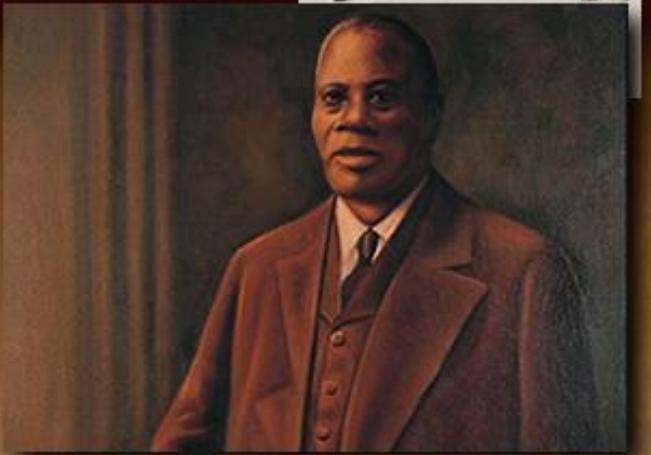


Worcester County's African American Heritage



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Text by Paul Touart from the 1995-2009 Worcester County Tourism website.
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Worcester County's African American Experience

The history of the African-American experience in Worcester County consists of a complex fabric of written facts and oral traditions, as well as people of local, state and national prominence. Worcester County's African American community can point to a long and rich history of people, places and events that have helped shape the cultural traditions of the Delmarva Peninsula. However, the full history of the African-American experience on the Eastern Shore has yet to be researched or written.



Fishing the Pocomoke c. 1925
(Photo courtesy Julia A. Purnell Museum)



Comfort Powell House
(Photo courtesy Gabe Purnell)

It is a sincere hope that this document may spur others to learn more about their own families or research individuals who have contributed in other ways to the complex and interwoven cultural fabric that distinguishes this unique region.

Find out more:

- **Maryland African American Culture**
<http://www.africanamericanculture.org>

We Shall Overcome: Slavery

The lower Eastern Shore, initially laid out as Somerset County in 1666, was settled by a diverse group of immigrants that included free white and black planters, indentured white and black servants and slaves. The earliest free settlers, white and black, endured endless struggles under harsh conditions that included high rates of disease and early deaths.

Beginning with the earliest colonial settlement of the lower Eastern Shore and stretching across more than three hundred years, blacks have had pivotal roles in the building and development of the agricultural and industrial economies that have served the Delmarva peninsula.



*Beverly Entrance Arch 1910
(Photo courtesy John V. Dennis)*

Erected during the 1770s the large brick house is distinguished by many unusual features. Attached to the south end of the house are the kitchen and colonnade, which would have been the working and living domain of several domestic slaves owned by the Dennis family. One of the most distinguished architectural features is the wrought-iron arch that accents the riverside entrance. Dennis family tradition holds that the decorative iron arch, featuring griffin heads, was made by Haitian slaves on the property in an attempt to ward off evil spirits that would endanger the plantation family.



*Former Slaves at Beverly
(Photo courtesy John V. Dennis)*

Although scores of lower Eastern Shore black families can trace their ancestry back to early free black settlers, the majority of black residents today are descendants of slaves who worked lower Shore plantations during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. They performed a multitude of tasks; from backbreaking labor in tilling fields of tobacco or corn to the endless chores associated with the daily operation of the plantation.

Slaves were trained in a host of traditional crafts within the construction trades, and they were surely involved in the assemblage of Worcester County's great 18th and early 19th century plantation dwellings. Beverly, located on the Pocomoke River, stands as one of the county's most elaborate and best preserved colonial dwellings.

By the mid 19th century, John Upshur Dennis owned 160 slaves who worked his numerous properties. Historically, Worcester County had a large number of slave-holding planters who erected an assortment of dwellings to house their slaves. The Merrill farm slave house, erected of hewn logs enclosing a single room, is one of the few examples of slave housing that has survived to modern times.

