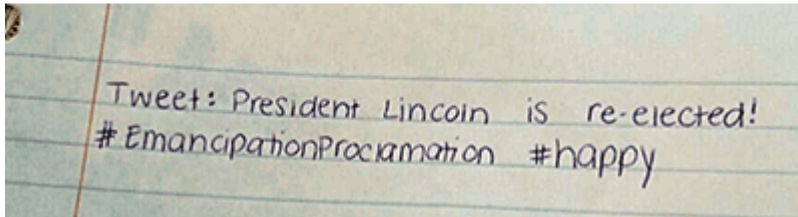
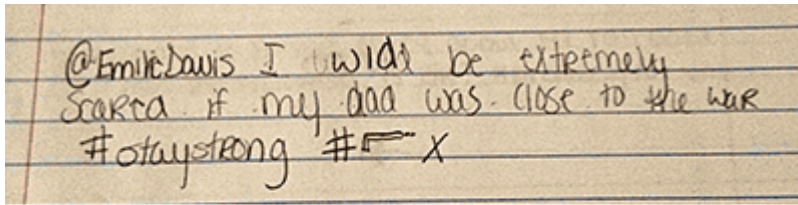


The Emilie Davis Diaries Project



Digital History and Civil War Commemoration

I saw Emilie Davis's diaries years ago—three leather-bound volumes, small enough to fit comfortably in a pocket, no bigger than a smart phone. I thought then that I would get back to them some day, when other deadlines had been met. I thought again about Emilie in 2011, after listening to an inspiring talk by Jill Lepore about Jane Franklin, a story that Lepore pieced together with small scraps of evidence—such as the diary Franklin kept of the births and deaths of (all but one of) her twelve children and the surviving letters she exchanged with her brother Ben—and a good deal of imagination. In Lepore's hands, Jane Franklin came alive, as did her era. Audience members imagined a middle-aged woman picking up a pen and sitting down to record her own thoughts, to enjoy the life of the mind that her brother had lived for decades and that Jane was now tasting for the first time. Seeing the joyful loops that formed the "J" and the "a" in her name, I remembered that Emilie also carefully wrote her name on the blank first page of her 1863 diary in big open letters, looping each end of the "E" and dotting the "i" with a flourish (fig. 1). She wrote her name on subsequent pages, too, though not with the exuberance implied in the series of loops and the long diagonal mark over the "i." Opening the book and writing her name in it the first time was an act of becoming.

In her diaries, Emilie—a young free black woman living in Philadelphia during the Civil War—remarks on the progress of her education and reflects on the challenges of living as a half-citizen of a slave nation. We do not have much to remind us that women like Emilie and Jane Franklin existed. But we do have their names written carefully on the inside covers of their diaries, laying claim to pen and book, and the thoughts expressed in them. Beginning in January 2012, I began transcribing and annotating the diaries with a talented and energetic group of graduate students—namely, Rebecca Capobianco, Ruby Johnson, Thomas Foley, Jessica Maiberger, and Theresa Altieri. We learned that doing so would make it possible to tell a new story about the Civil War. Emilie's diaries, available in transcriptions and original text on the [Memorable Days](#) Website, offer fresh perspective on the arrival in Philadelphia of black

refugees from south-central Pennsylvania during the Gettysburg campaign (June 27-29, 1863), jubilant celebrations in black churches accompanying the news of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (January 1-3, 1863), and the deep anxieties that free blacks like Emilie felt when Union advances nearly became reverses (April 13-15, 1865). Over the next year and a half, we explored the meetings Emilie attended, the street fights she witnessed, the anxieties and personal tragedies she experienced. We saw the Civil War through her eyes.

Digital history offers opportunities to democratize access to the past and to invite users into the research process

In building this Website we learned about the process of recovering and telling the story of women of color who left behind a deafening evidentiary silence, and the joys that can come in working collaboratively. Because it requires various levels of comfort with Wikis, blogs, html, tags, and social networking, creating an open-access research site is intensely collaborative and vastly more rewarding than the history we make alone. We were surprised and delighted to see how digital history has the potential to transform texts like a letter book or a diary, by revealing subtle contours and hidden patterns. When we began to encounter audiences and Website users, we realized that perhaps the most important thing we were doing was providing a new point of access for the creation of Civil War history.

