



Episode 903, Story 1 – John Brown Pike

Wes Cowan: This case asks how this blade point may have helped provoke cries for Southern secession in the lead up to the Civil War. September 1859. Of a population of 7.5 million Americans, more than half are in shackles and chains. One man is prepared to confront the violence of slavery with violence of his own. At Harper's Ferry, Virginia, white abolitionist John Brown, is readying plans to attack a federal arsenal and incite a slave rebellion throughout the south. When it finally comes, the news of Brown's October 16th raid shocks the nation. In the South, the attack fans long-simmering fears of a slave revolt, and sounds a louder drumbeat for secession. Now, a man from Solon, Ohio thinks he may have made a truly astonishing find at his local antique store – an original John Brown weapon, made for this historic raid.

Gary Whewell: I wonder if this weapon is an important part of American history, or a broomstick with a bowie knife on top.

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan, and I'm starting my investigation with a few questions for Gary Whewell. Cool thing. Where did you get it?

Gary: I bought it in Chagrin Falls, Ohio at an antique store about 15 years ago.

Wes: What did you pay for it?

Gary: \$170.



Wes: 170 bucks. You know I never walk into an antique shop and see something like this for \$170. Well, what do you know about it?

Gary: I think it may be a John Brown pike. John Brown was going to arm the slaves with pikes for his raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859.

Wes: Why do you think it has anything to do with John Brown?

Gary: I did a bit of research. John Brown was captured in his raid on Harper's Ferry, but a few of the people escaped to Jefferson, Ohio...

Wes: Okay.

Gary: ...which is a few miles from Chagrin Falls, where I bought it.

Wes: So is it that you want me to find out?

Gary: I would really like for you to find out if this is an authentic John Brown pike.

Wes: Well, I got to tell you, I have some personal history with John Brown. A few years ago I had the opportunity to sell one of the few known daguerreotype images of John Brown that had descended in his family from generation to generation. It sold for just under a \$100,000. So this is a great artifact for me to investigate. When I find out something, I'll bring it back and let you know.

Over the years I've sold a lot of pikes, and this one looks like a standard sort of pre-Civil War era pike. The metal, patina, and design all look period. The pike is a



really sort of primitive weapon and by the time the Civil War rolled around, it was pretty much obsolete. It's basically an 18th century weapon... is it really something Brown would have owned, or used? The thing I think is interesting about this one is there is stamped on the blade, C. Hart & Son, 1859. I mean, I've never heard of this C. Hart. Now you know I mean that's the right date. Brown's plan was to attack the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry with his followers. They would then seize guns stored there, and ignite a slave revolt throughout the South. Did they plan to use pikes to attack the arsenal? Honestly, I can't say whether this has anything to do with John Brown, Harper's Ferry, the abolitionist movement.

Now this is interesting... seems that Brown did plan to use this kind of weapon. I found several references to John Brown and pikes. There's one at the Smithsonian. There's some at the Kansas Historical Society. And there's something here. He ordered a thousand of these pikes that he was going to pass out to slaves that he anticipated would flock to him once they got news of the uprising at Harper's Ferry. And he would arm them with these pikes. The Kansas Historical Society actually lists the dimensions of the pike itself. The pikes Brown ordered consisted of a 9 ½ - 10 inch long double-edged blade. So, it's a little bit more than 9 ½ inches, great. 4 ½ inches wide iron guard. And a 3 ¼ inch long tapering ferrule. This is the ferrule. And this is a little short. This is 3 inches. Now, this is odd. There should be a screw here that connects the ferrule to the shaft.

And there is another potential problem. The pike at the Kansas Historical Society was made by Charles Blair of Collinsville, Connecticut. Not C. Hart. And apparently, the genuine pikes are all stamped with a serial number. Gary's pike just has C. Hart & Son, 1859. No serial numbers. I Googled C. Hart & Son, and



all I can find is some pottery. Bottom line, there are a lot of similarities between the known John Brown pikes and this pike. But there are some major glaring dissimilarities. Professor Spencer Crew from George Mason University is an expert in the African American experience.

Wes: Spencer, it's great to meet you. You know I'm hoping that you can help me with this problem. Have you ever seen a pike like this before?

Spencer Crew: Well interestingly enough, I have seen a pike like this before. I worked in Cincinnati in a place called the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and we actually had one of these on display at the Freedom Center.

Wes: Spencer explains the center had the pike because the weapon had been a key part of Brown's strategy. It was also a symbol of his willingness to overthrow slavery even if it meant resorting to violence.

Spencer: If you think about those who are opposed to slavery, he's sort of on that fringe. He's among a group of individuals who think you have to carry the fight to the South. If violence becomes a part of that, that's just an acceptable part of the process itself.

