

# EPITAPH

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**WELCOME TO THE  
FRIENDS OF THE AFRICAN  
UNION CHURCH CEMETERY  
DELAWARE CITY, DE**

Dear Friends,

As we head into 2019, I think of a quote from C. Wright Mill: "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both."

The Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery is not just about maintaining our cemetery. It's about the people buried there, their community, their experiences. Our goal is to honor these people by teaching about their lives, not just their deaths.

We are beginning a new membership year and I invite you to attend a board meeting or contact us so that we can hear your ideas for improving the cemetery and our programming. As always your dues help support our annual budget used for our projects and events; it would be impossible to carry on without your help.

During the past year:

- The Friends installed a new sign to identify the cemetery to those passing by on the Delaware City Branch Canal Trail.
- We held our first Annual Members' Event at the American Birding Association headquarters in Delaware City. Thanks again to our hosts Jeff and Liz Gordon.
- The landscaping committee was busy. We planted more trees at the cemetery with the help of Delaware Air National Guard Cadet Squadron (DANG) of the Delaware Wing Civil Air Patrol. Thanks to Bob Seidle for organizing the cadets.
- We continued to bring the story of the cemetery to the public with over 30 presentations of our program "Voices of the Past" to library, school, and community groups.

As we move into 2019, we welcome Marilyn Whittington to our Board of Directors. Marilyn is the past Executive Director of Delaware Humanities. We also welcome three new people to the advisory board: Vance Price, Nicole Worthley, and Brad Skelcher.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I want to thank you for your continued support, and invite you to become a hands-on member. Throughout the year there are opportunities to volunteer. Please check out our website at [www.africanunioncemetery.org](http://www.africanunioncemetery.org).

Regards,  
Wes Jones, President

October 2018 tree planting at African Union Church Cemetery



2018 Annual Member's Event, held at ABA headquarters in Delaware City



The cemetery and plaza are now complete with the installation of the entrance sign



# Reconstructing History-Making Connections to the Polktown Community

By Laura Lee

We are pleased at the success of our cemetery project. The AUC Cemetery finally is a resting place of honor and dignity that those deserved in life as well as death. There is much work to be done to help identify and tell the story of the entire community and not just the soldiers. As Dr. Dave Orr states, we need to strive to create a connection with living descendants - through historical research. But with only a handful of residents in today's Polktown, the clues are limited. Two studies have tackled the research challenges related to Polktown. This article focuses on the first study.

In 2010 the University of Delaware's Center for Historic Architecture and Design explored community connections of five similar Delaware communities (including Polktown) in their report entitled "Reconstructing Delaware's Free Black Communities, 1800-1870" (Rebecca Sheppard, Kimberly Toney). This endeavor stemmed from Underground Railroad research that demonstrated the lack of knowledge of the experience of the black communities in general. It was obvious that researchers had little information with which to assess the role played by these communities in the path to freedom. Though it might seem logical that they would have assisted in helping people escape slavery, not enough information was present to truly assess their role. Thus this study aimed to 1) uncover their role and 2) identify use of water routes to escape from the state. Additional goals included creating a research strategy, mapping the known data about free black communities and UGRR routes, and identifying a list of further research needs. The five communities studied were chosen based on presence of a 'substantial' amount of information surviving relating to the community and were located in a place that might have supported water-based escapes.

