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Emilie Davis's Diary and the Importance of the Gettysburg Campaign

MICHAEL D. PIERSON

The recent acquisition of Miss Emilie Davis's Civil War diaries by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania promises to open many of the closed shutters looking out onto war-time Philadelphia. The author's race and sex make her journals especially intriguing. Emilie Davis joins Charlotte Forten Grimké as only the second African American woman whose Civil War diary is known to have survived. Davis was a native Pennsylvanian, having been born free, probably in Lancaster County, in 1839. Her diaries start on January 1, 1863, the day the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect. She would then have been about twenty-four years old, and she continued her diaries until the end of 1865. The journals can now be read in two published editions, as the originals at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, or online.¹

My own interest in Emilie Davis's diaries began with what she wrote about the Gettysburg campaign. Gradually, this became a fascination with what she did not write about it. Her silences, especially after the battle was over, confused me. Her omissions led me to try to figure out what she may have been thinking—or not thinking—and why.

I now think about Davis's coverage of the Gettysburg campaign as two intertwined stories,

and this essay's structure reflects that division. First, starting in June, Emilie Davis began to worry about Robert E. Lee's pending invasion of her home state. Like others in Pennsylvania, Davis could now imagine that the war was coming home. Her reactions to daily news and rumors tell us a great deal about how the state's African American population experienced the campaign. Emotions among Davis's family and friends ran the gamut from fear to courage, from worrying about the present to grasping at opportunities for a better future. As we will see, Davis's family, friends, and city would be deeply affected by what they often thought of as "the Rebel raid." While Davis ordinarily spent almost all of her diary entries talking about private concerns such as her friends, family, suitors, employers, classes, and church meetings, for a few weeks in the summer of 1863 she made the Civil War the focus of her attention. She shows us how at least some African Americans experienced the Gettysburg campaign, and how Lee's invasion helped spur the arming of black troops in Pennsylvania.

The second half of this essay is mostly about silence, always a hard topic to analyze. Up until the moment of Pickett's Charge, Emilie Davis showed considerable interest in the Gettysburg campaign. The curious truth, however, is that Davis makes no mention of the battle of Gettysburg in her diary. She was also silent about the Army of Northern Virginia's retreat over the Potomac on its way back to Virginia. On the one hand, this is perhaps not too surprising. Davis hardly ever mentions military events; there is not one word about Shiloh, Antietam, or Fort Wagner in her diaries. But on the

¹ Two editions of Emilie Davis's diaries have been published. While they follow different editorial practices, both are useful. Karsonya Wise Whitehead, ed., *Notes from a Colored Girl: The Civil War Pocket Diaries of Emilie Frances Davis* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), includes the complete diaries and detailed chapters by Whitehead that fill in biographical details, plus analysis of African American life in nineteenth-century Philadelphia and beyond. Judith Giesberg, ed., *Emilie Davis's Civil War: The Diaries of a Free Black Woman in Philadelphia, 1863–1865* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014) has less supporting apparatus but still offers the full diary, editorial notes, photographs, and maps. The complete diaries are also available at <http://www.davisdiaries.villanova.edu>. Teachers may also wish to consult Karsonya Wise Whitehead and Conra D. Gist, eds., *Rethinking Emilie Frances Davis: Lesson Plans for Teaching Her Civil War Pocket Diaries* (Apprentice House, 2014).

other hand, readers might well expect some note that her worries had subsided, some reference to good, welcome news. The fact that she wrote on July 7, 1863, about the “surrender of Vicksburg,” only adds to the mystery surrounding her silence about the Army of the Potomac’s victory in her own state. Why mention Vicksburg but not Gettysburg?

Why was Davis silent about Gettysburg? Trying to answer that question in the second half of this essay allows us to explore the distortions and gaps that were (and still are today) all too common in the reports of battlefield events that reach the home front. How did people in northern cities and towns learn about the war? How reliable or complete was their idea of how the war was progressing? Why did some events make it into her diary, and others did not? These are not questions relevant only to African American history; everyone at home, regardless of their race, had to try to sift through different accounts to try to assemble an accurate idea of what was going on.² In the case of Emilie Davis, however, her racial status may enable us to track down—or at least to make a better guess about—her likely sources of information. Ultimately, both of the halves of the essay address the importance of Gettysburg to the war as a whole.

