

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



Dear Friends,

When I look back over the years and see how far we have come, I have to stop for a few minutes, catch my breath and then give Praise to God. It has been some 22, almost 23 years since we began our preservation of the African Union Church Cemetery. I give Praise to God for the many friends, public, private and corporate supporters who gave time, money and labor to make our effort an outstanding success.

The research by Dr. David Orr into the lives of the five United States Colored Troops buried in the African Union Church Cemetery has given us materials for a diverse and rich look at African American history during the Civil War. With this history, members of our group have been able to compile an interpretive, inclusive program, which we present to schools, libraries, churches and at public events. We have seen our telling of the Pvt. James H. Elbert's story evolve into a titled presentation "Voices of The Past", scripted by Laura Lee and brought to life by myself in the persona of Pvt. Elbert. This traveling program (which is free to the public!) has been a joy for me over the last few seasons. Being a storyteller, it has taken me on some emotional trips.

Just recently we have come into contact with a living relative of Pvt. Elbert, through the efforts of Roberta Perkins and Jeanne Corman. Her name is Morine Elbert Anderson. All of this has required me to step up to the work Laura Lee has scripted to do the best interpretation of the soldier and family history that we have. So with that in mind, I am leaving the position as President to devote all my time to the Pvt. Elbert's story. Thanks to everyone for all that you have done. Let us go forward with "Keeping History Alive".

Willis Phelps Jr.

Past President, Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery

The Board of Directors wishes to thank Willis Phelps, Jr. for serving as President of our organization for many years. His enthusiasm and leadership have been an inspiration to us all. Willis will continue to be front and center portraying Pvt. James Elbert in programs that are presented by the Friends of the AUCC to enthusiastic audiences throughout the state.

A solar powered surveillance system was installed at the cemetery in 2017. This system is monitored by the Delaware City Police Department. We wish to thank the Delaware City Police Department and the City of Delaware City for their help with this project.

Also new at the cemetery is a Delaware Historic Marker. Thanks to Senator Nicole Poore and Representative Valerie Longhurst for their support as well as the Delaware Public Archives for their guidance.

A NEW EVENT in 2018!! We are planning a Members Event in September. We will keep you posted.

Linda L. Beck, Executive Director



# Connecting the Generations...the Elbert Family

By Jeanne Corman and Roberta Perkins

*"We are braver and wiser because they existed, those strong women and strong men... We are who we are because they were who they were. It's wise to know where you come from, who called your name."*  
- Maya Angelou

Morine Elbert Anderson "met" her relative, Pvt. James H. Elbert, for the first time on December 2, 2017 at the African Union Church Cemetery. It was a special moment when she knelt by his headstone, reached out and touched it, and then sat back quietly to take it all in. Later, Morine shared her thoughts and feelings during that time, "My heart dropped to my feet because I felt like, I'm finally here, and he's probably singing that somebody has found him...I shed some tears and I felt overwhelmed with joy. Also, there was some sorrow - how could we not check on the grave, not show interest, or call his name? It helped me realize what family is about."

This significant event was witnessed by Linda Beck, Executive Director of the Friends of the African Union Church Cemetery (FAUCC) and several board members and their families. When everyone gathered at Mt. Salem UAME Church afterward, Morine shared part of her family story. Raised by her grandparents, she spent a lot of time with her grandfather, the Rev. Dr. James W. Elbert, traveling to church conferences and events. During these trips, he would tell her about their family. She particularly recalled him saying that his grandfather, her great-great-grandfather, Pvt. James H. Elbert, was buried in Delaware City. Over the years, this history has taken on increased meaning to her. Morine is a retired Army veteran working for the Wilmington Veterans Administration in human resources. In her role, she is always listening to soldiers' stories. Remembering what her grandfather told her, Morine realized she had a story of her own. This ignited an interest in finding her ancestor and she reached out to FAUCC.

## Telling The Stories

Many people have worked diligently since 1990 to reclaim this historically significant cemetery from the surrounding marsh. The cemetery, and the 6 men and 3 women known to be interred there, are a link to Polktown, a community settled by free African Americans in the early 1800s, just outside Delaware City. In addition, 5 of the 6 men served in the United States Colored Troops (USCT) during the Civil War. The mission of FAUCC has been to preserve and restore the physical site and to tell the stories of the mostly forgotten people who are buried there. This not only contributes to the history of Delaware and New Castle County, but also allows these individuals to be honored and their accomplishments celebrated.