Find out more:

- ***Influence of Prominent Abolitionists***
<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam006.html> (Library of Congress)
- ***The Internet African-American History Challenge***
<http://www.brightmoments.com/blackhistory/>
- ***Little-known Facts About Slavery***
<http://www.theblackmarket.com/slavefaq.htm>
- ***Slavery, Freedom and the Chesapeake***
<http://www.mdsg.umd.edu/MarineNotes/Mar-Apr98/side1/>
- ***Black Men, Blue Waters: African Americans on the Chesapeake***
<http://www.mdsg.umd.edu/MarineNotes/Mar-Apr98/index.php>
- ***Maryland in the Civil War: The 1st MD Eastern Shore Regiment***
<http://www.globalclassroom.org/mdinlv.html> (Global Classroom)
- ***The Autobiography of Frederick Douglass***
<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/B/fdouglass/dougxx.htm>
- ***The Emancipation Proclamation***
<http://www.nps.gov/ncro/anti/emancipation.html>
- ***Underground Railroad***
<http://www.nps.gov/undergroundrr/contents.htm>



*Merrill Farm Slave House
Pocomoke City vicinity*

Feel The Spirit: Churches

Worcester County has a strong history of resistance to slavery. Common to many places on the Eastern Shore, there are numerous claims by Worcester County homeowners as to their property being used as a stop along the "Underground Railroad." Several of the white churches, whether of Methodist, Episcopal, Baptist or Presbyterian faith, provided a slave gallery for a segregated worship service. The gallery at Beaver Dam Presbyterian Church south of the Pocomoke City and the gallery in St. Martin's Church have strong oral traditions as seating for African-Americans.



St. Paul's Church, Berlin

Germantown, located east of Berlin, is the site of the New Bethel Methodist Church, distinguished as one of the oldest African-American congregations. Tracing its organization back to 1855 by a group of free families, the New Bethel Methodists were formerly members of the Stevenson Methodist Episcopal Church in Berlin.

With a strong presence of Methodist anti-slavery teachings in the area by the late 18th century, and the nearby location of the abolitionist

leaders in northern Delaware and Philadelphia, fugitive slaves made their way north through this region from the lower Eastern Shore counties of Maryland and Virginia. The dense and natural cover provided by the Pocomoke River and its tributaries, stretching well into Sussex County, surely aided numerous slaves in their clandestine journey north to refuge in Wilmington, Delaware and Philadelphia.

A principal focus for each African-American community was the organization and construction of a church. Due to Methodism's strong stance against slavery, the newly formed congregations were largely of the Methodist faith, but a few Baptist groups were established as well. The churches built to house these new congregations were erected in the Gothic Revival style, which was widely popular during the second half of the 19th century.



St. Martin's Methodist Church, Showell



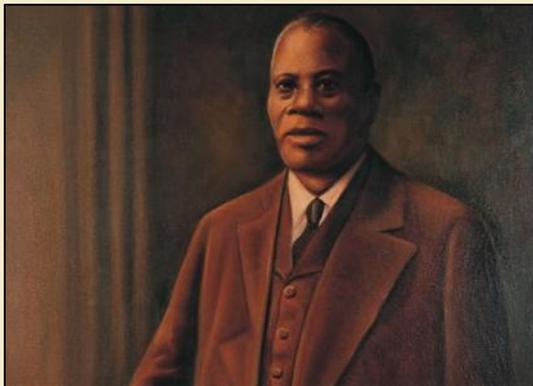
Ebenezer United Methodist Church, Snow Hill

Pullett's Chapel at Whaleyville, erected in 1892, is one of the oldest and best preserved examples in Worcester County with its intact tower and pointed arch colored glass windows. Numerous other churches, such as the New Bethel Church in Germantown, St. Paul's in Berlin, Ebenezer Church in Snow Hill or St. John's in Pocomoke City, were erected during the first decades of the 20th century. St. Paul's, erected in 1915-16 on the east side of Berlin, is perhaps the most impressive due to its large size and brick construction.



Pullett's Chapel, Whaleyville

One of Worcester County's most famous native sons is the Rev. Dr. Charles Albert Tindley, who was born in Berlin around 1855. He overcame slavery and poverty in his determination to educate himself for the ministry. Tindley founded one of the largest African-American Methodist congregations in Philadelphia. The Tindley Temple United Methodist Church was named in his honor.