Emilie Davis and the Invasion of Pennsylvania

Emilie Davis did not ordinarily use her diary to record the ebb and flow of Civil War campaigns. She rarely recorded what we would consider national news. Her remarks tended to be personal rather than overtly political or military. In addition, Davis was constrained in her writing by the small amount of space allocated to each day by the publishers of her blank diary books. But the Army of Northern Virginia’s move northward in the early summer of 1863 changed that.

Her comments in late June add a new dimension to the ongoing discussion among historians about how blacks in southern Pennsylvania experienced Lee’s invasion. Almost every major

history of the Gettysburg campaign mentions the seizure by Confederate troops of free-born black citizens as well as fugitive slaves. The histories also acknowledge that the Confederates did so with an eye toward carrying them south to enslavement. Historians also include details about the large number of blacks and whites who quickly evacuated the endangered parts of Pennsylvania.³ Clearly, the historical consensus is sympathetic to the plight of those who were at risk of being taken into slavery, with the authors variously noting the taking of children, the very large number of people effected, and making harsh judgments of the Southern practice.⁴

But agreement breaks down on the details. No one in the Confederate army seemed inclined to determine how many African Americans were taken, what their legal status was, or what eventually was done with them. Confederate staff work, rarely thorough, seems to have broken down on this matter. Within the broad spectrum of agreement that some African Americans were swept up by the Army of Northern Virginia and taken to an unknown, unpleasant fate, there are matters upon which historians disagree. Some historians, citing a lack of conclusive evidence, tend to minimize the extent to which Lee’s army participated in seizing African Americans. Kent Masterson Brown has concluded that the people swept up in the Confederate effort were seized by only two units, Imboden’s and Jenkins’s cavalry brigades, and that they operated at the greatest remove from Lee’s headquarters. He also notes that it is hard, given the sources, to know what happened to the people seized. In the end, he knows that people were taken up, and that “the seizures of free African Americans undoubtedly occasioned much grief and heartache among those who lost loved ones or who were separated from their families.” (We might add that the removal of people

² This idea comes from Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, who write that “for those with kin at the front, newspapers became tracking mechanisms.” For these civilians, “pooling unreliable information from multiple sources, . . . could become an obsession.” Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, “The Bonds of Print: Reading on the Home Front and Battlefield,” in *Massachusetts in the Civil War: The Commonwealth and National Disunion*, ed. Matthew Mason, Kathryn P. Viens, and Conrad Edick Wright (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 198, 199.

³ Examples include Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), 161, 642n77; Stephen W. Sears, *Gettysburg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 82, 110, 111–12; and Allen C. Guelzo, *Gettysburg: The Final Invasion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

⁴ For the taking of children, see Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 73; Coddington notes that 5,622 blacks lived in the invaded counties in 1860, with the total swelling to 10,790 if one adds Dauphin and Lancaster counties, which were threatened. See Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign*, 642n77; Sears condemns the kidnappings as “surely the ugliest” aspect of the invasion. Sears, *Gettysburg*, 112.

who were fugitives from slavery also would have created distress and the destruction of Pennsylvania families.) But Brown is unwilling to implicate the rest of Lee's soldiers in the dragnet. Nor is he willing to say that the soldiers who detained people were acting on orders from, or even the tacit approval of, very high ranking Confederate officers.⁵

At the other end of the spectrum, historian David G. Smith's essay about the Army of Northern Virginia's capture of African American civilians sees more widespread involvement by Lee's soldiers and officers. Smith believes that "evidence implicates units from every one of Lee's infantry and cavalry corps," not just the two cavalry brigades operating at the army's fringes that factor into Brown's work. Why was the practice so widespread? Smith writes that southerners acted from deep motives. Lee's army, he argues, saw the "mass captures of civilians" as settling the score against northerners whose troops had wreaked havoc in the South.⁶ The kidnappings were "revenge" and "retaliation." Also, the Confederates may have acted in this manner as a response to the increasing presence of black troops in the Union ranks in places such as Louisiana, Kansas, and the southern Atlantic coast.⁷ Smith places the total number of people sent to southern jails, slave traders, and military prisons as perhaps more than a thousand people, making "the slave raids . . . more widespread and more typical than scholars have previously believed."⁸

