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The 2017 Fortenbaugh Lecture: “I’m a Radical Girl”

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Abstract

In Gettysburg, we celebrate the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address in two ways: the Dedication Day ceremony and the Fortenbaugh Lecture. Every year on November 19, Gettysburg College and the Robert Fortenbaugh family invite a scholar to present their new Civil War research. This year, that scholar was Dr. Thavolia Glymph who presented her lecture titled “*I’m a Radical Girl*”: *Enslaved and Free Black Women Unionists and the Politics of Civil War History*. As the title reveals, her lecture revolved around black women unionists and their place in war efforts—a role which has often been overlooked. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

African American History, Fortenbaugh Lecture, Gender, Unionism, Women's History

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The 2017 Fortenbaugh Lecture: “I’m a Radical Girl”

By [Olivia Ortman '19](#)

In Gettysburg, we celebrate the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address in two ways: the Dedication Day ceremony and the Fortenbaugh Lecture. Every year on November 19, Gettysburg College and the Robert Fortenbaugh family invite a scholar to present their new Civil War research. This year, that scholar was Dr. Thavolia Glymph who presented her lecture titled *“I’m a Radical Girl”: Enslaved and Free Black Women Unionists and the Politics of Civil War History*. As the title reveals, her lecture revolved around black women unionists and their place in war efforts—a role which has often been overlooked.



Duke University history professor and 2017 Fortenbaugh Lecture speaker Dr. Thavolia Glymph.

During the Civil War, the title “unionist” was given to Southern women helping the Union cause. These women were accorded favors and gifts from Union soldiers and the government, often being given any aid they required with no expectation of repayment.

When the Union soldiers came into town, there were many benefits in being a unionist woman. Unfortunately, black women were excluded from those ranks. Even though black Southern women were contributing to the Union cause, they were not honored with the title of unionist or with the benefits that went along with it. That didn't stop these women from sacrificing, though, or from forcing their way into American politics.

Towards the beginning of the lecture, Glymph showed a picture of a young African American woman with a small American flag tucked into the waistline of her dress. When the picture first popped up on the screen, it meant very little to me. It was just the picture she had chosen for the cover of her book, probably a photo of one of the women she had talked about as an example of black unionists. I would have completely forgotten this image if it weren't for the pointed question Glymph posed. Why would a woman who has been dismissed by Northerners, a woman who would have to work extra hours to pay for rations from Union soldiers whom she helps, why would that woman wear the Union flag? Blacks were treated poorly by Union soldiers. Runaway slaves who went to Union troops were often given deserted tents and forced to sleep on the ground, made to pay for food rations and supplies, and in one extreme case, a group of runaway slaves were put on a train and sent to Chattanooga where they were left at the side of the tracks. The American flag was not necessarily a symbol of sympathy for blacks.

Yet, in spite of all those dismissals of blacks by Union supporters, or because of those dismissals, that black woman has stuck an American flag in her dress. By doing this, she asserts her ability to change what that flag stands for. She claims the freedoms that flag promises for herself and forces the Union to reevaluate their ideas of what they should do for blacks. All that black women unionists sacrificed in support of the Union war efforts made it clear that they had as much a right to be a part of the Union as any white person. They refused to be forgotten or pushed aside.

Talking to Dr. Glymph at breakfast the next morning, she explained that she always took her time with her writing because lives were at stake. She was referring to the people she writes about. Their lives and how we remember them are influenced by how she portrays them in her books. Decades after their deaths, she still has the power to guard or take their agency. I cannot speak for those black women unionists, but I think she gave them a platform for their voices to be heard. She brought those women back into our historical consciousness and finally gave them the title they deserved 150 years ago: unionist.