



Community, Prosperity, & Resilience

African Americans in
Chestertown, Maryland,
1700s to the Present

African American Heritage Walk
A Self-Guided Tour



Birds Eye View of Chestertown, 1907.

Introduction

Your walk starts at the waterfront neighborhood of Scott's Point, where some African Americans arrived as slaves and many others spent their working lives and owned property. It continues on a route that suggests, roughly, the growth of the free black population in the 18th and 19th centuries and its economic and residential expansion away from the waterfront, including, at different times, Cannon and Calvert Streets, Philosopher's Terrace, and Court Street.

You will visit thirty notable sites across two centuries. Some stops bear witness to the evil of racism, while most sites on this Heritage Walk mark the success that 19th and 20th century free black men and women found in the enterprises they pursued in Chestertown. They shine a light on the spirit, vitality, and creativity behind their stories.

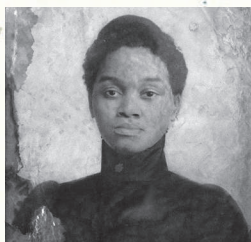
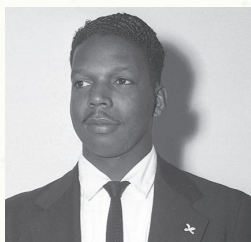
The tour also recognizes the prominence of two churches, Janes United Methodist Church and Bethel A.M.E. Church, with roots in the Colored People's Methodist Church in 1831. Both churches have continued to be important in African American life in Chestertown.

Several watershed events in the life of the town in the 20th and 21st centuries are included as well. Among these are the founding of Garnet School, the economic development of Cannon Street, organization of the Grand Army of the Republic, and the arrival of the Freedom Riders.

This publication is solely for nonprofit, educational purposes. All written material, unless otherwise stated, is the copyright of the Historical Society of Kent County, Inc. All editorial, reprint, or circulation correspondence should be directed to Historical Society of Kent County, Inc., at director@kentcountyhistory.org.



