

Col. Robert E. Lee lived in a fine, columned house in Arlington, almost within sight of the White House, which stood about three miles away on the other side of the Potomac. A highly polished and respected officer who was educated at West Point and later had served as its commandant, Lee had impressive family connections—his wife Martha was a niece of George Washington. For those who knew him, who had witnessed his easy, aristocratic manner of command, it was not hard to believe that he would eventually move from his own mansion to the white one across the Potomac. But history took a different course.

Lee responded to Buchanan's summons in such a hurry that he didn't take time to change into his uniform. Standing in his civilian clothes he received his orders from Secretary of War Floyd: put down the rebellion at Harpers Ferry. From Buchanan's own hand, Lee also received a hastily written presidential proclamation ordering the insurgents to disperse.

Unlike Buchanan, Lee was by nature a man of action, not of words. He tucked the proclamation in his pocket and rushed off to do his duty. Outside the president's office he met an eager young cavalry lieutenant, J.E.B. Stuart, who offered his services. Lee accepted. Within the hour, Lee and Stuart were on their way to Baltimore where they boarded a special train, provided by the B & O company, and steamed westward. Lieut. Israel Green and ninety Marines had gone ahead of them on an earlier train and were waiting for them at Sandy Hook just east of Harpers Ferry.

By the time Lee and his Marines crossed the Potomac and took up positions around the armory, it was well after dark. So, for fear of injuring the hostages—including his distant relation, Col. Lewis Washington—Lee decided not to move against the engine house until light.

At dawn Lieut. J.E.B. Stuart, who would perform so many dashing and reckless exploits as Lee's cavalry commander in the approaching Civil War, marched directly up to the engine house and pounded on the door. John Brown

answered the knock, and the sight of the old man's weather-beaten features brought a look of surprise to Stuart's face. "Why, aren't you old Osawatomie Brown of Kansas, whom I once had as my prisoner?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes," replied Brown, "but you did not keep me."

Stuart handed Brown a note written by his chief. Standing within an easy pistol shot of the embattled engine house, Lee watched the old man read the words. "Colonel Lee, United States Army, commanding the troops sent by the President of the United States to suppress the insurrection at this place, demands the surrender of the persons in the Armory buildings."

Holding the note in his hands, Brown knew that escape was impossible. The slaves had not rebelled and would not be coming to help him. Neither would Cook nor his other men in Maryland, if any of them were still alive and free. But he also knew something else—that somewhere a length of rope was waiting for him.

"No," said Brown. "I prefer to die just here."

Lee had his reply. Stuart jumped away from the doors and signaled with his hat. Instantly, Lieutenant Green came running with twelve hand-picked Marines close at his heels. The Marines tried to batter down the doors with sledgehammers but only managed to splinter the stubborn timbers. So they brought a heavy ladder and, using it as a battering ram, forced an opening.

First through the breach was Lieutenant Green who had to climb over a fire engine the raiders had pushed against the doors as a barricade. Jumping off the engine, he brought the heavy handle of his sword down over Brown's head and hammered the old man senseless to the floor. Two of the Marines who followed Green through the opening were cut down by musket balls, but the others pressed on, pinning Jeremiah Anderson and Dauphin Thompson to the wall with bayonet thrusts through the chest and stomach. Edwin Coppoc, Shields Green, and the unconscious John Brown were taken prisoner and dragged out of the engine house.