

EPITAPH

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



Dear Friends,

Last year's President's Letter began, "2020 will be an interesting year." Oops.

As it turned out, we weren't able to move ahead with our usual program of school and library presentations. It's been disappointing after all the momentum that Pvt. Elbert has created over the years.

At the beginning of 2020, we gave a well-attended presentation at the Delaware City Library on the African American community in Polktown. Wes Jones spoke about the Boyer family, its neighbors and relations. I presented aerial photos and maps to show the physical layout of the village and its buildings. As ever, we're looking to connect with descendants and relatives.

Meanwhile, Wes stepped in as interim executive director as we put hiring a paid person on hold.

Programs were postponed but the Property Management Committee kept an eye on the cemetery and plaza, carrying out our regular maintenance, adding landscaping and replacing the entrance sign. You will see new winterberry bushes if you stop by, along with new flags.

In the coming days, it looks like our presence will have to stay socially-distant. A video with Laura Lee and Willis Phelps would help make up for lost in-person dates, though not entirely. We haven't been successful capturing the live Pvt. Elbert as well as we'd like so we'll have to adapt with a studio script. When we can record this is still up in the air.

As always, the entire board wants to thank you for your support.

Your dues and donations are important. When conditions change, we will be out in the community again. Please think about becoming a volunteer or joining our advisory committee. Zoom meetings make it easier to stay in touch if you can't be there in person.

In the meantime, when the weather warms, stop by our cemetery for some rest and reflection. Check our website at www.africanunioncemetery.org, too.

Regards,

Craig O'Donnell, President



African Union Church Cemetery Work Continues



THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL HISTORY

By Wes Jones

Historians rely on written documents to provide the broad outlines of history, the dates, the names, the places. But there is more to history: oral history can be used to document the stories of social actors usually neglected in historical research. Oral history complements document-based history. It “fills the gaps”.

According to David Orr, founding member of the Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery:

Oral History is probably the most immediate as well as the most intimate way to understand the most recent past. It presents the feelings of the participants of culture as they remember it. They, the informants being interviewed, become the actors on the historical stage. Their voices are critical to our knowledge of their past. [1]

What can we learn from the informants? We can learn about the human condition, what people thought and felt as “history” unfolded around them. We can also gather clues about the things that weren’t written down.

Linda Price, a founding member (and Board member) of the Friends group who grew up in Polktown, and her late mother Joylette Carrington, who lived in Polktown from 1941 until her death in 2020, were interviewed for a 2015 article. [2] Much of the following is drawn from that interview and personal communications with Linda Price.

Listening to people talk about their memories gives us a human connection to history – it makes us aware that real people were alive back then, not just kings or presidents.

Joylette Carrington moved to Polktown in 1941 when she was eight. “Polktown was full of houses back then.” Her family rented a small place before buying the house she lived in for 60 years; that house was moved from Fort DuPont. She remembers large families back then; one household down a few houses had 12 kids. Growing up here as a child they went to movies at Fort DuPont: “if we weren’t let in we snuck in.” Skating was another activity but the roads were dirt so they had to go “downtown” to Delaware City. “Everybody came to Polktown here, for fun.” Ms Isabel and Mr Brown had “jitterbug joints” where all the kids went to dance. Mr Ponk had a gambling house; Joylette and a friend used to sweep up and were allowed to keep any change they found on the floor. Soldiers were there too; she remembers the first time she saw German POWs in 1943 or 1944 marching to Fort DuPont. They heard bugles in the morning and watched soldiers drill on the

parade ground during the day. She recalls skipping out of school and catching the bus to Wilmington to see the movies.

Linda Price remembers that there wasn’t much for kids to do in Polktown when she was a child in the 1950s, so they had to make their own fun. They played games like hopscotch, red light, and dodge ball, and caught lightning bugs in a jar. They went to see movies at Fort DuPont; she and her brother saw the giant praying mantis movie (probably around 1957), but he got scared and begged her to take him home. Mr. Earl had a dock along the branch canal and the kids used to catch fish and eels there. Linda did play

on a baseball team, the Ravettes, who played other local teams from Delaware, Pennsylvania and Maryland. According to Linda, she was pretty good, too.

Church was a big influence on the lives of Polktown residents. Joylette and Linda attended



Figure 1
Polktown children at Mt Salem Church, early 1950s.

Mt Salem Church in Delaware City. Figure 1 shows some smartly dressed children outside the church. Can you pick out Linda?