Digital history offers opportunities to democratize access to the past and to invite users into the research process. "Digital history," William G. Thomas III explained in a special issue of the *Journal of American History*, "possesses a crucial set of common components—the capacity for play, manipulation, participation, and investigation by the reader." We saw our collaboration grow in concentric circles, beginning with me and a small group of graduate students at Villanova ("Team Emilie"); then a team of digital librarians and a web designer; students in undergraduate, middle school, and high school classes; and finally Website users and audiences at commemorative events. Instead of working for years on a project before "releasing" it to the public, much of the work was done in public, as we invited students to take a stab at transcription and to identify points at which the diary should be annotated. The collaboration continues on our site, where users participate and join in the investigation.



1. Advertisements in The Christian Recorder (February 1, 1868), p. 3. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The site launched just after midnight on January 1, 2013, marking the day 150 years ago when Emilie began the diary, with the words, "Today has been a memorable day," in reference to the Emancipation Proclamation. Very soon after

we began receiving comments from users offering commentary and advice and sometimes suggesting leads on unidentified people in the diary. Because the site features our transcription alongside each original diary page, readers tell us what words we misidentified or offer us clues on those that we have not transcribed. “The word for the empty brackets seems to be ‘reading,’” a user explained about Emilie’s January 2, 1863, entry. Of Emilie’s entry for March 14, 1863, a reader who had done his or her own research suggested that “Lizzie” might be “Elizabeth White (born about 1840), the younger sister of Emilie’s future husband, George Bustill White.” Additionally, we have received a number of inquiries about the woman Emilie refers to as “Nel” or “Nellie” in the diary—Emilie’s closest confidante, who as yet remains unidentified. This summer, a Website user helped us to solve the mystery of what became of Emilie’s nine-year-old nephew, Frank, when his mother died while his father was serving in the U.S. Navy. Little Frank, whom we had hoped had gone to live with his uncle, turned up in the files of a Quaker orphanage (December 6-8, 1863). Welcoming Website users into the process of discovery has expanded our knowledge of Emilie’s life and her family connections.

The project’s success, therefore, relies on our ability to get the word out about the site and its subject, drawing in potential users. This approach gives us the chance to combine the tools of academic history with those of digital history to reach new publics. We turned to both social media (namely, Facebook and Twitter) and “old” media, such as radio and television interviews, public talks, and classroom lessons, to bring teachers, students, and amateur historians into the project. We found in both of these contexts opportunities for impromptu, unfiltered comments, for play and manipulation. For example, middle school students responded to the diary entries in a series of blogs; our favorites were the eighth-grader who defended Emilie’s idiosyncratic spelling (“I am not very good at spelling either, but that doesn’t mean I am not smart”) and the kid who worried that Emilie was “stalking” Vincent, her love interest. High school students “tweeted” responses to the entries—on small scraps of paper, no bigger than the diary pages. “President Lincoln is re-elected,” wrote one high school sophomore: “#EmancipationProclamation #happy” (fig. 2). “@EmilieDavis I wld be extremely scared if my dad was close to the war,” tweeted another, “#staystrong” followed by a symbol of a gun and an “x.” As we “played” on the site with students, we found new ways to think about Emilie, her classmates, and her friends.

Online discussions also took a more serious turn. In a series of early Facebook comments, two Website users engaged in a brief debate about racial identity, asking whether a white professor and a group of white graduate students could handle the job of reading and interpreting Emilie’s diaries as well as a person of color. Here was a discussion about identity politics that we might have in our college classrooms, played out in social media.



22. In an in-class activity, high school students tweeted responses to Emilie Davis' diary entries.

As we interacted with teachers, students, and various author audiences, we began to see that the site was bridging the gap between Civil War history and African American history. This point was brought home to us in February 2013 when we attended a daylong event celebrating the beginning of Black History Month. Depending on how you count it, we have had nearly five years of the Civil War sesquicentennial—this if you count from 2009, the year of the Lincoln bicentennial and the 150th anniversary of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry—but in many places black history remains a *month*. In a YMCA gym serving several black neighborhoods in Philadelphia, we crowded in with more than 300 attendees to cheer community activists, scholarship recipients, and local ministers for leadership in their communities. We took turns reading Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"; afterwards, people stayed around to hear us introduce them to Emilie Davis and her generation. After we shared several pages of Emilie's diary, in which she described her fears for her father's safety when rebel slave raiders were sighted near his home in south-central Pennsylvania in June 1863 (June 23, June 29, June 30, and July 9, 1863), attendees commented on the need to remain vigilant and active in promoting and protecting civil rights, lest the progress made by one generation be lost by another. These thoughts and comments seemed as apt for understanding Emilie's fear that her father—a free black man living in a state that had outlawed slavery—would (once again?) be a slave as they were for thinking about the context of the August 2012 Pennsylvania Supreme Court decision upholding the state's new voter identification law, a measure that aimed to restrict the voting power of immigrants, the poor, and people of color.

