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The Storm Breaks: Gettysburg's African-American Community During the Battle

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Abstract

By late June 1863, though rebel troops had already occupied Gettysburg briefly, the threat to the borough grew still more ominous. Rebel troops had cut the town's railroad lifeline to the north by destroying a bridge across Rock Creek, and convinced the local telegraph operator to flee with his equipment. The new isolation from news accentuated scattered reports of large forces, rebel and federal, approaching the borough from all directions. When federal cavalry arrived on June 30 to take up defensive positions west of town, Gettysburg residents sensed a looming battle. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Gettysburg, African American history, Battle of Gettysburg, Elizabeth Butler, Basil Biggs, Mag Palm

Disciplines

History | Military History | Social History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Storm Breaks: Gettysburg's African-American Community During the Battle

NOVEMBER 5, 2013

By: Brian Johnson, '14

By late June 1863, though rebel troops had already occupied Gettysburg briefly, the threat to the borough grew still more ominous. Rebel troops had cut the town's railroad lifeline to the north by destroying a bridge across Rock Creek, and convinced the local telegraph operator to flee with his equipment. The new isolation from news accentuated scattered reports of large forces, rebel and federal, approaching the borough from all directions. When federal cavalry arrived on June 30 to take up defensive positions west of town, Gettysburg residents sensed a looming battle.

In the morning, fears came true. Confederate troops attacking forcefully from the west and north collapsed the federal lines and drove the survivors through town in chaotic retreat. Realizing the imminent danger, African-Americans who had remained in Gettysburg tried to hide in any feasible shelter. Many likely stayed for the same reasons that had prevented them from acting on weeks of warning about the advancing Confederates. White employers, the source of economic survival for many free blacks, probably convinced many to stay because they needed the labor. Moreover, many local African-Americans probably suspected that local whites could offer better protection than flight across the countryside. Jacob Taughenbaugh's mother hid two black servants she employed under her home's porch. While it remained unsafe for them to leave their secret shelter, she slipped them sustenance. Elizabeth Butler remained with her employer until Confederate troops reached town, at which point she hid in the belfry of Gettysburg's Lutheran Church. Basil Biggs likely remained anchored in Gettysburg to protect property – his tenant farm west of town – just like many other local blacks. But by the afternoon of July 1, his farm engulfed in the Confederate advance, and with rebel troops quickly filling the borough proper, Biggs realized that there was little more his presence could accomplish. As Confederate troops reached the town square, Biggs borrowed a horse, and galloped down York Road just beyond the left flank of the Confederates converging on Gettysburg. Typical in why he stayed until July 1, Biggs was unique in how he could still flee.

Biggs and other black residents were right to fear. On July 1, Albertus McCreary witnessed rebels gather “a number of colored people” and march them out of Gettysburg. McCreary recognized his washerwoman, Elizabeth Butler, among the group before she escaped and hid in the Lutheran Church nearby – perhaps with the help of some of Gettysburg’s white residents. Another black woman – likely Isaac Smith’s wife – escaped capture only because her white, female employer refused to yield to Confederate troops insistent on taking her. When fighting forced her and her employer’s family to relocate to another house, the black woman again escaped capture because of the intervention of a white neighbor – this time through a brokered agreement to cook for a Confederate officer.

For blacks who had escaped to personal safety, property left behind remained another matter. Confederate troops took Basil Bigg’s cattle, cows, and 45 acres of wheat while they occupied his farm west of town. South of Gettysburg, among several farms owned by free blacks, Union troops consumed Abraham and Elizabeth Brian’s twelve acres of wheat and barley, took their livestock, and removed their fencing to make breastworks and campfires. The fury of Pickett’s Charge then caught the Brians’ house and barn – and the small house the Brians’ rented to another free black, Mag Palm – in a crossfire. The Brians’ barn even served as a breastwork for Confederates before advancing Union troops recaptured it.



As ambivalent as Abraham and Elizabeth Brian must have been about Union troops helping destroy and consume everything they had worked to build, they, like every one of Gettysburg’s black residents, must have rejoiced in one fact: federal forces had triumphed. Confederate invasion had threatened free blacks especially with capture and re-enslavement, and the common responses – flight, hiding, faith in an employer – were tenuous, uncertain, and dangerous. But the military verdict at Gettysburg ensured that the perils were temporary.

For further reading:

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Images:

[Damage to the Brian Farm, July 15, 1863]. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.