Sometimes oral histories give us information that can’t be found anywhere in written accounts. For example, up into the 1920s the C&D Canal ran right through Polktown into Delaware City. This part of the canal survives today as the Branch Canal. Dutch Neck Road ran right through Polktown, parallel to the existing branch canal. And along this road was the settlement of Cranberry (the name probably derives from the Cranberry Marsh, an area marked on an early canal map). Joylette said that she didn’t see Cranberry but heard about it when she was young. There were houses, a school and a church there along the bank of the canal; the canal was smaller then, “rowboat-sized”. “Everyone that could tell us about Cranberry is gone now.”

Figure 2 shows Polktown and the African Union Church in 1863. Dutch Neck Road heads out of Polktown to the southwest and several houses are shown in the settlement of Cranberry.

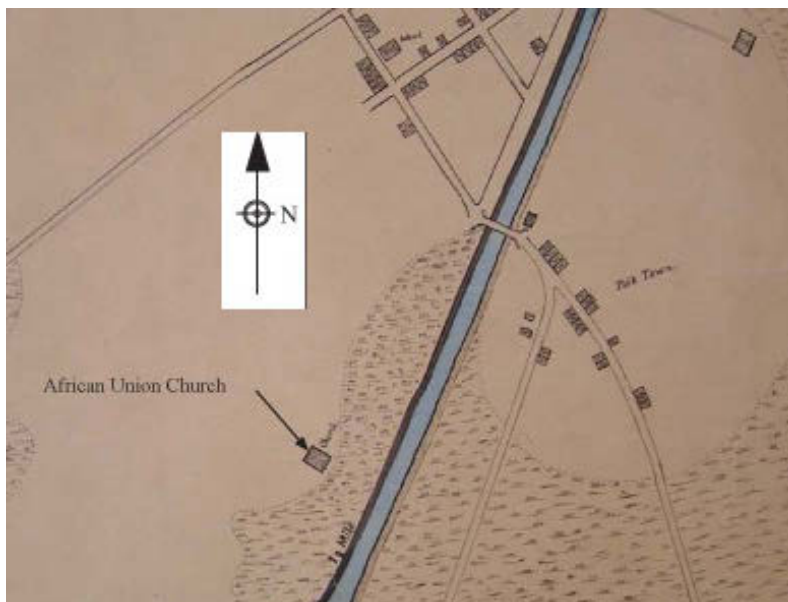


Figure 2
Polktown and Cranberry 1863 [3]

Newspapers Tell Quite a Tale

By Laura Lee

Historians researching marginalized communities such as Polktown often struggle to find a comprehensive historical record. Primary or first-hand resources are the gold standard in historical research yet there can be difficulty in the variety available. If you didn't read or write, you surely didn't write a letter home from the battlefield or leave a diary behind- by nature, the paper trail is more often slim. Census records, birth/death/marriage records provide a solid record of who existed and a peek into their life, but what is missing is the stories of those lives.

Secondary resources- second-hand accounts or re-telling of a story- need to be taken with a grain of salt and a discerning eye. Newspapers were most often far from unbiased, and owners espoused their point of view through them. Gossip was not uncommon, but if you are a historical researcher 140 years later that gossip can sometimes be gold.

Indeed, looking at Polktown references utilizing the subscription service Newspapers.com has kept me up till 3am as the incredible rabbit hole keeps tantalizing me with additional information. News stories and country chatter provides names and descriptions of residents and their lives that help to fill in parts of the picture of life of 190 years of Polktown. One topic alone provides incredible information on the community residents. In winter of 1891, poor Noah Benson was found headless in the canal, the victim of a brutal murder. The story had it all- conspiracy, a jailhouse snitch, a missing valise, mystery blood on a shirt, and scads of testimony from residents. Delaware City's own murder mystery dragged on for a couple of years and the stories, while riddled with racism, provide resident names, descriptions of the orientation of homes no longer remaining, personalities, and much more. No less than 25 colorful news stories provided tabloid-style of the details in the murder, which will be featured in a later issue of the Epitaph.

A quick glance of 19th century Polktown newspaper references provides a colorful array of happenings from tragic to the mundane to humorous. Very little exists in print from the early part of the century but stories picked up in the last quarter. In early October 1880 the *Daily Republican* told of poor Annie, "A daughter of M. Miller, at Polktown, was bitten on one of her fingers by a strange dog on Tuesday, that was supposed to be rabid. The finger was amputated by Dr. Belville. It will be some days yet before it can be determined whether or not the dog had the rabies; for the present he is no where to be found, but if affected with rabies he will no doubt turn up in some other locality very shortly. Not a dog is to be seen on our streets; with or without muzzles."

