

WELCOME
TO THE
FRIENDS OF THE
AFRICAN UNION
CHURCH
CEMETERY



Dear Friends,

I just want to thank each and every one of our supporters. Those in the individual, family, patron and sponsor membership levels give us a jump start towards seeking, and getting anchor, benefactor and corporate help needed to recover our cemetery.

It has been 25 years, much hard work and many blessings from folks like yourselves that have brought us to where we are today. The design for the cemetery is complete, the work has begun, and we are welcoming two new board members, Beth Konkus, and Jamal Hall.

I leave you with this thought "A picture is worth a thousand words", and the pictures we have from the past, placed alongside the pictures of today speak to us, telling us a story, almost lost, but for the work of folks like you, now preserved for the future.

The five USCT soldiers buried in the African Union Church Cemetery and those civilians who are also buried there, won't be forgotten. Again, I thank you, and look forward to a great 2015, making sure that "History Is Alive And Well" in Polktown, near Delaware City, Delaware.

Willis Phelps Jr., President

New Venues in Delaware City

American Birding Headquarters, the leading organization in North America for all aspects of recreational birding, is located in the Central Hotel at 93 Clinton Street. For more information contact: 302.838.3660 * 800.850.2473 * www.aba.org/join

Delaware City Heritage Association, a newly formed group, welcomes all those interested in sharing their time, talent or treasure, as they delve into Delaware City's collective deep rooted history. Monthly meetings are held at the Delaware City Library. For information contact Josias Bartram at 302.834.4148 or Josias.Bartram@lib.de.us

C & D Canal and Local History Museum celebrated its grand opening on April 15th. Bob and Joann Wisowaty created a small museum in an old storage carrier that is filled with artifacts, photographs and information about Delaware City and the canal. The museum is located next to Wiso's Crabs & Seafood at 101 Fifth Street. Admission is free. The Wisowatys have placed a donation box at the entrance to support the African Union Church Cemetery. For information call 302.836.0224.



The African Union Church Cemetery

Cutting Edge personnel installed over 12,000 square feet of sod at the cemetery in 2014



Kristin Cardi & assistant from Materials Conservation working on grave marker conservation



Private Elbert: The Voice of the Past By: Laura Lee

One of the ways the Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery brings the story of the United States Colored Troops to the public is through the story of Private James Elbert. The president of our group, Willis Phelps, gives life to Pvt. Elbert through engaging living history presentations for young and old. With the help of Dave Orr's meticulous research on Elbert, Willis has the uncanny ability to take you back to a time 150 years ago.

James C. Elbert joined the army as a young man of twenty-four. He left behind his mother Julia, sisters Harriet and Lavina, and brother William. His father, a farmer, passed away when James was just a boy. Most likely the Elberts lived in a small frame house in Polktown, one of the first free black communities in Delaware and home to the African Union Church. Listed as a 'day laborer' in the 1860 census, James probably supplemented the family income by fishing the waters of the Delaware, or making a living off the turtles, muskrat and ducks that populated the marsh. The census lists their family 'estate' at a value of twenty dollars.

Civil War Delaware was still a slave state, and ironically those who lived as free citizens in Polktown probably had friends and family that were slaves on farms just down the

road. One can only imagine how Elbert felt to be given an opportunity to 'put on the blue suit with eagle buttons' and take part in the fight that would eventually free his own neighbors, relatives, and the rest of enslaved Americans. It's hard to know the true motivations of James for joining the Army, but like many others the hundred dollar bounty surely was a strong incentive. For whatever reason, in 1863 he bid goodbye to his family and probably walked to Wilmington to sign up. Signing on for a three-year stint, Elbert would have traveled by train and wagon to Camp William Penn, a training camp north of Philadelphia. Here he received a uniform, gear, and a musket, whirlwind training, and became a private in Company C, 8th United States Colored Troops. The 8th was comprised of mostly free Northern blacks from Pennsylvania, a few Southern contrabands, recruits from Maryland and Delaware, and even a few from as far away as Indiana and even Jamaica. By January of 1864 after only a frightfully short training period they were on a steamboat headed for war.

Private Elbert's first stop was in South Carolina, where work likely included helping to round up 'contraband' or freed slaves. They soon headed off to Camp Finnegan in north central Florida, and it was here in February that Private Elbert came face to face with the brutal reality of war. The unit suffered a crushing defeat, and nearly half of his regiment were



From the Executive Director • Linda L. Beck

2014 was an exciting year. We could finally begin to see the results of our restoration work at the cemetery. Once the expanse of over 12,000 square feet of newly installed sod could be viewed with all the grave markers standing out against that sea of green, I knew we were making progress. Our resident archeologist, Dr. David Orr, was on hand providing advice and caution as personnel from the Cutting Edge painstakingly graded and applied top soil prior to the sod installation. More than twenty-five additional unmarked grave markers were discovered as they did their work. That was a very rewarding day!

Goals for 2015 and the future: Completion of interpretive wayside signs telling the story of the cemetery and of Polktown made possible through a grant from the Delaware Humanities Forum; installation of a metal fence around the cemetery; creation of a brick plaza next to the cemetery that will include benches, landscaping and a flagpole; continued outreach and education at public events and schools.

Such milestones can occur because private, corporate and public contributors have provided support to make the restoration a reality. I'd like to thank the following for their

The African Union Church Cemetery

either killed or wounded. A lack of adequate battlefield drill training and inexperience in loading their weapons under pressure likely contributed to the disastrous results. Their commander Colonel Fribley was killed, and 87 of Elbert's regiment perished in the battle that the Confederates dominated. By August, Elbert and his regiment were in Virginia, where at the Battle of Darbytown his luck ran out. Pvt. Elbert took a bullet in his shoulder, and was taken to a hospital in City Point. Here he remained listed as 'absent wounded' until November of 1864.

