

ISSUE

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2016

Newsletter of the
Friends of the African Church Cemetery

Epitaph

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

Dear Friends,

Here we are three months into 2016, and thanks to all of our supporters, it is starting out with many of our plans and hopes being realized with abundant blessings. Thanks to those of you who have been with us from the beginning, and the folks who we have just welcomed aboard in January. With the addition of a new Advisory Board, we are adding more vision to where we want to go beyond 2016.

In telling the stories of the five United States Colored Troops buried in the cemetery at the many programs that we've presented, and being moved by quite a few of the audience reactions (two 5th grade students wanted my autograph, and the pen I used!), we are looking forward to expanding those true stories.

Again, with the help of each one of you, your donations and the grants, pro-bono services and materials we've received, we are in a place of Celebration! In my last letter of thanks, I said that "A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words"! Look at those showing our progress. They speak to where we have come from, and with the help of each of you, where we are going.

Willis Phelps, President



The installation of the fence surrounding the cemetery and the brick plaza has been completed.

As work progresses this year on the Delaware City Branch Canal Trail, the Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery are looking forward to continuing with our plans to install solar lighting, benches, a flag pole and interpretive wayside signs on the plaza and landscaping the adjacent areas.

By: Craig O'Donnell

Nearly 180,000 U.S. Colored Troops took part in the Civil War. Most survived and not all recruits saw combat. But as veterans they were entitled to a free headstone marking their service. The Civil War veterans' tombstones are distinctive and the five USCT veterans we've identified in the African Union Church Cemetery have what can be called the "federal stone."

The United States Colored Troops Headstone Project on Facebook is a little more than three years old, "dedicated to the locating, photographing & displaying of United States Colored Troops (USCT) Soldiers headstones all over the United States & to PRESERVE their history through Photographs, Documents, etc"

Thousands of headstone photos have been posted with, where it's available, basic information on the veteran's service. The curator, John G. Hall, has gathered them into photo albums by state or by national cemetery, along with images of re-enactors, photos from the Library of Congress, documents and photos of USCT soldiers. Hall is Graves Registration Officer for the James Brady Camp of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War. He said, "To date I've



AUCC Hubert Mt Olive

This federal stone, from Wilmington, had dates added.



AUCC Furrow Mt Olive

This stone looks homemade. So does one other.



AUCC Graves Mt Olive

This plain stone for husband and wife includes unit information. The free stones would only name the soldier, not a spouse. This couple's family was able to afford a modest marker.

registered over 10,800 graves on the National Grave Database. Over 6,000 are USCT."

Mr. Hall continues, "I started in 2012 at Hampton National Cemetery. When I started the page I had no idea that it would grow so quickly. Within the first few days I was getting messages from people that they knew of USCT graves. So instead of a small project that only had the graves at Hampton it quickly grew into people submitting grave locations all over the country! As you can see we are now nearing 3,000 likes for the page. We even have a location of a USCT grave in Australia & Hawaii. As a member of Find A Grave also I've had a tremendous amount of assistance from other members. I think people like the fact that they can submit as little as one grave or hundreds if they choose. All we need is a clear photo and the location. Most of the time I do the research on the soldier but some have done it too!"

Hall's archive has 22 Delaware stones - one each from Riverview and Mt. Zion in Wilmington, one from Bethany UAME in New Castle and the rest from Mt. Olive, Wilmington. The stones from the African Union Church Cemetery will be added for Lewis Taylor, Alexander Draper, James H. Elbert, William H. Crawford and Joseph B. Bayard.

FRIENDS OF THE AFRICAN UNION CHURCH CEMETERY



PRESERVING AND SHARING THE STORY OF THIS CIRCA 1835 HISTORIC SITE ON THE NORTH BANK OF THE BRANCH CANAL IN DELAWARE CITY, DELAWARE



- ◆ Resting place of members of Polktown, one of Delaware's first free black communities.
- ◆ Final home of five members of the United States Colored Troops, serving valiantly in the Civil War.

The above rack card shows Willis Phelps, Jr. portraying James H. Elbert, Co. C 8th USCT and is currently distributed at various public sites. For programming, see contact information below.

The rack card was partially funded by a grant from the Delaware Humanities Forum, a state program of the National Endowment for the Humanities.



Get Involved!

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AUCCPROGRAMS@GMAIL.COM

POLKTOWN, DELAWARE • CIRCA 1835

The African American community known today as Polktown is one of the earliest remaining free black settlements in Delaware and has been continuously occupied for nearly two centuries. It extended on both sides of the historic branch canal and included a church, school and residences.

