

EPITAPH

THIS ISSUE

Welcome P.1
 Observing Juneteenth .P2
 & Back Page
 Marker Commemorates
 Polktown Suffrage P.3

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



Greetings!

It is with great enthusiasm that we share the exciting news of the upcoming Delaware City/Polktown Juneteenth Observance, organized by the Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery (FAUCC). Juneteenth stands as the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the end of slavery in the United States.

This event, celebrating resilience, freedom, joy, and family, is the result of a collaborative effort involving various groups and individuals in Delaware City. Spearheading this initiative for FAUCC are our Co-conveners, Mary Bricker-Jenkins and Marilyn Whittington, along with the Delaware City/Polktown Juneteenth Planning Committee, notably including the Mt. Salem U.A.M.E. Church. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all those generously volunteering their time and resources to ensure the success of this celebration.

In October, we welcomed visitors to the cemetery and plaza during the Jackson Lodge No. 19 Community Day and Trail Walk. Our sincere appreciation goes to the Lodge for their generous donation to our organization. Furthermore, we extend our gratitude to the Lodge for mobilizing volunteers for fall maintenance of the cemetery. Their efforts were truly appreciated.

This year brings a refresh of our website, unveiling a new and improved look. Stay tuned for the launch of these updates.

We are delighted to welcome Mary Bricker-Jenkins to our Board of Directors. A special thanks goes to Jeanne Corman and Roberta Perkins, who have transitioned to Advisory positions after serving as Directors for many years. We also express our gratitude to Wes Jones, former Executive Director, and Craig O'Donnell, former President, both of whom now continue as Board Directors. The success of FAUCC is indebted to the dedication and enthusiasm of individuals like you who have guided our organization.

As we move forward, your continued support through dues and donations remains pivotal to the growth and success of FAUCC. Donations can be mailed to FAUCC, Box 4200, Delaware City, DE 19706.

Thank you for being an integral part of our journey.
 Warm regards, Linda L. Beck, President

**Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery
 2024 Meetings**

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

March 21 ♦ May 16 ♦ July 18 ♦ September 19 ♦ November 21

Open to the public
PLEASE JOIN US

Check out our website, www.africanunioncemetery.org

Observing Juneteenth in Delaware City & Polktown

By Marilyn Whittington & Mary Bricker-Jenkins
Co-Conveners Delaware City/Polktown Juneteenth Planning Committee

On May 25, 1865 a large contingent of soldiers “shoved off” from City Point, Virginia with orders to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation in Texas. Many, perhaps most, of the soldiers were Black, members of the United States Colored Troops (USCT) that had fought for freedom during the Civil War. The Emancipation Proclamation had been signed by President Lincoln on January 1, 1863. Lee had surrendered at Appomattox in early April, 1865, signifying the collapse of the Confederacy. Nevertheless, skirmishes continued throughout the south, and many plantation owners continued to hold people in bondage. Texas was particularly resistant. Enforcement would be necessary. The contingent that set sail on May 25 faced many challenges, including rough seas and skirmishes with rogue confederate soldiers. Eventually, they landed on the island of Galveston. There, Union General Gordon Granger promulgated General Order No. 3:

“The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor. The freedmen are advised to remain quietly at their present homes and work for wages. They are informed that they will not be allowed to collect at military posts and that they will not be supported in idleness either there or elsewhere.”

That “freedom” was, and would continue to be, ambiguous and incomplete was clear to Black people in Galveston. Fear of reprisal mixed with joy. The freedom to work for wages left

many, if not most, in abject poverty. Writing for [The National Archive News](#), Michael Davis said,

“While the order was critical to expanding freedom to enslaved people, the racist language used in the last sentences foreshadowed that the fight for equal rights would continue.”

Juneteenth—the 19th of June of every year has been a national holiday in the United States since President Joe Biden signed the bill, Pub. L. 117-17, on June 17, 2021. Among those at his side was Opal Lee, a woman in her 90s, whose Texas home had been ransacked and burned by a white mob on Juneteenth, 1939. Known as “the Grandmother of Juneteenth,” Ms Lee had for many years walked 2.5 miles every June 19th to symbolize the 2.5 years it took for troops to arrive in Texas to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation.