Historian Margaret S. Creighton, who has offered the fullest treatment of how Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania affected African Americans, agrees with the more harrowing picture of Confederate actions. She cites Lt. Gen. James Longstreet ordering Maj. Gen. George Pickett to make sure he keeps control over captured "Contrabands," as well as Lt. Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson's active involvement in the enslavement and re-enslavement

of African Americans at Harpers Ferry in 1862. Creighton writes that "the seizing of African American families, including small children, was carried out at all levels of authority." But Confederate responsibility is not her main focus; nor will it be mine. Creighton's essay refocuses our historical attention away from Lee's army to a picture centered around "the African Americans who bore the brunt of the assault."⁹

This essay shares two of Margaret Creighton's goals. First, Creighton seeks to show her readers that "it is possible to put faces on some of the African Americans leaving Gettysburg."¹⁰ By giving considerable biographical detail about residents such as Owen Robinson, Mag Palm, Randolph Johnston, and the more well-known Abraham Brian (whose farm abuts the angle on Cemetery Ridge), Creighton humanizes the otherwise anonymous people who fled over the Susquehanna in fear of losing their freedom. Her second objective is to complicate the way we think about African Americans in the Gettysburg campaign. Noting that historians tend to only write about "the terrifying ordeals of kidnapping," she aims to add to the narrative the stories of black men "who were not only willing to bear arms for freedom, but had the opportunity to do so" at places like the Columbia-Wrightsville bridge south of Harrisburg.¹¹ The Emilie Davis diary enables historians to add a unique African American voice to our history of the refugees who moved away from the Army of Northern Virginia, and it shows in even greater detail the efforts of black Philadelphians to fight off the invasion.

Emilie Davis's diary gives us the ability to see more clearly how searing an event the invasion of Pennsylvania was for the state's African Americans. Davis's diary entries are always spare, and they flow together in a continuous stream of visits, work, classes, and church meetings. Each day's summary is brief and often cryptic, especially given her penchant for only using people's first names. With little

5 Kent Masterson Brown, *Retreat from Gettysburg: Lee, Logistics, and the Gettysburg Campaign* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 31–33, quotation on page 31. Brown states, for example, that "there is no record that any prominent army commander ordered the seizure of African Americans, and there is no reference that the contrabands were captured by any command other than Jenkins's and Imboden's brigades. Likewise, no record exists indicating the ultimate disposition of the captured contrabands referred to by Longstreet." (Brown, 32).

6 David G. Smith, "Race and Retaliation: The Capture of African Americans during the Gettysburg Campaign," in *Virginia's Civil War*, ed. By Peter Wallenstein and Bertram Wyatt-Brown (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2005), all quotations on 137.

7 Smith, *Virginia's Civil War*, 145. Quotations on 140, 142.

8 Smith, *Virginia's Civil War*, 144.

9 Margaret S. Creighton, "Living on the Fault Line: African American Civilians and the Gettysburg Campaign," in Joan E. Cashin, ed., *The War Was You and Me: Civilians in the American Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 217, 218. See also Peter C. Vermilyea, "The Effect of the Confederate Invasion of Pennsylvania on Gettysburg's African American Community," *Gettysburg Magazine*, 24 (2001), 112–28.

10 Creighton, *The War*, 221.

11 Creighton, *The War*, quotations on 224. Biographies of African Americans living in Gettysburg in 1863 on pages 221–24.

physical space to work with for each entry, she often overflowed from one day's space to the next. Entries overlap and merge. But in late June, concerns about the Rebel invasion erupt onto her pages.