Sometime around December of the same year Elbert was given a 20-day furlough and told he could go home. Had he been able to read and write, he might have known that this was not a permanent ticket out of the war. Back in Delaware City, in January he was apprehended as a deserter and taken to federal court in Virginia and charged with desertion a month later. His charge read as follows: "James Elbert... having been duly enlisted in the Military Service of the United States, and having received a furlough for twenty days, failed to return at its expiration, but did, without proper authority, remain absent from the hospital until apprehended at or near Delaware City, Delaware on or about the 18th day of January, 1865."

Elbert's defense was clear: he was simply incapable of reading the document and

did not understand the twenty day furlough stipulation. He was found not guilty of desertion but guilty of a lesser charge of absent without leave. Returning to his regiment, he probably forfeited one month's pay and suffered other punishments common to AWOL soldiers while in camp. After a month, he was back in the ranks but the war was drawing to a close. Instead of going home however, Elbert was sent via steamer to Texas in May of 1865. While other African American soldiers were being enlisted for post-war duty in the western frontier, Elbert opted out and took the steamer to Philadelphia. Did he feel an obligation to return home to help his mother and family? We will never know. Private Elbert left the Army on November 10, 1865.



Willis Phelps portraying James H. Elbert, Co. C, 8th Infantry, USCT
2014 Archeology & Heritage Festival,
Iron Hill Museum, Newark, Delaware

take some pride in returning to a Delaware where all Americans were now free. Private Elbert was laid to rest with four other USCT soldiers from the town, all who received granite markers from the federal government. The stones tell only of their name, company, and regiment. While his story is not written, his legacy is etched in stone and holds a prominent place in the African Union Church Cemetery.

There is no written record of Private Elbert's after the war, but he probably returned to a quiet existence of farming and living off the land in Delaware City. Private Elbert could

donations, grants, and services: American Swedish Historical Foundation, Inc., Annette L. Purnell, Cutting Edge of Delaware, Delaware Humanities Forum, Delaware State Employees Charitable Campaign, Delaware City Refining Company, Delmarva Historic Haunts, Granite-Corinthian Lodge, Greater Delaware Area Chapter Buffalo Soldiers, Hiram Lodge #25, Kristin Cardi, Longwood Foundation, Inc., New Castle Historical Society, and the City of Delaware City. We'd like to thank the following Delaware City businesses who've agreed to display our donation boxes: Cordelia's, Crabby Dicks Restaurant, Delaware City Liquors, Delaware City Marina, Delaware City Town Hall, La Matesina, Sunset Market, and Wiso's Crab & Seafood.

Finally, we'd like to thank those who have contributed through their yearly dues. Your interest and support are key to the success of this project.



Greater Delaware Area Chapter Buffalo Soldiers presenting check to President Willis Phelps & Rev. James Matthews

Delaware City Branch Canal Trail Update

*By: Richard Cathcart
Delaware City Manager*

After a very wet fall and winter work will be continuing on the Delaware City Branch Canal Trail. As most know this portion of the trail will connect to the Michael N. Castle Trail and will eventually link downtown Delaware City's Battery Park and Chesapeake City, Maryland. The Delaware City Branch Canal Trail link is in the final phase of the "lifts" which will bring the trail to the final sub-grade elevation. This final lift will have to settle over a three month period. After the settlement period the stone base for the finished trail will be installed to establish the final grade for the trail.

In mid-April geotechnical borings were completed that will test the soils in the area where the bridge abutments will be constructed. This test information will be used to design the abutments and the final design of the bridge. It appears that the project is still on schedule for an October trail opening.

The Branch Canal Trail link is going to feature the restored African Union Church Cemetery. There will be a path into the cemetery that will provide interpretive signage and a beautifully paved and landscaped plaza. The history of the cemetery is an interesting story of that era of time and an interesting story of the African American Civil War Soldiers buried there.

The trail will also feature an observation tower with views of the natural habitat of the wetlands and marsh. There will also be osprey nesting towers installed and will be a favorite place for bird watching enthusiast to observe the many species of birds.

Archaeology at the site of the Grave of Harriet Serena Byard

By: Dr. David Orr

During the landscaping activities and grave marker restoration activities of late 2014, some interesting archaeological artifacts emerged. A large iron object was seen to be located about three feet deep by the grave marker of Harriet Serena Byard and some other artifacts also were recovered. Fragments of what appears to be a late nineteenth/early twentieth century glass goblet, a small sherd of ironstone earthenware, and several pieces of oyster shells were identified during the resetting of the grave marker. It was then decided to excavate the large iron object and determine its true significance. Dr. Christopher Barton and Dr. David Orr excavated the area around the iron object and identified it as a fully preserved section of an ornamental iron gate, once part of an iron fence which probably surrounded the Byard grave site (see photograph below). Additionally, another glass goblet was discovered, this specimen seemed to be of twentieth century date.

What does this mean and how should we proceed? It was decided that Orr and Barton will return sometime during the Spring of 2015 and fully excavate the fence section. Preliminary interpretations indicate that the cemetery was still actively used in the first quarter of the twentieth century. A fuller interpretation will be produced following the 2015 planned excavations.



Gravestone of Harriet Serena Byard



Dr. David Orr & Dr. Christopher Barton excavating the site



Section of an ornamental iron gate

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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

- Individual (one person only) - \$10
- Supporting - \$30
- Benefactor - \$500
- I am interested in volunteering
- Family (family members at a single address) - \$20
- Patron - \$50
- Sponsor - \$100
- 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.

