

Gettysburg / Explore the Setting

The Landscape

The road networks that led the Union and Confederate armies to a collision in Gettysburg in the summer of 1863 were also vital in the establishment of the town's African American community. Eleven major roads come together in the town square, linking Gettysburg to such important locations as Harrisburg, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington. In the decades before the Civil War, these roads carried produce and manufactured goods from the small borough to larger markets. As the roads to Baltimore and Washington were better than those running north or west, the economy of the town and its surrounding area was linked more closely with the South than to the North. The roads that carried newly made carriages, brick, grain, or fruits to markets in Maryland and Virginia also brought fugitive slaves through the borough. Many of these runaways would seek refuge in the woods, creek beds, hills and boulder fields south of town. It is perhaps fitting that these same features of the south central Pennsylvania landscape would provide a measure of protection to Union soldiers defending against Confederate attacks during the Civil War's best known battle.

The hills and woods surrounding Gettysburg provided protection for runaway slaves seeking refuge, but there were also residents here sympathetic to the plight of runaways. These people allowed their homes and businesses to be stations on the "underground railroad" that traversed Adams County, providing both shelter and food for a brief period during the journey north.

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Look at the map below. How might these three geographical features have shaped Gettysburg resident's experience in the war?

Road network crossroads

Connection to the South

Underground Railroad



<http://www.gdg.org/maps/>

Gettysburg / Explore the Setting (cont'd)

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The African American Community

Gettysburg's African American community was established in the spring of 1776 when the Reverend Alexander Dobbin brought his two slaves to the Marsh Creek valley to construct a stone building that would serve as Dobbin's home and classical school. These slaves were the first known black inhabitants of what would become the borough of Gettysburg.

The area's proximity to the Mason-Dixon Line made it a haven for Underground Railroad activity, and many of the slaves who came to the region seeking freedom stayed because of the prospect of employment in the town's brick kilns, carriage shops, and farms. A visit from the nationally known Reverend Daniel Alexander Payne in 1837 sparked a religious revival in Gettysburg's African American community and led to the creation of St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church as well as the Wesleyan Church.

The Pennsylvania Free School Act of 1834 initiated the creation of a "Colored School" in town. In the years before the Civil War, religion and education would become the twin pillars upon which the Gettysburg's African American community was built.

In 1860, Gettysburg's population of 2,400 included 189 African Americans, twenty of whom owned property in the town. "Day laborer," according to the U.S. Census, was the most common occupation for men who were employed in Gettysburg's brickyards, carriage and wagon shops, on farms and in mills. The most common occupation for women was "domestic servant", working as laundresses and cleaners for white residents or taking care of their own homes. However, living in Gettysburg in 1863 was like, as historian Margaret Creighton has termed it, "living on the fault line." Slave raiders had entered the borough throughout the 1850's looking for runaway slaves. For some African Americans in Gettysburg, freedom also meant vigilance.

The town's proximity to the Mason-Dixon Line, which had brought so many of the area's black residents to Gettysburg in the first place, would put the town in the path of the armies and forever alter its African American community.