By the latter half of June, Davis starts to worry about her father, identified by Karsonya Whitehead as Charles Davis, who was living in Harrisburg. Even before Lee moved north, she had complained that she had not heard from him recently. In a rare joke, she wrote in May 1863, that "I have not heard a word from father. I fear they may have seceded."¹² Not much is now known about Charles Davis; Whitehead identifies him as having been born in Maryland and married to a woman named Helena, but beyond that she can only regret the "lack of information" about Emilie's father. What Emilie Davis's diary reveals, however, is her anxiety about her sometimes seriously ill father, standing as he was in the path of the Confederate army.¹³

Before June was out, her father's silence seemed truly ominous. Lee's army was already in Pennsylvania, a fact that Emilie certainly knew, and Harrisburg and its people were threatened. On June 23, she sat down and began: "I feel so worried about Father."¹⁴ Presumably knowing that she would always remember why she had been so anxious, she skipped over saying why she was concerned and then wrote three short sentences about the day's church meeting. Five days later, she recorded an action that reflects her level of alarm. On June 28, Emilie wrote and posted a letter for her father. As historian Martha Hodes notes in a different context, writing letters was an expensive action for working class people, requiring postage, paper, an envelope (with wax to seal it), a pen, ink, and perhaps most importantly, time.¹⁵ Clearly, Emilie needed to know

if her father was still free or she would not have committed to sending him a letter.

One day later, we read why Emilie went to the cost and bother of writing to her father. Writing on June 29, she filled the diary's entire space for the day with news about refugees from central Pennsylvania streaming into Philadelphia. "To day has bin the exciting day. I have witness refugees are com in from all the towns this side of Harrisburg. The greetes excitement Prevails." Her writing flooded over into the "Memoranda" pages at the back of the volume, where she added that on June 29, "the most exciting day ever witness by having Refugees line the Streets from all the towns this side of Harrisburg and even from Harrisburg." Emilie's worries about her father crested on June 30, with Richard Ewell's Confederate army corps at its high water mark just outside the Pennsylvania capital; she wrote "I am all most sick wrorrien about father the city is considered in danger."¹⁶

Throughout these entries, we see Emilie's anxiety in her words. We also see it, I think, in her unusually awkward spelling of "worrying" as "wrorrien," one of the most idiosyncratic spellings in her three volumes of diaries. It seems possible that she was agitated, writing so quickly that she took this difficult word to spell on the fly, and got far more tripped up in her spelling than was customary for her. There is a very real fear, in other words, of enslavement—even among those born free. We see also in these entries the web of family connections that transmitted—and thus magnified—the fear of enslavement beyond central Pennsylvania and into the rest of the North along lines of kinship and friendship. Lee's army did not just enslave those they took in person; they also took people's blood relatives and friends. The news of Lee's invasion was just that—big news—to African Americans throughout all of the free states. To suggest that the actions can be minimized by pointing to only a few units or commanders is to misunderstand what happened that summer. The kidnappings thrust the Civil War into Davis's diary, a sign of heightened awareness and, as we will see,

¹² Emilie Davis Diary, May 29, 1863. Emilie Davis's diaries are difficult to read. She wrote in cursive, and her spelling was not standardized. This has lead the scholars who have published the two modern editions to sometimes transcribe the Davis diaries differently. Also, as scholar Ann D. Gordon notes, "punctuation held no interest for [Davis] at all" (201). The transcriptions of quotations in this article are my own. I have taken Gordon's advice to go "to the manuscript and read the diaries afresh" (214). I have silently inserted punctuation where I thought it was necessary for clarity, but have tried to render Davis's spelling accurately. I have also capitalized the word "I" throughout, though Davis tended to write it in the lower case. Ann D. Gordon, "Getting History's Words Right: Diaries of Emilie Davis," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 139 (April 2015), 201, 214.

¹³ Whitehead, *Notes From a Colored Girl*, quotation on 99; see also 10, 73–74, 221.

¹⁴ Emilie Davis Diary, June 23, 1863.

¹⁵ Martha Hodes, *The Sea Captain's Wife: A True Story of Love, Race, and War in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 22–24.

¹⁶ Emilie Davis Diary, June 29, 1863; Emilie Davis Diary, Memoranda section, 1863 volume; Emilie Davis Diary, June 30, 1863. Karsonya Wise Whitehead writes about Davis and the Gettysburg campaign in Whitehead, *Notes From a Colored Girl*, 91–93.

of a greater willingness to take unpleasant actions on behalf of the United States.