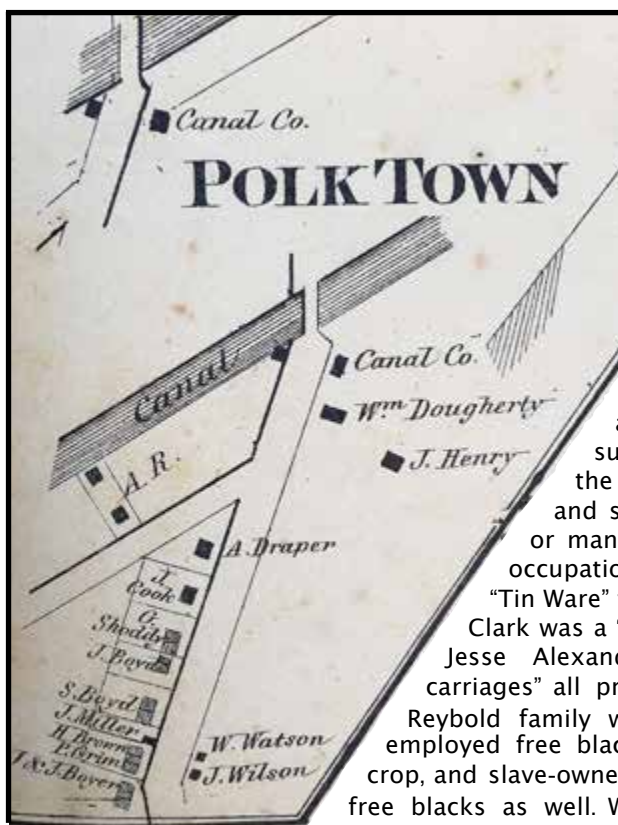
Researchers examined census records and tax assessments in efforts to reconstruct these communities. However black communities were not precisely identified in the censuses - and questions/data collection can vary from census to census. They took a backwards approach to research, starting with the 1870 "Red Lion Hundred" census. They then worked back in time, comparing to the Beers Atlas (1868) which lists surnames. In 1800 only 5 free black households (30 individuals) were listed in the census, with another 56 people residing with white employers. It grew steadily next 30 years, probably in part due to the growth of Delaware City. They cross-referenced sources and identified twenty households that were probably part of Polktown, plus another 16 individual blacks that lived in white employer households. Probate records, orphans court records, manumissions, deeds, and even an account book were used. Unfortunately church membership records sources were sparse. The data was entered on spreadsheets through a rather complicated process.

This study determined that ownership of Polktown land was largely controlled by whites from 1830 through 1845. At that point, free blacks began purchasing significant numbers of house lots from whites. Some purchased single or double lots while others bought multiple lots and later broke up for their family members. Between 1830 and 1850 the number of households nearly doubled. By 1870, there were at least 17 lots on both sides of the road from Delaware City to Port Penn. A second group of five houses existed on 5<sup>th</sup> Street north of the canal. Joshua Seiney and Shadrack Boyer both were leaders in the community in providing their fellow neighbors and family a boost in home ownership. Probate and other records demonstrate that owners generally also had a small amount of livestock and small gardens, probably to provide meat and milk for their own family's needs. A few tenanted or owned larger farms. Probate inventories show that household goods were somewhat meager - often listing a table and a few chairs, a couple straw beds, kitchen utensils and simple farming tools. After 1850 more families began to amass larger quantities of household property.

Employment information available to the researcher is again subject to what questions were asked on the census. Prior to 1850 the data is vague and shows that many worked in agriculture or manufacturing. Between 1850 and 1870 the occupation question appeared on the census. A "Tin Ware" factory stood at 5<sup>th</sup> and Clinton, George Clark was a "dealer in coal and lumber" and George Jesse Alexander's "manufacturer of coaches and carriages" all provided employment to residents. The Reybold family were slave owners but probably also employed free blacks to help harvest their huge peach crop, and slave-owner T.J. Clark (farmer) probably employed free blacks as well. Women were often listed as "keeping house" while unmarried women were often listed as domestic servants in white households.

One thing that was clear was that most free blacks owned little taxable property and when they did they were taxed for livestock, or a small frame house and lot. All fell within the poorest 40% of the population. In 1852 the tax assessments show that free black taxable property averaged \$255, while for whites it was \$2,217. The difference appeared to be in ownership of land and livestock, and their homes were overwhelmingly timber frame while whites had both frame and brick homes. In 1850 there were 14 free black households in Polktown, and by 1870 there were 29.

