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Independence Day 1866

John M. Rudy
Gettysburg College

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Independence Day 1866

Abstract

The grand national holiday was a quiet one in Adams County in 1866. Gettysburg was a ghost town. No fireworks. No parades. No mass celebrations. In the woods around the county, small knots of citizens gathered for picnics. Escaping the hot, dusty streets of the towns was obviously a boon for anyone who, as the Adams Sentinel put it, “embraced the opportunity of rustivating for the day.” [*excerpt*]

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Comments

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Living

Independence Day 1866

The grand national holiday was a quiet one in Adams County in 1866. Gettysburg was a ghost town. No fireworks. No parades. No mass celebrations. In the woods around the county, small knots of citizens gathered for picnics. Escaping the hot, dusty streets of the towns was obviously a boon for anyone who, as the *Adams Sentinel* put it, “embraced the opportunity of rustivating for the day.”

Undoubtedly, some of those wagons carrying merry-making parties rolled down the Emmitsburg road toward the glades in the southern part of the county. And as they passed Joseph Sherfy’s Peach Orchard, they would have seen only a smoking ruin where his brand new barn had stood. In the dark hours of the 4th of July, the Sherfy family awoke to find their barn engulfed in flames. This was the second time their barn had burned; the first was almost exactly three years before to the hour. The Sherfys ran to Littlestown in 1863 and weren’t on the farm when a shell caught the roof of their barn aflame. Fourteen men died in the blaze in 1863.

When they caught smoke in their nostrils and the glare of flames through the windows, the whole family bolted for their barn this time. Raphael, Sherfy’s 23-year-old son, dragged horses and cows from the collapsing barn, sustaining burns from the intense heat. The loss was staggering. The family was only beginning to recover from the ravages of war and now another tragedy piled onto their shoulders.

The afternoon of the Fourth brought torrential downpours across the county, catching reveling citizens on picnics by surprise. Peering from windows as the revelers returned to town, “it was a little amusing to

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**John M.
Rudy**



see the interesting condition of those who were spending the day in the woods,” the *Sentinel* smiled. Drenched, the citizens of the now re-United States only found joy in the summer shower.

The question of who deserved the title citizen hung like a pall over Independence Day 1866. While men and women were picnicking in Adams County, each state was debating whether the Constitution needed a 14th Amendment. Did America need to be a place where each state must provide, “any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws?” Was America truly committed to its revolutionary creed of making sure not to, “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law?” Could America ensure, “the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States?”

The implicit words missing in the 14th Amendment, but which anyone reading Gettysburg’s newspapers or wandering its streets new were there, was “race.” While the 13th Amendment destroyed slavery, the 14th would go a step further: declaring anyone born in the United States, including the men and women held in bondage just a

few years before, to be equal citizens under the law.

Gettysburg was lacking fireworks lighting its skies on July 4th, 1866. But the nation was still celebrating. The town fathers who typically organized local celebrations were busy in Philadelphia. General George G. Meade was presenting a gift to the Commonwealth. Governor Curtin received the flags, tattered and ragged from many hard fights, which Pennsylvania’s soldiers carried in battle to help preserve the United States and free the slave. “In the dark hours of 1861, when treason and rebellion lifted their impious hands against the National life,” the hero of Gettysburg addressed the Governor and crowd in Philadelphia, “Pennsylvania was the first State to fly to the rescue of our country and to send her sons into the field.” War had ended. The flags could be furled. “The work,” Meade concluded, “is over.”

War would rage across America for another decade as politicians and Presidents, vigilantes and hard-working citizens all argued over who exactly deserved the title “citizen.” Men would still die though the flags were furled. Women would still suffer though the flags were unfurled. Hatreds would still bubble though the flags were furled. America would continue in a long, secret war of Reconstruction. The remnants of our own local War of 1865-1877 are preserved at Adams County Historical Society just as vividly as the War of 1861-1865, waiting to be discovered by diligent researchers and curious citizens.

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