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One Year On: New Gettysburgians

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One Year On: New Gettysburgians

Abstract

It's been one year since freedom was preserved on a black man's farm. It's been one year since the rebel charge of men from North Carolina and Virginia crashed against Abraham Brien's stone wall and were repelled, since men from South Carolina and Maryland found their best laid plans for independence dashed upon the rocks of Emancipation and American Liberty. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Emancipation, slavery, freedom

Disciplines

African American Studies | Cultural History | History | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | 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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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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One Year On: New Gettysburgians

THURSDAY, JULY 3, 2014

It's been one year since freedom was preserved on a black man's farm.

It's been one year since the rebel charge of men from North Carolina and Virginia crashed against Abraham Brien's stone wall and were repelled, since men from South Carolina and Maryland found their best laid plans for independence dashed upon the rocks of Emancipation and American Liberty.

And in the intervening year, many of Gettysburg's black citizens, who had fled from rebel capture, have slowly returned.

Now it is the time in 1864 to celebrate that moment of victory, to celebrate American freedom. But Gettysburg's black population has changed as that celebrating began 150 years ago.

New faces milled in the street. Were Greenburg Madison or Jesse Nelson or William Hill preparing for their first July 4th in freedom? Each was a black refugee from the south. Madison and Hill hailed from Virginia, Nelson from Maryland. They are names in an 1864 draft register, exempt from compulsory service because the war would decide who they were. But if you asked any of them, would they deny being men? Would they deny being citizens?

James Royer was somewhere in Gettysburg too. He was 25 years old, working at a local restaurant or tavern as a waiter. In a previous lifetime, Royer had been a slave in Virginia. Now he was contraband in Gettysburg, his freedom hanging in the balance of the war. The gears were grinding slowly against slavery; the Senate was working to once and for all free Royer from fear. This year would be a true Independence Day for the young man.

William Wilson was a bit older. The 38-year-old man was born into slavery in South Carolina. He was married. And now he was a free man in the town where freedom had been defended, defined and ensured. Michael Fender was just like Wilson. He was a year younger, a lowly laborer, a runaway from slavery and a newly free citizen of Gettysburg. Contraband or not, July 4th would feel sweet this side of the Mason-Dixon line.



How many new citizens were there in Gettysburg who looked just like these men and women, drinking in freedom for their first July 4th. / [PD LOC](#)

America is a promise. It's a promise penned by a secretive cabal of men in a hot, sticky room in Philadelphia in 1776. It's a promise proclaimed on the steps of that building a couple days later.

And after that promise was penned, John Adams, a member of that cabal [declared that that promise](#) would, "be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America." Adams believed, "that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty."

But it shouldn't just be a staid celebration. "It ought to be solemnized," he wrote his wife jubilantly, "with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more."

If ever there were men who had reason to heed John Adams' advice, who should solemnize thorough tumult and exhalation, they were Madison, Nelson, Hill, Royer and Wilson. Freedom was real for perhaps the first time, one year on.