

EPITAPH

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



Dear Members and Supporters,

I would like to thank Linda Beck for her dedication in leadership of Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery (FAUCC) for almost 30 years. In this issue, we celebrate the cemetery re-discovery that brought together caring citizens to survey, design and build a beautiful educational plaza the public can access today. We thank Linda Beck along with Craig O'Donnell, Wes Jones, and Tracy Beck as they step down from their long-held director positions and remain as Advisory Board members. I am accompanied to renewed service by new officers Vice President Marilyn Whittington and Treasurer Loree Elton.

Since serving as representative to cemetery owner Mt. Salem U.A.M.E. church, I became very impressed with the board excellence in how organized their funding and stewardship of the cemetery has been. Even though, my degree is in Organizational Leadership, I was able to learn from them.

Established in 1996, FAUCC has been a beacon of light in the community as we work to discover history related to our cemetery. Craig O'Donnell reveals documents found about USCT William Watson.

Your generosity in sponsorship and volunteering is essential to this year's presenting public programs such as education through hosting events about and surrounding Juneteenth, commemorating the end of slavery. We will strive to rival last year's events, where this program involved eight different events for children and adults encompassing, poetry, photography, dance, storytelling, worship, community cookout, re-enactment at Fort Delaware, history presentations and music, culminating with a commemoration at our cemetery.

As we move forward in faithfulness, your continued support through membership and donations are important to reaching future generations. Please visit us at our meetings and events.

Warm Regards,
Rev. Marilyn Turner, President

Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery Meetings

**Delaware City Community Center
5th & Bayard Streets @ 6:00 p.m.**

**2025: March 20 ♦ May 15 ♦ July 17 ♦ September 18 ♦ November 20
2026: January 15**

**Open to the public
PLEASE JOIN US**

Check out our website: www.africanunioncemetery.org

Linda Beck and the African Union Church Cemetery: Shared Histories

By Dr. Mary Bricker-Jenkins-Abbreviated Version

After nearly 40 years, Linda Beck has stepped aside from the Board of Directors of the Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery. It would seem fitting, therefore, to feature her story in this issue of Epitaph. This article is based on a two hour interview with Linda Beck on December 11, 2024 in her home outside Port Penn. Characteristically, she greeted us—Linda Butler and me—with her freshly baked banana bread, coffee, and a thoroughly organized pile of folders documenting the history of the FAUCC. What becomes clear in her narrative is the creative power of an individual who understands and nurtures the power of a collective with a shared vision.



Linda Beck

Linda Beck's first encounter with the African Union Church Cemetery was through two articles written in 1990 by her late husband, Bob Beck.¹ In the articles, Bob recounts a call from his archaeologist friend, Dr. David Orr, inquiring about a rediscovered Black cemetery outside Delaware City – a call that evoked childhood memories of seeing what the young boys believed to be caskets jutting out from eroding banks of the Branch Canal towpath. By 1990, David Orr and John Wharton, manager of the contiguous Delaware City Trailer Court,² had mobilized considerable interest in the burial ground in the marsh, had documented the presence of the remains of several members of the United States Colored Troops (USCT) who had served in the Civil War, and had confirmed its founding in 1835 by members of the African Union Church.³

When Bob Beck—or Robert, as Linda refers to him—died in 1993, Linda recalls, “I had to carve my own path.” That path led to the first gathering of what is now the Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery (FAUCC) in 1996. Following it reveals Linda's notable talent for networking—stitching together many of the friends she had or had made along the way into a cohesive group with a shared vision and commitment.

Another tool she used to carve her own path was her life-long love of history. “When I was a child, I always had an interest in history, and there was a cemetery...the Dr. David Stewart Cemetery. It was behind my house in a field...I went out there. I was about 11 or 12 years old, and I drew a map of everyone that was buried there. So doing cemeteries is not a new thing for me.” Linda's particular interest in Delaware history led to her discovery of J. Thomas Scharf's two volume history written in the mid-1800s. “I didn't own those books. They were very expensive.

But I could go to the Wilmington Library and write the history down on index cards.” She was about 15 years old and, in her words, “very wonky.”