*Rev. Dr. Charles Albert Tindley
(from a painting by Patrick Henry)*

Tindley was also a noted songwriter and composer of gospel hymns, and is recognized as one of several founding fathers of American gospel music. His hymnal, "Songs of Paradise," is still in use in Worcester County, and five of his hymns appear in the revised Methodist hymnal used worldwide. One of his most beloved songs includes the popular anthem for the Civil Rights Movement, "We Shall Overcome." *Tindley Chapel Day is celebrated in Pocomoke City at the Mt. Zion United Methodist Church.*



Tindley Memorial

Didn't It Rain: Civil War

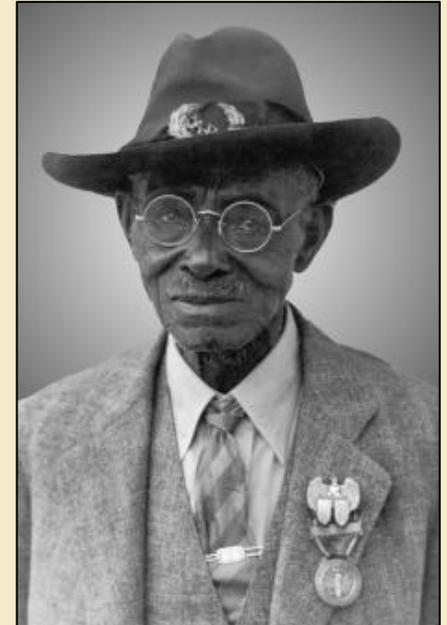
With its closeness to Virginia, the lower Eastern Shore population was bitterly divided on issues surrounding the Civil War. For most Southern sympathizers on the lower Shore, the federal recruitment of free blacks and fugitive slaves was an intolerable insult. It is estimated that 20 percent of Maryland's Union companies were composed of black soldiers.

General Lockwood, commander of the Eastern Shore companies, was especially active in recruiting black enlistees. One Civil War participant from Worcester County, Isaiah "Uncle Zear" Fassett (1844-1946) was born into slavery southeast of here in Sinepuxent in 1844. His owner, Sarah A. Bruff, released him from bondage at age nineteen on November 11, 1863, when the U.S. Army paid her \$300 in compensation. That same day, Fassett enlisted in Company D, 9th United States Colored Troops.

This infantry regiment served in South Carolina and also fought in several battles in Virginia in 1864.1865, including the Wilderness, Deep Bottom, Fussell's Mill, Fort Gilmer at Chaffin's Farm, and the siege of Petersburg. The regiment was among the first to occupy Richmond on April 3, 1865. After the Confederate capital fell, Fassett was promoted to corporal then discharged on November 26, 1866. His brothers, Franklin, Andrew, John, and George, also were freed and served in the U.S. Army.

Isaiah Fassett settled in Berlin after the war. Known in his later years as Uncle Zear, he was among Maryland's "Boys of '61" who attended the 75th reunion at Gettysburg in July 1938. Fassett served as commander of the Grand Army of the Republic post in Berlin until it disbanded, then was GAR department commander in Delaware from 1943 until his death. He was Maryland's next-to-last surviving Civil War soldier when he died on June 24, 1946.

Memorabilia associated with Isaiah Fassett and other African American Civil War soldiers are in the collections of the Calvin B. Taylor House Museum here in Berlin, Maryland. Like many other Eastern Shore counties, Worcester County was a haven for spies and smugglers because it was home to many Confederate sympathizers and because of its proximity to the Pocomoke River and the Chesapeake Bay. One such smuggler, Dr. Isaac Costen, made many clandestine trips by sailing down the Pocomoke River, hugging the coastline to Exmore, Virginia and crossing the bay into the Rappahannock River.



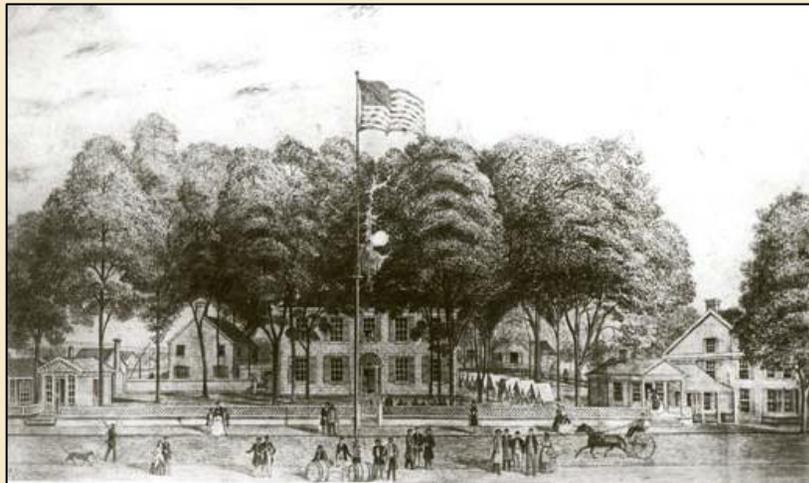
Isaiah Fassett
(Photo courtesy David Briddell)

