

NATIONAL HOMESTEAD AT GETTYSBURG

1866-1877

(A Brief History)

After the Civil War there was a great need and urgency to establish homes for the vast number of children who had lost fathers fighting for the Union during the war. Some of these little ones had no one to care for them, while others may have had mothers who for one reason or another were unable to properly provide for their wellbeing.

With this in mind, a group known as the National Association of Philadelphia was founded and chose Gettysburg as the site for an orphanage to provide for the needs of these children. During April and May of 1866 a site was chosen and purchased, the property of Captain John Myers on Baltimore Street at Cemetery Hill consisted of two acres, a large brick house, a stable, well, garden and orchard *(The property had been used during the 1863 battle as the headquarters of Major General Oliver O. Howard).*

To help care for the orphans and oversee the daily management of the establishment a strong dedicated matron would be needed. The choice of this woman was the result of one of the saddest yet heartwarming stories of the Battle of Gettysburg:

After the battle, as the dead were being placed in temporary graves, a soldier was found with no identification except for a photo of three small children clutched firmly between his fingers. Before burial that photo was carefully removed and preserved. Word spread of the unfortunate man who had been thinking of his children at the moment of death. A movement was begun to find that soldier's family and thus determined his identity. Copies of the photo were distributed throughout the North and eventually it was printed in the American Presbyterian. A copy found its way to Portville, NY where it fell into the hands of Philinda Humiston who immediately recognized it as the one she had recently sent to her husband, Sergeant Amos Humiston (Co. C 154th Reg. N.Y.S.V.).

The soldier now had a name and his family had been found. Copies of the photo were printed, poems were written and songs sung about the unfortunate

children, money raised by the sale of these items were donated to the widow to help support her children.

Philinda Humiston was invited to Gettysburg to help supervise the new homestead. She accepted and did a remarkable job overseeing the children whose numbers grew yearly to more than sixty by 1869. With so many youth to care for, more room was needed and in 1869 a second building was constructed, a frame structure at the Southwest corner of the original brick building.

This may have been the best of times for the children. Everything at the Homestead appeared to be in good attention. The children were well fed, well clothed, well-educated and in Great Spirit and health when Philinda remarried on October 26, 1869 to Lt. Asa Barnes and left Gettysburg for a new life in Becket, MA.

During the next five years the standards at the establishment remained high. But the dark shadow of decline began to rise on the horizon in 1875 as the townspeople began to take note of the unacceptable changes. The educational decline, the tattered uniforms, a rise in doctor calls signaled that something had changed at the Homestead on the hill. But try as they may the citizens of Gettysburg were unable to gain entry to inspect the conditions in which the children were being forced to live. The Headmistress, Rosa Carmichael, who had replaced Mrs. Humiston had the final authority to oversee all activity at the Orphanage, even who was allowed entry. The Association in Philadelphia gave her this power and unfortunately, try as they did, the good people of Gettysburg could not break her hold on the children.

On Memorial Day 1876 the struggle between Rosa and the town came to a head when the procession of townspeople arrived at the Homestead expecting the children to lead them to the cemetery and place flowers on the soldiers' graves, some on their fathers' graves. Instead, the orphans were locked inside, humiliated as they watched from their windows as children from town distributed the flowers.

The following months brought on a bitter conflict between Rosa, her representatives and the Grand Army of the Republic Veterans. She was brought to trial on charges of Cruelty of Children and found guilty, she was fined \$20 and

ordered to leave town. But she refused to leave and continued to rule over the children.

An incident on Christmas Eve 1876, where a boy was found locked in an outhouse, late at night, finally led to the downfall of Rosa and The Orphanage. A new investigation disclosed evidence indicating that Rosa had locked children in a dark room in the cellar known as the dungeon, she had shackled orphans to the walls of the cellar and placed them in vats of water until their legs became too weak to support them and they almost drowned. Children were missing and were never found. No charges of murder were ever presented.

She was finally forced out of town. Disappearing from recorded history, never to be heard from again.

The damage, however was done, finances were all but gone, and the great experiment was in debt leaving no option but to close the doors forever. The remaining children were either sent to other facilities or taken in by Gettysburg residents. What had begun as a most charitable, heartfelt endeavor eleven years earlier was over.

Due to its ending, The Homestead eventually faded away from the history of Gettysburg. The vast majority of visitors over the past 150 years pass by the old building never knowing its historical significance. In 1957 TV personality Cliff Arquette (known as Charlie Weaver) purchased the original structure and brought to light the significance of the building. Years later in 1993 a book "One Soldier's Legacy", written by two local women, Mary Ruth Collins and Cindy A. Stouffer detailed the story from the death of Sgt. Amos Humiston to its sad demise and up to current times. These two women along with Mr. Arquette need to be recognized for their efforts to bring The Homestead history from the shadows to the light where the good times need to shine.