



## Governor Wise at Harper's Ferry

By Bert Dunkerly

When violence broke out at Harper's Ferry on October 16, 1859, Henry A. Wise was governor of Virginia (today the village is in West Virginia). In the aftermath of the raid, Virginians were on edge: fears of slave revolt were everywhere and the feeling grew that the Federal Government could not protect them.



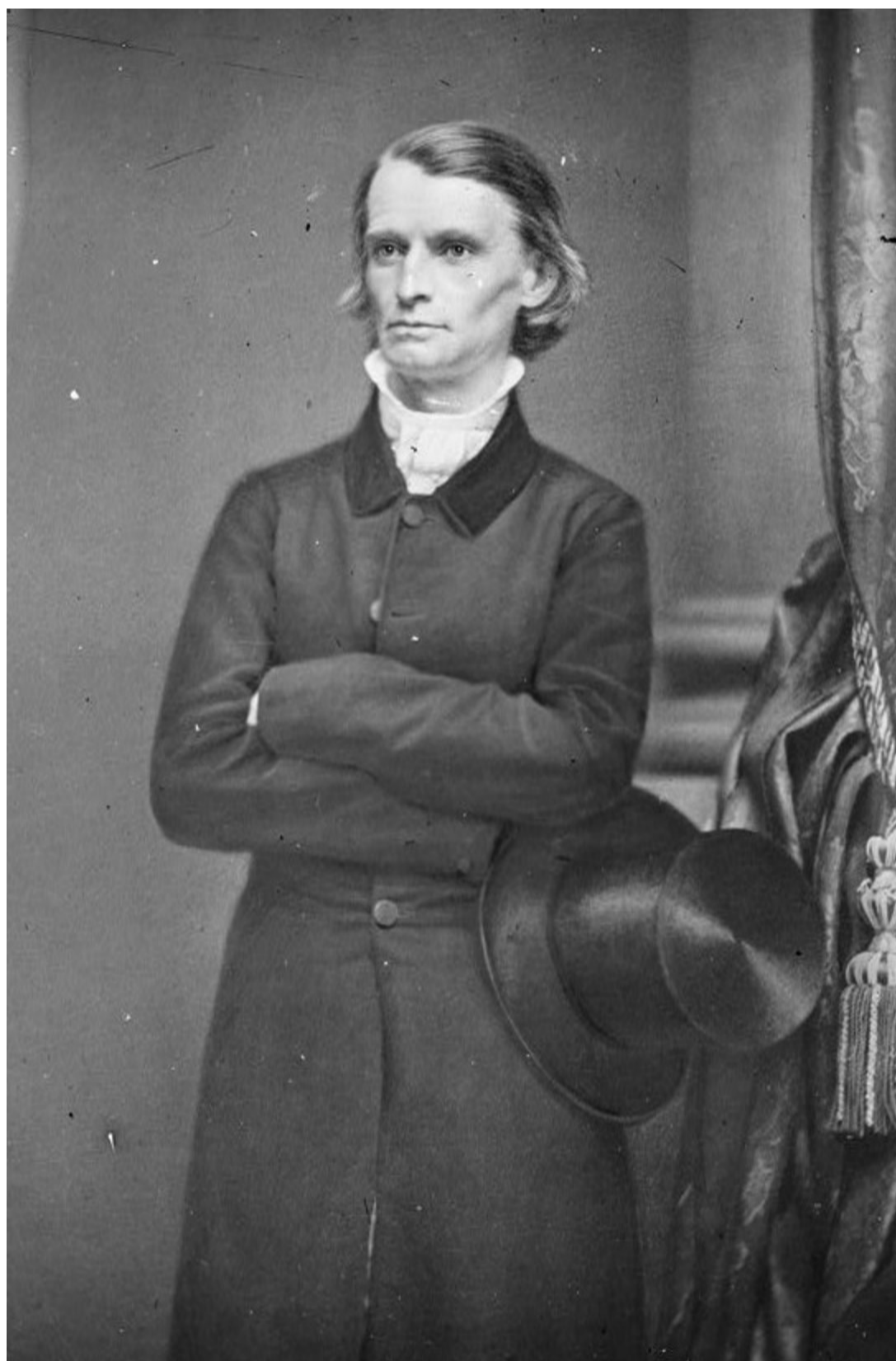
Modern day Harper's Ferry as seen from Maryland Heights

Following the raid, Governor Wise ordered Virginia militia to guard Harper's Ferry as well as other key sites in Virginia. He also wrote President James Buchanan. He sums up widespread sentiment on the raid, and criticizes the arsenal's lack of security, which "made that arsenal a positive danger instead of being a protection to the surrounding country . . ." Wise goes on to state that, "there was no watch worth naming kept at the arsenal, and no military or civil guard whatever. Finding, on Thursday morning last, that the U. States Marines, under Col. Lee, had been ordered away from Harpers Ferry, and that there was no guard left there, I organized a corps of volunteers, to watch and guard the confines of Virginia contiguous to & around the arsenal & grounds attached thereto, ceded to the U. States, and incidentally to afford protection to the same as well as to the people and territory of Virginia . . ."

Brown was guilty of treason and sentenced to death, but Governor Wise held the power to commute the sentence to life imprisonment. He briefly considered it, thinking of sending Brown to a mental hospital. Yet after meeting with Brown in his jail cell, Wise decided that he was not insane, and should be executed. Brown's vision, determination, and clear thinking impressed Wise- he was deeply motivated by his cause and thus dangerous. He had also attracted loyal followers who might attempt to strike again. Wise intended to make a strong stance on the issue; it was one of his last acts as Governor, his term ending in 1860.

That fall and winter, all across Virginia, communities organized local militias, and existing militias began drilling in earnest, stockpiling arms and supplies. In Lynchburg one volunteer cavalry unit even adopted its name after Governor Wise.

During Virginia's secession Convention in the spring of 1861, Wise was an ardent proponent of secession and preparation for military defense.



Virginia Governor Henry A. Wise

The widespread fear that most northerners approved of Brown's Raid, that prominent abolitionists had a hand in supporting it, and that the Federal Government could not maintain peace or protect them, all contributed to the rapid arming and drilling of militia across Virginia that winter. In fact, one cavalry unit from Lynchburg even named itself after Wise. Many of these newly-formed militias would muster into Confederate service in 1861.

Bert Dunkerly, author of today's Blue and Gray Dispatch, will be leading a tour March 25-28, 2020 of the 1865 North Carolina Campaign for the Blue and Gray Education Society. Be a part of learning by interacting with this world class historian! Click on the Blue and Gray Educaiton link below to visit our webiste for more information and to register.

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