In Plain Black and White: Race & Gettysburg, Winter 1863

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Abstract
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Race was the live wire of Gettysburg's political scene. For the roughly 10% of the borough's population that was black, that live wire must have shocked daily. [excerpt]

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“Kinkyheads,” the Gettysburg Compiler gleefully quipped at the bottom of a column in its February 23rd edition, “is the new title used for Abolitionists.” This was, of course, “in contradiction to 'Copperheads.’”

Race was the live wire of Gettysburg’s political scene. For the roughly 10% of the borough’s population that was black, that live wire must have shocked daily.

Still, the local community soldiered on. "The 'Americans of African descent,' connected with the A. M. E. Church in this place,” the Republican Adams Sentinel announced on February 10th, "intend holding a Festival for the benefit of their Church, on the evening of the 23d inst." The meeting would take place, "in a large room on Washington street, near the church." The editor was convinced that the meeting would, "doubtless be patronized by a full house."

What happened in that meeting isn’t recorded. But imagining the scene isn’t hard. Patriotic meetings abounded throughout the North as the war limped toward its third year. And a people whose fate was tied to the war being fought would have naturally turned toward the struggle just south of their homes. Were there songs? Were there speeches? Was there talk of Lincoln's new Proclamation? Of the Negro Soldier Bill? Of the chance to fight for their own freedom?

Gettysburg’s white population, though, was concerned too with the fate of those blacks in the Third Ward and their compatriots held in chains. The Compiler, by Sentinel editor Robert G. Harper’s estimation, "raises the cry of 'Abolition—Abolition,' to divert the public censure from his disloyal articles. Still, Harper concluded, "he cannot get clear of the shirt of Nessus, with all his endeavors to do so, by shouting aloud—the Negro—the Negro—Abolition—Abolition!"

How the heads of Gettysburg's black community must have watched dumbstruck as the white establishment blithely debated their fate, like some cosmic tennis match where the ball bandied back and
forth was the very definition of freedom and the players were blissfully unaware that the stands were filled with the freed-or-not-freed-depending.

"Our neighbor of the Sentinel," Compiler editor Henry J. Stahle wrote from his new office along Baltimore Street, "is very crusty under the charge of being an Abolitionist." Harper, Stahle wrote, "took passage on the rickety and suspicious vessel, 'Negrophobia,' in the face of the counsels of the best men in the nation, some of them leaders in the old Whig party, and if he goes down with her, he will have no one to blame but himself."

On Washington Street a block over from Stahle's newspaper office, the black community of Gettysburg (like the rest of the, "Americans of African descent," sat in that selfsame bark, their term for it, "Freedom," and not, "Negrophobia." And for them, if it sank, it meant rack and ruin.

Robert Harper fired back at Stahle, noting that the editor, "appears to have no other day or night dreams, (if we are to judge from the articles in his paper) than the terrible bugaboos, the Negro, and Abolition." Pronouncing Stahle's ramblings, "much wildness, and queer—very queer language there," Harper tiptoes on the line of rebuffing Stahle's wind but not the accusation of being an Abolitionist. Still, faint praise can also be damnation.

In the same issue where he adeptly avoided confirming or denying an Abolitionist bent, Robert Harper printed a notice of the success of the fair held by the black community. The, "Festival last night," he penned in his pages, "we learn was quite a success, and that a handsome sum will be realized."

Stahle's estimation of the fair was markedly different. Beneath an account of the Quaver Club's Concert held the same night cribbed nearly word-for-word from the Sentinel, Stahle laid into the A.M.E. Fair. "The Festival of the 'Americans of African descent,' on Monday evening, was, we are told, largely and liberally patronized by 'black spirits and white,'" the editor wrote, skillfully making sure to point out this definitely wasn't from first hand knowledge. Still, the support was a farce, put up by the, "Union League," for the express purpose of denigrating and showing up the white community of Gettysburg, "because on the same night 'white folks' had a Promenade Concert at Sheads & Buehler's Hall."

The next week, Stahle ran a piece from the Patriot & Union on black soldiers. "This State is overrun with agents from Massachusetts seeking negro recruits for he unfilled quota of the army," Stahle's pages echoed the Harrisburg newspaper's refrain. The black soldiers were being recruited for the nascent 54th Massachusetts Regiment (Colored). "Massachusetts may have all the negroes she can raise from this quarter," the Patriot & Union blithely concluded.
But in the Third Ward, Gettysburg’s citizens weren’t passive creatures. They had hopes and dreams. They had fantasies of true freedom for all and a future safe from fear of slave catchers drifting across Pennsylvania’s porous border. They were no one's fools. It's just that they didn't have a newspaper to call their own. So the white folks a block away set the type, and the black folks lived their lives, fighting the war in their own way that today is largely invisible.

Still, glimmers of those dreams peak through the darkness.

Later that spring, as the cold of winter was melting into the warm of April, in a camp in far away Massachusetts, a new recruit filled out his paperwork to join the 54th. His name was James T. Russell. He was 35 years old. He stood 5 foot, 8 1/2 inches tall. His skin was dark, his eyes brown, his hair black. His place of birth?

The clerk wrote down the words on the form: "Gettysburgh, Penna."