

EPITAPH

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

Dear Friends,

In October, we were proud to show our video, *Voices Long Forgotten*, for the first time. More than a 150 people came to Delaware City to see it on the Fire Hall's big screen. Our hard-working Film Committee did a fine job. Many thanks to the Auxiliary for the snacks and extra chairs.

This *Epitaph* has more about the 20-minute film. We have entered it for consideration in the Documentary category of the West Chester Short Film Festival.

This will be a busy year. We brought live programming back late in 2022 and are rebuilding momentum in 2023. Film showings, without a reenactor, are a new offering. To schedule a program, email: auccprograms@gmail.com

The five veterans from Polktown were just part of Delaware's larger free Black community. U.S. Colored Troops markers are all around the state. A particularly large number are in New Castle at Bethany Church and in Mt. Olive Cemetery in Wilmington. A few cemeteries have just one, including Delaware City's Greenhill Cemetery. Tony Wade of New Castle compiled a spreadsheet covering several dozen veterans in New Castle County. It's time to expand to the other two counties.

A new website tops our to-do list now, one with far more information about the Colored Troops and Polktown, and better website navigation.

Volunteers are always welcome to help on one of our committees. To volunteer, email us at: africanunioncemetery@gmail.com or come to a meeting. They're held every other month, third Thursday, starting in January. Check Facebook by typing: "friends african union cemetery facebook" into Google to find us.

Your dues and donations are important, so here's the info on that: donations can be made online at <https://www.gofundme.com/f/support-delawares-us-colored-troops> or mailed to FAUCC, Box 4200, Delaware City DE 19706

Regards, Craig O'Donnell, President

**Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery
2023 Meetings**

**Delaware City Community Center
5th & Bayard Streets @ 6:30 p.m.**

March 16 ♦ May 18 ♦ July 20 ♦ September 21 ♦ November 16

**Open to the public
PLEASE JOIN US**

Check out our website, www.africanunioncemetery.org

Polktown's Schools, 1867-1922

By Jeanne Corman

Before the American Civil War, free African American communities of Delaware did not receive financial support for public school education from the state, although they paid taxes that supported schools for white children. After the war, African Americans wanted the state to provide access to public education for their children. State politicians resisted funding for this, even though in 1866 only seven (privately owned) schools existed in the entire state. In January 1867, white and African American religious and community leaders responded by creating a private philanthropic organization, the Delaware Association for the Moral Improvement and Education of the Colored People (DAMIECP), to establish an educational system for African American children.

The residents of African American communities immediately began applying for financial assistance from DAMIECP to build schools. When requests were approved, the organization coordinated efforts to build the schoolhouses, including securing building materials from the Freedmen's Bureau, raising funds, recruiting teachers, paying all or some of teacher salaries, and purchasing books and supplies. The communities themselves contributed significantly toward the schools. Local school committees and church trustees raised funds and negotiated leases or purchased land for schools. Community members provided labor to build the schools and board for the teacher. Families contributed 10 cents per week per child for tuition and purchased their books.

By the end of June 1867, 14 elementary schools were completed throughout the state, including the Delaware City Colored School, which had opened on June 12. The Freedmen's Bureau Education Division monthly report from June, with information supplied by DAMIECP, showed that the school opened with 36 "scholars" (16 male, 20 female), 34 of whom were under the age of 16, all paid tuition, and "almost all" were free before the Civil War. The report also indicated the school was "sustained in part" by the Freedmen's Bureau. Bureau records from 1868 stated a "colored church" owned the school building.

The schoolhouse was located in Polktown, a section of Delaware City, along today's Branch Canal. Polktown was established before the Civil War as a free African American community. Trustees of the African Union Church purchased land to build a church and cemetery in 1835. White land owners

sold and rented lots to free African Americans through the 1840s and 1850s. African Americans who owned multiple lots sold or rented to family and other community members. Nearby employment and increased homeownership allowed Polktown's population to grow sufficiently to sustain churches and require a school.

