

Retracing the steps to freedom

Abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens is key figure in celebration of Juneteenth

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By JON RUTTER, Staff

African-American freedom marchers returned to town Saturday for the first time in decades. The "Juneteenth" commemoration of the release of the last American slaves in 1865 was the catalyst.

Abolitionists Thaddeus Stevens and Lydia Hamilton Smith were the honorees.

It was the first time since World War II that Juneteenth pilgrims have visited Stevens' West Chestnut Street grave, said black community leader and Millersville University professor Leroy T. Hopkins Jr.

Re-enactors donned top hats and 19th-century skirts and recalled the tense days of slaves escaping on the Underground Railroad.

Darlene Colon, portraying Smith and wielding a black parasol against the sun, told how her great-great-great grandfather, Ezekiel Thompson, was tried for treason for fighting slave catchers in the famous 1851 Christiana resistance.

Stevens got the 46-year-old black farmer off the hook in court. "That's how I came to have a great respect for Stevens," Colon said.

The legendary legislator and his confidante, Smith, are thought to have had an active hand in helping runaway slaves. Some fugitives might have gotten away on Stevens-owned railroad cars fitted with hidden compartments, said preservation consultant Randolph Harris.

Because of the risky behind-the-scenes work done by Stevens and Smith, said Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology's Paul Culbreth, "Lancaster is the portal to the free world for African-Americans."

History train

At the cemetery, Lancaster Councilman Nelson Polite Sr. and others laid a wreath at the foot of Stevens' granite tombstone. Art "G.I." Brinson, a Lancaster actor portraying black reformer Frederick Douglass, called Stevens an "exceptional" friend who ignored skin color and divined "the souls of the downtrodden."



Art "G.I." Brinson as Frederick Douglass and Darlene Colon as Lydia Hamilton Smith, above, help to commemorate Juneteenth Saturday in Lancaster.
Photo: Jeff Ruppenthal, Sunday News

After paying their respects, marchers hiked down the hot midday sidewalk to the East Vine Street site of the future Thaddeus Stevens/Lydia Hamilton Smith museum.

The group then proceeded to a program at Crispus Attucks Community Center, 407 Howard Ave.

More than 75 people gathered to eat barbecue and listen to music by the Bright Side Baptist Church men's choir.

Also celebrating Juneteenth this weekend were Bethel AME Church, the African American Historical Society, Lancaster Historical Society, Wheatland, Lancaster Religious Society of Friends, Christiana Historical Society and Pennsylvania Dutch Convention & Visitors Bureau.



Paul Culbreth, left, and Nelson Polite Sr. place a wreath at the Thaddeus Stevens grave. Photo: Jeff Ruppenthal, Sunday News

Juneteenth was born June 19, 1865, when Union officer Gordon Granger landed at Galveston, Texas, and announced the end of the Civil War. His arrival came two years after President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863. Stevens had already become a hero to blacks and progressive whites by then.

Hopkins credited the firebrand congressman for singlehandedly saving public education in Pennsylvania and for spearheading through the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution that made possible civil and equal rights advances.

People thronged Stevens' 1868 funeral, Hopkins said, and the Concord-Shreiner Cemetery at North Mulberry and West Chestnut streets soon became a kind of mecca. "There's a tradition ... of making a pilgrimage to Stevens' tomb," Hopkins said. The Emancipation Club met there on the 50th anniversary of emancipation, in 1913.

Hopkins said the release of the racist "Birth of a Nation" movie in 1915 and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan conversely spurred attention to Stevens. The militant abolitionist was big, too, in the Great Depression years, according to news archives researched by independent scholar Tim Niesen and photographed by Randolph Harris. In July 1934, more than 300 blacks converged on the cemetery under the Pennsylvania State Negro Council. The next month, former Philadelphia Mayor Harry A. Mackey called for an annual, statewide pilgrimage, which apparently continued for several years.

The development of the museum and the discovery of a probable hiding place for fugitive slaves in a brick cistern have helped shine more light on Smith. The upper middle class black woman owned multiple properties in Lancaster and kept house for Stevens. Yet, said Colon, "When she entered a room, he got up and gave her his chair."

The two were generations ahead of their time in gender and racial equality, Colon said. Now, said Cheryl Holland-Jones, executive director of Crispus Attucks, Juneteenth is undergoing a revival lest people forget the lessons of history. Hopkins, who noted that poet Carl Sandburg once visited Stevens' grave, said the black history trail through Lancaster still has the potential to attract a national audience. "We have to tell our story," Hopkins said.

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Darlene Colon, left, and Nelson Polite Sr. Photo: Jeff Ruppenthal, Sunday News