Discovering the War at Home: Oakland Manor, George Gaither, and the Shipley Brothers

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Discovering the War at Home: Oakland Manor, George Gaither, and the Shipley Brothers

Abstract
From my high school, which is majority African American, it takes only ten minutes to drive to Oakland Manor, a grand, sweeping 19th century-style stone house that sits in my hometown of Columbia, Maryland, a town made up mainly of apartments and identical suburban homes. Growing up, the manor was no more than a big, old building that hosted weddings and was somehow tied to my local history. Growing up, moreover, I did not realize the extent to which my hometown was tied to slavery and the Civil War; both seemed too far removed from a community that stressed diversity and inclusion throughout my childhood. However, after discovering a monument to the Confederate soldiers from Howard County, in which Columbia is located, I learned that Oakland Manor holds a historical narrative that I never knew existed so close to home. During the Civil War, it was the property of a cavalry officer who joined the Confederacy and owned three slaves—all brothers who joined the USCT and fought against their former owner’s cause. Ten minutes from my high school was sitting an opportunity to learn about and interpret slavery and the Civil War in my hometown.

Keywords
1st Virginia Cavalry, 9th USCT, African American History, Election of 1860, Election of 1864, George Riggs Gaither, Maryland

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From my high school, which is majority African American, it takes only ten minutes to drive to Oakland Manor, a grand, sweeping 19th century-style stone house that sits in my hometown of Columbia, Maryland, a town made up mainly of apartments and identical suburban homes. Growing up, the manor was no more than a big, old building that hosted weddings and was somehow tied to my local history. Growing up, moreover, I did not realize the extent to which my hometown was tied to slavery and the Civil War; both seemed too far removed from a community that stressed diversity and inclusion throughout my childhood. However, after discovering a monument to the Confederate soldiers from Howard County, in which Columbia is located, I learned that Oakland Manor holds a historical narrative that I never knew existed so close to home. During the Civil War, it was the property of a cavalry officer who joined the Confederacy and owned three slaves— all brothers who joined the USCT and fought against their former owner’s cause. Ten minutes from my high school was sitting an opportunity to learn about and interpret slavery and the Civil War in my hometown.

The Confederate cavalry officer was George Riggs Gaither, a wealthy planter and slave-owner, and a descendant of the founders of Gaithersburg, Maryland. Gaither was born in Baltimore in 1831 to a prominent family (one that had been in Maryland since 1650) and resided in Oakland Manor, which he called “Bleak House,” after the contemporaneous Dickens novel. At least three black men were enslaved at Oakland Manor: brothers Mason, William, and Joseph Shipley. Before the start of the Civil War, Gaither formed a cavalry unit, the Howard County Dragoons, that consisted mainly of landed gentry, many of whom owned slaves, and spent most of its time drilling and parading for the locals.
Captain George Riggs Gaither’s Howard County Dragoons were mostly landed gentry, many of whom owned slaves. Photo via Library of Congress.

The Dragoons sprung into action after the Baltimore Riots on April 19, 1861, as they were stationed in the city to help quell the violence and keep the peace. However, the Dragoons were soon asked to swear allegiance to the United States, and most refused, heading south to Leesburg where they split up into Company K, 1st Virginia Cavalry, Company M, 1st Maryland Cavalry, and Company K, 2nd Maryland Cavalry. Gaither himself joined Company K of the 1st Virginia on May 14, not even a month after the riots, and was promoted to Captain that July. Neither Gaither or his men specified why they left the Union after being asked to swear allegiance, but it is not unusual to think that a wealthy slave owner in a border state would have opposed President Lincoln’s administration and the actions taken to keep Maryland from seceding. Gaither could have been moved by his belief in states’ rights, his opposition to government control, or his adherence to the institution of slavery.

Gaither saw combat at 2nd Manassas (where he was captured and exchanged about a month later), Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and here at Gettysburg. Though Gaither himself was probably still in captivity at the time, the 1st Virginia Cavalry was indeed present at the Battle of Antietam, making it likely that some of the original Howard County Dragoons would have fought in their home state. The return may have been as bittersweet and complex as the Dragoons’ relationship to Maryland. While they likely held a tremendous amount of state pride, given that they were highly esteemed in
Maryland society and were willing to risk danger or death to quell the Baltimore riots, they were now unwelcome in their home, a slave state polarized by pro-Union and pro-Confederacy sentiment. They entered Maryland not as successful knights returning from a crusade for their home state but rather as outsiders campaigning against fellow statesmen.