Significant progress has been made in achieving this mission, including opening the restored cemetery to the public in 2016 with interpretive signs explaining the history of the cemetery, people, and community. FAUCC also provides educational programs at schools and in public venues. These programs, based on the research of civilian and military records, tell the story of Pvt. James H. Elbert, one of the 5 men who served in the USCT. Mr. Willis Phelps' portrayal of Pvt. Elbert has introduced countless children and adults to him and kept his story alive over the years.



Linda Price (left) and Linda Beck from FAUCC, introducing Morine Elbert Anderson to the cemetery.



Morine Elbert Anderson at the gravesite of Pvt. James H. Elbert.

FAUCC is now looking to expand the stories that can be told by discovering living relatives of the people buried in the cemetery. Archeologist Dr. David Orr addressed the significance of this in his 2009 report about the cemetery and the 5 USCT buried there, "The descendants of the soldiers should be interviewed...This is the most important product that could grow out of this cemetery's rediscovery. Connecting the living to a common identity is a goal which I hope is someday realized. Hopefully, people will come forward with sources of information heretofore untapped." Morine Elbert Anderson's contact with FAUCC created the first possible connection. What a wonderful coincidence that it is with Pvt. James H. Elbert, the 'public face' of FAUCC for so many years!

## Making Connections

Morine's oral family history makes a strong connection to Pvt. Elbert. As a historian, Morine's father Vance Elbert, wanted to document it. However, he couldn't locate records that would definitively link his grandfather, Silas J. Elbert to his great-grandfather, Pvt. James H. Elbert.

When Morine contacted FAUCC, we wanted to work with her family to hopefully find that missing link. Looking through online records, the difficulty became apparent. While Pvt. Elbert is fairly well documented in his early life through US Census and military records, no records appear from the time he mustered out of the military in 1865 until his death, at approximately age 40, on June 18, 1882. The reverse is true for Silas J. Elbert. Who he lived with as a child is unknown because he appears for the first time in the 1900 US Census when he was approximately 28 years old. Now the next steps are to get advice from local genealogists and search in person for documents located in state archives and county records.

The online research did reveal other people who appear to be related to Pvt. Elbert through his sister, Harriet, and brother, William. We will be making contact with them in hopes of not only gaining more information about the Elbert family, but also possibly creating a link between living extended families

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# Polktown: Fact or Fiction

By Craig O'Donnell

Few free black villages figure in literature. Polktown is an exception.

Poketown People by Ella Middleton Tybout was published in 1904 by J.B. Lippincott. Today, the book is considered collectible Delawareana.

What did Tybout set out to do? In common with dozens of other writers of the day, she wanted to chronicle picturesque and amusing rural characters. She chose residents of the Delaware City area, African Americans who worked for her family. Her 13 stories drew on the free African Americans Tybout encountered when she was young: domestics, farm laborers and pastors. As she was writing, she surely imagined specific people. To think it is history is tempting, but none of the characters has been identified with a Polktown resident, and the stories aren't fixed in time by reference to historical events.

She grew up on Hamburg Road and her fictional tales, evoking her childhood in the 1880s and 90s, were set in nearby Polktown. They appeared in Lippincott's Monthly Magazine in 1901-03 and were collected into Poketown People in 1904. They are in a particular place and era. But they are not history.

According to her introduction, "I recall with affection certain dark-skinned friends of my childhood, whose patience and unflinching kindness endeared them to me then and deserve recognition from me now. These sketches are simply intended to depict the Negro as I have known him or her with their eccentricities, superstitions, strange code of morality, and curious practical application of religion to everyday life. The higher education of the Negro is fast obliterating the types I have described. There are still some left, however, and to them and the memory of others who helped to make my childhood happy, I dedicate this little volume."

A century later, it's hard to understand what made these stories so humorous. But it would be unfair to doubt her sincerity. She grew up among whites and blacks. Part of her affection for her companions may have been due to having no father: George Maxwell Tybout, buried in St. Georges Cemetery, died the year she was born.

But in 1900 Tybout fell neatly in with the times and sincerity is not enough. For decades an entire category of American fiction had been focused on exotic types with their peculiar speech (ruralites, sailors or fishermen, pioneers, cowboys). Bernard A. Drew has labeled these stories of African Americans, usually by white writers, "Jim Crow era" fiction. His 2015 book "Black Stereotypes in Popular Series Fiction, 1851-1955" examines 29 authors and their characters in particular and summarizes 72 others, including Tybout, mostly "a sea of white writers who clung as long as they could to stereotype."

For example, characters often spoke uneducated dialect. It is one thing to write "Poketown" – Delawareans say it that way. Tybout uses phonetic speech throughout: for example, "Whut kin' ob a bolt am a thundahbolt?" asks one boy.