Following the Civil War, Worcester County black residents turned to livelihoods they had known before the war, sometimes hiring on as sharecroppers for their former masters.

One of the beloved 19th century black figures of Worcester County was Sampson Harmon, fictionalized as "Sampson Hat" in George Alfred Townsend's novel, "The Entailed Hat." Portrayed as a folk hero, he was reputed to be the strongest and fastest man in at least two counties and able to run down a deer to capture it. He is best remembered as a long-time resident of Furnace Town, where he worked for Judge Thomas Spence who operated the furnace during the mid 19th century. Sampson Harmon reached 106 years of age.



*Sampson Harmon
(Photo courtesy
Julia A. Purnell Museum)*



Worcester County Courthouse, ca. 1861.

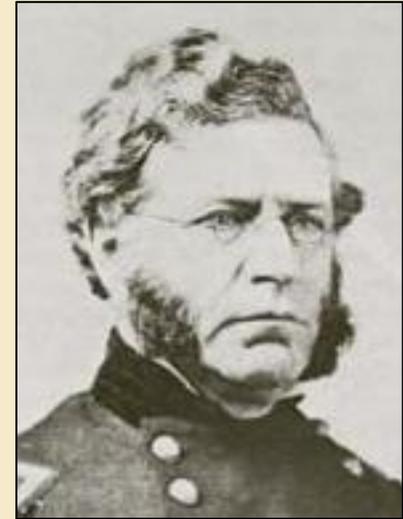
*The courthouse, jail, and adjacent buildings were erected after a fire that burned the center of the county seat in 1834.
(Image courtesy Worcester County Commissioners)*

*From Maryland Civil War
Trails: Staging Ground at the
Worcester County
Courthouse:*

In November 1861, a force of about 4,500 United States Army officers, soldiers, cavalymen, and artillerists assembled in and around Snow Hill. Some of the troops camped here on the Worcester County Courthouse yard. Gen. Henry H. Lockwood commanded the expedition, which marched south through the Eastern Shore to Accomack and Northampton Counties in Virginia via the Pocomoke River as a show of Union strength on the Eastern Shore. Lockwood's orders were to reassure the civilian population, restore lighthouses to working order, and to disarm and disperse any Confederates that his command encountered.

When Lockwood began marching south on November 14, his force included a diverse collection of units, including detachments of the 4th and 14th Wisconsin Infantry, 2nd Indiana Infantry, 1st Michigan Infantry, 2nd Delaware Infantry, 1st Eastern Shore Maryland Home Guard, Capt. Ormand F. Nims's Boston Battery (six brass rifled field pieces), Capt. Thomas S. Richards's Company of Independent Cavalry (later Co. M, 1st Pennsylvania Cavalry), Col. William H. Purnell's Legion, and 500 of Duryee's Zouaves (Col. Abram Duryée's 5th New York Infantry).

The expedition followed the Pocomoke River to Newtown (present-day Pocomoke City) and then marched overland to Drummondtown in Virginia. Lockwood encountered small numbers of Confederate troops and rudimentary defenses at Newtown and also in Virginia at Temperanceville and Drummondtown. The Confederates fled, and many of them threw their weapons aside as they escaped. Lockwood, along with his family, occupied the Drummondtown house of Dr. Peter F. Brown, who had fled across the Chesapeake Bay. The expedition was considered successful and ended on November 22.



