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Between the World and Them

Jeffrey L. Lauck
Gettysburg College

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Between the World and Them

Abstract

The first time I learned the story of the Bryan family and their Gettysburg farm was when I read Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*. For Coates, there was something poetic about the fact that the climax of the Civil War's bloodiest and most well-known battle—a moment forever enshrined in Confederate memory thanks to the likes of William Faulkner and Ted Turner—occurred on land owned by a free black man and his family. Pickett's Charge—the greatest symbol of Confederate martial honor in the Civil War canon—had been repulsed on property that represented so much of what its participants fought to prevent: freedom, prosperity, and dignity enjoyed by African Americans. [*excerpt*]

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Between the World and Them

By [Jeffrey Lauck '18](#)

The first time I learned the story of the Bryan family and their Gettysburg farm was when I read Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*. For Coates, there was something poetic about the fact that the climax of the Civil War's bloodiest and most well-known battle—a moment forever enshrined in Confederate memory thanks to the likes of [William Faulkner](#) and [Ted Turner](#)—occurred on land owned by a free black man and his family. Pickett's Charge—the greatest symbol of Confederate martial honor in the Civil War canon—had been repulsed on property that represented so much of what its participants fought to prevent: freedom, prosperity, and dignity enjoyed by African Americans.

As poetic as this juxtaposition may be, there is much, much more to this story. And yet, until recently, there has been little effort to publicly interpret the Bryans' story on the Gettysburg battlefield landscape. This semester, my colleague [Daniel Wright](#) and I set off to rectify that incongruence.



The author with colleague Daniel Wright at the Bryan farm.

In 1860, the Bryan family lived on a bustling farm and could claim more wealth than most Gettysburgians, black or white. Yet something stood between the Bryans and a world of economic and personal security that would have been enjoyed by a white family of equal status. For the Bryans, constant terror lurked at their doorstep—a fear not unlike that which Richard Wright illustrated in [the poem that inspired the name for Ta-Nehisi Coates's book](#).

For as long as they could remember, the members of the Bryan family had to constantly watch their backs and the backs of their black neighbors as profiteering slave catchers rounded up black Pennsylvanians with little regard for whether they were born free or enslaved. This fear only intensified after the passage of both the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act that required all citizens, North and South, to aid in the apprehension of humans that sought freedom of their own accord, as well as the landmark 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sanford* Supreme Court case that made it clear that African Americans were not citizens and would therefore have few legal means of protesting their kidnapping in a court of law.

A year after the *Dred Scott* decision was handed down, terror struck quite literally close to home for the Bryans. Mag Palm, a 32-year-old washerwoman, rented a small shack on the Bryans' property near the Emmitsburg Road outside Gettysburg. One night in 1858, Palm was ambushed by two slave catchers after leaving work in town. The two men attempted to bind her and take her south to slavery, but Palm fought back, biting off one man's thumb before managing to escape. Palm had been lucky, but the message was clear to every one of the roughly 200 black people living in town: Gettysburg was not safe. And the Bryan family, owning more wealth than most in the black community, had the most to lose from a future run-in with slavery.

Despite the risks, the Bryans stayed put in Gettysburg. For many black Gettysburgians, the Civil War brought hope. It seemed as if the war would change *something* about their perilous life on the edge of freedom and slavery, and the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation suggested that the eventual change would be positive. While 1863 appeared to be a year of jubilee for the Bryans and hundreds of other black Gettysburgians, catastrophe intervened.

The Bryans, just like other Gettysburg civilians, black and white, endured the destruction and chaos that came with battle. Buildings were damaged or destroyed, crops and livestock consumed, and gardens turned into graveyards. Yet the Bryans and other members of the black community also had to confront face-to-face, and *en masse*, the unending peril they had come to know so well.

As grey-clad soldiers invaded southcentral Pennsylvania in the summer of 1863, they rounded up scores of black men, women, and children whom they encountered, claiming them as escaped "property." Many families, including the Bryans, fled ahead of the Confederate columns. Others were not as lucky. Eventually, the Bryans returned and salvaged what they could of their ruined farm and shattered community. The great terror had passed for the moment, and their world could begin to heal.

Twenty-five years later—long after the Bryans had moved out of their farmhouse on Cemetery ridge—white Union and Confederate veterans met for the first of three major Blue-Grey reunions on the Gettysburg Battlefield. In a symbolic gesture of reconciliation, veterans of the two opposing sides clasped hands over a stone wall that

had once bisected Bryan's property. In doing so, however, the veterans chose to forget the Bryans' world and move on from the war without reckoning with its greater meaning and impact. Millions of people that looked like the Bryans still could not enjoy many of the freedoms offered to whites in a world created by the war, yet the reconciling white veterans seemed to have already decided that the war was about martial valor and honor above all else.

This is the story that Daniel and I have attempted to tell through our Bryan farm wayside project for Gettysburg National Military Park. Clearly, the story is long and complex, weaving together themes of terror and freedom that demand a book rather than a mere interpretive wayside exhibit to truly do the Bryans' story justice. My hope is that the wayside will help visitors understand a bit better what it was like to be black in Gettysburg before and during the battle and how the war's aftermath glossed over unhealed racial wounds and ignored black perseverance in the face of terror. Ideally, visitors might also challenge their own understandings of the battle and even pursue more information on the Bryans and their world. Today, the battlefield's interpretive landscape largely ignores this narrative. Soon, the story of the Bryans and their world will be seen front and center at the battle's most well-traversed hallowed ground.