We learned a lot spending the day with teachers, students, and community leaders, and we have continued to talk about Emilie's diaries with the participants in this meeting. In the summer of 2013, I received a letter from a woman wanting to lay claim to a Civil War ancestor; she had heard about our genealogical work on Emilie Davis and her family. "My paternal grandmother's mother's father was a 'boy slave,'" eighty-five-year-old Lillian Loatmen Boggs wrote, "he rose to become a principal of a one-room school house." When I told her I might have found a man named "Loatman," who shared her maiden name (but with a different spelling) and who was drafted in Baltimore in September 1864 into the First Regiment, United States Colored Troops, Lillian wrote back to say she thought it was the right guy because, like herself and others in her family, Edward was short, or as she put it, "vertically challenged." Edward's draft record indicates that at age thirty-five, he stood five feet, three and a half inches tall.

The First Regiment served in the Petersburg Campaign and charged into the confusion after the explosion of the Union mine under the Confederate works on July 30, 1864—the Battle of the Crater. The following January, Loatman was with the regiment when the men helped capture Fort Fisher, North Carolina. He died in March 1865, before he could witness the surrender of Confederate forces in

North Carolina and the final collapse of the Confederacy. Edward Loatman's enlistment records indicate that his name is included on the African American Civil War Memorial in Washington, D.C.

I am guessing that, like other African Americans of her generation, Lillian Boggs has not traveled to Civil War battlefields or other sites where she might recognize a name or identify with a description. As the historian Tiya Miles explained at a conference at Gettysburg in March 2013, her grandparents packed their car with food and blankets before going on road trips in anticipation of not finding a hotel that would take them. They would not have planned a family trip to a national park then—and those fears survived until at least the next generation. Additionally, in an era of shrinking school budgets, fewer school-aged children will visit Civil War sites today, although the National Park Service has never been more committed to telling an inclusive story of the war. Digital projects such as *Memorable Days*, on the other hand, have the capacity to bring Civil War history home to people like Lillian Boggs, and this is one of the things we hoped to achieve in researching Emilie Davis's diaries.



3. Signature on inside cover of 1863 Emilie Davis diary. Image courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

Lillian Boggs's typewritten letters to us highlight the distance between historians who sigh about the challenges of wrangling the "infinite archive" that digital history has produced and, well, most other folks, particularly those who see in this explosion of information new opportunities to answer questions about family history. Stricken by a case of "*Roots* envy," as Henry Louis Gates has called it, African Americans have become avid genealogists in the past three decades, turning eagerly to Ancestry.com and DNA testing in an effort to fill in the gaping holes that slavery left in their family trees. I am not sure Mrs. Boggs knows that we have created and maintain a Website tracing one black family's move from slavery to freedom, but she hoped that I might be able to help her solve some mysteries about her own family. "[D]o you know if there is a list, (or place)," she wrote, "where I could find out if I had an ancestor in the Civil War?" While no one comprehensive list exists, we now have many new digital sources, like the University of Virginia's Geography of Slavery site that uses information from runaway slave ads to map the suspected trajectories of fugitives' flights, and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's ambitious digitization of William Still's massive list of fugitives who passed through Philadelphia.

Another as-yet untapped source for similar information is the potential of digitizing the hundreds of "Information Wanted" ads that appeared in black newspapers during and after the war. According to my count, nearly 1,900 such missing persons ads were printed in Philadelphia's *Christian Recorder*—a newspaper published by the African Methodist Episcopal Church—between 1866 and 1890: mothers looking for children, husbands looking for wives, and children

looking for parents. The ads began as early as 1863 and continued for years after many others had likely given up hope of finding families separated or lost in slavery, escape, or wartime dislocation. By digitizing these ads, we may be able to fill in some of the holes that slavery has left in the genealogical records of African Americans.