Gaither was forced to resign due to ill health in October, 1863. A year later, he was sent to Europe on a mission for the Confederacy, the nature of which is not known today. However, given Gaither’s economic and social status, as well as his post-war employment in the cotton industry, it might be speculated that he was sent to propose economic assistance for the Confederacy. On July 15, 1865, Gaither returned to Baltimore and signed an oath of allegiance to the United States, in which he agreed to “support all laws and proclamations which have been made during the existing rebellion with reference to the emancipation of slaves.” He would never own property of the likes of Mason, William, and Joseph again. Riggs also wrote to President Johnson to ask for pardon, arguing that he had left the Union before Lincoln had “establish[ed] military lines” and no longer had any connection with the Confederacy. He was pardoned in September. Despite his former role in the Confederacy, Gaither became a cotton trader and an active member of the Maryland militia. He died in 1899.

In my research, I failed to find any detailed accounts of Gaither’s post-war life in Maryland. Given that he did come from a wealthy family, it is likely that he received financial support or simply had enough left over to reintegrate himself into society and kick-start his cotton-trading endeavors. A more complicated matter is his reception; Gaither left his home landed and well-respected and returned, to some, a traitor. While his family, friends, and business contacts may have held no resentment, given his recent pardon, other members of the community would not have found his time in the Confederate army so palatable. This can be concluded from Howard County’s voting patterns: in 1860, only 0-1 percent of Howard County voted for Lincoln, while in 1864,
40-50 percent voted for the incumbent emancipator. This data could represent an increase in abolitionist—at least Republican—sentiment, and thus, I have come to conclude that Gaither certainly would have had his enemies at home in Howard County.

But Captain Gaither was not the only resident of Oakland Manor to serve in the Civil War. In November 1863, Mason, William, and Joseph Shipley, Gaither’s former slaves, joined the 9th USCT at Camp Stanton, Maryland. William was killed on August 14 or 15, 1864, in the skirmishes at Deep Bottom, Virginia. Mason and Joseph went on to fight at Chaffin’s Farm and Fair Oaks and were entrenched outside of Richmond before occupying the city on April 3, 1865. They survived the war and were mustered out on November 20, 1866. Mason and Joseph’s rise from slavery to occupying the Confederate capital represents a tremendous shift in opportunity from 1860 to 1865 alone; what would have been the white slave owner’s nightmare—an armed black man—was now the Shipley brothers’ manifestation of freedom. For them to fight against their former master’s cause, moreover, was a powerful demonstration of autonomy as well as the sweeping presence of African American soldiers fighting for the Union. The case that most interested and inspired me throughout the research process was that of William, one of the 9th USCT’s 46 enlisted men to be killed in action, whose death is a result of the fledgling freedom that he, along with his brothers and millions of other African Americans, finally achieved in life.

Thus, in the light of a controversy surrounding the removal of a Confederate monument from my county courthouse, I was able to discover a relatively unknown bit of local black history and learn more about divided sentiments in my hometown. The story of the Shipley brothers and Captain Gaither pushed me to think of the nature of Civil War memory and monumentation: why would Howard County, which saw a surge in Republican and abolitionist sentiment from 1860 to 1864 and now embraces diversity in its government, school system, and various communities, memorialize Gaither and not the Shipleys? How could the legacy of Oakland Manor be conceptualized in public education and used to teach our community about our local history? Why does all of this even matter?

To me, it matters because it presents a number of interpretive opportunities. Oakland Manor itself could be used as a teaching site to give Howard County residents an idea of what slavery and plantation life looked like in our community. Indeed, I think it would differ from our ideas of slavery derived from perceptions of the Deep South and bring the issue closer to home. It also presents the opportunity to discuss Reconstruction—how did Gaither manage post-war success despite his legacy as a slave owner and a Confederate? Moreover, Civil War memory is a hot-button topic in my town, as memory of the removal of the Confederate monument in front of the Howard County Courthouse is still fresh in our minds. How then, can we use both the Shipleys and Gaither in our dialogue about racial tolerance and monumentation? What does their story tell us about racial progress and regress in America?
Today, in addition to hosting weddings, Oakland Manor houses the old slave quarters and the Howard County Center of African American Culture, an older stone building that is presumed to have been the Dragoons’ garrison. The Civil War was much more a part of my town than I ever expected. Perhaps, in a few years, the stories of Mason, William, and Joseph Shipley will be told at my high school. Perhaps, in a few years, a resident will walk past Oakland Manor and think not only of its wealthy, 19th century owners, but of the slaves who left it to fight for freedom and justice.

Sources


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