Polktown land ownership was controlled by whites from 1830 through 1845. Two purchases by African Americans, first by Rev. Shadrach Boyer and his two sons, then by Perry Reynolds and Betsy Green in 1853, marked the first African American ownership.

Polktown's initial fortunes were linked to the canal. Today's neighborhood is a reminder of the original community.

Map of the Site of Delaware from actual surveys by and under the direction of S.G. Barr 1868

POLKTOWN
CIRCA 1950
Photographs courtesy Goshel Moore Jones

AFRICAN UNION CHURCH CEMETERY

The Headstone Project & Economics

The standard federal tombstones are distinctive because of their small size, curved top and the veteran's name and unit in raised letters within a shield. While any veteran could have one, those who could afford a more elaborate stone sometimes mentioned their military service on it. Others did not. All but three, photos identified on previous page [AUCC Hubert Mt Olive, AUCC Furrow Mt Olive, AUCC Graves Mt Olive] in Delaware's collection are federal stones like those in the African Union Church Cemetery.

As Dr. David Orr has mentioned many times, a tombstone usually indicates social and economic status. Not always: egalitarian Quaker burial grounds and government-run veterans cemeteries come to mind. So far, Delaware's 27 USCT veterans seem to have been working-class men and most of the families took advantage of the free federal headstone.

On the USCT Headstone Project page it's easy to see the range of markers the veterans have had. In other states there are variations on the prototype federal stone which could be regional or associated with Grand Army of the Republic posts (the G.A.R. was a benevolent veterans' social group) or perhaps replacements - an interesting



AUCC Hall Merion Pa The elaborate Hall family stone in Merion, Pa., is a wealthy veteran's monument. Walter P. Hall's military service is absent from the family stone.

question, but one that doesn't apply to Delaware so far.

In contrast to the federal markers for USCT who were low on the economic ladder and sometimes illiterate, a headstone in Pennsylvania's album is a clear example how the economic status of a veteran is reflected in a monument.



AUCC W.P. Hall

The family burial plot and monument speak to a very successful African American businessman who signed up at age 16 only to find the war ending within a matter of weeks.

Hall, of the 24th USCT, lived from 1849-1917; enlisted Feb. 8, 1865 [1865, he wasn't a 7-year-old soldier] and was discharged Oct. 8, 1865.

Later, he was prominent enough in Philadelphia to merit a listing and photo in G. F. Richings, "Evidences of Progress among Colored People," 1902. (Source: Digital Public Library of America/University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.) He was in business as a "Retail Merchant, provisions and stores at Reading Terminal Market." Hill was on the vestry, Union AME Church, Philadelphia; founder of the Pioneer Building and Loan Association, 1889; and president of Mercy Hospital (founded 1907, it was an African American hospital).

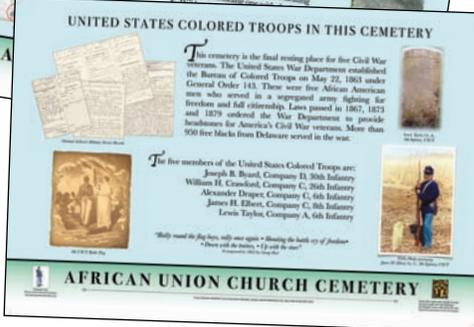
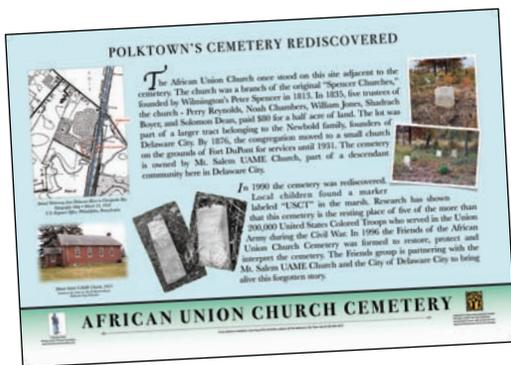
Delaware City Branch Canal Trail Update

*By: Richard Cathcart
Delaware City Manager*

Finally we can see the light at the end of the tunnel getting larger. The opening of the Branch Canal Trail that will connect the Michael Castle trail is just around the corner. The last "Lift" has passed the compaction (settlement) test, which means it can be graded to its finished elevation and prepared for asphalt surfacing. Although this is a big hurdle to get past, the installation of the bridge will be the hurdle that brings this project home to completion.