While we figure out how to make all of these new digital tools talk to one another and to us so that we can unlock the mysteries of families separated in slavery, we ought to stay alert for opportunities to engage audiences in schools, churches, and gyms and invite people like Lillian Boggs into the process, and to bring multiple experiences together. Historians have never been so keen or better equipped to integrate the fields of women's, African American, and Civil War history. Digital history produces new points of entry for people to lay claim to—and to make—Civil War history, engaging and interacting with sources that challenge avid genealogists to look beyond their own family tree to explore the environment in which it grew.

While we were annotating Emilie's diaries, we discovered all sorts of new ways the Civil War was experienced in Philadelphia, the city where Lillian Boggs has spent nearly her whole life (she now lives just north of downtown). In 1860, the city was home to 13,008 "free colored women" and 9,177 men, who supported a web of religious, cultural, and political institutions. Emilie's attendance at the Institute for Colored Youth, the premier school for black youth, and her affiliation with several black churches, indicated that she was part of a politically active community in an exciting time. Reading her diary allowed us to imagine her excitement (mixed with regret) when she helped send off a regiment of young black volunteers (June 15-17, 1863) who signed up to help drive the Confederate army out of the state—before the state was ready to accept their assistance. We could also see why she might attend lectures delivered by the former slave and fiery Baptist minister, Reverend James Sella Martin (January 25, 1865), Frederick Douglass (February 16, 1865), the poet and former slave Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (February 27, 1865), but decline to go the last lecture in the series, delivered by William D. Kelley, a Pennsylvania Congressman (March 22, 1865). At the time, Kelley was enthusiastically campaigning for a bill enfranchising black men in Washington, D.C. While Emilie might have been interested in the issue, Kelley was known for giving long orations on the history of suffrage rights in the state—perhaps not an appealing way to spend the evening. Although she could not vote—nor could the black men in her life—Emilie liked to predict the outcome of elections (November 8-10, 1864). Notably, Emilie took care not to go out on Election Day, for there was always trouble in the streets (October 13-15, 1863). There was trouble on other days too, like on September 24, 1864, when Emilie noted "excitement this afternoon mr. green was molested and defended himself" (September 24-26, 1864). Green's "molesters" surely regretted their act, for Alfred Green, Sergeant Major in the 127th USCT, fended off the men first by pistol-whipping them and then by shooting one of them in the leg.

And we learned a great deal about cultural life in Civil War Philadelphia,

discovering a cast of characters who made the city and time come alive. Emilie attended concerts, learned to play the guitar, and frequented performances by celebrities who we were delighted to meet. On May 11, 1864, Emilie noted that, "Nellie did not come up as i expected this evening a Miss Greenfeilds concert comes off to night." Upon further investigation, we learned that Emilie attended a concert performed by Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, a former slave from Natchez, Mississippi, known as the "Black Swan." Some time before the war, Greenfield moved from Mississippi to Philadelphia, where she was freed and raised by Quakers. Greenfield was well known for her enchanting voice and classical repertoire, and she became a favorite in particular of Frederick Douglass. Indeed, she regularly opened for Douglass, warming up the audience with her music before Douglass took the stage. If Edward Loatman had come to Philadelphia in the spring of 1864, he too might have bought a ticket to see the Black Swan.

Through Emilie we were also introduced to Blind Tom. In September 1865, Emilie attended a performance given by Thomas Wiggins, a former slave who toured concert halls performing musical numbers he learned from memory. A complicated figure, Blind Tom inspired awe with his talent—performing two different songs on different pianos, while singing a third song—but he frustrated critics with his deep loyalty to his former master, who controlled all the proceeds of Tom's popular shows. Emilie declared herself "much Pleased with the performance excepting we had to sit up stairs wich made me furious" (September 14, 1865). To have to shuffle up to the balcony at the same venue where she had attended lectures by Frederick Douglass and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was too much for Emilie who, by late in 1865, expected more from white Philadelphians than a segregated performance venue. "The prejudice against blacks extends to every class," an 1860 article about Philadelphia in *Douglass' Monthly* explained, "and may be remarked in pleasure and in business. At theatres and concerts, lectures and churches, the negro is restricted to a remote gallery." Emilie was well positioned to remark on the changes the war wrought on Philadelphia and its inhabitants—and what had stubbornly remained the same. Engaging in digital history opened our eyes to these lived realities of urban life in the North during the Civil War.