Later that month, the talk was about the happenings at the "Union M. C. Church". The same paper stated, "the usual quiet of Polktown, adjacent to Delaware City, was excited on Saturday evening. Polktown is inhabited almost wholly by colored people, and there is a church building in which the people worship, and occasionally hold fairs,

festivals, concerts & c. A festival was held on the evening in question, and all concerned seemed to be enjoying themselves in a rational manner. Quick as a flash of lightning however, the festivities were interrupted and where before was joy and hilarity became worse than pandemonium".

The article went on to describe a disagreement with two men over a young lady. "Promenading up and down the sacred edifice were James Neil and a lady, who seemed perfectly satisfied to have James as her gay gallant. To this, however, Wm. Stafford objected, approached the parties and stated with James as to his undue familiarity intimating that he had a prior claim...." You're not going to find that in census records!

The Daily Gazette of July 11, 1882 had a bizarre piece that appears to be an attempt at humor with a possible backstory or two. "The following notice is posted up in the post office and on street lamp posts attracts the attention of the people: \$15,000 reward for the conviction and imprisonment or life of the person or person banging at the door of Solomon Hemsley Johnson. Signed and approved by the Hon. Amos Horatio Miller Mayor of Polktown. The premises of the above will be guarded in the future by his honor, the Royal Bengal Tiger, "Jumbo", by order of the Board of Public Safety."

In 1888 our friend Alexander Draper, one of the United States Colored Troops soldiers now buried in the cemetery made the papers for some different heroics. The Middletown Transcript reported "Alexander Draper, a citizen of Polktown, while cutting corn on the farm of Jos. Ellison, near Delaware City, a few days ago, detailed a blacksnake of enormous size. The snake cast a look of reproach at Draper, who dropped his corn knife and fled. The people living along the road between the Ellison farm and Polktown, who saw him go by, are willing to back him against any trotting horse in the neighborhood." That same year, a grim report of the death of little Alice Watson, colored, age 7 years, who was "run over by a wagon on the Polktown road. The wagon was in tow of a traction engine. The deceased, with several other little children, ran out from the roadside and clambered upon the tongue of the wagon. She fell off and was caught under the wheels."

Another crime was reported in the Delaware Gazette and State Journal on February 18, 1892. The Rev. George Shorter of the UAME Church in Polktown was assaulted by one George Shorter, who "received the full extent of the law- 5 years imprisonment, \$500 fine, and an hour in the pillory.". The article also went on to comment on the weapon, a razor. "Perhaps this will put a stop to the too free use of the razor among the colored community in this vicinity."

Historical newspapers, while fraught with racism, factual errors and bias, are still an excellent tool for learning about communities. They provide the researcher with stories behind some of the people, breadcrumbs to follow, and help make history just plain interesting.

Become a member or volunteer today It's through our partnership with history enthusiasts like you that we are 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. Check out our website at www.africanunioncemetery.org

Tracy Beck, Membership Chair

THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL HISTORY - *continued*

And sometimes oral interviews just tell you things you didn't know. Figure 3 shows some people in front of a store in Polktown – who are they? Turns out, that is a 1952-53 photo of our own Board member Marilyn Whittington in her grandmother's arms, with her sister and mother, in front of her grandfather's (Earl Perry) restaurant. According to Linda Price there was a bar to the left, where she was never allowed, and a restaurant to the right.

References:

[1] David Orr, *Port Pennings*, Newsletter of the Port Penn Area Historical Society, 2014, <http://www.portpenn.org/newsletter/ppahs%202014%2001%20spring.pdf> (Accessed 20210131)

[2] Sheppard, Rebecca J., et. al., "Connecting the Free Black Community of Polktown and the African Union Church Cemetery," Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware, August 2015.

[3] Map No. 14, Manuscript Collection 51.15, Chesapeake and Delaware Canal Papers, Delaware Historical Society, Wilmington, Delaware.

Figures 1 and 3, photographs courtesy of Linda Price.



Figure 3
Earl Perry's restaurant/bar in Polktown around 1952 or 53.



**Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery
2021 Meetings**
Delaware City Town Hall - 407 Clinton Street @ 6:30 p.m.

March 18
May 20 ♦ July 15
September 16
November 18

Open to the public
PLEASE JOIN US

**We're meeting remotely now due to COVID-19.
Check our website, www.africanunioncemetery.org, to be
invited to our meeting via ZOOM.**

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, PO Box 4200, 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