It is important to note that the African Americans in Philadelphia were galvanized by the news that they heard from the central part of the state. Davis's diary shows this quite clearly. Even as she worries about her father, Davis also writes about the enlistment of her city's African American men into militia units. The history of African Americans in the Gettysburg campaign is at least as much about enlistment as it is about kidnapping. In fact Davis arguably writes more about the community's military response than about her father and the refugees, in part because she saw the formation of the military units herself. For her the biggest single event in this mobilization was the departure of the Banneker Guards, an African American militia company in which many of her friends had enlisted. The unit left for Harrisburg on June 17. Her entry about their send-off reads like any number of other women's diaries during the war: "To day has bin the most exciting I ever witness. We went to see the boyes start for Harrisburg. I left home about 9 o'clock. It was almost 12 when I came home." Davis elaborated on the event in the Memoranda pages at the back of her 1863 diary, writing that the day "will be remembered by a great many of our People. nearly all of our best young men left for the War."¹⁷ The history of Gettysburg needs to include the story of the mobilization of black men for Union military service. This is especially important given that Philadelphia was home to 22,000 African Americans.¹⁸ This was a significant number of people, and their complete mobilization for the war effort would notably help the United States of America win the war. We might note, for comparative purposes, that Richmond, Virginia, the Confederacy's second largest city, had about 26,000 white people living in it in 1860.

Which is not to say that the black soldiers were welcome when they got off the train in Harrisburg. Certainly they were needed; Governor Andrew Curtin had put out an urgent call for troops to repel the invasion, and the overall response had been weak. Even still, the arrival of the Banneker Guards

in the state capital prompted concerns that some white troops already there might not like serving alongside the Guards, and the African American men found themselves back in Philadelphia the day after they had left.¹⁹ For her part, Emilie Davis had mixed feelings about seeing them come back. Writing on the 18th, she remembered that "the first thing I heard was that the boyes had bin sent back. I feel glad and sorry." Later, she wrote only that the soldiers "happily returned the next day unharmed."²⁰ Given Davis's involvement in abolitionist activities, we should not be surprised that she was "sorry" that the men had been discriminated against. Her happiness, however, reminds us that many people wanted their friends and relatives back safely from the war at almost any cost. The fact that she was willing to see them go in the first place is a mark of the extent to which the arrival of Lee's army at her father's doorstep drove home the necessity of her friends' and family's enlistment. Later in the war, when the excitement of the invasion died down, she would rue the conscription of one of her brothers, Alfred.²¹

The Union army's unceremonious refusal to allow the Banneker Guards to defend Harrisburg did not put an end to the matter, however. Davis wrote two days later that the would-be soldiers were talking again about going off to war. This set off alarm bells again for Davis, who wrote the next day that "we all are so thankful that our boyes are all hom again."²²

But this reprieve would not last. No doubt prompted by the willingness of the Banneker Guards and other African American men in the state to volunteer, the government began to almost immediately rethink its refusal to welcome black Philadelphians into the ranks. On June 19, 1863, (the day after the Banneker Guards returned to the city) Lt. Col. Charles Ruff announced that he had orders to raise a black regiment in Philadelphia. A week later, Camp William Penn was opened just outside the city to house and train new African American

¹⁷ Emilie Davis Diary, June 17, 1863; Memoranda section, 1863 volume.

¹⁸ For more on the black community in Philadelphia, see Nick Salvatore, *We All Got History: The Memory Books of Amos Webber* (New York: Times Books, 1996), 16–26.

¹⁹ The Union general commanding the defenses of Harrisburg was Darius Couch. See A. M. Gambone, *Major-General Darius Nash Couch: Enigmatic Valor* (Baltimore: Butternut & Blue, 2000), 150–53.

²⁰ Emilie Davis Diary, June 18, 1863; Memoranda section, 1863 volume.

²¹ For example, Davis seems fine with Alfred's trip to Canada, seemingly to avoid the draft. Emilie Davis Diary, July 16, 1864.