For many decades, the joy of Juneteenth has been celebrated in Black communities with family and community gatherings. But, Ms Lee reminds us, “We’re not talking about a Black thing or a Texas

thing. We are talking about freedom for everybody. And we’re not free yet. We’ve got too many disparities – absolutely too many to say that we are free.” Her examples cross the lines of color . . . “education where they don’t want us to tell the truth. . . freedom from joblessness and the homelessness and health care that some of us can get and others can’t. We need freedom from these things, and it’s going to take all of us working together to get it done.” [localprofile/opal-lee/juneteenth](#)

“Working together” is something that people of Delaware City and Polktown know how to do. Thirty years ago, Black and White citizens came together to reclaim a cemetery in the marsh that is the final resting place of at least



My Road To Juneteenth

By Mary Bricker-Jenkins

Co-Convener Delaware City/Polktown Juneteenth Planning Committee

In 1960 I was attending a small Roman Catholic women's college in New York. I had no place to go for the Christmas break until my best friend, my "big sister" Voncile, invited me to her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I was excited to have more time with her and to be with a family for the holidays in a city I'd never visited.

We boarded the southbound train in White Plains. In DC Voncile said we had to move. She led me to the back of the train. There the conductor looked curious and a bit alarmed. Voncile reassured me, "He's just not used to seeing a white face in the colored coach."

Once in Winston Salem, there was a steady stream of visitors to the home. Mrs. Larke, Voncile's mother, would say "My my my, been so long since we've seen you!" as she caught them staring at me to verify the rumors. We'd all giggle when they left.

Voncile loved to dance, so the first Friday night of our vacation we piled into a car with many others and drove far out of town to a small building at the top of a hill. Inside, people were dancing to the tunes from a huge jukebox, the biggest and best stocked one I'd ever seen. I danced with a lot of people, and with nobody in particular, until a certain young man and I locked eyes. "He's quite a catch," Voncile said, "and very, very nice." Apparently he made inquiries about me too. Arrangements were made for us to double-date on New Year's Eve.

On New Year's Eve, Voncile's date arrived at Mrs. Larke's home at the appointed hour. My date did not. We waited several hours. I felt awkward, and very hurt. Eventually we decided to go out, the three of us. I spent the evening bewildered, feeling ugly and unworthy. Maybe I felt angry too, but in the 1960s jilted girls blamed ourselves. That "outside forces" might be in the mix that night did not occur to me.

A few days later, we all knew. My young man's father, the community's undertaker, had locked him in the basement of their home on New Year's eve. Better he should spend the night with the cadavers than be one.

"Just because I'm white?" I asked. Patiently and kindly, Voncile and her family explained that, yes, it was because I was white, but no, not because the father was 'prejudiced' against whites. He wanted

to keep his son safe. He would not have been safe being seen around town with a white girl.

It took many decades for the meaning of that night, New Year's Eve 1960 in Winston Salem, to unfold. Understanding has come in waves. Most likely it's still incomplete.

I returned to college up north with a renewed commitment to confront prejudice. We had a "social justice club," and I joined it. Voncile did not. "That's your thing," she said. Eventually I understood that she was saying, "That's your responsibility."

As I became more active in the civil rights movement, I began to understand the difference between prejudice and racism, and then the difference between people's racist attitudes and pervasive institutional racism.

In 1967, Martin Luther King condemned the war in Vietnam and began to organize across racial lines to build a poor people's movement. Some said he abandoned the fight for civil rights, but he showed how racism was used to keep us divided, squabbling and sometimes warring against each other, to keep us from understanding and challenging the deepest roots of our pain. The career soldiers in my family were enraged and offended by his stance. I loved and respected them. The seamless linking of racism, militarism,

and poverty was compelling in theory; applying it would lead inevitably to difficult choices.

As we prepared for Juneteenth this year, I asked my colleagues to begin our observance on Shove Off Day, May 25—the day in 1865 that Black and White troops together boarded a ship in Virginia to carry the word of emancipation to Texas. Together they faced storms, skirmishes, sickness—as well as all the prejudices, fears, and enforced institutionalized inequities that are still part of our shared history.

I believe Voncile was correct: It's my responsibility to confront and end racism and all that divides us. But I believe her position was incomplete: We're all in this together. Racism keeps us separate and apart, weakened in our work to understand and transform all the beliefs and structures that stand in the way of the full flowering of freedom. Let's shove off together on this journey.

