Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

Civil War Era Studies

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Born in Slavery: One Grave in Chambersburg

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Abstract

A simple epitaph with amazing impact: "Born in Slavery, Died Feb 15 1908." Those words speak and speak loudly. Thomas Burl wanted it to be known for eternity that he *was* a slave. And he wanted it to be known that he wasn't when he died. That label defined his whole life. It defined who he was when he had the name "slave" forced on him when he was born. And it again defined him through its absence after 1863. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, slavery

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Born in Slavery: One Grave in Chambersburg

THURSDAY, MAY 30, 2013

A simple epitaph with amazing impact: "Born in Slavery, Died Feb 15 1908." Those words speak and speak loudly. Thomas Burl wanted it to be known for eternity that he *was* a slave. And he wanted it to be known that he wasn't when he died. That label defined his whole life. It defined who he was when he had the name "slave" forced on him when he was born. And it again defined him through its absence after 1863.

Thomas Burl knew he was free, precisely because he knew the antithesis of freedom. And he died a free man in a free land.

And now, if you wander through Mount Vernon Cemetery in Chambersburg, Burl will still be standing there to remind you what freedom means: put simply, it is the utter absence of slavery. That's all Thomas Burl needed to know. He told us through his epitaph that that knowledge was enough.

Requiescat in pace et in libertate, Thomas.