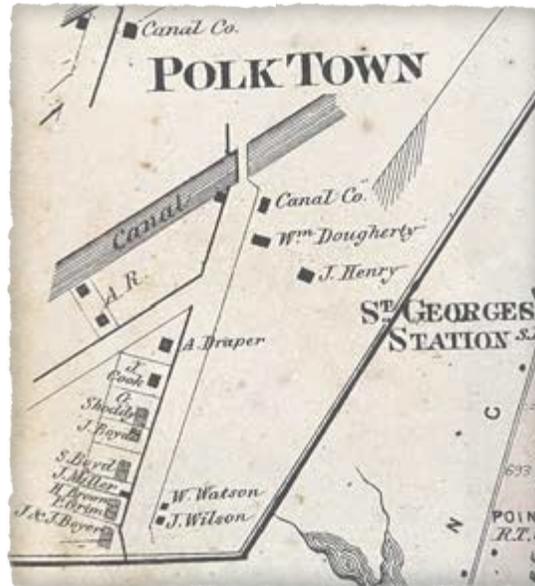


Figure 1: Detail of Beer's Atlas showing Polktown, 1868. Note the lot with 2 buildings next to the canal & letters A.R. corresponds to the school lot.

According to a 2015 report by Rebecca Sheppard, et al., from the Center for Historic Architecture and Design (CHAD) at the University of Delaware, the schoolhouse was a "one story frame front-gable building" sitting "along the south side of the Canal, facing Dutch Neck Road just west of the main section of Polktown." Three different maps; *Beer's Atlas* 1868 (Figure 1), *Map of New Castle County Delaware* 1881 (Figure 2), and *Atlas of New Castle County Delaware* 1893 (not shown) show only one developed lot along the canal meeting that description. Each map shows two buildings on that lot, the school and possibly the church that owned the school.

The Sheppard report also stated this school served the Polktown children until 1921 when a plan to widen the canal called for its demolition. However, the school slated for demolition was not the original 1867 building.

State involvement with African American schools began in 1875 with a tax to be collected from African Americans and distributed by DAMIECP. However, decreasing fundraising by DAMIECP and insufficient tax collection caused an increasing financial burden on African American communities, who then began pressuring legislators for assistance. This resulted in the first appropriation of funds (\$2,500) in the state budget for African American schools in 1881. Between 1881 and 1892, DAMIECP involvement ended, county school superintendents began supervising the schools, appropriations increased, and funds were set aside for remodeling and building schools. The Polktown school received some of these funds.

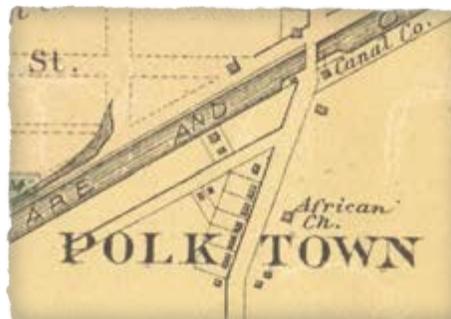


Figure 2: Detail of Hopkins Map of New Castle County Delaware, 1881

The local newspaper, the *Middletown Transcript*, reported on August 8, 1896 that in Delaware City "The School house which the State is building for colored children on the lot across the bridge is now fully under way." The February 6, 1897 issue noted that, "the children of the colored school have moved into their new school house and they are quite proud of it." (While a *Wilmington Every Evening* newspaper article on March 3, 1905 stated that St. Paul's Roman

Polktown's Schools - continued

Catholic Church in Delaware City was dismantled and "will be converted into a school house for colored children" in Polktown, no additional evidence was found to confirm this occurred.)

Deed records indicate the 1897 school was built on the same lot as the 1867 school. In 1864, Andrew Reybold purchased the lot the 1867 school was built on. That lot was sold to William Reybold in 1880, and the deed stipulated it be held in trust for the use of the Free Colored School of Delaware City. The estate of William Reybold sold the lot to the Superintendent of Free Schools of New Castle County and Trustee for the Colored Free School in Delaware City in April 1896, the same year construction began on the school that was completed in 1897. The Commissioners of the Colored Free School of Delaware City purchased the lot for \$1.00 in 1899. They are still listed as the owners.

When the state took control of the African American schools, it created an education system separate from the system for white children. Funding for each school depended on the local tax base. In his book about the history of African American education in Delaware, Bradley Skelcher stated that since properties owned by African Americans tended to be undervalued, their schools received 25% less funding. In addition, state spending for white and African American schools was inadequate overall, leading to dilapidated buildings and closures. A federal Bureau of Education report in 1917 outlined these poor conditions and inadequate funding, prompting both African American and white leaders to seek answers.

One was Pierre S. du Pont. He funded an organization to address these problems in public education. The organization commissioned a survey in 1919 of all school buildings in the state, comparing them to the current standards for health, safety, sanitation, environmental settings, recreation, lighting, etc.