By linking the tax assessments and census data, the researchers were able to identify where the residents lived. Four to six households were on Fifth Street near the schoolhouse, and another cluster of 20 households (The map shows 14 dwellings) sat on the south of the canal. On the north side of the canal Mary Trusty rented a home from another free black and her home included her children John (7) and Elizabeth (15), and young couple Eliza and Walker Harris (listed as a laborer). Joshua Seiney was a 62-year old laborer. Neighbors George Young and his wife Martha also housed Ann Smith (17) along with their three children. William Gibbs owned



Beers' Atlas of Delaware, 1868

By Roberta Perkins

**F**or this issue of the Epitaph, we are highlighting Willis Phelps Jr., one of the original founders of the Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery (FAUCC). Willis is also a master storyteller. He has portrayed many African American men in American history; including one of the 5 USCT soldiers who are buried in the African Union Church Cemetery—Pvt. James H. Elbert.

I wanted to know how Willis started telling stories, how he chose the people he portrays, what it means to him to tell the stories, and what he hopes the impact will be.

No one can tell his story like Willis can. We met on a fall day; the time of year when the leaves begin to change, the air is crisp, and you have a hot cup of tea while sitting in front of a warm fire. Keep that image in mind as we share excerpts from our conversation with you.

**Roberta Perkins:** Hello, Willis...thank you for being interviewed for the Epitaph.

**Willis Phelps Jr.:** Hey, it is my pleasure. I am glad we can do this.

**RP:** How did this journey of storytelling begin for you?

**WP:** It was something I inherited from my cousins, my mother, grandfather. They were not professional storytellers, but at family gatherings, they always had this "Oh you remember when James did this, or so and so did that?" They would tell stories about what they did as youngsters. I'd listen and remember. What I call living history, for real.

As a teenager, I would tell stories to my family. They would look at me and ask "How do you know that? You were only 3 years old." Even at 3 years old, I remembered every detail.

**RP:** When was the first time you told a story in period dress?

**WP:** The first time was as a black cowboy... My uncles and cousins told tales of black cowboys doing cattle herding, caring for horses, and fighting Indians. Information was difficult to come by. Like Bass Reeves, a former enslaved man. He worked as a deputy marshal. I did not see this in the movies or history books. I wanted to show folks there were black cowboys and what they did, so I did the research and began writing short stories and little plays.

**RP:** How did you choose the other people (personas) you use to tell your stories and why?

**WP:** Some personas, I pull their names out of the air. Some represent real people in my life. Like my grandfather. His name was George Washington Bowman. G. W. is what they called him. He was on the Hays Plantation in Orangeburg County, South Carolina. Stories that were told about my grandfather inspired me to develop many of the personas I would create and interpret.

Another persona was Jacob Teet. He was a compilation of several USCTs who became Buffalo Soldiers. From him I created the stories I wanted to tell about the blacks in the west. Stories that were not told and when they were, they were not correct.

**RP:** Tell me about one of your well-known personas; Esau, the blacksmith.

**WP:** Esau was an accident. I had an opportunity to portray a blacksmith's apprentice, at Fort Delaware. The time was 1863 - 1864. At first he had no name. Then, Dale Fetzer, head interpreter at the fort, and I attended a workshop. He portrayed, General Schoepf, commander of the fort. I portrayed his body servant. He called me over, a couple of times, to bring his boots to him. I didn't know he was calling for me. The third time he called "Esau! Bring me my boots!" I brought them to him and he said "Thank you, Esau. The boots are looking good." That was when Esau was born.

From then on, I developed Esau from what I knew of enslaved men I had read about. He was a former slave, now a free man working at the fort. I thought about, how did he become free, how did he get to the fort, who were his people, how did Esau learn to read and write? It was a challenge, but little by little he came to life.

I had so much fun with that persona. Lee Jennings, the originator of the historical interpreter program at Ft. Delaware, encouraged me to stick with it. His goal was to develop an African American history for the fort.

