

**WELCOME
TO THE
FRIENDS OF THE
AFRICAN UNION
CHURCH
CEMETERY**

By: Wes Jones

Right here in Delaware City lies an unheralded bit of American History - an unmarked cemetery containing the remains of generations of African-American people from our area. This cemetery is the burial place of five members of the U.S. Colored Troops who bravely served on the side of the Union in the Civil War. It is our mission to restore this cemetery, owned by the Mt. Salem Union AME Church and to tell the story of the mostly forgotten people who lived, died and were buried there.

Join us to learn about the proposed trail and planned restoration of this cemetery.

How it All Began

The history of the cemetery is entwined with the history of African-Americans and their churches in Delaware. Most of these churches have had several names over their lifetime, and several locations, and tracing the history is somewhat challenging. Peter Spencer was born into slavery in Kent County, Maryland in 1782. After being freed, in 1813 he founded the African Union Church, also known as the Union Church of Africans, in Wilmington. This was the first independent black Christian Church in the United States.

On November 12, 1835, five members of the African Union Church, Perry Reynolds, Noah Chambers, William Jones, Shadrach Bowyer, and Solomon Dean, paid \$80 for a half acre of land near the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal near Delaware City in Red Lion Hundred, New Castle County, Delaware. The church lot was part of a larger tract of land belonging to Daniel Newbold and his wife, Rachel. The Newbolds were the founders of Delaware City, originally known as "Newbold's Landing". The church's lot was located 30 feet west of the west line of a ditch that ran alongside the original C & D Canal (now called the Branch Canal). This location is across the Branch Canal from Polktown, the Free African-American Community.

A schism in the African Union Church occurred in the 1860's resulting in the formation of two "Spencer Churches", the African Union First Colored Methodist Protestant Church (AUMP) and the Union American Methodist Episcopal Church (UAME). The Delaware City congregation joined the Union American Episcopal Church. The current owner of the cemetery is the Mt. Salem Union American Methodist Episcopal Church, located on the corner of Fourth and Bayard Streets in Delaware City.

No list of interments has survived, nor any period image of the cemetery itself. While there are



The African Union Church Cemetery

Rediscovery of Cemetery

In 1990 Dr. David Orr received a call from John Wharton, the manager of the Delaware City Mobil Home Community. Wharton told him that some local children had discovered some unusual looking stones in the marsh near the original Chesapeake and Delaware Canal (the Branch Canal). Wharton thought they might be gravestones since they had names with some interesting inscriptions, among which were the repeated use of the four capital letters, USCT. Orr wondered: if this could mean United States Colored Troops (the name given to African-American soldiers fighting for the Union in the Civil War)? When Orr visited the cemetery he found four such USCT markers. On a later visit that year with fellow archeologists, they were joined by James Parker, a Delaware City Councilman and a Mr. Harding, who informed them that they believed the cemetery belonged to the United African Methodist Episcopal (UAME) Church. The African Union Church Cemetery had been rediscovered.



Willis Phelps portraying James H. Elbert, Co. C., 8th Infantry, USCT

no records of the African Union Church structure itself, a few historic maps indicate the church's location. An 1863 canal map shows the church at its original site, within the present cemetery grounds. Maps from 1881 and 1893 show the cemetery, but also show church structures across the canal in the settlement of Polktown.

According to Dr. Orr, "The cemetery presently contains eleven marble stones (two of which have marble foot stones) and many other fieldstones which possibly mark interments. Five of the stones mark the resting places of United States Colored Troops. These are: Lewis Taylor, Company I, 6th Infantry, USCT, Alexander Draper, Co. C, 6th Infantry, USCT, James H. Elbert, Co. C, 8th Infantry, USCT, William H. Crawford, Co. C, 26th Infantry, USCT, and Joseph B. Bayard, Co. C, 30th Infantry, USCT. All of these stones are military ones, provided to the veterans by the government. Four civilians are also indicated by marked gravestones. Two of them, Harriet Serena (died September 11, 1857 at the age of 30) and Rebecca, (died April 6, 1861, at the age of ten), are from the Bayard family. Perry Reynolds, an original trustee of the African Union Church and member of the group who purchased the site for the cemetery and the first church from the Newbolds in 1835, died May 13, 1861 at the age of 63, and Sarah Neal died April 18, at the age of 38, are the only other marked graves. There are assuredly a lot more unmarked graves as is typical of African American cemeteries. Some may

have sunk out of sight like the stone of Lewis Taylor, discovered long after the initial discovery of the cemetery. The URS survey located a fieldstone marker which was inscribed with the initials 'E.W'. The cemetery appears to be have been abandoned by about the time of World War One."

The Cemetery Today

No photographs exist that show what the cemetery looked like when it was being used. But we know that for much of its active life there was a church and a thriving community nearby. The grounds of the church were near the tow-path of the canal and were most likely plain but well cared for.

Today, after 80 years of disuse, the cemetery is rough, like most abandoned cemeteries. It is difficult to access and overgrown. In the summer the marsh grass grows tall and hides everything; in the winter the fallen grass covers the stones.

The Cemetery Tomorrow

We don't know what the cemetery looked like when it was being used. However, the Friends have worked with the engineering firm, URS, to develop a master plan for the restoration of this site. Our master design incorporates elements which historians and archeologists consider typical of contemporaneous cemeteries.



Dick Cathcart, Delaware City's Town Manager, and Sean Johnson, The Cutting Edge, planning cemetery clean-up.



Cutting Edge personnel cleaning up the African Union Church Cemetery.

