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Challenging Lincoln: How Gettysburg's Lincoln-centric Emancipation Narrative Has Overshadowed Local Black History

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Abstract

When it comes to symbols of emancipation, President Abraham Lincoln is king. No other person is more associated with the abolition of slavery than "The Great Emancipator" himself. This holds true in Gettysburg just as much as it does throughout the country. Only last September, Gettysburg College erected a statue of Abraham Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation in the hope that it would "promote the discussion of race relations in America today." Yet when it comes to commemorating and remembering the struggle for emancipation, Lincoln is far from the only face that we should look to in our historic town. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Abraham Lincoln, Emancipation, racism, Black History

Disciplines

African American Studies | History | Political History | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

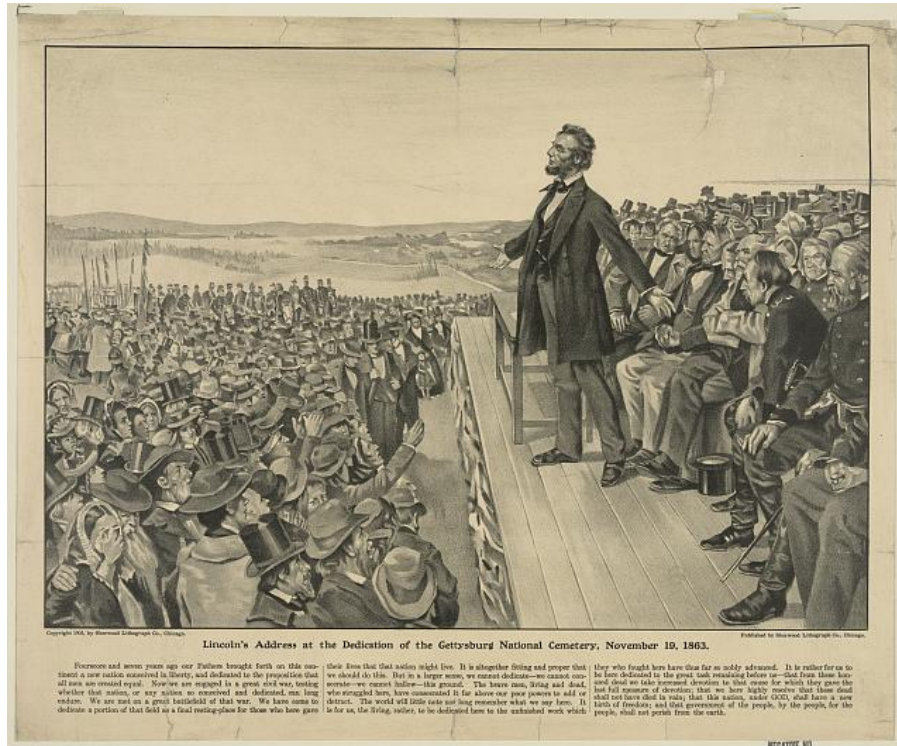
ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Challenging Lincoln: How Gettysburg's Lincoln-centric Emancipation Narrative Has Overshadowed Local Black History

February 29, 2016

By Jeff Lauck '18

When it comes to symbols of emancipation, President Abraham Lincoln is king. No other person is more associated with the abolition of slavery than “The Great Emancipator” himself. This holds true in Gettysburg just as much as it does throughout the country. Only last September, Gettysburg College [erected a statue of Abraham Lincoln](#) signing the Emancipation Proclamation in the hope that it would “promote the discussion of race relations in America today.” Yet when it comes to commemorating and remembering the struggle for emancipation, Lincoln is far from the only face that we should look to in our historic town.



*Abraham Lincoln has been forever linked to Gettysburg thanks to his famed “Gettysburg Address.”
Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

The borough has a long and rich history of both slavery and liberation. The first African Americans to arrive in Gettysburg did so as slaves to Alexander Dobbin, the Presbyterian minister who founded a classical school in the soon-to-be-incorporated town. The Dobbin House, today a colonial tavern and eatery, was built in 1776 by Dobbin's slaves. James Gettys, the borough's founder and namesake, also owned a slave named Sydney O'Brien. For reasons unknown, Gettys freed O'Brien and gave her a house in the southwest corner of the town, close to the Dobbin family home. Thus was born Gettysburg's free African American community.

Despite an early history rooted in slavery, Gettysburg would soon become a bastion of resistance. Only a few miles from the border with Maryland (a slave state), Gettysburg was an important stop on the Underground Railroad. African Americans in town were crucial to the anti-slavery efforts, despite living in constant fear of being kidnapped into slavery under the Fugitive Slave Acts. Their fears were well founded, too. In 1845, Catherine Paine, an African American woman who lived in nearby Bendersville, PA, was taken by slavers and brought back south of the border into slavery.

In spite of the dangers, black Gettysburgians worked hard to bring their enslaved brothers and sisters in the South up through their town and into the North and freedom. Jack Hopkins, the custodian of Pennsylvania College (now Gettysburg College), was part of a network that brought runaways from Thaddeus Stevens's iron furnace in Caledonia along an unfinished (actual) railroad that led to Gettysburg. Hopkins worked closely with the Beta Deltas (also known as the "Black Ducks"), an unofficial anti-slavery fraternity at Pennsylvania College, alerting them of newly arrived runaways. Members of the fraternity then hid them in a makeshift cave on the summit of Culp's Hill.

Hopkins was not alone in his efforts. Mag Palm, who successfully fought back against a group of men who attempted to enslave her, was an incredibly active agent with the Underground Railroad, known in Gettysburg at the time as "Steven's Railroad." Basil Biggs also helped, providing shelter for fugitive slaves in the McPherson Barn and his own house. In an ironic twist, one of the places used to hide fugitive slaves in Gettysburg was the Dobbin House, the very same structure built by slave labor in 1776.

Our sixteenth president was undoubtedly an incredibly important figure in the destruction of America's "peculiar institution." Yet it is important to remember that he was not the *only* figure in this struggle. In many communities, such as Gettysburg, he probably was not even the most important figure in that struggle. President Lincoln spent a matter of minutes in our small town [promoting emancipation](#), yet black Gettysburgians had been working for decades to actively liberate themselves and their fellow African Americans. In many ways, Gettysburg has more black history than Lincoln history.

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