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Dig Into Local Black History

John M. Rudy
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

Introduction to Dr. Louis Eugene King, African-American anthropologist with the Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Park Service at Gettysburg

Keywords

black history, African-American history, Gettysburg, Louis Eugene King, Civilian Conservation Corps, CCC, National Park Service, NPS, Boy Scouts of America, Black History Month

Disciplines

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Comments

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Dig into local black history

"Race prejudice has not even a straw crutch to lean on," Dr. Louis E. King said to a group of local young women at the Y.W.C.A. in 1935, "there is no correlation between skin color and intellectual ability." King knew race prejudice. The African-American anthropologist had, after all, broken the color line in the Civilian Conservation Corp and the National Park Service at Gettysburg. "We come into the world without our consent and most of us will go out against our will so let's reach out our hands and be neighborly," King urged his fellow Adams County citizens.

The history of Gettysburg's African-American heroes is not hard to find if you care to look. Much can be known about men like Louis Eugene King by leafing through news clippings and files at the Adams County Historical Society. The sentiments and emotions of King, and the black men he helped command at the local CCC camp in McMillan's Woods, are far from lost to the historical record.

King faced an uphill climb when he was hired by the National Park Service as a junior historian at Gettysburg. He had already been denied his PhD in Anthropology by Columbia University on account of his standing in America – the family man from poor West Virginia upbringing could not afford to submit the 27 typescript copies the New York university demanded. The appellation "Doctor" was only ceremonial in the local black community until 1951 when Columbia changed their rules.

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

*John M.
Rudy*



After King was hired as the first black officer commanding men in the CCC, the white officers of Company 1355 resigned piecemeal, requesting other assignments. They were replaced with black candidates. The CCC camp at Gettysburg became one of only two in the nation with all black labor and officers – a racial coup-d'état for the Department of the Interior.

King did more than work on the battlefield. He became a stalwart leader in the local black community. He organized a Boy Scout troop for local African-American youth when that organization was segregated. Troop 74, under King's leadership, presented a play in June of 1937: "The King's Dilemma." In the sanctuary of Saint James Lutheran Church, local black youth derided segregation through a modern-day parable from W.E.B. DuBois' children's monthly. Then the men's chorus from the CCC camp sang out against hate.

King was let go from the National Park

Service in 1942 as the Second World War drew the nation's attention and resources. The park could only afford to employ one historian. King's white historian coworker at the park was brother of the Dean of Gettysburg College; King had been at the park three years longer than his coworker. Dr. King finally found a new job moving pallets at the naval depot in Mechanicsburg, where he worked for the rest of his life – never again able to find a job in the field of history.

In 1969, Dr. Louis E. King, in his retirement a part-time lecturer at Gettysburg College, gave a speech at St. Joseph's College in Emmitsburg, Md. The African American in this country, he told the young women there, "wants to be accepted as a human being capable of making responsible contributions to society and worthy of a voice in the future of his country."

Louis King's voice and the voices of countless others are easy to find. Black History Month is a great time to visit Adams County Historical Society. In fact, any month is a great time to dig into our local black history. Reels of microfilm can become time machines and unveil new heroes. With diligent work and determination, you can find amazing stories hidden in plain sight right outside your door.

John M. Rudy is a volunteer researcher at the Adams County Historical Society in Gettysburg. More information can be found at achs-pa.org.