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## Digging Up a Local Hero in the Archives

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# Digging Up a Local Hero in the Archives

## Abstract

Gettysburg Burgess William E. Olinger was an unassuming local politician. Born during the Civil War, Olinger was the child of local farmers. A teacher and insurance salesman, Olinger was also a fastidious county auditor in the 1890s and served as clerk of the courts from 1912 to 1916. By the 1920s, Olinger was in charge of the Borough of Gettysburg, one of the most powerful political voices in the county. [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

Olinger, Gettysburg, KKK, Ku Klux Klan, Burning Cross

## Disciplines

History | Race and Ethnicity | Social History | United States History

## Comments

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# Living

## Digging up a local hero in the archives

Gettysburg Burgess William E. Olinger was an unassuming local politician. Born during the Civil War, Olinger was the child of local farmers. A teacher and insurance salesman, Olinger was also a fastidious county auditor in the 1890s and served as clerk of the courts from 1912 to 1916. By the 1920s, Olinger was in charge of the Borough of Gettysburg, one of the most powerful political voices in the county.

But in the early 1920s, other voices were trying to amplify their political power. Burning crosses were beginning to pop up across the county, dropped by the side of the road by the Ku Klux Klan and hastily lit. This Klan, its second incarnation in American history, not only stood against African Americans' civil rights, but turned their ire against Jews and Catholics, as well. And that organization was seeking a toehold in Adams County.

The night of Sept. 7, 1923, a flaming symbol of hate flickered in the windows of Abbottstown's square. The same night someone lit another cross along the Baltimore Pike just beyond Two Taverns. The following night, cars pulled over along the Lincoln Highway just beyond Abbottstown to gawk at another massive flaming display.

Then invitations came. The Klan distributed them throughout the town and countryside, urging local men to join the hate group. The first meeting was scheduled for Sept. 24 in the lodge of the Patriotic Order, Sons of America (itself a nativist and anti-Catholic organization) above 17 Chambersburg St. in Gettysburg.

When Burgess Olinger received word of the plan he was incensed. "I am opposed to the Ku Klux Klan and will take steps to stop Monday evening's meeting," Olinger announced on the front

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page of the *Gettysburg Times*, "even if it requires the services of the police." Olinger could not stand for a new hate group appearing in his streets. "The opportunity will no doubt be offered those present to form a branch of the Klan here," he continued in his press statement, "and I am opposed to that."

A Klan riot in Carnegie (just outside of Pittsburgh) the month before was still commanding headlines. One man had been killed and hundreds more wounded after local citizens stood up against Klan forces marching in their streets. Olinger's threats of interposition were possible portents of violence and murder in the streets. "Klan War Looms Here as a Possibility When Burgess Says He Will Stop Meeting," the *Times* trumpeted a warning from its front page, adding below for emphasis the distinct possibility of, "A Klan war in Gettysburg!"

The meeting's organizers, among them veterans of the riot at Carnegie, called the Burgess' bluff. "Friends of the Klan point out," the *Times* reported a few days after Olinger took his stand, "that unless the meeting takes on a seditious and peace-disturbing aspect, the authorities can take no action." And the Klan leaders were right. Speaking your mind, no matter how vile the words, is not a crime in America. Burgess Olinger was helpless.

"The lodge room was jammed and packed for the meeting," the *Times* reported, "and many unable to gain admission left before the speaking began." The room was rated to hold 75; the crowd easily pushed over 200 people. Professional Klan speakers stood before the crowd and set down the platform. And woe to those who stood in the way. "The K.K.K. does not endorse any candidate for office," said Rev. J.H. Hanson, "but let a man who has a spot upon his escutcheon attempt to run for office, and just that quick, the Klan will know about it and oppose his election."

Burgess William Olinger was only allowed to last two more years in political office. The incumbent head of the borough faced a challenge from his own Democratic party during the 1925 primary. Between 1923 and 1925, the Klan had gained traction in the county's political machine. Crosses burning on front doorsteps, in the square at the center of town and on public school lawns became commonplace. The Klan organized picnics and initiations. Standing in their way was not where any local politician wanted to be. William Olinger was defeated by one vote in the Democratic primary.

Digging into local history can be a hard journey to take. Sometimes you unearth demons you'd rather stay buried. And sometimes you find new heroes in men like William Olinger, who stood up for a brief moment against hatred. Come out to the Adams County Historical Society yourself and dig through old newspapers. Open up the dusty vertical files. You never know when you'll find another hero like Burgess William Olinger.

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