Jack Hopkins' Civil War

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Abstract

In the 1862 Pennsylvania College album there is a photograph of John Hopkins, who that year was entering his fifteenth year of service as the college's janitor. In one student's book, the portrait of Hopkins jokingly refers to him as the school's "vice president." This appellation speaks volumes about the life of the African-American custodian, for while it was clearly made in jest as a token of the students' genuine affection for Hopkins, it symbolizes the gulf between the white students and the black janitor. It goes without saying that the students found the picture humorous because they understood that in their time, a black man could never be the vice president.

John Hopkins was born in Maryland in 1806. The 1860 census lists him as a mulatto. Very little else is known about Hopkins's first forty-one years. Was he born free or a slave? Did he leave Maryland openly, or escape via the Underground Railroad? All that is known for certain is that Hopkins was in Pennsylvania by 1841 or early 1842. Unfortunately, large gaps like these are fairly typical when researching Pennsylvania's antebellum African Americans.

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