²² Emilie Davis Diary, June 20, 1863; Emilie Davis Diary, June 21, 1863.

troops.²³ It is hard to see this move to finally mobilize the city's African American population as unrelated to the Banneker Guards's trip to Harrisburg, or to the Gettysburg campaign more generally. While historians have found many origins for African American military service in the war, from Kansas to Louisiana to the Sea Islands, we can also add Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania as another, if rather late, moment when reluctant whites came to welcome the raising of black regiments. By helping to push racially conservative Pennsylvania into the column of states where blacks would be not only admitted to the ranks but actively recruited, housed, and trained, Lee's invasion was that much more of a strategic loss for the Confederacy than we have already thought.²⁴

Silence and the News

Interestingly, as soon as the calendar turned to July, Davis's diary falls silent about her father's plight, the battle of Gettysburg, and Lee's ensuing retreat. Silence in historical sources is usually simply frustrating; what, if anything, did the writer think about what was going on? But Davis's diary offers us a chance to see how war news traveled to northern civilians, even ones living in major cities like Philadelphia. Often, we might not be able to know—or even guess—what papers a Philadelphia resident might have read. Therefore we might not know, or even want to speculate about what a person might have known at any given point. This is especially true for a place like Philadelphia, which was served by many newspapers and magazines. So ordinarily we might just leave it at this: we cannot even start to know why Davis left Gettysburg out, or why she chose to include the fall of Vicksburg. In fact, she not only notes Vicksburg's surrender, but goes so

far as to write that there was “great rejoicing here the surrender of Vicksburg.”²⁵

Emilie Davis's membership in the often segregated African American community opens up avenues for investigation about what she might have known and when. One place we can start our investigation into her silence is with the *Philadelphia Christian Recorder*, the city's black-owned and edited newspaper. We can assume that Davis got her news from a variety of sources, but we can also start with the idea that she, or people with whom she regularly conversed, had access to the *Christian Recorder*. By looking at its coverage of the campaign, we can see if Davis's diary reflects the paper's vision of what had happened. Not surprisingly, its coverage of Lee's invasion began early and continued throughout the invasion. As early as June 20, 1863, the paper warned that “whoever fancies themselves safe from harm, will assuredly have their tranquility disturbed by the enemies of free institutions for some time.” The next issue of the weekly paper tried to pinpoint the location of the rebel army, knowing that news would be of great interest to much of their readership. This proved difficult, of course, and the editors had parts of the Army of Northern Virginia in Pennsylvania at Greencastle and Chambersburg, as well as at Shepherdstown, West Virginia, and Williamsport, Maryland. Subsequent issues encouraged black men to enlist, and reported on progress toward getting black troops into the Union ranks. But the paper received news slowly; the day after Pickett's Charge the *Christian Recorder* could only say that they thought all of Richard S. Ewell's corps was probably in Pennsylvania. Indeed it was.²⁶

But what about after the battle of Gettysburg? Here too the *Christian Recorder* did a good job of providing robust, if not always timely or accurate coverage of the Gettysburg campaign. The issue dated July 11 included a dispatch dated four days earlier that announced “Meade's victory” and stated that “Lee's defeat has been total and disastrous.” While historians might quibble about the coverage, which only records events from the first two days of the three day battle, there is no denying that if Davis had access to the *Christian Recorder* she would have known about the battle and the extent

²³ Frank H. Taylor, *Philadelphia During the Civil War, 1861–1865* (Philadelphia: Dunlap Printing Company, 1913), 187–88.

²⁴ Much has been written about the ways in which the United States came to recruit and employ African American soldiers. Some recent studies include Douglas R. Egerton, *Thunder at the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments That Redeemed America* (New York: Basic, 2016); Stephen V. Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments that Changed the Course of the Civil War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008); and Edward G. Longacre, *A Regiment of Slaves: The 4th United States Colored Infantry, 1863–1866* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003). These studies build on pioneering works, including Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953); Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861–1865* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1956); and James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 192–220.

²⁵ Emilie Davis Diary, July 7, 1863.

²⁶ *Philadelphia Christian Recorder*, June 20, June 27, and July 4, 1863.

of Union success. If anything, the newspaper probably exaggerated the degree of the victory. In all, there were three solid columns of news about the battle, all arrayed under the headline: “The Rebellion has Received a Mortal Wound.”²⁷ So why did this not warrant inclusion in her diary?

