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Separate but Equal? Gettysburg's Lincoln Cemetery

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Abstract

The most well-known cemetery in Gettysburg is, of course, the Soldiers' National Cemetery. Another cemetery in Gettysburg that receives less attention is the Lincoln Cemetery, currently located on Lincoln Lane. This small cemetery is home to around thirty Civil War veterans. Why were these men not buried in the Soldiers' National Cemetery, a cemetery created for all veterans of the Civil War? The answer: they were African-American. While they were allowed to fight for their freedom, even in death, these men were still not equal to the white soldiers they fought beside. [*excerpt*]

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By *Savannah Labbe '19*

The most well-known cemetery in Gettysburg is, of course, the Soldiers' National Cemetery. Another cemetery in Gettysburg that receives less attention is the Lincoln Cemetery, currently located on Lincoln Lane. This small cemetery is home to around thirty Civil War veterans. Why were these men not buried in the Soldiers' National Cemetery, a cemetery created for all veterans of the Civil War? The answer: they were African-American. While they were allowed to fight for their freedom, even in death, these men were still not equal to the white soldiers they fought beside.

Some Union soldiers were willing to fight for abolition, but many did not believe in racial equality, even in the army ranks. The most famous of example of this is General William T. Sherman, who detested the freed slaves who followed his army as it marched through Georgia and South Carolina. He also had to be forced by Abraham Lincoln to allow black soldiers in his army, remarking in his memoirs that his army "preferred white soldiers." The Civil War was also often seen in its immediate aftermath as a war about reunion, with the abolition of slavery being a necessary side effect. Burying African Americans next to white soldiers could therefore hamper reconciliation efforts between North and South, as cemeteries often became places of shared memory and reverence for both sides. With this in mind, it is not surprising that these veterans of the United Sates Colored Troops were not allowed in the main cemetery in Gettysburg, and another place for them to be buried was needed. The cemetery created to fill this need was what would eventually become Lincoln Cemetery.

Soldiers' National Cemetery. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

In 1866, a group was formed for the express purpose of finding a good place to bury the community's African American veterans. This group was called the Sons of Good Will, and it originally had three members: Basil Biggs, Nelson Mathews, and Thomas Griegsby, all of whom were African American. Biggs was also involved in reinterring bodies in the Soldiers National Cemetery, hired as a laborer by the government. This was a very lucrative opportunity for Biggs and others who wished to make money to pay for all the property that had been destroyed during the battle. Perhaps his experience doing this spurred him to create a similar cemetery for African American veterans of the Civil War.

In 1867, the Sons of Good Will bought a half-acre of land in a neighborhood located in what is still known as the "third ward" of Gettysburg, where African Americans were required to live–attempts to move out of it were always denied by the local government. It was on the outskirts of town, and as such, its residents were always subject to getting their land taken away as the town expanded. A prominent landowner in this part of town, Eden Devan, sold the first plot of land to the society for $60, to be paid in two installments. Most of the land that the cemetery was created from was bought from African American members of the community, just like this first half acre. The cemetery came to be known as the Good Will cemetery after the society that founded it. It would

eventually house not only the thirty USCT veterans but also many members of the African American community.

In 1906, the Lincoln Cemetery merged with the other black cemetery in town, which was located near the AME Zion Church. The church no longer could afford to maintain their cemetery and appealed to the Sons of Good Will for help. This led them to the decide to disinter and reinter all the bodies in the Good Will Cemetery, which now became the only African American cemetery in Gettysburg. In addition, the town wanted the land that AME Zion's cemetery was located on, and they pushed for the consolidation of the two cemeteries. In 1916, after the Sons of Good Will ceased to exist, due to the death of most of the members, so some of the land on Good Will Cemetery sat was sold to Lincoln Lodge 145, was an African American Elks Lodge. The members of this organization became the cemetery's caretaker, especially in 1920 after all of the lots were sold and entrusted to their care. This is how it came to be known as the Lincoln Cemetery. The Lincoln Lodge was responsible for the cemetery until around 1934, when its last member became incapable of caring for it. After that, the care of the cemetery fell into hands of concerned citizens and members of the community.

As no one in particular was in charge of the cemetery, it fell into disrepair. This was a common problem in African American cemeteries everywhere, and it followed a pattern of destroyed African American cemeteries in towns whose white cemeteries were kept in pristine condition. In many instances, this pattern continues today. An example of this is in Richmond, Virginia. The African American East End and Evergreen Cemeteries there are overgrown with many headstones knocked over, while the nearby Oakwood Cemetery is kept in good condition, as the Virginia government provides money to the Daughters of Confederate Veterans for its upkeep. In a similar situation, the Lincoln Cemetery became overgrown, so much so that one could hardly tell that it was there. Often, people used the cemetery for parking. Headstones were knocked over, and the cemetery became a mess.

In the 1970s, the Gettysburg College service fraternity Alpha Phi Omega cleaned up the cemetery as one of their projects. Eventually, care of the cemetery was given back to the AME Zion Church, which appealed to the town to help with maintenance. The town agreed. The Lincoln Cemetery Project Association was established in the late 1990s to help preserve the cemetery and raise awareness of its existence. Now, there is a locked fence around the cemetery due to concerns of vandalism and a lack of respect for those buried there. The association also holds an annual Memorial Day service complete with a parade, and the cemetery is in much better shape than it has been over the years. There are also waysides around it that provide interpretation in order to help people learn about the history of the cemetery and understand that even though the USCT veterans buried in the cemetery fought for freedom and citizenship, they were still segregated in death. The Lincoln Cemetery Project Association works to preserve not only the cemetery itself but also its memory and the memory of African Americans who fought in the Civil War

This cemetery is interesting for many reasons, one of them being the fact that, despite its existence, two African American Civil War veterans were still allowed to be buried in the Soldiers' National Cemetery. Why were these two allowed to be buried here when everyone else was denied access? One of these men was Charles Parker, a member of the 3rd USCT. He was originally buried in Yellow Hill Cemetery until 1936, when he was reinterred in the Soldier's National Cemetery. Yellow Hill Cemetery was located in Butler Township, and the surrounding area was home to a thriving African American community until it was abandoned in the 1920s. The cemetery was left without anyone to care for it, so many of the bodies in the cemetery were moved to the Lincoln Cemetery. Parker's reinternment was part of Worker's Progress Administration project to locate all the graves of Civil War soldiers. In Gettysburg and the surrounding towns, this job was taken up by Henry Stewart. When Stewart found Parker's body, the Yellow Hill Cemetery was in serious disrepair, so the decision was made to move him to Soldier's National Cemetery.

The story of Henry Gooden, the other African American man buried in the Soldier's National Cemetery, is more perplexing, however. Gooden died in 1876 and was reinterred in 1884. This raises many questions as to why Gooden was allowed to be buried there when only one other African American man was. There is scant information on Gooden. Perhaps he especially distinguished himself during the war. It seems unlikely that he would have been allowed to be buried there without anyone really noticing or caring, given the racial feelings of the day. Gooden was buried in the United States Regulars plot in Section D, as part of the prominent Civil War section of the cemetery, alongside white soldiers, with the same granite marker. He was given an equal place among the rest of the dead; the records do not provide an answer as to why this was so. Gooden's case is an unusual one, as he was the one of the very few that was granted equality in death. In contrast, the African Americans in Lincoln Cemetery remained unequal, have largely been forgotten about, left behind by history, in a cemetery that was poorly taken care of for far too long. These men were good enough to fight beside white men, but only two were good enough to be buried beside them, a perfect example that freedom did not mean equality.

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