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The Third-Annual Abolitionists' Day Event

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The Third-Annual Abolitionists' Day Event

Abstract

Three years ago, Adams County declared the first ever Abolitionists Day—a day dedicated to honoring the lives of the county's abolitionists. The county's abolitionists were a varied group, comprised of both whites and free blacks, men and women. Through their efforts, thousands of slaves were able to find their freedom in the North. One impressive couple, William and Phebe Wright, helped approximately one thousand men, women, and children to freedom. Adams County was also home to Thaddeus Stevens, a Gettysburg resident who used his position in the US House of Representatives to fight against the institution of slavery. With people as distinguished as these in the county's history, it is fitting that the county has set aside a day to commemorate them. To aid in this commemoration, several groups from the county came together to create a two-hour program that honored these abolitionists and educated modern county residents about their legacy in a performance that featured a collection of skits, talks, and music. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Abolitionists Day, Adams County

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Third-Annual Abolitionists' Day Event

By [Claire Bickers '20](#)

Three years ago, Adams County declared the first ever Abolitionists Day—a day dedicated to honoring the lives of the county's abolitionists. The county's abolitionists were a varied group, comprised of both whites and free blacks, men and women. Through their efforts, thousands of slaves were able to find their freedom in the North. One impressive couple, William and Phebe Wright, helped approximately one thousand men, women, and children to freedom. Adams County was also home to Thaddeus Stevens, a Gettysburg resident who used his position in the US House of Representatives to fight against the institution of slavery. With people as distinguished as these in the county's history, it is fitting that the county has set aside a day to commemorate them. To aid in this commemoration, several groups from the county came together to create a two-hour program that honored these abolitionists and educated modern county residents about their legacy in a performance that featured a collection of skits, talks, and music.

The skits were all based on the true stories of the county's fight for emancipation. One portrayed the kidnapping and daring escape of a young freewoman who had been mistaken for a slave. Another skit, performed by Isaiah Washington, depicted the risks that newly freed James Pennington was willing to take to be educated that eventually led to his rise as a prominent intellectual. Washington, who has given past performances as a slam poet, delivered some of Pennington's anti-slavery writings with a poet's outspoken fervor, which was fitting for material that was every bit as passionate. This skit particularly emphasized the interracial cooperation that defined the anti-slavery movement in Adams County by depicting the roles that both black and white members of the county took on to fight the institution of slavery. Max Weikel, acting as Gettysburg College Professor William Reynolds, gave another striking performance as he delivered an impassioned speech for emancipation and anti-slavery. Weikel's portrayal of Reynolds was outspoken and eloquent—it was easy to imagine how Reynolds' public speaking skills, cultivated in the classroom, might have captivated a town meeting. As a Gettysburg College student, it was especially moving to see the role that one of our own professors once took in the fight against slavery.

The program alternated between these anti-slavery skits and musical performances of abolitionist music. The music was performed by Dearest Home, a folk music group, and Judy C. Williams, a skilled reenactor. Dearest Home played traditional pro-abolition

songs with nineteenth century instruments, including a piano and a banjo. The group was careful to prepare the audience with context for the songs they sang, especially when the songs dealt with racially sensitive issues: For example, songs that included words that, in the nineteenth century, were considered common-place but have since changed, gaining newer, darker connotations. Because the band was careful to prime the audience with the necessary context, they allowed the audience to appreciate the songs in their intended light. Dearest Home's performances were a reminder that the phenomenon of political music is anything but new; music has long been a vehicle of political movements.

The other musical performances were sung by Judy Williams, who played the role of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield. After escaping slavery, Greenfield became so famous for her musical prowess that she was called "The Black Swan." Her songs were heartbreakingly beautiful, as she sang songs that mourned the loss of a son to slavery, and the hopes of emancipation. She even sang "My Country 'Tis of Thee," a song rendered particularly tragic against the backdrop of slavery. Watching Williams sing as Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield was particularly thought-provoking because, although, based on the contemporary descriptions of her music, she was a similar talent to "The Swedish Nightingale," Jenny Lind, Greenfield's name does not retain the same power as the European songstress's. Although it can be difficult to ascertain exactly why one person is remembered in history and another is not, it is difficult not to wonder if Greenfield would be better remembered if she was white and not an African American. Regardless, it was refreshing to actually be educated about Greenfield's legacy as both an early African American concert musician and an anti-slavery activist, while heartwrenching to hear Williams' emotive voice sing from the perspectives of slaves searching for hope in the bleak realities of slavery.

The emotional performances described were all put together by the Thaddeus Stevens Society, the Gettysburg & Menallen Friends Meetings (Quakers), Adams County Human Relations Council, YWCA of Gettysburg & Adams County, and the Interfaith Center for Peace and Justice. These groups put a lot of hard work and passion went into this public history project, and I would definitely recommend attending next year if you can—you'll leave with a greater appreciation for the important humanitarian work done in this county before it gained infamy in 1863.