Reading the *Christian Recorder* also makes us ask why news of Vicksburg made it into her diary. While Gettysburg warranted three columns in the *Christian Recorder*, Vicksburg garnered only three lines in the July 11 issue.²⁸ Davis’s entry about Vicksburg is on July 7, so even those three lines could not have spurred her to writing. We have to conclude, then, that while Davis may well have read the city’s black newspaper, or talked to others who had access to it, it did not drive what showed up in her diary. So what did? How did she learn about what was going on? Or, more to the point, why did Davis write some news into her diary and not other events? How did she decide what was important?

The answer is as obvious as it is a revelation about the nature of nineteenth-century life. Emilie Davis wrote about what was in front of her. Her focus on what she had actually seen becomes apparent when we turn away from newspapers and look at how Philadelphia commemorated the two battles. When she writes “great rejoicing here the surrender of Vicksburg,” she literally meant that people in Philadelphia celebrated the Union victory on the Mississippi. What she had probably seen was at least some part of a blizzard of happiness that descended over the city when the Confederate surrender in Mississippi was announced. According to historian J. Matthew Gallman, church and fire engine house bells pealed, a giant crowd gathered, flags flew, and Union League members paraded. To add more excitement, fireworks burst over the city, and gas jets illuminated the word “Victory” over the Union League building in the city center. How could Davis ignore this burst of noise and visual stimulation?

The other Civil War events that make it into Davis’s diary follow the Gettysburg and Vicksburg pattern; if events came directly before her, they made it into her diary. Which is not at all to say that the Civil War, even the Civil War of high politics and

military events, is absent or even that it makes only rare appearances. But it does mean that people who went to the trouble of putting on a public show of their politics had a far better chance of making it into Emilie Davis’s diary than people who did not. Public celebrations and planned events filled her diary, while matters to which she had no direct personal involvement were omitted. Seeing what political and military events she included gives us not only the picture of a young woman deeply engaged with public life, but also a sense of how she learned about what was going on around her. It also gives us a way of seeing what they thought was important.

We see Emilie Davis’s engagement with civil society and national events most clearly in her entries about going to hear abolitionist speakers. While she does not record what people said, we see her going to many events in the three years the diaries cover. She heard the abolitionist Hutchinson Family singers twice; she was in the audience for Frederick Douglass at least four times. She went through a period of remarkable civic engagement in the spring of 1865, hearing addresses by at least five reformers (Douglass, Frances Harper, Horace Greeley, William Kelley, and Anna Dickinson) in the span of two-and-a-half months.²⁹ We cannot know what lay behind this burst of political attention; she had always attended reformers’ speeches and musical concerts, so this was not new behavior so much as a change of degree. Perhaps it was the pressing question of what the post-war world would bring. Perhaps there were just more people on the speaking circuit those months.

The 1864 election also brought politics literally to her door, and thus into her diary. It is intriguing to note that Davis wrote about the Union Party’s torchlight procession on October 8, 1864, presumably because she saw or heard it. She also recorded the Democratic Party’s rally in the city, which distinctly entered her life by making it impossible for her to get home because “the streets were to[o] rowdy. the Democrats had the rowdy prossion.”³⁰ (Here, too, we see Davis’s spelling deteriorate—“prossion” instead of “procession”—in an entry that discusses the alarming possibility of white violence.) She kept inside again on November 8, thinking that Lincoln

²⁷ *Philadelphia Christian Recorder*, July 11, 1863.

²⁸ *Philadelphia Christian Recorder*, July 11, 1863.

²⁹ Emilie Davis Diary, February 16, 1865 through April 28, 1865.

