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Abolitionists Day: Why Now?

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Abstract

This past Saturday, I attended the very first Abolitionists Day here in Gettysburg. I wasn't sure what to expect when I arrived at the Seminary Ridge Refectory, but the crowded room seemed like a promising sight to me. When the event started, I was greeted with the words of famous abolitionists—William Loyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Beecher Stowe—being spoken by reenactors in period garb. As I listened, I couldn't help wondering why now? This was a question I heard echoed by many of the other event goers. Why hold the first Abolitionist Day on March 4, 2017?

Keywords

Abolitionism, Confederate Battle Flag, Olivia Ortman, Politics

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Abolitionists Day: Why Now?

By [Olivia Ortman '19](#)

This past Saturday, I attended the very first Abolitionists Day here in Gettysburg. I wasn't sure what to expect when I arrived at the Seminary Ridge Refectory, but the crowded room seemed like a promising sight to me. When the event started, I was greeted with the words of famous abolitionists—William Loyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Beecher Stowe—being spoken by reenactors in period garb. As I listened, I couldn't help wondering why now? This was a question I heard echoed by many of the other event goers. Why hold the first Abolitionist Day on March 4, 2017?



Several of the reenactors who attended to commemorate the abolitionists. Photograph by author.

Thankfully one of my professors explained that this day was also Confederate Flag Day. Last year at this time, Gettysburg was home to a Confederate flag rally. Although I was

not present at that event, I heard stories about it from friends. Fellow blogger Jeff Lauck [compared the event to battle as angry demonstrators turned the day into a hostile debate of whose view of the flag was right](#). This Abolitionist Day, activity was meant as a response to that Confederate flag event. It was an alternative for people who didn't want to celebrate the controversial history and separation evoked by that divisive symbol.

As I listened to the words of the neoabolitionists, I couldn't help but reflect on the tumultuous world we're living in. While I'm typically a girl who prefers to bury her head in the past, lately there has been no avoiding the news. To put it mildly, last November's election has elicited very strong reactions from the country—reactions which are pulling people apart. It seems that everywhere I've turned since the election, I'm hearing news of protests as people pit themselves against each other. While Americans have always disagreed—it's the beauty of living in our country—the recent arguments have been extremely disheartening to me. We've become so focused on pushing our own opinions that we've stopped listening to the voices of others. It's hard not to look out at our country and hear the words, “a nation divided,” echoing through my head.



The crowd that attended the event. Photograph by the author.

On Saturday I heard neoabolitionists preach equality amongst all races, because it was not only the moral thing to do, but also the American thing to do. It has been 234 years since we formally earned our Independence from Great Britain, 152 years since the Civil War ended, 53 years since the signing of the Civil Rights Act, and 2 years since gay marriage was legalized. These were all events that embodied the concept of equal opportunity amongst all, the idea upon which America was founded. Yet today, we are still questioning which rights we will give to different citizens. I listen to people ask those questions while preaching the correctness of their politics and I wonder how we're

going to move forward as a nation. What good can we do if all we can see are differences?

This Abolitionists Day event has given me hope, though. It showed me that, at a time when the country seems to be split into separate factions, people want to come together. We leave our warm houses (or dorm rooms) to face the icy wind because we want to put our differences aside and join our neighbors in celebrating our past. On Saturday, I looked at an audience of faces that spanned the generations, races, genders, and political spectrum. I also saw a group of neoabolitionists who spanned those same categories. This is why the first Gettysburg Abolitionists Day was held on March 4, 2017. It was held on this day because this was the day we needed it. We needed to be shown how far we've come since the Civil War and be reminded of how far we still have to go. We needed to understand that these abolitionists overcame great odds to achieve their aims and we can do the same if our messages are worthy. We needed to have a reason to come together.