As you read this, the contractor is having their engineer finalize the construction drawings for the "platform" that will bridge the tidal creek, which will then provide direct connection with the Castle Trail. Once the drawings are completed the contractor can install bridge foundation that will eventually support the bridge. Other work that has to be performed includes: leveling the trail pathway, fine tuning wetland and cemetery drainage and paving the pathway. The scheduled ribbon cutting is still projected for early spring of this year.

Although this has been a project that has been under construction for a very long time, the trail will be an amenity that we can all be proud of. The trail will link downtown Delaware City with North Chesapeake City. It will provide residents and many visitors an opportunity to enjoy one of the most scenic trails in the region. It will bring visitors to Delaware City and in turn will bring economic benefits to our businesses. With the planned Dragon Run Trail and the upcoming Delaware Byways Trail, Delaware City will become known as a destination for trail options.



Interpretive Wayside Signs

completed in 2015 will be placed in the plaza next to the African Union Church Cemetery.

These signs were partially funded through a grant from the Delaware Humanities Forum, with funds from the National Endowment of the Humanities.



Belfast Lecture

By: David G. Orr

An unusual venue for a lecture about the African Union Church Cemetery was provided by Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland, on October 27, 2015. This came about through a former PhD student of mine, Professor Audrey Hornung, who is currently Head of the Schools of Paleoecology, Archaeology, and Geography at Queen's. She asked me if I would be willing to lecture to the school about the cemetery. I, of course agreed and soon I received an invitation from the Dean and the day and title were agreed on. My talk was called "A Free Place for Free People: African-American Community Archaeology in The Delaware Valley(USA)". I was staying with Audrey in Callybacky, Antrim, at the time so it was most convenient. I had been visiting archaeological sites of all periods in Ulster, led brilliantly by Audrey's husband, Nicholas Brannon, just retired chief archaeologist of Northern Ireland for the Department of the Environment.

Ulster is a beautiful land rich with history and archaeology and I was captivated by the power of its landscape and its people. It is also the land of my ancestors, the Magees and Orrs, who seem to be everywhere throughout the province. There is also some dramatic symmetry between the conflicts still present in both of our countries, one of race and the other of religion. My audience, students and faculty mostly, but some interested public as well, were well aware of this background. I quickly quoted the Irish Nineteenth Century patriot, whose statue dominates the street named after him in Dublin, Daniel O'Connell. He had met Frederick Douglas and I would love to have listened in on their conversations in 1845. "Slavery" was one of the favorite words to describe the Irish relationship to their ancient enemy and occupiers of their land, the English. Yet my own lecture concentrated on an illustrated interpretation of Polktown and Congo Town and the significance of such freed black communities in the subsequent history of African Americans in the United States. As archaeologists my Irish audience deeply appreciated the historiographic importance of the military headstone and the stories they told about the heroism and dedication of those who

served in the United States Colored troops. Additionally, they enthusiastically responded to the powerful nexus created by the African American community, past and present, in creating an holistic account of what is truly an important part of american culture. All and all, it was a tale well received!!

Last year was the 150th anniversary of the birth of the poet William Butler Yeats in Ireland. My talk also referenced his comments on the products of revolution; cultural alienation and political instability. This year continues these themes with the Centennial of the 1916 Easter Rebellion in Dublin which led to a free Ireland and further religious conflict in the north which opted to stay loyal to the United Kingdom. As I travelled throughout Ireland, north and south, I was confronted by this legacy which still seemed to simmer under the surface. I was especially conscious of it in Derry (Londonderry) where the memory of the violence of the recent "troubles" were on display in huge graphic murals throughout the Catholic Community (Free Derry, Bogside). I quickly recognized the metaphorical significance of my Queens' University tale of racial conflict in Delaware, vis-à-vis the cruel long standing religious wars waged in Ireland between Catholics and Protestants. I now seemed to better understand my own ancestor William Orr who fought the English and died a martyr in 1798. As Yeats



Queen's University, Belfast

would say "and what if excess of love bewildered [him] till he died". For me it also brought home the role of human conflict, racial and religious, economic and class, even urban versus rural, in our present age. It was an unforgettable Odyssey for me as I sought to discover the actual origins of my own family who had emigrated from this place in the late 18th and early 19th century. But mostly it posed new questions for me as I remain bewildered by the past with which I have had such a long conversation throughout my life.

Whose past is it? What are its lessons? Can we learn from it? But there was no question that my Irish peregrination strengthened my resolve that in our own time James C. Elbert, Co. C, 8th USCT, still has an important story for all of us.

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.