This was before audio recording. On one hand she was conveying an accent common in rural, especially southern, America. In her 1902 story in New England Magazine, "The Price of an Angel," she tried to capture a New England rural accent in print.

On the other, this was designed to amuse a white audience. Phonetically rendered African American talk was a well-established stereotype by 1900.

Tybout's stories ("parables") have a Biblical component. Much of the material concerns Biblical characters and references, another stock Jim Crow literary device.

A church called "Little Bethel" figures prominently, sometimes competing for parishioners with an upstart church, Zion. That's no surprise considering the central role churches held, and still hold, in African American communities. To be sure, there was a church in Polktown. But the tales aren't history and should not be confused with the true African American cultural experience in late-1800s Delaware City.

That stereotypes are in play is not a new idea. In 1931, book reviewer Wilson Jefferson wrote of author Roark Bradford's tales, "This false approach towards the wealth of material in negro life is made intentionally ... these authors know that a majority of their readers have never come into intimate contact with [African Americans and] conclude that it is easier and more remunerative to cater to this empty half knowledge than to attempt to relate the black man artistically to that humanity which is the world."

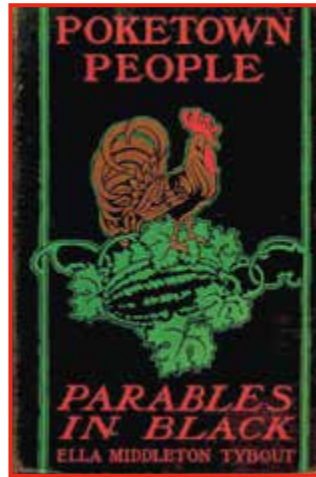
So young Ella Tybout may have heard the themes in her stories. She may have been well-acquainted with her free African American neighbors. But later, "Poketown life" is embellished in the telling for mainly white readers.

Only one of the 13 stories can be traced to local folk tales. Tybout's sketch of Delaware's Fiddler's Bridge legend involves a preacher and domestic shenanigans rather than a proper haunting.

The legend was still told in the mid-20th century. I heard it from my father, Patrick O'Donnell Jr., on car trips as we passed south of St. Georges. It involves an African American fiddler (maybe drunk, maybe mad) who would sit on the railing and play until, one night, he fell into the creek and drowned.

From then on, tossing a dime over at midnight would summon the musical ghost. Fiddler's Bridge, unlike Little Bethel, can be located. It is on Route 13 over tiny Scott's Run, a creek that

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*Ella Middleton Tybout  
Photo courtesy Thomas Tear*

also possibly creating a link between living extended families that didn't exist before.

By identifying and connecting people who can honor and keep alive the memory of their ancestors, the African Union Church Cemetery, the people buried there, and the Polktown community, are relevant now and will continue to have meaning for future generations.

## Connecting Generations...Your Help Is Needed

As Dr. Orr wrote, "hopefully people will come forward" and help FAUCC make connections with the living relatives of the 9 men and women in the cemetery. In addition to James H. Elbert, the following people identified by headstones are Harriet Serena Byard, Perry Reynolds, Sarah Neal, Rebecca Webb and USCT soldiers Lewis Taylor, Alexander Draper, William H. Crawford and Joseph B. Byard.

You can help in 3 ways: 1) let us know if you are, or may be, related to any of the people listed above; 2) contact us if you know someone who may be related, or encourage that person to contact us; 3) offer your experience in doing genealogical research.

Contact us at: [info@africanunioncemetery.org](mailto:info@africanunioncemetery.org) or FAUCC, 407 Clinton Street, PO Box 4159, Delaware City, DE 19706

runs into the C&D Canal. It's overwhelmed today by the Route 1 Biddles Plaza tollbooths and recent construction on the extended Route 301. The old bridge is long gone.

## Who was Tybout?

Ella Middleton Tybout was born in 1871, near today's Hamburg Road and Route 9, and died in 1952 in Pennsylvania. The family estates Bellevue and Stockton were west of Route 9 north of Red Lion Creek. A now-missing state historical marker was placed on Hamburg Road in 2001.

Starting in 1901, she published in popular magazines like Lippincott's Monthly Magazine, Frank Leslie's Monthly and New England Magazine. She later wrote several novels, for example, "The Smuggler" and "The Wife of the Secretary of State."



Location of Tybout farms north of Red Lion Creek in New Castle Hundred Atlas of the State of Delaware, D.G. Beers, 1868

**Become a member or volunteer today** It's through our partnership with history enthusiasts like you that we're 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.

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, 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       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](mailto:info@africanunioncemetery.org)

