

Zion Union Cemetery

Burial Site of Civil War Veterans



Perhaps the greatest achievement of Mercersburg's African American community was in response to a call to arms in the Civil War. Prohibited from serving in the Union Army until after the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, Mercersburg's African American men heeded the call with enthusiasm, eventually sending eighty-eight men to war.

The first African American Regiment formed in the North was the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, made famous in the movie *Glory*. In April, 1863, a recruiting official from the 54th Massachusetts made a visit to Mercersburg and found fertile ground. Forty-four men from the Mercersburg area served in the 54th and 55th Massachusetts regiments. Additionally, forty-four men would enlist in various



Federal units known as the United States Colored Troops, or the United States Colored Cavalry. Included among the 54th Massachusetts volunteers were two sets of four brothers - the Christys and the Kunkletons. Of these eight young men, seven would become casualties, and three would never return to Mercersburg. All told, nineteen of Mercersburg's thirty men in the 54th would be casualties of war.

Prior to 1877, Mercersburg's African American burial ground was a small cemetery on Park Street. By 1876, a new cemetery was needed. On April 12, 1876, a group of African American residents purchased a parcel of land, nearly three acres, just south of the Borough (now located at the end of Bennett Avenue). In November of that year, the Zion Union Cemetery Company filed a petition in the county court for an article of incorporation. The petition was witnessed by twenty nine persons, including the community's pastor, Alexander Watson; two women; and at least fourteen Civil War veterans.



At least thirty-eight Civil War veterans are buried in Zion Union Cemetery, including thirteen members of the 54th Massachusetts. This constitutes the largest known burial site of 54th troops in a private cemetery. The cemetery is still in use by the Mercersburg's African American residents.

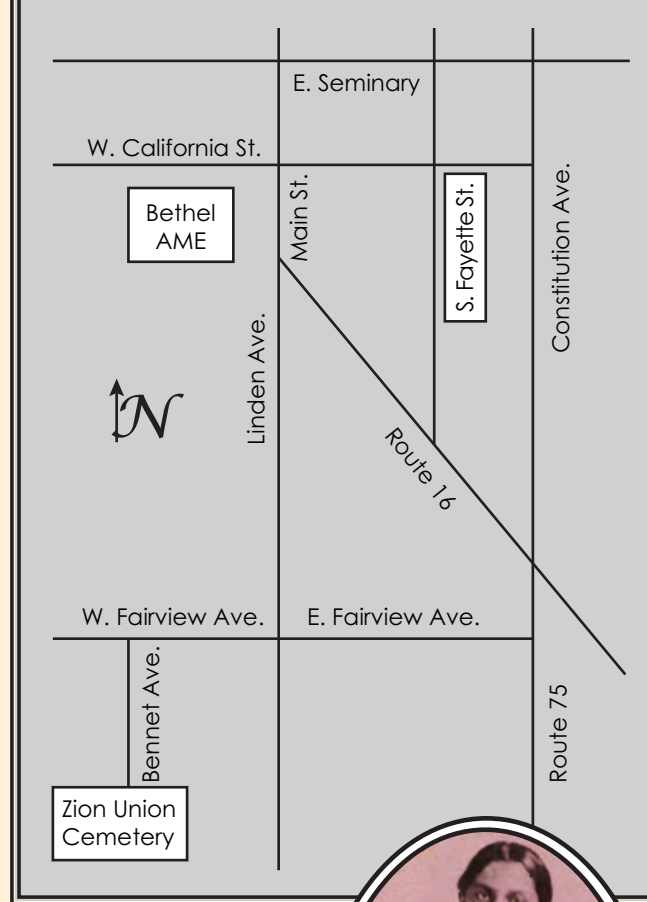


Photo at Right: Susan Virginia Butler Stoner, wife of James M. Stoner, 2nd U.S. Colored Cavalry.

Front Cover Photos
(top): Decorative Gable of Bethel AME Church.
(Bottom): View of South Fayette Street with the Hugh Mc Connell House (ca. 1840) in the foreground.



More Information: Mercersburg Area Chamber of Commerce
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African American Historic Sites of Mercersburg



A Living Legacy

★ Produced by the Mercersburg Historical Architectural Review Board ★



- 1. A view of 227 S. Fayette Street in the early 20th century.
- 2. The Brooks-Watson House (215 S. Fayette St.). Owned by African Americans since the 1840's. Known as the Shotgun House for its consecutive one room additions.
- 3. Mural in Bethel A.M.E. Church (24 W California St.), depicting Jesus and a doubting Thomas. Painted by Clifford Johnson, Eugene Reidout, and Edward Strawthers in the 1940's.
- 4. The Filkill family, circa 1910.
- 5. Original fireplace mantle in the Cornelius Lauderbaugh House (29 S. Fayette St.).
- 6. The Lauderbaugh House door, circa 1840.

The African American community in Mercersburg traces its roots to efforts by religious and community leaders in the late eighteenth century to manumit, or free, held slaves in Pennsylvania. In addition to freedmen, the community's members included newly manumitted slaves and runaway slaves from Southern States. By the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the community began to concentrate along Fayette Street with residents beginning to own property and homes. The 1825 tax assessment lists for the town show African Americans Patrick Adams and Sally Good each owning a house and lot. In 1839, a student at Marshall College (present day Mercersburg Academy) wrote that there was a large African American community in the town as well as a related community west of town known as "Africa." By 1850, the U.S. Census recorded 26 African American households; the occupants of six of these owned their homes. Only five of the heads of the community households in 1850 were born outside the state, evidence that most of the community were from Pennsylvania. Although most of those who lived in "Africa" were farm hands or laborers in the rural area around the Borough, there were also skilled trades people, including carpenters, quarrymen and blacksmiths. At least one member of the community was a teacher, another an engineer.

By the start of the Civil War, the African American community was well established. African Americans were prohibited from joining the Union Army until President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. When given the opportunity to fight, Mercersburg's African American men responded. At least eighty-eight men from the Mercersburg area enlisted in the Army; nearly half served with either the 54th or 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiments. At least 38 Civil War veterans are buried in Zion Union Cemetery. Others were buried in the small cemetery on Park Street at the site of Mercersburg's first school and church for African Americans (replaced in 1892 by the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church on West California Street).

The strength and vitality of Mercersburg's historic African American community is unique to Southern Pennsylvania, and it is truly a living legacy. From the many early homes in the Fayette Street neighborhood to Bethel AME Church, from the outpost at "Africa" to the historic Zion Union Cemetery, the symbols of this historic legacy continue to be shared by an active, vibrant community. We invite you to witness and share in this heritage as it continues to grow and evolve.