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Calm Before the Storm: Gettysburg's African-American Community Before the Battle

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Abstract

African-Americans have always been a part of Gettysburg's community fabric. Slaves belonging to Samuel Gettys, the area's first settler, arrived as early as 1762 to build one of the first local taverns. Samuel's son James, who founded Gettysburg in 1786, also owned slaves, including Sydney O'Brien. After her owner's death, O'Brien obtained her freedom, and in purchasing a small lot along South Washington Street helped establish the borough's African-American neighborhood. The free black community continued to grow over the first decades of the nineteenth century as Pennsylvania's policy of gradual emancipation effectively ended slavery in the state by the 1840s. And with uniquely promising economic, social, and educational opportunities, Gettysburg attracted black residents, free and enslaved, from a number of neighboring states. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Gettysburg, African American history, gradual emancipation, Battle of Gettysburg, Sydney O'Brien, Basil Biggs, Underground Railroad

Disciplines

History | Military History | Social History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Calm Before the Storm: Gettysburg's African-American Community Before the Battle

OCTOBER 18, 2013

By Brian Johnson, '14

African-Americans have always been a part of Gettysburg's community fabric. Slaves belonging to Samuel Gettys, the area's first settler, arrived as early as 1762 to build one of the first local taverns. Samuel's son James, who founded Gettysburg in 1786, also owned slaves, including Sydney O'Brien. After her owner's death, O'Brien obtained her freedom, and in purchasing a small lot along South Washington Street helped establish the borough's African-American neighborhood. The free black community continued to grow over the first decades of the nineteenth century as Pennsylvania's policy of gradual emancipation effectively ended slavery in the state by the 1840s. And with uniquely promising economic, social, and educational opportunities, Gettysburg attracted black residents, free and enslaved, from a number of neighboring states.

Many like Basil Biggs arrived from Maryland, the closest slave state. Biggs was born in Carroll County, on the Pennsylvania-Maryland border, in 1819. Though he was born free, Biggs met hardship early when as an infant he lost his mother. She had left him \$400 to obtain an education, but the money ran out too quickly despite Biggs's hard efforts to make a living working as a laborer and teamster.



Basil Biggs with his wife, Mary. Adams County Historical Society

Hoping to get his children the education he never had, Biggs moved his wife and children to Gettysburg in 1858. Maryland law forbade blacks from learning to read. In Gettysburg, free black children had been allowed into local schools as early as 1824. Black educational opportunities then became formal when in 1834 the Pennsylvania legislature passed a Free School Act requiring community schools for children. Gettysburg established four new white institutions for different quadrants of the town, and on the corner of South Washington and High Streets a fifth school for black education. Attendance reached as high as 46 percent of eligible African-American children, though supplementary classes conducted by local ministers may have pushed the overall rate of black school attendance even higher.

The scholastic opportunities enjoyed by Biggs's children represented only one facet of Gettysburg's dynamic black community. In response to white churches in the borough that treated black attendees as lesser congregants, black residents founded Asbury Church and Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal Church (currently St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church) between 1837 and 1843. Wesleyan Methodist's congregation added to the local antislavery alliance when it established the Slave Refuge Society the same year as the church. Society members likely used their place of worship as a stop along the Underground Railroad, adding to a web of black and white "conductors" from Gettysburg that shepherded fugitives from western Adams County, into the town and outlying area, and finally northward. Despite interracial cooperation and Pennsylvania's status as a free state, Gettysburg's participation in the Underground Railroad still placed residents in imminent harm. One of the most active agents, Margaret Palm, had to fight off a group of slave-owners who nearly succeeded in kidnapping and selling her into slavery.

Basil Biggs must have faced similar danger for the active role he played in antislavery efforts. Biggs likely hid fugitives in the McPherson Barn, a nearby quarry, and his home, a tenancy on the farm of John Crawford located three west of town. His life perhaps best captured the promise, risk, opportunity, and marginality that defined life for many fellow black residents. But the Civil War – and especially the Battle of Gettysburg – would change everything.

For further reading:

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