Those who visit the African Union Church Cemetery will inevitably take note of its artistry. Linda underscores the fact that the design of the cemetery and its plaza was based primarily on the wishes of its legal owners, Delaware City's Mount Salem U.A.M.E. Church, its ministers and congregation. But it also reflects the hand of an artist in the implementation of the design. Linda traces her interest in and talent for art to her graveyard sketches, continuing through her earliest school years at the two room Port Penn School. It was cold, sparsely furnished and equipped; the pictures on the wall “were not much,” she

thought. Summing up her earliest school experiences, Linda said simply, “I was very artistic.”

In the fourth or fifth grade Linda transferred to the Commodore Macdonough school in St. Georges. There she met “Miss Holly, a representative visiting from the Board of Education.” Visiting Linda's painting class, Miss Holly “picked out two paintings that she liked, and they were hung up, and she wanted to know who did them. Actually, I had done both of them.” As a result of that visit, Linda “was allowed to go to the Delaware Arts Center, and somehow this got paid for because my family did not have the money.”



AUCC circa 2015

In effect, Linda created her own curriculum outside of school early on; her trips to the cemetery and the drawing of the graves—which she still has—represented the earliest history and art classes. Her weekends at the Delaware Art Center led to a lifetime of appreciation and participation in art and design in all aspects of her life and work. Her time in the library copying the history of Delaware onto index cards grounded her commitment to history.

Linda Beck and the African Union Church Cemetery: Shared Histories

Years later, Robert helped expand Linda's interests to include natural history and ecology, thus preparing her for constant accommodation to a rising water table and invasive species at the cemetery. Robert had recounted that the Beck Dairy Farm and others were deliberately flooded to attract muskrats when the fashion market demand rose in the 1920s, thus creating today's marsh. Reflecting on its challenge and its beauty, Linda recalls that Robert "introduced me to all this. And I thought, 'This is marvelous!' He was the perfect husband for me."

While Linda's interest in art and history underpin her work with the African Union Church Cemetery, Linda emphasizes that *everybody* involved in the reclamation of the Cemetery and in the Friends organization "brought something to the table." Her special skill, as we shall see, was weaving those contributions into the fabric of the group.

Robert's articles and early involvement had sparked Linda's interest in the cemetery, but it wasn't until 1996, three years after his passing, that she actively engaged in organizing FAUCC. "I went down [to Kent County] with Tracy Beck [her daughter] to the annual meeting of the Delaware Historical Society." There they talked with Dr. Reba Hollingsworth, a well-known educator, and Kay Wood Bailey, Delaware Prison Arts Administrator, about the cemetery on the Branch Canal and the possibility of cleaning it up. That was September. In October, a small group met at Grassdale, a Division of Parks & Recreation facility in Delaware City. Present were James Parker, a Delaware City Councilman and Mount Salem U.A.M.E. Church member; Dr. David Orr, an archaeologist in Delaware City; Harmon Carey, an

group. Another turning point was when Delaware City Manager Paul Morrell got involved, offering his expertise. Willis arranged with the state for imprisoned men to help with major cemetery cleanups. David Orr led efforts to locate additional graves through a "probing session" and with ground-penetrating radar.

Realizing ongoing cleanups weren't enough, Linda proposed a more comprehensive approach. With tax-exempt status secured, they could fund-raise and apply for grants. Also, the Michael N. Castle Trail was being developed at the time; the Delaware City Section of the trail would pass by the cemetery, curving around it as it reached the old tow path along the Branch Canal. It was the perfect moment to think about a master plan.

Shaping the plan, the group relied heavily on the vision of Mount Salem U.A.M.E. Church. Initially some thought the suggested enhancements were not in keeping with a 19th century African American cemetery. But David Orr asserted, "It's what the community wants, the way they want to honor their descendants." Linda Price, a Mount Salem Church member who grew up in Polktown, was integral to shaping the final vision. A shared goal established, funds were raised to hire engineers for a cemetery design and rendering, significantly aiding fundraising efforts.

Boundary establishment was another hurdle. Though the church held the deed to the land, physical markers were unknown. Fortunately, Linda Beck's late husband had a survey of the original Delaware City Trailer Court; it showed "a little square of the cemetery and sight lines to Route 9." It was enough for a surveyor to mark the corners and place cement monuments.⁴ A title search followed, handled *pro bono* by Thomas J. Reed, a law professor at the Widener University's Delaware Law School.

