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An Early Black Cemetery on York Street

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An Early Black Cemetery on York Street

Abstract

Many are familiar with William H. Tipton, a well-known local photographer who recorded iconic views of the town, battlefield, and monuments surrounding Gettysburg. What many people may not know is that Tipton built a house in the early 1900s right on top of Gettysburg's first African-American cemetery. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Gettysburg, William H. Tipton, AME Church, Battle of Gettysburg, York Street Cemetery, Black Community, Jack Hopkins, Abraham Brian, Clara Diggs, Lloyd Watts, Goodwill Cemetery, Lincoln Cemetery

Disciplines

African American Studies | Cultural History | History | Social History | United States History

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Living

An early black cemetery on York Street

Many are familiar with William H. Tipton, a well-known local photographer who recorded iconic views of the town, battlefield, and monuments surrounding Gettysburg. What many people may not know is that Tipton built a house in the early 1900s right on top of Gettysburg's first African-American cemetery.

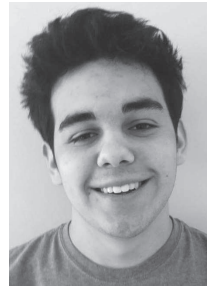
Before the house at 311 York St. was constructed, the property was filled with tombstones of prominent members of Gettysburg's black community. As historian Betty D. Myers points out in her book, "Segregation in Death: Gettysburg's Lincoln Cemetery," early members of the black community purchased a lot on York Street in 1828 for the purpose of establishing a cemetery.

Historic maps of Gettysburg from 1850, 1858, and 1872 show the cemetery on York Street. In 1863 during the Battle of Gettysburg, Andrew Schick remembered that Confederate soldiers who died at St. James Lutheran Church were taken "to the colored graveyard and buried." In 1868, Jack Hopkins, Janitor of Pennsylvania (now Gettysburg) College, was buried in the York Street Cemetery after "one of the largest witnessed here for years."

In 1906, the congregation of St.

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

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Paul's A.M.E. Church in Gettysburg voted to abandon the cemetery and move identified graves and headstones to the Lincoln Cemetery across town. A survey was done of the existing headstones and the congregation eventually sold the property to William H. Tipton. Among those whose stones recorded were: Abraham Brian, a well-known farmer who lived near the site of Pickett's Charge; Clara Diggs, a black resident of South Washington Street whose property was excavated in 2007 by archaeologists before new homes were built on the site; John A Disnick, John W. Watts, and John Redding, all veterans of the Civil War; and Violet and Valentine Watts, the parents of Lloyd F.A. Watts who was a prominent member of Gettysburg's black community

for many years.

Like most cemetery abandonments, many bodies were left behind. This cemetery was in full operation from about 1828 until the establishment of the Goodwill Cemetery (now called Lincoln Cemetery) in the late 1860s. For this period of about forty years there were probably well over 100 black citizens interred at the York Street Cemetery. In 1906, only 36 headstones existed.

When William Tipton broke ground for his new two-story brick house on York Street, he disturbed dozens of graves. Bessie Lutz, who lived just across the street, remembered that "bones were found—which were placed in a box back of the stove & when dry were burned." This alleged desecration of human remains is deplorable, but the saddest part of the story is that this cemetery has been almost completely forgotten. I hope that one day this site will be preserved and properly marked. There can be no doubt that some of Adams County's earliest African American citizens are still buried at 311 York St. in someone's backyard.

Andrew I. Dalton is a volunteer with the Adams County Historical Society and a member of the Gettysburg College Class of 2019.