Maybe the next stop is Winston Salem. Or maybe next door.



*Pictured left to right: Mary and Voncile
Manhattanville College, circa 1960*

Reflections

By Marilyn Whittington

Co-Convener Delaware City/Polktown Juneteenth Planning Committee

My paternal great grandmother Elizabeth Bowers Shorter is buried in Delaware City. She spent some of her life in Polktown, although I visited her only when she was a resident of Delaware City. My dad was a dutiful grandson, and nearly every Sunday after Sunday school we drove from Wilmington to eat dinner at her table. I was 18 when she died in August 1968. Her tombstone etching gives her birth year 1885.

Her birth year is significant. It means she was born a free black child, as were her four sisters, my great aunts —Laura, Helen, Reba and Edith. (Their mother was enslaved, the property of a family who

grandmother because she read the black press, and it was common knowledge President Truman, a veteran and child of slave-owning parents in Missouri, would have the courage to do such a thing. Three veterans —my father and her two nephews— served honorably among hundreds of thousands (eventually dubbed “the greatest generation”).

Then in 1954 she saw the end of segregation in public schools. She was marveled by the courage of civil rights leaders Rosa Parks, Roy Wilkins, Medgar Evers. I think she expected Malcolm’s gun down and mourned Martin Luther King’s assassination. She witnessed the political achievements of Adam Clayton Powell and Ralph Bunche. She praised the March on Washington. She was astonished by the civil rights acts passed under Lyndon B. Johnson. Sputnik worried her. She saw John Glenn orbit the Earth.

This country is the only country she knew, despite its flawed laws and blatant racial discrimination which she endured. Could she imagine any holiday in tribute to the emancipation of people of African descent? I don’t think so.

But for her and all those men, women and children like her, we will celebrate and commemorate Juneteenth, the most recent legislated national holiday, a day to reflect on what it means to have freedom.



*Pictured left to right: Edith Mae Portlock, Elizabeth "Lizzie" Portlock Bowers Shorter, our great grandmother, Helen B. Portlock Ennis, Reba Portlock
Photo courtesy of Wayne K. Portlock, circa mid-1940*

lived in Kent County, Delaware. Given the name Bowers, I believed without investigation, their mother belonged to landowners in what was and still is Bowers Beach. My brother, Wayne, knows more.)

Having been born in 1885, I know she lived through five wars and the ongoing Vietnam conflict. She lived with stories of lynchings and suspicious deaths of black men and women, prohibition, the stock market crash, the migration of black share croppers leaving the south, and Roosevelt’s New Deal. She read the black news papers, was always informed about “our stories”.

In 1948, three years after World War II’s end when Harry Truman succeeded President Roosevelt, he issued Executive Order 9981, eliminating racially segregated Armed Forces. It astonished my great

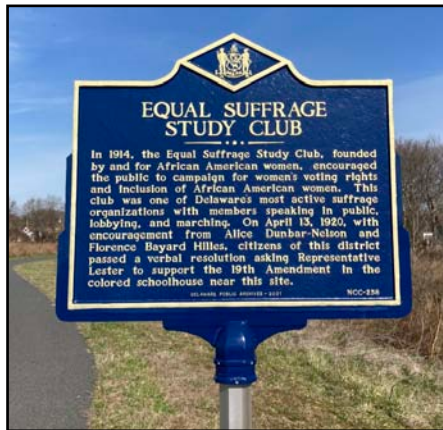


*Laura Portlock
Photo courtesy of Wayne K. Portlock, circa mid-1940*

Marker Commemorates Polktown Suffrage Meeting

By Jeanne Corman

People traveling to or from the Michael N. Castle Trail, along the Branch Canal Trail in Delaware City, will notice a state historical marker that was installed on October 7, 2021. It is one of four markers, issued by the Delaware Public Archives & Delaware Heritage Commission, celebrating the centennial of the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that guaranteed women the right to vote. This marker commemorates a meeting of the Equal Suffrage Study Club (ESSC) held on April 13, 1920 "in the colored schoolhouse near this site".



State historical marker along the Branch Canal Trail.

Segregation of institutions and organizations by race was the norm during the "Jim Crow" era in Delaware, even while there was a shared goal such as women's suffrage. As stated on the sign, African American women in Wilmington founded the ESSC in 1914 to bring forward voting rights issues that specifically impacted African American women, and men—a response to exclusion from suffrage organizations, such as the Delaware Equal Suffrage Association, whose members were white.

