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“Consternation was depicted on all their countenances”: Gettysburg’s African American Community and Confederate Invasion

Brian D. Johnson
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

On June 15, 1863, Albert Jenkins’s Confederate cavalry brigade became the first of Lee’s men to enter the North when it crossed the Potomac River and headed for Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. Lee had issued strict orders forbidding his men to damage or confiscate private property unless it was a requisition made for necessary supplies, and overseen by authorized Confederate staff. Jenkins’s men half-heartedly obeyed, and scoured the area for anything valuable, including African Americans, fugitive or legally free, who might be sold into slavery. One horrified Chambersburg resident watched local blacks attempt to hide in cornfields only to have troopers chase them down through the young stalks. Others capitulated after troopers fired at them. When Lee arrived in Chambersburg on June 27, his horror at scenes of looting and robbery compelled him to reissue his order concerning private property. But he made no mention of over 200 captured African-Americans – some of whom had been born in Chambersburg – removed south by Jenkins’s cavalry. On the same day in nearby Mercersburg, one startled local watching fugitive-filled wagons roll towards Maryland asked a guard how he could do such a thing. Confederates, he replied, were simply “reclaiming their property.”
[excerpt]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Gettysburg, African American history, Battle of Gettysburg, Salome Myers, Tillie Pierce, Basil Biggs

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Military History | Social History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

“Consternation was depicted on all their countenances”: Gettysburg’s African American Community and Confederate Invasion

NOVEMBER 7, 2013

By: Brian Johnson, '14

On June 15, 1863, Albert Jenkins’s Confederate cavalry brigade became the first of Lee’s men to enter the North when it crossed the Potomac River and headed for Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. Lee had issued strict orders forbidding his men to damage or confiscate private property unless it was a requisition made for necessary supplies, and overseen by authorized Confederate staff. Jenkins’s men half-heartedly obeyed, and scoured the area for anything valuable, including African Americans, fugitive or legally free, who might be sold into slavery. One horrified Chambersburg resident watched local blacks attempt to hide in cornfields only to have troopers chase them down through the young stalks. Others capitulated after troopers fired at them. When Lee arrived in Chambersburg on June 27, his horror at scenes of looting and robbery compelled him to reissue his order concerning private property. But he made no mention of over 200 captured African-Americans – some of whom had been born in Chambersburg – removed south by Jenkins’s cavalry. On the same day in nearby Mercersburg, one startled local watching fugitive-filled wagons roll towards Maryland asked a guard how he could do such a thing. Confederates, he replied, were simply “reclaiming their property.”

Word of invasion reached Gettysburg the same day that Confederate cavalry crossed the Potomac and captured Chambersburg. Although it is unclear precisely what news reached the borough, Gettysburg’s African American residents immediately understood the especial danger posed to them by rebel troops. Salome Myers recalled of that night that black residents “made such a racket up and down by our house that we could not sleep.” According to Myers, at news of the Confederate advance black residents had “transformed into limping, halting, and apparently worthless specimens of humanity”

regardless of whether they could flee or were forced to stay by responsibilities at home. Gettysburg resident Tillie Pierce recalled that many packed what they might carry on their backs or in hand-drawn carts and joined a mass, hurried exodus down Breckinridge and Baltimore Streets. “The greatest consternation was depicted on all their countenances as they hurried along,” Pierce described, “crowding, and running against each other in their confusion.” Many headed for the Pennsylvania backcountry, and many others for Philadelphia, Harrisburg, York, or Yellow Hill, a small, free-black community located seven miles north of town. As they traveled, black residents from Gettysburg joined a stream of black refugees from across south-central Pennsylvania.



A week later, approaching Confederate infantry precipitated another evacuation in Gettysburg. Jubal Early’s force marched into town on June 26 after brushing aside local militia. When his men departed for York the next day after confiscating fabric, food, whiskey, and candy from Gettysburg’s shops, still more black residents, convinced that the Confederate threat was tangible, finally abandoned their homes for refuge elsewhere. The wife of Abraham Cole, reverend of Gettysburg’s St. Paul’s African Methodist Episcopal Church, waited out the Confederate presence in a loft above the kitchen of a sympathetic local. As soon as the enemy departed the next morning, she and her daughter fled.

Yet others black residents remained. Basil Biggs had moved with his family to Gettysburg in 1858 from Maryland to build a new life. Through news of Confederate advance and the arrival of part of a rebel division in town, Biggs remained, not yet willing to abandon everything he had worked for to an uncertain fate. Only commencement of a major battle would sway his mind – and only at the last moment.

For further reading:

Guelzo, Allen C. *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.

Paradis, James M. *African Americans and the Gettysburg Campaign*. Toronto: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013.

Image:

[Baltimore Street]. Courtesy of the Adams County Historical Society. Gettysburg, PA. Image reproduced with permission from the Adams County Historical Society.