Currently, I portray Pvt. James Elbert, a USCT soldier who is buried in our African Union Church Cemetery. Dr. David Orr and I developed a program around the story of Pvt. Elbert. It is a story of his life



Willis Phelps portraying "Esau" at Fort Delaware blacksmith shop  
Photo courtesy of Robert Seidle



Willis portraying a Revolutionary War soldier at Greenbank Mill  
Photo courtesy of Robert Seidle

in Polktown, becoming a soldier, his injury, court martial, and eventual return home.

Laura Lee, the program director, and I take the story of Pvt. Elbert to public schools, libraries, and public events as part of our outreach and education of the cemetery and the community of Polktown.

**RP:** What does it mean to you share these stories?

**WP:** It gives me a good feeling to be able to educate (my audience) and answer the questions they ask. Their questions and curiosity inspires me to learn more so that I can continue to educate. It is important to me to be part of telling these stories.

a house down the street but he and his wife Genty actually lived several houses away. Mr. Gibbs was a boat steward at age 64, probably on one of the steam boats that traveled the waterways.

On the canal's south side, all but one of the 20 households were laborers - Lebonsey Pernell was the Methodist minister. Shadrack Boyer and sons lived there along with others who had bought their homes either from him or white landowners Ezekiel Shaw and J. B. Henry. Additional residents included laborers William Watson, Alexander Draper (a USCT veteran post-1865), and George Shorter. Widows Betsey Green and Caroline Caulk also lived there.

The cemetery itself originated in 1835 as part of a purchase by several members of the community, and known internments date from 1857 to 1868. Surely far more burials took place than are marked - often a grave might have a fieldstone or since-gone wooden marker. At least two churches existed in the years after the Civil War, and it is unknown what stood prior to that. Trustees of St Peters Methodist purchased a lot in 1872 from James Henry (5<sup>th</sup> street) and built a meeting house. A second congregation built a church along the new road near the canal. The community also received Freedman's Bureau assistance to build a school opening in 1867, near the canal bank.

The study provides a great road map for future research, and we are excited about the prospect of continuing the quest for information with the aid of online tools such as Ancestry.com, Newspapers.com, and the Library of Congress' free "Chronicling America" site. Anyone with information on former residents of Polktown is encouraged to reach out and share information - no detail is too insignificant and may lead to more knowledge.

My daughters and I, they became storytellers with me, we call it "The rest of the story"; that which does not appear in the history books or the movies.

**RP:** *How do you want these stories to impact people?*

**WP:** When I look out over my audience, I see they are in another time. They are able to hear the story of black men they had not heard before. My hope is that people, especially the young students, are inspired, motivated enough to continue learning from where I have started. A letter we received from one young student said, "I didn't like history until you came. I love history now. I want to learn more!" These letters and reactions I receive from students inspire me to keep doing this.



*Willis with students at Fort Delaware  
Photo courtesy of Robert Seidle*

**Become a member or volunteer today** It's through our partnership with history enthusiasts like you that we're able to continue "Making History Matter". Membership support helps the Friends care for the cemetery, and provides our education programs with the resources to serve more school students and other interested organizations. Volunteers are vital to the Friends group. If you are interested in volunteering your time, please contact us. Thank you for your support.

Tracy Beck, Membership Chair

**Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery Membership Application**

*Submit this form with your check made payable to: Friends of the AUC Cemetery*

Mail to: Friends of the AUC Cemetery, C/O 407 Clinton Street, PO Box 4159, Delaware City, DE 19706

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone #: \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_

*E-mail for Friends Group ONLY. We will not share your e-mail address.*

**Membership Categories: Memberships are valid for 1 year**

- Individual (one person only) - \$10       Family (family members at a single address) - \$20
- Supporting - \$30       Patron - \$50       Sponsor - \$100       Anchor - \$200
- Benefactor - \$500      I would like to make a one-time donation of \$ \_\_\_\_\_
- I am interested in volunteering

*Please contact us at the above address or send us an e-mail: [info@africanunioncemetery.org](mailto:info@africanunioncemetery.org)*