Gen. Henry H. Lockwood
(Photo courtesy Library of Congress)

Find out more:

- ***The Black Military Experience in the Civil War***
<http://www.history.umd.edu/Freedmen/bmepg.htm>
- ***History of African Americans in the Civil War National Park Service***
http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/history/aa_history.htm
- ***Purnell Legion Cavalry, US***
<http://www.2ndmdinfantryus.org/us cavPLC.html>

Go Down Moses: Free Blacks

Emerging as a new and significant part of the Worcester County populace during the first half of the 19th century were free blacks. Numbering only 446 in 1800, the population of free blacks had expanded to 3,500 by 1860.

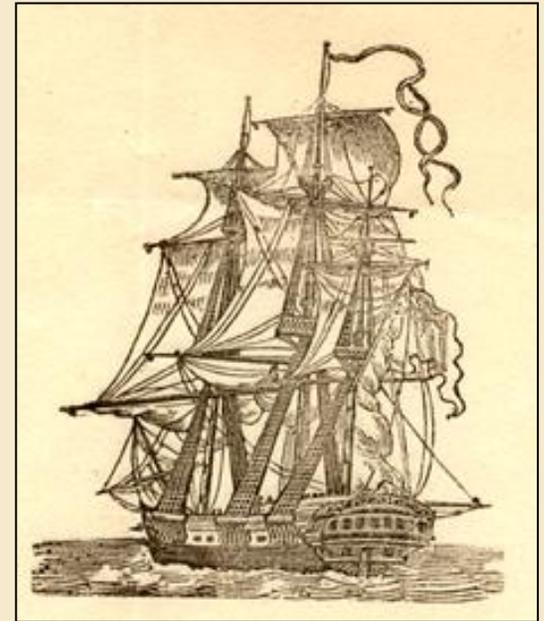
While a few of the free blacks living in Worcester County in 1800 could trace their ancestry back to free black colonists, the larger part descended from ex-slaves who had been freed following the Revolution. Despite the overwhelming odds against them, a few of these former slaves were able to establish remarkable estates during the first half of the 19th century.

As tensions surrounding the issue of slavery escalated during the 1840s and 1850s, free blacks were viewed with suspicion as natural allies of the remaining slave population. As a result, the decades before the Civil War found free blacks across Worcester County segregating themselves in distinct communities with the obvious hope that strength in numbers would offer some measure of protection. The black neighborhood of the southwest side of Snow Hill is historically identified as "Freetown" and several dwellings, including the Harmon House, date before the Civil War.

As the Civil War drew near the numbers of manumitted or freed slaves grew significantly in Worcester County. Several of these former slaves, as well as some free blacks, left Worcester County. Several of these former slaves, as well as some free blacks, left Worcester County in an effort to escape the hostilities common before the war.

Several families residing near Snow Hill around 1830 relocated to a watermen's community known as Sandy Ground on New York's Staten Island. Members of the Hinman, Lambden, Bishop, Purnell, Robins and Johnson families established new homes along the island's south coast, engaging primarily in the oyster business they had known on the Eastern Shore.

Other Snow Hill blacks are credited with establishing the town of Snow Hill, New Jersey, later changed to Lawnside in 1907.



A ship similar to the Liberia Packet

Some went even farther leaving the United States altogether. Dozens of free blacks or former slaves embarked on a return to Africa through the office of the Maryland Colonization Society. Members of the Bowen, Fooks, Johnson and Dennis families can trace ancestors who made the voyage across the Atlantic. Judge Ara Spence, owner of the Mansion House at Public Landing, left a specific clause in his will for his slaves, where were to be freed and transported to Liberia following his death.



Man with Ox Cart
(Photo courtesy of Fred Bruekmann)

Find out more:

- **Map of Maryland County, Liberia** (Library of Congress)
[http://rs6.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gmd:@FILREQ\(@field\(SUBJ+@band\(Liberia--Maryland+County.+\)\)+@FIELD\(COLLID+Immap\)\)](http://rs6.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gmd:@FILREQ(@field(SUBJ+@band(Liberia--Maryland+County.+))+@FIELD(COLLID+Immap)))
- **African-American Mosaic: Colonization** (Library of Congress)
<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam002.html>
- **Emigration Back to Africa Movement**
<http://www.theblackmarket.com/slavefaq.htm#Emigration Back to Africa Movement>
- **Ex-Slave Narratives** (Library of Congress)
<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam015.html>
- **To Be More Than Equal: The Many Lives of Martin R. Delany (1812-1885)**
<http://www.wvu.edu/~library/delany/home.htm>
- **Mapping Africa: Africa and the Diaspora Movement**
<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/aoi/images/diasp2.jpg>
- **The Great Migration**
http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/lessons/grade-3-4/Great_Migration.aspx

March On: Soldiers

The 20th century brought much hope, but many difficulties remained for African-Americans on the Eastern Shore with continued segregation and outbreaks of racism. As in wars past, local black residents served bravely in World War I, World War II, as well as the Korean and Vietnam conflicts.