Wes: And why the pike?



Spencer: Well I think the pike is because it's not complicated. It's certainly simpler than a rifle. It's the kind of thing that anyone can use fairly easily. It's a pretty frightening object.

Wes: You know, some people would say John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry was a complete failure.

Spencer: You have to decide what success is. I think if the goal was to capture the arsenal and create this uproar among the enslaved, that part is not successful. But I think the larger symbolic value of it is very successful. The pikes become sort of this wonderful symbol. You have politicians on both sides using it as a way of sort of stirring up the crowds. You have northern politicians who come on stage with a pike and would sort of use it to indicate that, this is the kind of strong position we need to take to stop the south from spreading slavery to the rest of the nation. But Southerners would do the same sort of thing with this kind of a pike and come onto the stage and indicate the kind of problems they were going to face with the north. But they also become a souvenir of interest to a lot of people because they wanted to have something associated with this event. And you have blacksmiths who begin knocking these out all over the place.

Wes: Well, do you have any opinions about this one? Do you think this is a souvenir?

Spencer: I don't have enough knowledge to be able to tell you that for sure.



Wes: Have you ever seen or heard of a pike stamped C. Hart & Son with the date 1859?

Spencer: I have not.

Wes: The maker of several of the pikes I've seen online was Charles Blair of Collinsville, Connecticut. Historian Cliff Alderman is in Unionville, just 5 miles down the road from where Blair worked.

Wes: Have you ever seen one of these pikes before?

Cliff Alderman: I've seen a pike before, yes.

Wes: Cliff explains how in the swirl of public attention after the raid, investigators tracked Browns' steps and the source of his weapons.

Cliff: In 1857, John Brown asked Charles Blair, in Collinsville, Connecticut to make a thousand of pikes. He gave the first half of the money and then Brown disappeared for over a year. When Brown came back in 1859, Blair said, I'm sorry, I'm too busy, I'll find you somebody else to do it.

Wes: In sworn testimony, Blair admitted to beginning production of the pikes, and he also disclosed who filled the final weapons order.

Cliff: He ended up subcontracting the work to Chauncey Hart. He was a blacksmith in Unionville, Connecticut in the 1850s. And the first week of



November, 1859 he was in a lot of trouble. He was fingered as the person who made these pikes for John Brown.

Wes: Cliff tells me that neither Blair nor Hart knew that Brown was going to use these pikes in his raid on Harper's Ferry. Hart usually made tools and traps. This was the only time in his career he was contracted to make weapons. Cliff also shows me other stamps that Hart had used on his tools, and believes my stamp looks similar. Cliff believes our pike was made by Hart. So, do you think this is a pike that actually could have been used by John Brown and his men during the raid on Harper's Ferry?

Cliff: I don't believe so.

Wes: Why?

Cliff: The pike would have had a hole board with a screw. It would have had a serial number in one of three places on it.

Wes: Do you think this could be a souvenir pike that Hart made?

Cliff: It could be a souvenir pike, but I doubt very much that Chauncey Hart would have made it.

Wes: Because why?



Cliff: This was a very controversial event in U. S. history. It was an attack on a federal arsenal. So he wasn't going to be commemorating everything that happened to him. Being arrested. Being humiliated by making more pikes.

Wes: I'm in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia with Dennis Frye, the chief historian at the Harper's Ferry National Historical Park.

Dennis Frye: This is the Kennedy farm that John Brown would select as his headquarters, his base of operations for the war against slavery.

Wes: So this is really where it all began?

Dennis: This is where it began, absolutely. Brown himself would be here for about three months, preparing and planning.

Wes: Dennis says Brown's plan was to stash hundreds of pikes at the nearby farmhouse until the raid was over. They would then be distributed to the slaves who rose up in rebellion.

Dennis: And on the night of October 16, 1859, Brown would gather his men, and say, "Men get on your arms, we shall proceed to the ferry." And Wes, let's proceed to the ferry.

Wes: I'll follow you.

Dennis: Alright.



Wes: Main Street, Harper's ferry?

Dennis: You're on it. Shenandoah Street. The United States Armory is right over here at this site. Twenty buildings once stood right here. The United States arsenal, right over here. Same night watchman who covered the armory also covered the arsenal. So Brown's men take the arsenal without any difficulty whatsoever. The plan is working perfectly Wes, perfectly.

Wes: But Brown's tactics were soon derailed.

