not just a tool for pro-slavery propaganda. Paul Shackel describes Shepherd as a tool to “justify the existing social system and to demonize John Brown,” yet there perhaps was some sincerity in the mournful reports of Shepherd’s death.²² Eva Sheppard Wolf’s *Almost Free* details the life of a free black in Virginia named Samuel Johnson who worked at a local tavern where he gained many white allies.²³ These allies helped Johnson in his fight for freedom in the Virginian courts, and even signed testimonials swearing to his upstanding character.²⁴ It is possible that Shepherd was another Johnson, a free black who had made acquaintances or even friendships with whites who would think highly enough of him to praise his loyalty after a shocking and unjust death. Shepherd’s boss, a white man named Fountain Beckham, reportedly cherished his relationship with his employee, and was “greatly excited at his death, as the old man had had him ten or twelve years, and liked him very much.”²⁵ The fact that Shepherd “was buried in Alexandria with ceremony” and military honors also suggests that he was more than just a tool for pro-slavery rhetoric, and was truly valued by the white community.²⁶ Seeing as Shepherd appeared to have an important relationship with the community, Shackel perhaps assumed too quickly that the articles about Shepherd were superficial and simply political. Shackel is correct, though, that the *Virginia Free Press*, regardless of whether the writers actually appreciated Shepherd for his character, dwelled on

²¹ Ibid.

²² Shackel, *Memory in Black and White*, 83.

²³ Eva Sheppard Wolf, *Almost Free* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 14.

²⁴ Ibid., 26.

²⁵ “Slave Insurrection at Harper’s Ferry – Great Excitement!” *Shepherdstown Register* (West Virginia), October 22, 1859.

²⁶ “Funeral of one of the Colored Victims,” *Staunton Vindicator* (Virginia), October 28, 1859.

Shepherd's death in order to vilify abolitionism. Although extremists failed to portray Shepherd's death in a factual, nonbiased way, the conclusions of these radical sides of the slavery debate have shaped the American memory of his life and death, and the details of John Brown's raid.

Just one year before John Brown's raid, William Seward declared that an "irrepressible conflict" was taking place in the United States, and that the country would inevitably become "either an entirely slaveholding nation, or entirely a free-labor nation."²⁷ Although the Civil War is commonly understood as a fated event in American history, the vitality of the moderates in both the Republican and Democratic parties as late as 1859 is evidence that the conflict was perhaps not destined to be. Michael Holt argues in *The Fate of Their Country* that the Civil War was a result of the choices made "by politicians for personal or partisan advantage, regardless of the consequences to the nation as a whole."²⁸ He claims that the partisanship of slavery's expansion issue caused the middle-ground of political parties to break down by 1858, leaving only the irreconcilable arguments of the extremists.²⁹ Newspaper reports of Hayward Shepherd, though, show that even as close to the outbreak of war as late-1859, the moderates were not joining in the same types of radically polarizing rhetoric as the extremists. Although John Brown's raid is often understood as an event which made the war inevitable, it seems instead that there was still strength in the moderates even after the raid. This suggests that extremist rhetoric had yet to completely divide the nation, and that there was still potential for agreement between the moderates of both parties. Holt is correct that a lack of moderates on the issue of slavery is

²⁷Michael F. Holt, *The Fate of their Country* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 124.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

what led to the Civil War, but it is quite possible that the divide between political parties was not quite yet as extreme in 1859 as to warrant the conflict.