However, prominent civil rights leader Alice Dunbar-Nelson, ESSC's president, and Florence Bayard Hilles, chairwoman of the Delaware branch of the National Woman's Party, would campaign together at public meetings such as the one described by the marker.

Actually, two meetings were held in Delaware City that night. Both had the same agenda: pass a verbal resolution asking

Representative Edward Lester of that district to support state ratification of the 19th Amendment. The first meeting, for white residents in the area, was held at the Delaware City firehouse. The speakers were Mrs. Hilles and Miss Vivian Pierce from California. The resolution passed unanimously. The second meeting, as reported the next day in Wilmington's newspaper, *The Every Evening*, "was held in the colored school house, about thirty colored citizens being in attendance. Mrs. Hilles and Mrs. Dunbar-Nelson, of this city, addressed the audience. A similar resolution was passed."

These meetings took place during a time of intense lobbying by suffragists. They believed Delaware could become the 36th state to ratify the 19th Amendment, thereby satisfying the requirement to make it part of the U.S. Constitution. While the Delaware Senate voted to pass the amendment, the House voted against going into committee to consider the ratification resolution just before the General Assembly adjourned on June 2nd for the remainder of the year. Despite the verbal resolutions passed during the ESSC and firehouse meetings, Rep. Lester was not swayed and joined 23 other Representatives in that negative vote. Instead, Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the amendment on August 18th, and it officially became part of the U.S. Constitution on August 26, 1920. Delaware eventually approved ratification on March 6, 1923.

Resources:

Boylan, Anne M. *Votes for Delaware Women*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2021

The Evening Journal, Wilmington, Delaware, April 14, 1920

The Evening Journal, Wilmington, Delaware, June 3, 1920



Alice Dunbar-Nelson, ESSC President, addressed the schoolhouse meeting attendees. (Ohio History Connection)



The Delaware City Colored School, located in Polktown, where the suffrage meeting described in the marker took place on April 13, 1920. Polktown School, circa 1921

Courtesy of the Hagley Museum and Library

Observing Juneteenth ~ continued

five members of the USCT. The African Union Church Cemetery, now held by the Mt. Salem U.A.M.E. Church, was established in 1835 on the edge of Polktown, one of the oldest Free Black Communities in Delaware. Several Black families also lived along 5th Street. Despite Delaware being a slave state, we know of at least seven young men from our town signed up to serve in the USCT. The [Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery](#) was organized to reclaim the land and the history of those interred there. Together, we make history, carrying the legacy and the dreams of freedom of our USCT and their families forward.

This year, the FAUCC is doing that by organizing the Delaware City/Polktown Juneteenth Observance. In conjunction with Main Street, the Delaware City Library and the Mt. Salem U.A.M.E. Church, we will begin, as the USCT did, on Shove Off Day, May 25th and end on June 19th. Planning has begun and has far to go, but we have the enthusiastic support of the City of Delaware City and many residents, Black and White, including some descendants of early Polktown residents.

May 25, Shove Off Day: An educational and cultural gathering at the Community Center sponsored by the Delaware City Library. 250 5th St., Delaware City.

Between May 25-June 19: The Delaware City Library will host several programs including an essay and art work challenge for youth. Date and specifics to follow. 250 5th St., Delaware City.

Sunday, June 16, at 10:00 A.M.: Mt Salem U.A.M.E. Church invites the community to worship with their congregation. A community barbeque will follow on the church grounds. 305 4th St., Delaware City

June 16 to June 21: Contemporary photography exhibit by E. Lynn Dilliplane; "The Landscapes of Delaware Harriett Tubman Underground Railroad Byway" at The Central Hotel Petite Social, 85 Clinton St., Delaware City. Sponsored by Main Street Delaware City, Inc.

Wednesday, June 19, at 10:00 A.M.: Solemn Ceremony at the African Union Church Cemetery in honor of those who have fought and who continue to fight for freedom. 1840 Michael N. Castle Trail, Delaware City.

Wednesday, June 19, 6:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M.: *Best Kept Soul*, an evening of R&B and Soul, at the bandstand in Battery Park, 31 Clinton St., Delaware City. Sponsored by Main Street Delaware City, Inc.



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 ~ 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