Dennis: Train's coming into town. One of the night watchmen from the bridge escapes from Brown's captors and flags down the train, stops it. Baggage porter went out on the platform. He would be shot by Brown's men. A doctor who resided in one of these buildings here. We don't know exactly, hears those shots, goes to nearby Charlestown. Notifies militia. And all of a sudden the equivalent of our National Guard starts rushing towards Harper's ferry. So by 11:00 a.m. Monday morning the raid is only 12 hours old, Brown would be surrounded in what he had chosen as his headquarters building which is the fire engine house of the U. S. Armory. And he's not going to get out.

Now because they have attacked a United States government installation, the president of the United States sends marines out here. And they're going to be commanded by United States Army Lt. Colonel, Robert E. Lee. The same Robert E. Lee that later becomes a Confederate general. Because this is a fire engine house, they find a ladder and they're going to use that ladder as a battering ram to try to break through the doors.



Wes: In three minutes, it's over. Wounded and bleeding Brown is arrested, and placed on trial for murder and treason. Only six weeks later, Brown is executed. Brown's raid of Harper's ferry was cut short, along with his hopes of inciting an armed slave rebellion. Dennis says the pikes stashed in the farmhouse were not used that day. Well Dennis here's my pike. Thought you'd like to take a look at it. What do you think?

Dennis: I have two here that the National Park owns that are authentic. Well, on first glance, this particular pike does not have all the attributes of the original John Brown pikes.

Wes: Despite the differences between our pike and the originals, Dennis does think ours is from the same period. Did you see that the blade of my pike is also stamped with a manufacturer's name?

Dennis: You know, that's extremely unusual. None of ours has a manufacturer's name.

Wes: Are we looking at a fake?

Dennis: I say, highly, highly unlikely for this reason: no one knows who Hart is. "The blacksmith" who is associated with these pikes is Blair. I doubt even John Brown knew that Hart was manufacturing these additional pikes. So if someone was going to make a fake pike they would not have put Hart, they would have put Blair's name on the pike.



Wes: Dennis gave me a suggestion: to meet with Michelle Hammer, the resident blacksmithing expert at Harper's Ferry.

Wes: Hi, Michelle?

Michelle Hammer: Hi.

Wes: Wes Cowan.

Michelle: Nice to meet you, Wes.

Wes: Nice to meet you. Well, here's the pike.

Michelle: Alright, let's take a look over here.

Wes: Michelle explains the blacksmithing process that created our pike. She says the discrepancies between our pike and the known original pike make perfect sense.

Michelle: Wes, this is a model 1841 Harper's Ferry rifle and it's a finished product.

Wes: At first, I'm not sure why she's showing me a musket, or where's she's going with her logic. But Michelle explains how the Harper's Ferry armory both stored and designed weapons.



Michelle: And here I have a patten piece or prototype for the lock on the finish pieces not even made of iron, it is made of lead.

Wes: Before making the final product, the weapon needed templates and moulds.

Michelle: And there are two holes here and five holes there.

Wes: So they're a little different that the finished product?

Michelle: A little bit different, right.

Wes: What Michelle says next will certainly be news to Gary. Gary, I told you during our initial meeting that this was a great story for me personally because I had been so fortunate to sell that fabulous daguerreotype of John Brown. So I went into this investigation with both feet. But I got to tell you, when I looked at this pike and sort of started learning more about them, my first reaction was, this thing's a fake.

I tell Gary how every expert had pointed out problems with our pike, until I spoke with Michelle Hammer, a blacksmithing expert at the Harper's Ferry National Historical Park. Michelle explains that our pike may not have the finished characteristics of the Harper's Ferry pikes, but she thinks it's still connected to the raid.

Michelle: Chauncey Hart would have needed a prototype if he was finishing out this contract given to him by Charles Blair.



Wes: Are you suggesting that my pike that's stamped C. Hart & Son may be the prototype for the John Brown finished pike?

Michelle: That's exactly what I think you have.

Wes: Michelle pointed out that each blacksmith makes his own template, even if working on an already established order.

Michelle: Chauncey Hart would have needed a prototype if he was finishing out this contract given to him by Charles Blair. And he would have kept this in his pattern room, so it's very possible that it stayed there for many years.

Gary: It makes me very happy.

Wes: What you have is a one of a kind artifact that relates directly to one of the most important events in the antebellum history of our country.

Gary: I appreciate you going to all this effort Wes. The information you gave me is very worthwhile. I appreciate it. I've learned a lot, and that's the important thing.

Wes: The pikes were so important to Brown that he entrusted them to his son. During the raid, Owen Brown stayed behind at the Kennedy farmhouse to guard the supply of pikes and rifles. His brothers, Oliver and Watson, accompanied their father, and were killed in the raid. Owen Brown escaped into hiding, and wound up living a hermit's life near Pasadena, California. After the Civil War,



John Brown's wife, along with some of their children, also moved to California hoping to make a new life for her family.