³⁰ Emilie Davis Diary, October 8, 1864; Emilie Davis Diary, October 29, 1864.

would be re-elected but fearful of violence. As with the results of the Gettysburg campaign, Davis's coverage of the election neglects to record who won.³¹

Davis's written reactions to events surrounding the end of the war confirm that events that came before her directly were the ones that she recorded later in the day. We see, for example, the fall of Richmond, a long-anticipated event. Davis records this harbinger of the Confederacy's doom, but perhaps only because of its impact on her life: "I went down to Ellen's to rejoice over the good newes. Richmond has fallen. the city is wil[d] with excitement. flags are flying." In an especially telling sequence of entries, Davis later that month omits all mention of Lee's surrender at Appomattox, but takes considerable interest in a ceremony in Philadelphia on April 14 centered around the return of the United States flag over Fort Sumter: "to day is the day we Celebrate the soldiers Parrade a flag was Presented to the regiment by the banneker."³² Davis ignores the rest of the Confederacy's military collapse; the capture of Jefferson Davis goes unrecorded.

Very few national events transcend Davis's pattern of including only events that she witnessed or in which she took part. The one clear exception is the New York City draft riot, which was significant enough for her to note, even though there was no public reaction to it in Philadelphia. Even the assassination of Abraham Lincoln seems to walk a fine line between her needing to record the distant event because it was important and her writing about it because of the local commemorations of the President's life that she had witnessed. She begins by writing of it in its own right. "Very sad news was received this morning of the murder of the President," she wrote on April 15. But she then immediately resumed her tendency to place everything in terms of what she had seen around her. "The city is in deep mourning."³³ The next day she wrote that "everyone seems to Partake of the solemnity of the times." Four days later, she wrote perhaps her most poetic passage, noting simply that "everything has a solemn affect. The streets look mournful. The

people more so."³⁴ While this is literally a comment on what she has seen rather than on what she feels about Lincoln's death, the repetition of sadness—solemn, mournful, more so, couched in three short staccato thoughts—conveys something of the emotions that Davis was experiencing. That she felt a personal need to mourn Lincoln's death is affirmed by her witnessing of the funeral procession through Philadelphia on the 22nd. The next day she waited for hours to "get to see the President." After succeeding, she concluded that "it was actually a sight worth seeing."³⁵

Davis's entries about Lincoln's death and funeral encapsulate the key to the mystery of her silence about Gettysburg and her talk of the Union triumph in far-away Vicksburg. She wrote about what was going on around her. In many ways, if you wanted to impress the importance of an event on Davis—and no doubt many, many, others—you had to make it a visual event in their lives. Lincoln's death mattered, but his funeral procession coming into the city and then having his body lie in state made it "a sight worth seeing." And then worth writing about. Philadelphia publicly celebrated Vicksburg, but held no such display for Gettysburg, perhaps because the event was more diffuse than a dramatic mass surrender of an army and a city.

Emilie Davis's diaries are an important source for historians of the Gettysburg campaign. It helps to highlight the importance of the Army of Northern Virginia's capture of African American civilians by showing us how people in Philadelphia reacted to Confederate actions. Davis had shown little interest in the war's twists and turns or even the involvement of African American men in the Union military. But now she shows not just a new interest in the war, as exhibited by the fact that it makes it into her diary at all, but also in that she has a new (and perhaps temporary) commitment to having the men she knows well serve in the army. The Gettysburg campaign seems to have done that to Emilie Davis, and the invasion also changed some white Pennsylvanian's ideas about African American military service. Gettysburg, in those ways, would be a victory for the Union cause.

³¹ Emilie Davis Diary, November 8, 1864.

³² Emilie Davis Diary, April 3 and 4, 1865 (for the first quotation); second quotation on April 14, 1865.

³³ Emilie Davis Diary, April 15, 1865.

³⁴ Emilie Davis Diary, April 16, 1865; Emilie Davis Diary, April 20, 1865.

³⁵ Emilie Davis Diary, April 23, 1865. On April 22, 1865, she thought "the coffin and hearse was beautiful."

Historians can also use Davis's diaries to learn how important public parades and ceremonies were in teaching people that some events really mattered. That Davis records the public hoopla about Vicksburg, and also political campaigns, abolitionist speakers, Fort Sumter's flag, and Lincoln's funeral drives home the local and visual nature of nineteenth-century life. How Davis writes about the Gettysburg campaign, and how she ignores the

battle and its aftermath, can tell historians a great deal about Civil War America.

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