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Things Never Change: Piecing Together College Life

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Things Never Change: Piecing Together College Life

Abstract

Sometimes you stumble on something on eBay you just can't pass up. It's that \$6 buy that is awkward, odd and just a little out of your scope. But it's only \$6. If you'd buy a burger for \$6, you shouldn't pass up an original letter from 1835.

Every letter has a story. And each of those stories has its own drama, its own meaning, its own power. The mundanities of human life can be just as powerful as the battles and charges. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

1830s, Ebay, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Letter, Pennsylvania College, Rudy

Disciplines

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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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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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Things Never Change: Piecing Together College Life

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2013

Sometimes you stumble on something on eBay you just can't pass up. It's that \$6 buy that is awkward, odd and just a little out of your scope. But it's only \$6. If you'd buy a burger for \$6, you shouldn't pass up an original letter from 1835.

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In the waning days of August 1835, George Heilig set pen to paper to send a message off to his brother William. His motives were two-fold. His pastoral duty called him to let a local Gettysburgian, a man named Buehler, know that his sister-in-law was in dire straights near Norristown. A widow and her two children suffered in destitution without their husband and father. But George wasn't quite sure how to contact Buehler. "I could not for certain tell," George wrote to his brother William, "whether he was black smith, or Dr. or Bookseller or what." William's task was simple: "see to it that he may get the letter in calling upon him & asking him whether he has rec'd an epistle from me."

But George seems to be practicing pretense; he didn't mince to his beloved brother William. "Why don't you write to us," pleaded to William, "as an affectionate brother who has more engage in such matter than we."

William Heilig was away at college in Gettysburg, studying at the newly minted Pennsylvania College. His school wasn't north of town; it sat smack dab in Gettysburg's bustling streets at the corner of Middle and High streets. Pennsylvania Hall and the sprawling campus where decades later soldiers would suffer were all just a pipe dream of delusional Lutheran church fathers.

And like every young man far away from home, he forgot to write. "I have been looking for a letter long since but in vain," George told his brother. And news from Gettysburg back toward Philadelphia's outskirts was important to George, pastor of a congregation in Centre Square. "I'm always pleased to receive some intelligence from your place since it is the head quarters of our Lutheran Zion."

That Gettysburg was someone's Zion long before a battle was fought here is hard to imagine. Pilgrims



a

words
George
time to

make annual hajjes to the sacred shrines scattered across the town's fields like lost words. They genuflect at altars and offer supplication to violent and, perhaps, Christ-like sacrifices.

Before the Lutheran Theological Seminary and Lutheran College were hospitals and charnel houses, they were the heart and soul of the Lutheran church in America.

Before the violence, before the blood, before the Civil War Zion, there was the Lutheran Zion.

George Heilig walked to the post office to mail his brother the letter. He entered and paid the 12 1/2 cents to mail his letter. The clerk mentioned he had a letter for Heilig, perhaps he said it as he neatly penned the postage rate in the letter's corner. The pastor tore open his own letter, one from Mr. Buehler in Gettysburg. Enclosed was cash for the widow and her orphan children.

His pretense foiled, George asked for his letter back. He ripped open the wax seal and grabbed a pen, scribbling hurriedly. He explained that the letter was unnecessary, that the Buehler's were sound. William needn't bother the blacksmith or doctor or bookseller but to give him the family's thanks.

Then George Heilig carefully resealed the meaningless letter to his brother William and handed it back to the clerk. It traveled the long road to Gettysburg.

Perhaps George never cared about the Buehlers at all. Perhaps news from Lutheran Zion didn't matter. Perhaps he only longed to hear from William.

Perhaps we all have Williams who we long to hear from.

A close-up photograph of a handwritten note on aged, yellowed paper. The text is written in a cursive script and reads "Why don't you write to us,". The ink is dark, and the paper shows signs of wear and discoloration.