Continuing a tradition established after the Civil War were the Buffalo soldiers who started out as members of the all-black 10th Cavalry Regiment sent west to keep peace between native Americans, white soldiers, and settlers. In a segregated armed forces, the 10th Cavalry's "Buffalo soldiers" served later with Teddy Roosevelt when he and his "Rough Riders" stormed San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War in 1898, and even afterwards, during World Wars I and II as well as Korea.

One of the last of a group of enlistees to serve as a Buffalo soldier was Worcester County native, Edward Johnson, who was born in Snow Hill on December 2, 1918. He enlisted in the 10th Cavalry Unit in 1939 just prior to turning 21. Trooper Edward Johnson served in the United States Armed Forces for over 31 years, retiring as a Sergeant Major in 1971.



Edward Johnson, Sr.



Lt. Col. Edward P. Drummond, Jr.

One of the hundreds who served in the United States Air Force was Lieutenant Colonel Edward P. Drummond, Jr. Born in the African-American community of Unionville, west of Pocomoke City, he later entered the last class of pilots to train at the Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama. He went on to dedicate 25 years of his adult life to the United States Air Force, retiring in 1970. Lieutenant Colonel Edward P. Drummond, Jr. Amassed over 6000 flying hours during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, and he was highly decorated for that service.

Find out more:

- ***Buffalo Soldiers & The Indian Wars***
<http://www.buffalosoldier.net/>
- ***History and Roster of Maryland Volunteers - U.S. Colored Troops***
<http://aomol.net/000001/000366/html/index.html>

Hold Your Light: Segregation

Schools and other public institutions were once segregated like much of the rest of the country until the 1960's. Ocean City was strictly segregated as well during the early 20th century. Reserved periods, known as "Colored Excursion Days," were limited to days after the principal summer season.

Formerly known as "Henry's Colored Hotel," the prominent three-story shingled frame structure survives as one of the oldest hotels in Ocean City today. Charles T. and Louis Henry bought the hotel in December 1926.

Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Count Basie and Louis Armstrong were guests of Henry's Hotel in the days when black entertainers could perform in major hotel ballrooms, yet not sleep in the hotels themselves.



The Henry Hotel, Ocean City

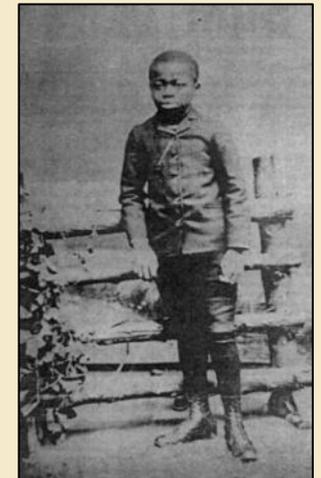
Another site in Pocomoke City, Mar-Va Theater, has an interesting African-American association with its segregated entrance and seating used solely by blacks. Little changed since it was redecorated in 1937, the interior of the Mar-Va has a separate staircase, ticket booth, bathroom, concession stand and seating in the balcony that were intended for black visitors.



Mar-Va Theater



Outten's Colored Theater, Snow Hill

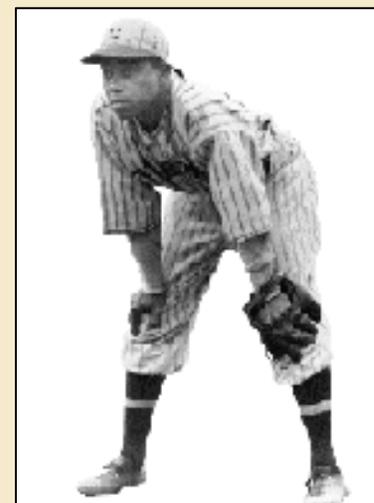


Charles Henry

Segregation also played a role in the national and local expression of the country's principal pastime, baseball. One of the most recognized of the national Negro League is William Julius "Judy" Johnson who was born in the vicinity of Snow Hill near Newark on October 26, 1899.

