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Locks and Cash: Whose Black History? (Part 2)

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Abstract

A few weeks ago, the Hanover *Evening Sun* ran an article on the Lincoln Cemetery in Gettysburg and the locks which hang on its gates. This is by no means a new item of interest. The locks have girded the gates of the cemetery for three years. Still, the article (no longer on the *Evening Sun's* website but [archived here in a PDF](#)) raises a few interesting questions about the delicate balance between preservation and interpretation. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Interp Theory, Memorial Day, Black History, Civil War to Civil Rights

Disciplines

African American Studies | 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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THURSDAY, JULY 14, 2011

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Lincoln Cemetery lies at the corner of Breckinridge Street and Long Lane. / CC / [Bobby Housch](#)

A few weeks ago, the Hanover *Evening Sun* ran an article on the Lincoln Cemetery in Gettysburg and the locks which hang on its gates. This is by no means a new item of interest. The locks have girded the gates of the cemetery for three years. Still, the article (no longer on the *Evening Sun's* website but [archived here in a PDF](#)) raises a few interesting questions about the delicate balance between preservation and interpretation.

The caretaker of the cemetery told the *Sun* that when the cemetery was, "opened to the public," that the, "heavy traffic and lack of discipline and respect has caused graves to sink and stones to be pushed over." The lock went on the gates. Now only those with a, "sincere interest," are allowed to tread into the hallowed ground.

Lincoln Cemetery is the descendent of the original Good Will Cemetery, which served as a burial plot for the county's United States Colored Troops who were denied burial at the Soldier's National Cemetery just a stone's throw away. The history of the small plot is integrally linked with the story of freedom and the meaning and legacy of the Civil War. It is perhaps the most important ground in Gettysburg to visit when you are trying to unravel the legacy of war and the impacts of the conflict on America's black community.

But it's tough to visit the ground. A lock stands in the way. The caretaker asked the rhetorical question in May: "We have to decide, do we preserve the history that reflects the black citizen?... Or do we leave it open to be vandalized and trampled?"

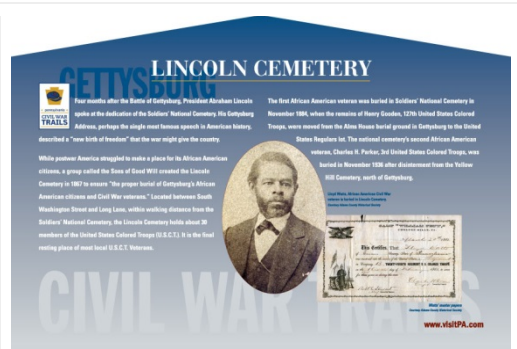


"Thankful"-ly, someone has uploaded photos from "my" cemetery on [findagrave.com](https://www.findagrave.com)

I understand the struggle to restore a cemetery. A cemetery restoration, involving resetting more than 20 stones, was [my Eagle Scout project](#). But the reason you restore any landscape is two-fold. You want to preserve the place, but to a specific end: enjoyment and appreciation. I wanted people to see Blocktown Cemetery and appreciate it. I wanted people driving by to wonder, "What is that?" and stop for a stroll through the area. I know, someday, Thankful Olcott's tombstone will tumble forward again. And I have faith that another historian or Scout will come along and fix it so another generation can enjoy it once again. That's how preservation works.

Is destruction really all that leaving the graveyard open will accomplish? Is vandalism and trampling the only outcome of the locks being left off the gates? Couldn't leaving the graveyard open to visitors to wander between the stones also help to foster a new found appreciation for the men and women buried there and their struggles?

Visitors are supposed to show a, "sincere interest," in black history before they can enter the sainted ground. But how do you develop that interest when the majority of black history in Gettysburg has been effaced from the landscape? Slivers and nuggets still exist here and there, but the majority of the African-American story in the town has been wiped clean from the slate with the concerted focus on three days in July. This is absolutely wrong. The story of Gettysburg's black community, a community which has remained more-or-less intact within the Third Ward for over 150 years, begs to be told to every succeeding generation.



Lincoln Cemetery's Civil War Trails marker.

Lincoln Cemetery is the chief tangible reminder we have on the landscape that a black community existed in Gettysburg in the 19th century. The home of Jack Hopkins, prominent member of the black community in 1863, crumbles to dust on Washington Street. The photos of Mag Palm, holding her hands defiantly for the photographer just as they had been tied by men trying to drag her south to slavery, appears in numerous places around the town; her photo often goes conspicuously uncaptioned. Basil Biggs' integral role in reburying the union dead after the battle, the men who had died to ensure his freedom and the payment for whose burial he would use to build a new and prosperous life, is a miniscule footnote if mentioned at all.

Where else can a casual visitor, who might not have a, "sincere interest," when they walk in through the gate gain that interest before walking back out?

I understand that, just like the African American Civil War Museum, it is the prerogative of the cemetery to do as they wish with their property. But how productive is that lock? How damaging will that \$200 price tag end up being for the AACWM? Isn't it imperative that the Civil War story of the Americans of African descent be told to ever broader audiences? Don't we need to win converts to the fold of black history and not simply preach to the choir again and again?

Lincoln Cemetery was, "restored to preserve the only concrete history of the colored troops," in Gettysburg.

At the Memorial Day celebration held in the cemetery, my pastor and friend Rev. Joseph Donella gave the keynote address. In part he said that the black community's, "dead heroes belong to the whole nation. What they suffered in life and death, then, needs to serve as our reminder. Let us not look to the past, to recapture hostilities and wayward sins. Let us remember, what they dared not forget, our dignity is preserved by collaboration in community."

Wandering thoughtfully among those stones is the best reminder any of us might find.