

Gettysburg / Resources

Resource #1. African American Bios (Learning Activity #1)

Lloyd Watts:

Lloyd Watts was born free in Maryland in 1835, and moved with his family to the Gettysburg area in 1850. He attended school in Gettysburg, and worked for fifteen years as a laborer, perhaps in the town's brick kilns or carriage-making shops. In 1865 he enlisted in the United States Colored Troops. Among his duties was guarding Confederate prisoners of war, some of whom had been captured at Gettysburg. Watts was promoted to sergeant, in all likelihood because he was literate. After the war, Watts returned to Gettysburg, where he was a teacher in the town's "Colored School," an active member of St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and one of the "most respected colored citizens" of the town.

Basil Biggs:

Basil Biggs was born in Maryland in 1819. His mother died when he was four, leaving Biggs to be hired out to work for others. Although his mother left him the substantial sum of \$400 with which to be educated, it was later stated that his only education was "with his hands." He married Mary Jackson in the 1840s, and they moved their family to Pennsylvania in the 1850s so that their five children could receive an education.

Biggs settled in Gettysburg in 1858 and reportedly used his home to conceal runaway slaves during the day. In 1863, Biggs was working as a veterinarian and a tenant farmer. With the threat of Confederate invasion of Pennsylvania, Biggs took his family east to Wrightsville. When they returned, "they found that the Confederate army had set up a field hospital on part of the farm, and that the entire property was covered with items dropped by men of both armies." Biggs later filed a claim for the loss of eight cows, seven steers, ten hogs, six beds, sixteen chairs, ninety-two acres of destroyed crops, eight tons of hay, ten crocks of apple butter, two sets of dishes, and jellies. Additionally, forty-five dead Confederates were buried on the farm.

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In the weeks after the battle, Biggs was hired to bury more than 3,300 Union soldiers in the new National Cemetery. He used the money he earned to purchase a farm on the battlefield. He was an active member of the Sons of Goodwill, which worked to create a cemetery for the town's black Civil War veterans. Biggs was buried in this cemetery after his death in 1906.

The Last Will and Testament of John Fisher, July 19th, 1863

"I give and bequeath unto Basil Biggs, at present residing on the farm of John S. Crawford, my whole estate, Real, Personal, and Mixed, of what ever kind and wherever found that I may be possessed at the time of my death, after the payment of all my just debts, funeral expenses, a decent sett (sic) of tombstones for myself, and the costs and charges of settling my estate (aforesaid).

Margaret Palm

Margaret "Mag" Palm was twenty-four years old at the time of the battle. Born in Maryland, she moved to Gettysburg in the 1850s. An active member of the Underground Railroad, she was known locally as "Maggie Bluecoat" for the War of 1812 officer's coat that she wore when she conducted slaves to freedom. Mag believed that this work made her a target for Southern slave catchers, who on one incident attacked Mag, tied her hands, and attempted to bring her back to slavery. With the help of a passerby Mag fought off her attackers and escaped. At the time of the battle, Mag, her husband Alfred, and their son Joseph were living as tenants on the Abraham Brien farm.

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Owen Robinson

Born a slave in Maryland, Owen Robinson lived in the borough of Gettysburg for twenty years before the war, operating a small restaurant on West High Street, where he sold oysters in the winter and ice cream in the summer. Charles McCurdy, a boy who lived in Gettysburg at the time of the battle, remembered that "Whenever there was a report that the Rebels were coming, (Owen) would decamp with his family for a place of safety, and did not return until the coast was clear." In the summer of 1863, as the Confederate army approached, Robinson asked McCurdy's father to care for his pigs and fled. Robinson returned after the battle and in the years after the war served as the sexton of Gettysburg's Presbyterian church.

Abraham Brien

Abraham Brien, whose farm stood at the center of the Union battle line at Gettysburg, was born in Maryland around 1804. He moved to Gettysburg in the 1830s so that his children could receive an education. At the time of the battle he owned twenty acres of land with two small houses, a barn, a wagon shed, and two tenant houses. Brien and his family fled to unknown parts just before the battle. He returned to find his property ravaged by the battle. He filed a claim for five acres of wheat and two acres of barley, 200 fence boards, a tenant house which had been "torn and riddled and almost destroyed by artillery fire," his own home which was damaged by artillery fire, ransacked by soldiers, and stripped of its siding for use as burial markers for Union soldiers. The government reimbursed him fifteen dollars for his losses. After the battle Brien sold his farm and moved into town. He died in 1879.