He began his twenty-one-year Negro League baseball career in 1918, and he participated in more than 3,000 professional games, earning recognition from his peers as the best all-time third baseman. In 1975, "Judy" Johnson was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. Memorabilia on "Judy" Johnson are on display at the Julia A. Purnell Museum in Snow Hill.

Local baseball teams were segregated as well, as represented by the Legionnaire Stars team of Pocomoke City. Formed in 1945 following WWII, the team was composed of former war veterans and graduates of the Stephen Long School and Worcester High School. The team played up and down the Eastern Shores of Maryland and Virginia over a three-year period. The community aided the team in the purchase of supplies. Similar teams played in other parts of Worcester County and those teams included the Berlin Eagles, Snow Hill's Hanks, the Showell Wildcats and the Stockton Braves. Some of these teams continued to play as late as the early 1970s.



*Judy Johnson
Cooperstown Baseball
Hall of Fame*

Find out more:

- ***From Segregation to Integration: The Donald Gaines Murray Case, 1935-37*** (Maryland Archives)
<http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/stagser/s1259/121/1844/html/0000.html>
- ***Negro Baseball League Site***
<http://www.blackbaseball.com>
- ***With Little Deliberate Speed: School Integration in Prince George's County, Maryland***
<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/E/integration/integrx.htm>
- ***Thurgood Marshall*** Biography
<http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/harmon/marsharm.htm>
- ***The National Women's Hall of Fame: Rosa Parks***
<http://www.greatwomen.org/women-of-the-hall/search-the-hall/details/2/116-Parks>
- ***The Movies, Race and Ethnicity: African Americans*** (Media Resources, UC Berkley)
<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/imagesafam.html>
- ***African-American Odyssey*** (Library of Congress)
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/aaohhtml/aohome.html>

I'm On My Way: Education

The Sturgis One Room School Museum was restored and opened in downtown Pocomoke City in May 2000. Earlier in this century, local African-American families raised their children within the segregated educational system established throughout the state. Representative of the dozens of facilities used by black children is the Sturgis One-Room School. (Opened as a museum in 2000 it is currently located on Willow Street in downtown Pocomoke City.) Dating around 1900, the weatherboard frame structure was used for elementary grades until the Stephen Long School in Pocomoke City opened in 1937. The school has been restored and welcomes visitors on Wednesdays and Saturdays from 1 -4 pm, May - October, and by appointment.



The Sturgis One Room School



Class at Sturgis School



Willie Sturgis



*Stephen Handy Long
(Photo courtesy Alonzo Tull)*

Higher education was segregated as well. Founded in 1886 under the auspices of the Delaware Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Centenary Biblical Institute of Baltimore, the University of Maryland Eastern Shore in Princess Anne was started as a black oriented school of higher learning. Shortly after its inception, the Princess Anne Academy, as it was popularly known, was designated as part of the state land-grant educational system in order to comply with a federal mandate to offer college level education to black students. The institution continued as a private school until 1926, when the State of Maryland purchased the property outright. It was not until 1970, however, that it became a bona fide branch of the University system and named the University of Maryland Eastern Shore.

A sound and solid education of elementary and higher learning for all black children was one of the principal missions advanced by local educator Stephen Handy Long (1865-1921). Born in Pocomoke City at the end of the Civil War, Stephen Long grew up in Boston, Massachusetts. Stephen Long returned to the lower Eastern Shore and began his teaching career in Somerset County. He eventually became the principal of the Pocomoke Grammar School on Bank and Fifth Streets.

In 1914 he became the first African-American school supervisor in Worcester County. Long initiated several model programs for black youth. Tragically, he was murdered on September 13, 1921, in a conflict surrounding his desire to ensure that orphan boys used as farm laborers received the education to which they were entitled. He is buried in the Hall's Hill Cemetery. A service organization, the Stephen H. Long Guild, Inc., was formed in 1980 to provide financial assistance for the education of African-American youngsters.



Mt. Zion One Room School

Find out more:

- *Host Our Coast Video: Sturgis One Room School House*