Fundraising and management of money were vital. "Every dollar counted. Every dollar. We could not waste money. We couldn't do something twice. Our first fundraiser was at Crabby Dick's [Restaurant]. God bless him, John Buchheit did a little fundraiser for us," Linda recalls. Donation boxes were placed around town. The first large grant came from the Delaware Distressed Cemetery Fund for \$10,000, followed by \$5,000 from the Delaware City Refining Company. In 2013, \$16,500 was received from The Mayor's Ball, an event begun by John Buchheit, bringing the total to over \$30,000.

Working collaboratively with the town of Delaware City, the FAUCC, the church, and the engineering firm URS, a plan was developed that included a leveled, fenced cemetery with a brick plaza and landscaping. The estimated cost was \$135,278. By then, the group had \$40,000.

Recalling an early discussion about project management with city officials, Linda quotes one



Conceptual Design by URS Corporation

advocate for African history; Kay Wood Bailey; Lee Jennings, a Division of Parks employee, "and Tracy and myself. That was 1996. We decided to form a group, and it became known as the Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery."

Progress was slow but steady. Kay Wood Bailey arranged *pro bono* legal services to incorporate and obtain tax-exempt status. Willis Phelps, a professional reenactor who was to become, with Laura Lee, central to the FAUCC historical education program, joined the

Linda Beck and the African Union Church Cemetery: Shared Histories

saying "Oh, it's easy, Linda." Naively believing him, she set about doing it. Vision and funding goal in hand, she managed a very energetic group in 2014. Delaware Humanities funded interpretive signs, the survey was completed, bylaws written, and the first edition of *Epitaph* was published. Laura Lee's grant proposal to the Longwood Foundation secured \$50,000. State Representative Valerie Longhurst secured an additional \$50,000 from the state legislature.

In October, it was time to lay the sod. Sean Johnston, owner of Cutting Edge of Delaware, operated the grader, with David Orr ensuring an archaeological approach was used. The grader moved slowly, inch by inch, stopping every time it encountered a stone. Stones were an anomaly in the marshy area, so they knew that each marked a burial site. The crew pulled them to the surface. One had initials on it carved by hand. They knew more burials had occurred, but marshland had claimed many remains. In the end, five U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) grave markers and numerous 19th-century burials were identified.

At last Linda had a moment to reflect. "I stood on the trail berm, looking at the beautiful, beautiful green sod. The tombstones were shiny white, and I thought, 'Oh boy, this really looks good.'" But she quickly returned to the group's collective achievement. "I never thought we wouldn't make it. The group always had so many friends they could call on."

By September 16, 2016—ten years after Linda and Tracy's initial meeting—the cemetery was ready for its grand opening. Toby Williams, a professional steeplejack, donated the flagpole, and the American Legion provided the first flag. The USCT and other grave markers were cleaned, sod laid, the plaza completed with benches and lighting, and trees planted. But, Linda noted, "Just because you're done doesn't mean you're done."

With the project's completion, the group shifted strategic focus to maintenance and public education. Linda prioritized cemetery upkeep while Laura Lee and Willis Phelps brought history to the public through reenactments of Pvt. James Elbert's story. The COVID pandemic halted in-person presentations, but a grant from Delaware Humanities through the 2021 American Rescue Act funded the film *Voices Long Forgotten*⁵ preserving the story for future generations. Other activities and projects were envisioned, but "we just didn't have the people." With characteristic caution, Linda warned "you don't want to be choosing to undertake activities that you cannot do correctly...you

can look at your board and tell the strengths, and you use those strengths."

Over the years, Linda has held various roles in the organization. "I know I'm a micromanager, but I know where all the money is, how much is spent, that we must stay on budget. And I know everyone has to play their part." Historic cemetery care requires such ongoing commitment. The reward is a serene space for contemplation and for honoring the ancestors – their sacrifices, tenacity, and vision.

In spring 2024, Linda announced she would leave the FAUCC Board in 2025. "You should leave when good people are there, and you're still well enough to help. But step back. Give others a chance."

Linda, who moved so gracefully through the several stages of development of the cemetery and the organization, knows things will change. "It's going to be different. Everybody's got to get their feet on the ground and feel comfortable. It's going to be fine. I DO think it's going to be fine."



