

The John Brown Pikes

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THE most interesting of the John Brown relics are the pikes that he intended to put in the hands of slaves. A pike consisted of a two-edged blade, ten inches long, made from steel; a guard five inches wide, made of malleable iron, attached by a ferrule, also of malleable iron, to a handle six feet in length, made of ash. They were obtained from Charles Blair, of Collinsville, Conn. When the United States Senate appointed a committee, known from its chairman, Sen. James M. Mason of Virginia, as the Mason Committee, to investigate the Harper's Ferry Invasion, Blair was summoned to Washington and in his testimony gave a full account of the making of the pikes.¹ There is some account of the pikes in the biographies of Brown by Sanborn² and Villard³ and additional data are contained in the letters of Blair to Brown in the archives of the Kansas State Historical Society.

About the first of March, 1857, Brown spoke in Collinsville on the subject of conditions in Kansas. The next morning he exhibited in a local drug store some weapons that he had taken from Pate's band at Black Jack. In showing a dirk he remarked that, if mounted on a long handle, it would make a capital weapon with which the settlers of Kansas could defend themselves against sudden attack. It was Blair's recollection, three years after the event, that Brown then turned to him, knowing he was a blacksmith, and asked what it would cost to make five hundred or a thousand of them, and that he replied that he would make five hundred for a dollar and a quarter apiece, and a thousand for a dollar apiece. Sanborn represents that the remark was made to H. N. Rust, with whom Brown was negotiating for the repair of some pistols sent from Kansas, and that Rust later took up the matter with Blair. Some color is given to Sanborn's version of the incident by the fact that two of Brown's later communications to Blair were made through Rust.

Brown returned to Collinsville March 11 and arranged with Blair to make a dozen sample pikes and send them to him at Springfield, Mass. March 20 Blair wrote Brown that he would send the samples on the following day. The ferrules, he wrote, were made of sheet

1. *Senate Report*, No. 278, 36th Cong., 1st sess., pp. 121-129. Serial No. 1040. Cited hereafter as Mason Report.

2. F. B. Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown* (Boston, 1885), pp. 375-378.

3. Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, A Biography Fifty Years After* (Boston, 1910), pp. 283-285, 400-401.

iron and were not satisfactory, but that it would cost more to make them of malleable iron; that he would meet Brown in Hartford the following week and settle upon the price. In a postscript Blair added that if Brown wanted more, he could put the samples in with the rest; if not, he could pay twelve dollars for them. Brown endorsed the letter as answered March 23, probably writing that he would come to Collinsville.

March 30 the contract for the pikes was signed at Collinsville. Blair testified before the Mason Committee that it was drawn by Brown, but the copy in the archives of the Kansas State Historical Society is in Blair's handwriting.⁴ Brown may have made a rough draft from which Blair made a copy. The contract provided that Blair would furnish one thousand "spears" at one dollar apiece. The spears were to be like the samples, except that the ferrules were to be of malleable iron instead of sheet iron, and attached to the handles by screws instead of being riveted, so that they could be shipped separately. Brown paid \$50 down and was to pay \$500 within ten days and the remaining \$450 within thirty days thereafter. The spears were to be finished by the first of July.

Brown paid the \$50 down and a total of \$350 within ten days, but April 2 wrote Blair that he had been unable to make the further payments required by the contract. Blair replied on the 15th that he had not taken any further measures than to ascertain where he could get the handles, ferrules, etc., and if Brown did not find it convenient to raise the money for the thousand he would make five hundred at the same rate. In his testimony before the Mason Committee Blair thought that he had already bought the steel for the blades and begun working on them, but from his contemporary letter that appears not to have been the case. April 16 Brown sent word through Rust that he hoped to have the money soon, and April 25 he sent Rust \$200 for Blair with the message that "he need not hurry out but five hundred of the articles" until he should hear from him again.⁵ Blair acknowledged receipt of the \$200 on the 27th and said that he could "take along 500 of the articles" if desired, but that he had ordered the handles for the whole number, and that it was more convenient to get all the guards, ferrules and screws at one time but that if it were not convenient for Brown to remit the balance of the money before the first of July it would be just as well if he would allow a corresponding length of time in which to complete the contract.

4. Contract printed in Sanborn, p. 377.

5. Letters to Rust in Sanborn, p. 376.

May 7 Blair wrote Brown that he must wait three weeks for the ferrules and some four weeks before the handles would be seasoned sufficiently to set the ferrules; that if the ferrules were put on before the timber was properly seasoned they would be likely to work loose; that the blades would be forged, tempered and ground, so that it would take little time to finish them when the lumber was right, and that he thought that they would be ready by the first of July, but not as soon as first talked of. He added that he intended to go to Iowa for a few weeks, but that the business would be attended to in his absence by his son. He closed the letter to Brown by "wishing him success in his enterprise," the only time he made any comment in his letters upon the use to which the pikes were to be put. To both letters Brown replied May 14 from Canastota to the effect that Blair need not hurry the first five hundred until the handles were properly seasoned or the remainder until he should hear from him again.

Blair did not receive this letter until his return from Iowa. August 27 he wrote Brown that he had commenced the whole number of articles, that he had all the handles well seasoned, the ferrules, guards, etc., but that not having heard anything further from him, had let them rest. "I did not know," he wrote, "but that things would take such a turn in Kansas that they would not be needed." He added that he did not blame Brown, as he well knew that "when a man is depending on the public for money he is very likely to be disappointed," and that he need not give himself any uneasiness about the affair, for if I go no further with them, "I shall lose nothing, or but little."⁶ September 11, and again February 10 and March 11, 1858, Brown wrote explaining his inability to make the payments called for by the contract. February 10, Blair had written Brown that he could not go on with the spears unless assured of his money; that he would let Brown have them if he could get them finished elsewhere, but that he would prefer to go on with them if some responsible parties would guarantee payment within three or four months.

