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Historic Journey to the Ballot Box

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Historic Journey to the Ballot Box

Abstract

Cumberland Township, wrapping around three sides of the Borough of Gettysburg, sprawls across the center of Adams County. Unlike its bustling neighbor, Cumberland Township lived a slower, rural life. But on Election Day the residents of the surrounding hills and swales poured into the borough to cast their ballots. While men from Gettysburg swarmed the Courthouse steps to make sure their voices were heard, Cumberland Township's voters trekked to the south end of town, to the tavern once owned by Conrad Snyder (now known as the Dobbins House).

The election in 1870 was a peculiar one... [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Comments

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Historic journey to the ballot box

Cumberland Township, wrapping around three sides of the Borough of Gettysburg, sprawls across the center of Adams County. Unlike its bustling neighbor, Cumberland Township lived a slower, rural life. But on Election Day the residents of the surrounding hills and swales poured into the borough to cast their ballots. While men from Gettysburg swarmed the Courthouse steps to make sure their voices were heard, Cumberland Township's voters trekked to the south end of town, to the tavern once owned by Conrad Snyder (now known as the Dobbin House).

The election in 1870 was a peculiar one. It was a year of firsts. Oct. 11 saw a new wave of voters coming to the polls. Among them was Otho Johnson. He stepped up to the ballot box for the very first time that year. Just moments before his back taxes for Cumberland Township had been paid – two dimes' worth of money. For a man who had been living in Adams County's poor house for nearly a decade that amount of money in his hand must have looked like a fortune. This was the first time Johnson was eligible to vote in Pennsylvania since 1838 on account of the color of his skin.

"In elections by the citizens, every white freeman of the age of twenty-one years, having resided in the State one year," who had paid his proper taxes, the Commonwealth's constitution declared in a new amendment in 1838, "shall enjoy the rights of an elector." With the stroke of a pen, the Keystone State disenfranchised thousands of its citizens. By the election of 1870, had nothing changed, that number of men denied the ballot would have been over 17,000.

But the intervening years had brought Civil War, peace and social revolution.

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

*John M.
Rudy*



The Constitution's Fifteenth Amendment now guaranteed the right of any man, white or black, to vote. And Otho Johnson was exercising that right perhaps for the very first time in his 70s at a ballot box on the edge of Gettysburg.

His journey to the ballot box that day had not been smooth. Jonas Johns, the steward of the poor house, and his son David Johns were both Democrats, doggedly opposed to seeing the men of dark complexion offered the ballot. And Steward Johns wielded a stiff sort of power over Otho Johnson.

"The rules do not permit inmates to go to town without permission of the steward," fellow resident Thomas Nolan, a white man, reported after the election, "punishment for violation of the rules is twenty-four hours," with a 56 lb. weight strapped to the ankle.

When election day dawned, Thomas Nolan, along with a bevy of other inmates, was loaded into a wagon with Jonas Johns and taken to the polling place. Otho Johnson, without permission to leave, was left back at the almshouse north of the borough.

"I wanted to vote my own sentiment," Nolan complained, "I didn't want any of their tickets." Still, Steward Johns pressed a slip of paper into his hand, a Democratic ballot, and pushed him forward. He, "didn't open or read the ticket," because he knew full well

that he would be forced to vote how his steward directed. Republican poll workers noticed that every man Jonas and David Johns brought to the polls was white and voting under duress. They confronted the almshouse's steward about the blatant political posturing. Jonas Johns gave them permission, if they wanted, to fetch the black voters from the poorhouse. "Now you see," Johns' son said snidely, "we don't interfere with your voters."

When Otho Johnson placed his vote for that very first time it was a small miracle, helped forward by stalwart earthly angels. Milling about the polling place were a handful of Gettysburg's local black citizens. Basil Biggs, who headed work crews reburying the men who fought for freedom in the National Cemetery just a few years before, was handing ballots out to Republican voters. But Otho was illiterate; he wanted to make sure his vote counted for exactly who he wanted. He handed it to Lydia Watts, a local black woman whose husband fought in the United States Colored Troops and died for the right of the slave to breathe free. She read out the names. Johnson, satisfied, handed the ballot to the workers at the polls and stepped one small step closer to full equality.

Whether it is pouring over Congressional records and court testimony to unearth lost stories of the struggle for voting rights or digging through your own family roots, you can find amazing things just by visiting the Adams County Historical Society. Come crack open the files and discover the past for yourself.

John M. Rudy is a volunteer researcher at the Adams County Historical Society in Gettysburg. More information can be found at achs-pa.org.