Linda isn't leaving alone. Tracy and Wes Jones are also stepping aside. They will serve on the Advisory Board. Former president Craig O'Donnell has shifted focus to the Juneteenth History Team. Linda will help maintain the cemetery as a member, not chairperson, of the Property Management Committee. "Someone has come along who can

'micromanage' just like me," she says with a wink.

Despite stepping back, Linda isn't done. Her next project? Getting the cemetery on the National Register of Historic Places.

Stay tuned for the next chapter!

- 1) *The Island Paper*, July 1990 and August 1990. Photographic copies in the personal collection of Linda Beck.
- 2) Known today as the Delaware City Mobile Home Community.
- 3) For the history of the discovery of the cemetery, the USCT and some of the other people interred there, and the organization's contemporary programs, see the website of the African Union Church Cemetery, <https://africanunioncemetery.org>. See also the copies of the FAUCC newsletter, *Epitaph*, available on the site. See especially the 2014 article by Wes Jones in the first issue at <https://www.africanunioncemetery.org/newsletter/FAUCC%202014%20Newsletter.pdf>
- 4) Cement monument corner markers: Two are in the marsh, one is on the grassy path into the cemetery on the east side and the fourth is a nail driven in the ground near to the trail by the surveyor.
- 5) A weblink to view this film can be found at: <https://www.AfricanUnionCemetery.org>

Dr. Mary Bricker-Jenkins is a board member of FAUCC. She is grateful to Jean Bonner, Linda Butler, and Tracy Beck for considerable help with this article.

Read the full version of this article online at:

<https://africanunioncemetery.org/newsletter>

William Watson: Who was he? Where is he?

By Craig O'Donnell

We know William Watson was a Civil War draftee, a wounded veteran, and a local storekeeper.

We have his September 1899 obituary from The Middletown Transcript, a paper that at the time published Delaware City news too. We'd like to find William Watson's resting place so he is remembered along with our five veterans and their fellow USCT soldier, Joseph T. LeCount, who is buried nearby in the Greenhill cemetery. We'd also like to find his descendants. His obituary opened the door to this search.

"William Watson, a respected colored man, aged 69 years, died at his home Monday after a few weeks' illness. Funeral Services were held at the Union M.E. Church Thursday afternoon; interment was made in the colored burying ground.*"

"William Watson served in the Civil war in Co. I of the 6th US Infantry. In the battle at Petersburg he was on the skirmish line and was wounded in the arm, which was amputated on the field where it was buried."

Watson, then, fought rebels in the siege of Petersburg, Va.

From census records we know the Watsons lived in Polktown. We know his daughter Julia M. Watson married Perry A. White in August 1897.

But we don't know where his marker is. There is no William Watson found in either local cemetery, and so far no one has turned up an order for a government Civil War veteran's stone. The website Findagrave.com doesn't turn up any William Watsons in New Castle County, at least not so far.

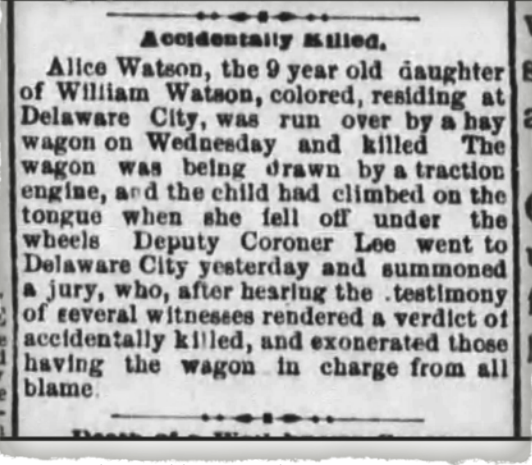
More clues

William was married to Elizabeth J. Watson in the 1870 census, with children Wilson, Ellen and Elizaretta.

By 1880, he had married Lavinia Watson. Wilson, listed as W Thomas, was 15; James and Ellen, 14; C Harry, 13; J Samuel was 9 and W George was 8; Leander was 4, Julia was 1, and M Alice was a baby.

His family was large but not all survived. There are death certificates for three youngsters who died as children: Anna Mary, Alice and Margaret. Alice lost her life at age 9 when she fell from a hay wagon. Elizaretta is unaccounted for.