The African Union Church Cemetery

The cemetery is adjacent to the soon-to-be-completed Delaware City Branch Canal Trail. This new trail will lie atop a high berm which will protect the cemetery from encroachment by tidal waters. The security of the site will be increased by leveling the uneven land and installing iron fencing around the cemetery proper. A locked gate will keep casual visitors from disturbing the historically significant grave markers, and will allow controlled access to the burial sites for family members, scholars, and the maintenance personnel. Maintenance-free solar lighting will be installed to make the cemetery safer, allowing the Delaware City police force to view the grounds during night time patrols.

The hardscaping involves brick paving, benches, and informational signage. There will also be a wood-chip handicapped accessible trail from the Branch Canal Trail down to the cemetery. This ramp will be the access route to the cemetery, and will also allow maintenance vehicles to pass.

Landscaping consists of native plants highlighting the cemetery, and also a border of trees along the northern boundary to screen the cemetery from the adjacent residential property. This will serve as additional security.



The Cemetery Tomorrow
Rendering by URS

When this project is complete, the African Union Church Cemetery will be a beautiful place to visit, to learn about the history of and celebrate the lives of the people buried here. The site will be safe and secure, requiring only periodic maintenance.

References:.

Mooney, D., Wiencek, R. & Wuebber, I., "Phase I Investigations of the African Union Cemetery Delaware City Branch Canal Project", URS Corporation, Burlington, NJ., May 2009.

Orr, Dr. David, "The African Union Church Cemetery - Delaware City, Delaware", September, 2009.

Michael N. Castle Trail on the C & D Canal Update

After months of permit delays, Dick Cathcart, Delaware City Town Manager, is pleased to report that construction of the Delaware City leg of the 16-mile recreational Chesapeake & Delaware Canal Trail began in September. The Trail, a multi-use path backed by federal government and various citizens groups, broke ground in summer 2012. Currently, the leg from the St. Georges Bridge parking lot to the Summit Marina has been completed, with work slated to continue on the Summit-to-Chesapeake section this fall. Not only is the trail a wonderful community resource, but its location adjacent to the African Union Church Cemetery will provide a historical discovery experience to the walkers, bikers, and horseback riders who come upon this fine historical resource. The Friends group is pleased that it will bring an audience directly to the cemetery, fostering community knowledge about the honored soldiers and their families buried there.

The Delaware City link will stretch from the historic branch canal area to the St. Georges Bridge. After this portion of the trail is completed, a bridge will be installed to link it to the currently completed sections to St. Georges. The goal is to have the Delaware City leg completed by August of 2014. Another exciting feature of the trail will be installation of an observation tower for bird enthusiasts and nature lovers, and placement of osprey nesting platforms nearby.



Necia Beck designing the cemetery's interpretive signs.



Work has begun on Delaware City's portion of the Mike Castle Trail.



Why join the Friends Group?

By Laura Lee

If you are already a member of the Friends of the African Church Cemetery, we thank you for your support. If not, please consider becoming a part of this dynamic project. The founding goal was and still is to bring alive a forgotten tract of history - the Polktown cemetery, part of one of the earliest free black communities in Delaware. We are in a renaissance, and the movement forward to our goal is very exciting.

Situated on the outskirts of town, those put to rest in the cemetery were segregated in death as they were in life. Over a decade, members of the church and town community rallied to create a friends group with both preservation and education in mind. Dr. David Orr conducted his historic research on the soldiers, and charismatic Willis Phelps sought every opportunity to portray Private James Elbert to audiences everywhere.

The group organized and become incorporated as a nonprofit organization. A partnership agreement was created with the Mount Salem United African Methodist Episcopal Church, owners of the plot.

However, despite the partnership and nonprofit status donations were sparse. In the last couple of years, a reinvigorated board bolstered by an enthusiastic committee and supportive town of Delaware City have produced results with the help public, corporate and private donations. We'd like to thank those who have contributed through their yearly dues and donations. Every penny counts.

We also like to thank the following, who provided private, corporate, and public contributions and services of \$500 or more.

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|--|--------------------------------|
| State of Delaware Distressed Cemetery Fund | The Delaware Humanities Forum |
| 2013 Delaware City's Mayors Ball | The Cutting Edge of Delaware |
| Delaware City Refining Company | Crabby Dick's of Delaware City |
| Delmarva Historic Haunts | New Castle Historic Society |
| Annette L. Purnell | The Town of Delaware City |

With the church congregation changing radically over 170 years, despite efforts, no connection has been made between the people buried at Polktown and the living community. Recently, a descendant of Pvt. Alexander Draper has been identified. Says Orr, "Connecting the living community - is essential. We need people who can proudly say, 'Those are my ancestors'." Your support will help tell the story of the United States Colored Troops (USCT) and their families buried beneath the ground at Polktown. Together we can tell their story and preserve the legacy of this once-forgotten part of American history.

OFFICERS & BOARD MEMBERS

Willis Phelps, President
Linda Orr, Vice-President
Laura Lee, Secretary
Wes Jones, Treasurer

Tracy Beck
David Orr

Linda Beck, Executive Director

Mt. Salem UAME Church:
Rev. James Matthews, Linda Price
Town of Delaware City:
Richard Cathcart, Town Manager
Stanley Green, Mayor

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

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual (one person only) - \$10 | <input type="checkbox"/> Family (family members at a single address) - \$20 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting - \$30 | <input type="checkbox"/> Patron - \$50 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Benefactor - \$500 | <input type="checkbox"/> Sponsor - \$100 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I am interested in volunteering | <input type="checkbox"/> Anchor - \$200 |
- I would like to make a one-time donation of \$ _____

Please contact us at the above address or send us an e-mail: info@africanunioncemetery.org

The Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery is a 501 (c)(3) organization. Contributions are tax deductible.