Not surprisingly, the African American schools received the lowest scores on average. Specifically, the surveyor's report described the Delaware City school in Polktown as located in a marsh with the rear of the building about 30 feet from the canal and "Upon no part of the school ground at the time of the survey was it possible to walk without wading through water or mud." Furthermore,

"There can be little hope for the education or Americanization of children that are required to secure their education under conditions such as are found in this building." A photograph of the school house, circa 1921 (Figure 3).

The report recommended that all existing schools be rebuilt. When white Delawareans resisted tax increases that would also benefit African American education, du Pont used his own funds to rebuild African American schools. Construction of the new, du Pont-funded Delaware City School #118 C[olored] began in October 1921 and was dedicated on April 23, 1922. It was built north of Polktown and located off 5th Street. The old school in Polktown may have been slated for demolition, but the canal was not widened at that time, and it is possible the building continued to serve the community for events and meetings. An aerial photo from 1932 showed a building still standing on the site.

This new 1922 school closed a chapter started 55 years prior, during which the determination of African Americans in Polktown, and throughout the state, resulted in schools to provide the education that had been denied their children. While the new schools funded by du Pont would improve learning conditions, a much longer struggle lay ahead to achieve educational equality.

Resources:

Delaware Association for the Moral Improvement and Education of Colored People Collection, Delaware Historical Society, Wilmington, Delaware

New Castle County Deed Books, Recorder of Deeds Office, Wilmington, Delaware

Sheppard, R. 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

Skelcher, B. *African American Education in Delaware: A History Through Photographs, 1865-1930*, Delaware Heritage Press, 1999

Special Report of the Commissioner of Education on the Condition and Improvement of Public Schools in the District of Columbia: Submitted to the Senate June, 1868, and to the House, with Additions, June 13, 1870, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1871

Strayer, G.D., Engelhardt, N.L., Hart, F.W. *General Report on School Buildings and Grounds of Delaware*, Service Citizens of Delaware, 1919

United States, Freedmen's Bureau, Records of the Superintendent of Education and of the Division of Education, 1865-1872. *FamilySearch*. <http://FamilySearch.org>: 26 July 2022. Roll 16, p. 132 & Roll 34, p. 33

Weeks, Stephen B., *History of Public School Education in Delaware*, Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education, Bulletin 19, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1917



Figure 3: Polktown School, circa 1921
Courtesy of the Hagley Museum and Library

Reflections ~ Voices Long Forgotten

By Marilyn Whittington

I was thrilled to witness the crowd, more than 150 guests, who joined the inaugural film showing *Voices Long Forgotten* at the Delaware City Fire Hall, October 14, 2022. The film weaves three important narratives in Delaware history I never, ever learned in my formal Delaware education, not even at the University of Delaware. These three narratives are: Polktown was a free black community; the African Union Church Cemetery has been owned continuously for more than 150 years by black parishioners in Delaware City, and that five U.S. Colored Troops from Delaware City who served in the U.S. Civil War are buried and honored in that same Cemetery. It's more than remarkable that these truths remained obscured until two decades ago. This 20-minute documentary includes a beautiful aerial view of the marshland at the canal and it features a talented storyteller Willis Phelps who portrays Pvt. James H. Elbert, Company C, 8th USCT.



Photos courtesy of Guy Harrington



devoted more than 20 years of leadership—they and others—to bring this to light. There continues to be what Dr. Orr calls “a descendant community” in Polktown. Those of us who viewed the new documentary can now piece together the significance of that tiny hamlet. A paternal lineage connects my family to the hamlet. My great grandmother, Elizabeth “Lizzie” Bowers and her grandson, Ronald B. Portlock is my (deceased) father. I can think of my ancestors with new insight.

What's really impressive is Linda Beck of Port Penn, Linda Portlock Price, of Polktown, Tracy Beck of Wilmington and Professor David Orr, of Delaware City

But most important to me was how well the documentary was received that Friday evening by everyone who attended. If you are the least bit curious in forgotten pieces of history existing at the head of the Castle Trail, you're hard pressed to find a more beautiful restoration of the Cemetery, too long hidden in the marsh grasses along the branch Canal. And it's all so beautifully captured by Emmy Award filmmaker, a Delawarean herself, Sharon K. Baker.

Our thanks to the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Delaware Humanities and Jackson Lodge #19 for helping to fund this film.

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

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