Since the 1900 census was destroyed in a fire, we don't have a snapshot of Watson's family then. After 1900, with William now dead, the question is



Accidentally Killed.
Alice Watson, the 9 year old daughter of William Watson, colored, residing at Delaware City, was run over by a hay wagon on Wednesday and killed. The wagon was being drawn by a traction engine, and the child had climbed on the tongue when she fell off under the wheels. Deputy Coroner Lee went to Delaware City yesterday and summoned a jury, who, after hearing the testimony of several witnesses rendered a verdict of accidentally killed, and exonerated those having the wagon in charge from all blame.

Daily Republican October 12, 1888 reports Alice Watson accidentally killed at age 9.

where the offspring went, including Julia Watson White and husband Perry.

Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery's (FAUCC) Juneteenth History Team continues to search for the records of William Watson, USCT veteran, and for his descendants.

If you have any information that might help the search, please contact: info@africanunioncemetery.org
Craig O'Donnell, FAUCC Past President, retired journalist, researcher.

A MYSTERY BURIAL

*Note: the obit refers to the "colored burying ground." This is unclear, because the African Union Cemetery, as far as we can tell, does not have his marker. Greenhill Cemetery, a Black section of Delaware City Cemetery, had opened a few months before. It's reasonable to guess that the obit would have mentioned if he was interred in the new cemetery, with "burying ground" referring to the older unnamed place now called the African Union Church Cemetery.

However, it's also possible that his marker has been in Greenhill for the past 125 years, but has fallen and been covered by grass. No one so far has probed for buried stones, a common feature of old cemeteries.

2025 Delaware City-Polktown Juneteenth Observance-RAIN OR SHINE

Shove Off Day, Saturday, May 24. Morning at the Delaware City Library: "Shove Off for Freedom" a program for children and adults by Kathy Trusty, independent historian, Black history educator, children's book author. Ferry Tickets \$7 each for those attending the morning program; Lunch at the Pavilion, Fort Delaware State Park. Afternoon at Fort Delaware State Park: Children's Games and Activities typical of the Civil War Era. Led by Fort Delaware staff.

Saturday, June 7. "Looking Back/Moving Forward". Midday at Battery Park Bandstand: Harriet Tubman and the Tilly Rescue with Debra Martin. Afternoon at the Delaware City Library: Artist's Tour of "Landscapes of the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway" with E. Lynn Dilliplane. Exhibit on display May 24 to June 21. Evening at the Delaware City Community Center: The Sankofa Drum and Dance Company.

Tuesday, June 17, 6:00p.m.-7:30p.m.. Delaware City Library. Finding the Enslaved Ancestors. Delaware Public Archives & Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, Delaware Chapter.

Juneteenth, Thursday, June 19. Morning: Juneteenth Memorial Service, a solemn Ceremony at

the African Union Church Cemetery. Music by the Hildaman Chorale and others. Afternoon/Evening: Suite Franchon and Friends and Best Kept Soul performances.

Sunday, June 22, 12:00 Noon: Mount Salem U.A.M.E. Church Juneteenth Worship Service.

Afternoon: Community Cookout. A traditional community cookout offered by the Mount Salem U.A.M.E Church congregation on the church grounds. Performances celebrating Black history and culture.

Throughout the Juneteenth observance period at the Delaware City Library: All regularly scheduled library programs for children, teens, tweens and adults, will be Juneteenth themed library programs.



Check these websites for event updates:

www.Juneteenth-DelCity.org and www.AfricanUnionCemetery.org

Sponsors as of March 1, 2025:

City of Delaware City, Delaware City Fire Company, Delaware City Library, Delaware City Police Department, Delaware City Refining Company, Fort Delaware State Park, Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery, Main Street Delaware City, Mt. Salem U.A.M.E. Church and the Underground Railroad Coalition of Delaware.

Board of Directors

President: Rev. Marilyn Turner
Vice President: Marilyn Whittington
Secretary: Vacant
Treasurer: Loree Elton

Dr. Mary Bricker-Jenkins
Robert Seidle
Mt. Salem U.A.M.E. Church:
Rev. Marilyn Turner – Ex-Officio

City of Delaware City:
Paul Johnson, Mayor – Ex-Officio
Britney Loveland, City Manager – Ex-Officio

There is also an Advisory Board that assists the Board of Directors. Contact FAUCC if you are interested in serving on the Advisory Board.

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 our website at www.africanunioncemetery.org ~ Claire Wyngaard 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

