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A Letter of Man: "And what is 'truth'?"

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A Letter of Man: "And what is 'truth'?"

Abstract

Have you seen [the letter](#) making the rounds on the internet? It's been tough not to see the letter in the past week or so. And it certainly is powerful and meaningful. Jordan Anderson has struck a chord with modern audiences nearly 150 years after he dictated a snide and sarcastic letter to his former master. Reading over the former slave's word, it feels like he tailored his tone for the tongue-in-cheek, breezy style of the virtual world. *[excerpt]*

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Slavery, Citizen

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

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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A Letter of Man: "And what is 'truth'?"

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2012



Have you seen [the letter](#) making the rounds on the internet? It's been [tough not to see the letter in the past week or so](#). And it certainly is powerful and meaningful. Jordan Anderson has struck a chord with modern audiences nearly 150 years after he dictated a snide and sarcastic letter to his former master. Reading over the former slave's word, it feels like he tailored his tone for the tongue-in-cheek, breezy style of the virtual world.

When would these people be called citizen?
Could Anderson's letter have helped the
march toward true freedom? / PD [LOC](#)

amazingly moving [Broadway flop Reunion](#). The letter is read with Stephen Foster's "Hard Times Come Again No More" as underscore. It is a brilliant moment encapsulating the true revolutionary shift of the war. A black actor with a wonderfully booming voice intones, "eleven thousand six hundred and eighty dollars," with such weight and power.

The internet latched onto the letter, immediately asking if it was real. I had the same reaction when I first heard its forceful words. I first heard Anderson's letter because it appears on the soundtrack of the

I did some digging after hearing the powerful words, wondering if these were authentic or the invention of a brilliant playwright. I found a few users at [Snopes](#) who had already done much of the research for me. The letter appears to be authentic to the period.

But did Jordan Anderson write it? Did he dictate it? And in the end, how much does that really matter?

The people of 1865 who reprinted the sarcastic letter wanted it to be real. The very fact that the words attributed to Anderson saw viral distribution in the months after it first appeared in an Ohio newspaper shows there was a real desire from Americans to believe the words were real. Why were they reprinted?

The Wellsville, Pennsylvania *Agitator* ran a version of the letter in October of 1865. That year's state legislative races all revolved around black voting rights in the Commonwealth. Regardless of whether the letter was an invention or the genuine article, it still became a keen and sharp political tool to advocate that a black man could be just as witty, intelligent and snidely observant as a white man. The letter could help show a white Pennsylvanian audience that yes, in fact, a black man was smart

enough to employ sarcasm and identify irony. Why not let him vote?

Is the letter real? We'll never know for sure, unless we find the original document, and even then it might still be a little suspect. But is it *real*, in the sense that it sheds light on what the past was like, how people acted and what they felt. Does it help us to reach a better understanding of the Truths of the past? Of course.

We feel the pain of a slave, just like voters across America did as they went to the polls in the aftermath of the war, deciding who in their states were worthy of being called 'citizen'.