And then there was the ice cream. In the process of building the Website, we tagged each entry in order to populate the word cloud that appears at the bottom of the page; this process revealed things that we had not even thought to look for. Like keyword searching in period newspapers, digitizing a source like a diary can help to uncover hidden patterns, preferences, and even unspoken thoughts. Tagging Emilie's complaints about foul weather allowed us to think about how her movement around the city became circumscribed, how outbreaks of illnesses increased in the winter, and how fighting in the eastern theater stalled in the midst of nor'easters. Had we not been tagging, we would likely never have discovered that Emilie liked ice cream. Indeed, during a time of intense worry, loss, and fear, Emilie recorded going out for ice cream on four separate occasions. Emilie enjoyed ice cream at a "saloon" with her friends after a particularly "dull day" working as a domestic (May 13, 1864),

then again the next week after a children's concert (May 19-20, 1864), on an unseasonably cool day in August (August 27, 1863), and even after a crowded church choir concert in February (February 16, 1863). Admittedly, this is a slim evidentiary basis from which to make any assumption about Emilie—and also, who doesn't like ice cream? But Philadelphians of color did not generally take such luxuries for granted. In the summer of 1857, for example, Charlotte Forten and a friend were refused service at three Philadelphia ice cream parlors before they gave up. Emilie's regular enjoyment of the cold treat in 1863-1864 stood as evidence of the expanding space that black Philadelphians inhabited during the Civil War. Pushed to make our academic research meet the structural requirements of digital history, we saw something new in the diary every time we looked. Working together to transcribe and annotate Emilie Davis' three slim diaries, and to build the *Memorable Days* Website, allowed us to see fluctuations in morale in the Civil War North, to witness through her eyes events of enormous political significance, and to enjoy the small victories war made possible—writing your name in a diary, for instance, and going out for ice cream with a friend.

Digital tools are rapidly making possible the integration of African American and Civil War history, as they allow users to search for bits and pieces of information buried under—and preserved within—the mountains of paper produced during the Civil War. In addition to the admittedly few diaries written by African Americans during the Civil War, there are traces of lives left behind in the census, enlistment rolls, and the fugitive slave and information wanted advertisements. Through online transcription and annotation—and the dissemination of these sources—digital tools are allowing historians to write new chapters in the history of the Civil War. Freed from the restraints of institutional memory, digital history sites are particularly well equipped to commemorate the Civil War as an important period in African American history.

Further Reading:

Emilie Davis's original diaries are located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The online transcription with contextual annotations can be found at the Memorable Days Website: <http://davisdiaries.villanova.edu>. Mrs. Lillian (Loatmen) Boggs' letters (May 23, 2013 and September 25, 2013) are in the author's collection. The Information Wanted advertisements in *The Christian Recorder* are digitized as part of Accessible Preservatives' African American Newspapers, but they do not retain their original format. The *Recorder* is available on microfilm at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The University of Virginia's [Geography of Slavery](#) tracks fugitives through runaway slave ads. And the Historical Society of Pennsylvania has digitized [William Still's list of fugitives](#) who passed through Philadelphia.

On digital history, see the essays in the special issue, "Interchange: The Promise of Digital History," *Journal of American History* 95:2 (September 2008).

Edward Loatman's enlistment records are available on [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com), U.S. Colored Troops Military Service Records, 1861-1865 (Provo, Utah, Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2007; by subscription). The 1st Regiment USCT's history of Civil War combat is available at [this National Park Service site](https://www.nps.gov/1861usct) (accessed 09/15/2013). On the history of U.S. colored troops, see William Dobak's *Freedom by the Sword: The U.S. Colored Troops, 1862-1867* (Center for Military History, 2011). For more information on the speakers and entertainers whom Emilie saw in person, see *The Black Swan at Home and Abroad; Or, a Biographical Sketch of Miss Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, the American Vocalist* (Philadelphia, 1855); *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, ed. Brenda Stevenson (New York, 1988).

Henry Louis Gates describes "'Roots' envy" in "My Yiddishe Mama," *The Wall Street Journal* (Feb. 1, 2006). Jill Lepore's new book on Jane Franklin is *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin* (New York, 2013).

This article originally appeared in issue 14.2 (Winter, 2014).

Judith Giesberg is professor of history and director of Graduate Studies in the Department of History at Villanova University. She is editor of *Emilie Davis's Civil War: The Diaries of a Free Black Woman in Philadelphia, 1863-1865* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014) and author of *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* (2009).