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Historical Society Has Tools to Dig Deep

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Abstract

"On last Wednesday night, Lincoln's Birthday," the Star and Sentinel reported in 1908, "a colored lodge of Elks was instituted in Xavier Hall this place with 45 members." The Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World was originally formed as an African-American fraternal organization in the 1890s after a white elks lodge in Philadelphia denied local black men membership. By 1908, the organization was quickly working its way through Pennsylvania. And now Gettysburg had "Colored Elks," working as a social safety net for the black community of the Third Ward. They provided aid to the sick and the grieving, loans and death benefits. (*excerpt*)

Keywords

Elks Club, Colored Elks, William Evans, Annie Matthews, Gettysburg

Disciplines

African American Studies | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

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"On last Wednesday night, Lincoln's Birthday," the Star and Sentinel reported in 1908, "a colored lodge of Elks was instituted in Xavier Hall this place with 45 members." The Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World was originally formed as an African-American fraternal organization in the 1890s after a white elks lodge in Philadelphia denied local black men membership. By 1908, the organization was quickly working its way through Pennsylvania. And now Gettysburg had "Colored Elks," working as a social safety net for the black community of the Third Ward. They provided aid to the sick and to the grieving, loans and death benefits.

As the knot of men poured back into the streets that night, they headed to a hub of the Third Ward's social life. "An elaborate banquet," the Star and Sentinel noted, "was enjoyed at Evans' café."

Just a block away from the Elks' first meeting hall at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, William Evans' restaurant was the perfect place to fete the new order and celebrate the birthday of the great emancipator. And Evans, newly appointed as the, "esteemed leading knight," of the Colored Elks, was the perfect host for a celebration of Lincoln. He was the living embodiment of emancipation. He was born in Ware Neck, Virginia in October 1863 to Solomon and Martha Lee Evans.

The Virginia he was born into was a brand-new creation – newly rid of slavery. The young Evans grew up in a state of progress; the slavery of his parents' generation was a slowly receding nightmare. He learned to read and write, illegal for a

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

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black child just years before. Then he did the unthinkable; Evans attended Hampton Institute, the black teachers' college just 50 miles south of his birthplace, and graduated in 1890.

Just after he graduated from Hampton Institute, William Evans met, fell for and married Ruth Annie Mathews, a young black woman from Gettysburg. The son of slaves settled where emancipation was secured.

Annie Mathews' birth was just as momentous as her husband's. Her parents were a well-established and upstanding local African-American family before the war. While Robert E. Lee's army was invading Pennsylvania, Annie's mother was feeling labor pains.

The day after the first Confederate forces arrived in Gettysburg in 1863, Mrs. Mathews gave birth to Ruth Annie. Like most of the town's black population, the growing family was running for their lives. Instead of being born in a warm bed in the borough's third ward, Annie Mathews entered this world a refugee fleeing a slave-catching army.

When Annie Mathews was barely a year old, her brothers struck back. Samuel,

Nelson and William Mathews all joined the 127th United States Colored Troops in September of 1864. The rebel army had invaded their hometown, threatening their baby sister's life from her very birth. Annie's older brothers marched off to defend their nation, their race and the very idea of freedom.

William Evans and his wife Ruth Annie Mathews Evans were the embodiment of the outcome of the Civil War. After they married, their dreams began coming true. William quickly became a scion of the community. He served on the county's Republican committee, voting exactly as his brothers-in-law had shot.

And they opened their own restaurant along South Washington Street. Evans' Restaurant became a hub for Gettysburg's entire community. "Notice to Public," ads on the front page of the Gettysburg Times trumpeted, "Fine Salt water shell oysters at EVANS' RESTAURANT."

Year after year, Evans' ad appeared in the local press, welcoming the entire community - black and white - to partake of a son of slaves' and a sister of colored troops' fresh imported oysters.

Whether the history you're obsessed with is driven by your family tree, a newspaper ad or the area's vibrant benevolent organizations, Adams County Historical Society has all the tools to find out just how deep the story goes. Digging deep into the heroes of the past is easy in our county's attic.

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