Nothing more was done about the pikes for nearly fifteen months. June 3, 1859, Brown unexpectedly appeared in Collinsville and wanted the pikes finished. Blair protested that he regarded the contract as forfeited, that he was busy with other things and could not bother with them, and that as Kansas matters were settled they would now be of no use. Brown replied that they might be of some use, if they were finished up, that he could dispose of them in some

6. Printed in Sanborn, p. 378.

way, but, as they were, they were good for nothing. Blair finally agreed that if Brown would pay the balance due he would get someone to finish the "goods." The next morning Brown paid \$150, \$50 in bills and a check of Gerrit Smith's for \$100, and three days later sent a draft from Troy for the remaining \$300. Blair secured a man by the name of Hart to finish the pikes. The last of August he received letters from Chambersburg, Pa., signed "I. Smith & Sons,"⁷ instructing him to send the "freight" to them at that place in care of Oakes & Cauffman. At that time the railroads did no freight business themselves, but that business was done by forwarding companies owning private freight cars. Oakes & Cauffman was a forwarding company. The blades, guards and ferrules were packed in boxes and the handles were tied in bundles of twenty or twenty-five and marked "fork handles." Blair testified that 954 were sent, presumably in addition to the twelve samples originally made. He also testified that he did not know where Chambersburg was, but supposed that it was on the way to the West. A letter dated at Chambersburg, September 15, also signed "I. Smith & Sons," acknowledged their receipt. From Chambersburg they were transported in wagons to the Kennedy farm. Some of the pikes were taken to Harper's Ferry October 16, the night of the raid. The next morning all the material remaining at the farm was taken by Cook, Tidd and Owen Brown to a country school house three miles from Harper's Ferry on the Maryland side. When this was seized 483 pikes and 175 broken handles for pikes were found.⁸ The remaining pikes are supposed to have been distributed to slaves.

There is no means of ascertaining how many of the pikes have been preserved, but probably a considerable number are still in existence. There is one in the National Museum in Washington. There are two in the museum of the Kansas State Historical Society, one with the original handle and the other without a handle. They were purchased in 1881 from J. Shaw Gallaher, of Charles Town, West Va., for \$15 apiece, and were the first relics bought by the Society. There is one in the historical collections of the University of Kansas. It originally belonged to John S. Cunningham, a pay director in the navy.⁹ By him it was given in 1885 to George Alfred Townsend,

7. Printed "J. Smith & Sons" in the Mason Report. The "J" should be "I." Brown had assumed the name Isaac Smith.

8. Mason Report, pp. 51, 54-59. James Redpath, *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* (Boston, 1860), p. 269. Redpath gives the number of broken handles as 150, but the inventory in the Mason Report gives 175.

9. John S. Cunningham was made purser in the navy in 1857, pay director in 1871, retired in 1883, and died in 1894. He wrote Townsend in 1885 that he witnessed the execution of John Brown, but the records of the Navy Department do not show that he was present in an official capacity.

a noted journalist of that day. At Townsend's death in 1914 his effects were sent to Boston for sale at auction, and this pike was among the articles purchased by Charles L. Cooney, a local antiquarian dealer, by whom it was presented to the University of Kansas in 1923. For the original handle a shorter one of oak had been substituted.

A relic is of very little value unless it has some significance. The pikes are important because the order for them is the first indication of Brown's intention to abandon the Kansas field and to revert to his earlier plan of starting a slave insurrection in the South. The civil war in Kansas in the summer of 1856 resulted in the victory of the Free State men and amply proved their ability to defend themselves. Governor Geary arrived in Kansas in the fall of 1856, suppressed the roving bands upon both sides, and established peace in the territory. Brown went east in January of 1857 ostensibly to raise funds for the defense of Kansas but really with other plans in mind. He planned to bring his band together in the fall of 1857 at Tabor, in southwestern Iowa, where he had stored two hundred Sharps rifles intended for Kansas, and he engaged an English adventurer by the name of Forbes to give the men military instruction. Toward the end of February, 1858, he communicated his plans to Gerrit Smith and F. B. Sanborn at Gerrit Smith's home in Peterboro, N. Y., possibly omitting mention of Harper's Ferry as the intended point of attack, and received from them their hearty approval.¹⁰ Soon afterward Brown and Forbes quarreled. Forbes went east and betrayed Brown's plans to Seward, Henry Wilson, Horace Greeley and others. May 24, Brown's backers—Gerrit Smith, Howe, Parker, Stearns, Higginson and Sanborn—met in Boston, decided that the execution of the attack must be postponed in view of Forbes' disclosures and sent Brown to Kansas to divert suspicion. It is scarcely possible that Brown, in spite of his professions, ever intended to send the pikes to Kansas. They were not suited to the kind of warfare waged in the territory, and pitchforks would have afforded equally good protection to the lonely women on the farms. On the other hand, they exactly suited his plan for a slave insurrection. They could be had in large quantities for little money, they required neither ammunition nor special skill in their use and would be effective in hand-to-hand combat. In view of their special importance in the development of Brown's plans, it is perhaps worth while to have told their story in detail.

10. Ralph Volney Harlow, "Gerrit Smith and the John Brown Raid," in *The American Historical Review* for October, 1932, v. 38, pp. 39-42.