Some of
the faces
that made
Chestertown



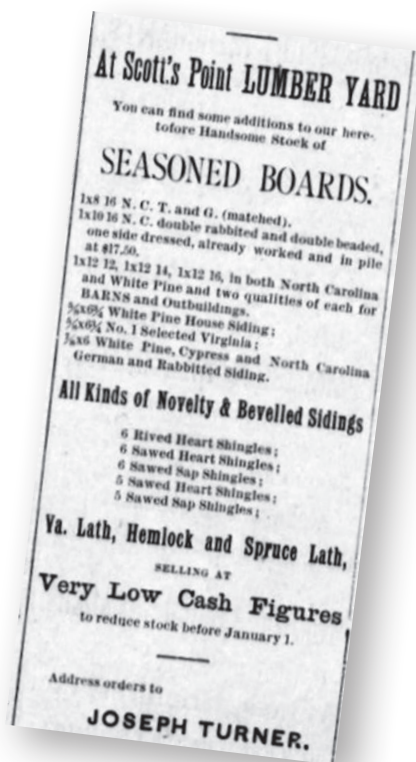
Contents

1. Foot of Cannon Street at Scott's Point.....	2-3
2. 202 & 210 South Water Street.....	4
3. 104, 106, & 108 Cannon Street.....	5
4. 105 South Queen Street.....	6
5. 107 South Queen Street.....	6
6. Sumner Hall, 206 South Queen Street.....	7
7. 102 South Cross Street.....	8
8. Janes United Methodist Church, 120 South Cross Street.....	9
9. 300 block of Cannon Street.....	10-11
10. Southeast Corner of Mill and Cannon Streets.....	12-13
11. Hilda Hopkins Way.....	14
12. The Faith Life Church, 434 Calvert Street.....	14
13. 204 North College Avenue.....	15
14. North College Avenue (Street Mural).....	15
African American Heritage Walk Map.....	Center
15. Bethel A.M.E. Church, 237 North College Avenue.....	18-19
16. College Avenue and Calvert Street.....	20-21
17. 320 Calvert Street & 300 Block of Calvert Street.....	22
18. 222 Calvert Street.....	23
19. 200 Block of Calvert Street.....	23
20. 339-341 High Street.....	24
21. 320 High Street.....	25
22. 302-304 Park Row.....	25
23. Corner at Maple Avenue, Philosopher's Terrace, Cross Street.....	26-27
24. 100 block of North Cross Street.....	27
25. Memorial Park Road.....	28
26. 100 Memorial Plaza.....	28
27. 200 block of High Street (Street Mural).....	29
28. 210 High Street.....	29
29. Court Street and Church Alley.....	30-31
30. Foot of High Street.....	32
Afterword.....	33

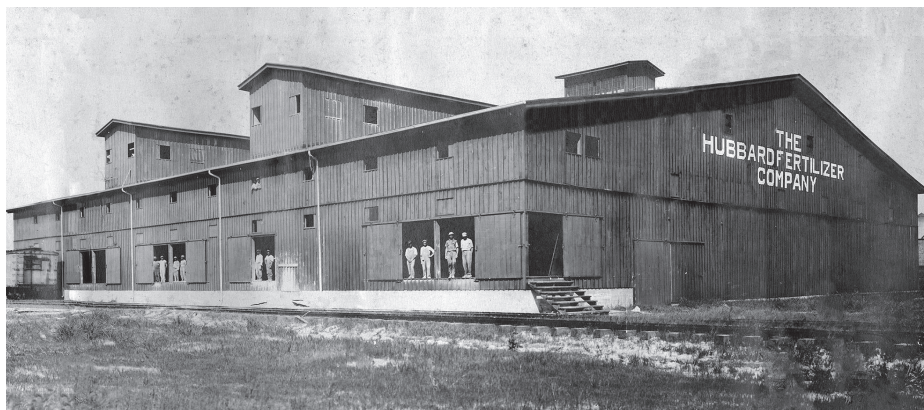
1 Foot of Cannon Street at Scott's Point

It is fitting to start here at the foot of Cannon Street with a historical marker erected by the Town of Chestertown as part of its Chestertown Unites Against Racism program launched in September 2020 after the killing of George Floyd. The plan aimed to recognize past racial inequities and to recognize contributions of all citizens. The marker acknowledges that “on the backs of many of Chestertown’s African American ancestors this Town and County were built and flourished.”

The marker is aptly placed in Scott’s Point, an area of roughly 20 acres, running southerly from this first residential block of Cannon Street, along South Water Street (formerly Front Street), and curving around South Queen Street (formerly Railroad Avenue), bordering what today is Wilmer Park. Although Scott’s Point takes its name from one of the earliest white owners, by the late 18th and



early 19th centuries, it was home to both enslaved African Americans and a growing free black population, many of whom owned their own homes. Throughout the 19th century as well, this waterfront neighborhood nurtured



significant entrepreneurship and employment for free black men and women: the fishing industry, a sawmill, a fertilizer company, a basket factory, a canning factory, and ice cream and oyster parlors. In the mid-20th century, Elmer Campher, a successful black businessman who sold insurance and ran rooming houses, owned many Scott's

Point properties. Much of Campher's property was sold in 1988, when he was about 80 years old. No African American homes remain on Water Street today. The last was condemned by the Town and torn down in 2019. Stops #2 and #3 below detail some important buildings within Scott's Point.



Opposite: Ad for Joseph Turner's lumber mill at Scott's Point, Chestertown Transcript, January 2, 1890, and Scott's Point factory of the Hubbard Fertilizer Company, ca. 1900.

This page: African American residences on Railroad Avenue (now South Queen Street abutting Wilmer Park), ca. 1940; workers at the Scott's Point basket factory, ca. 1900; historical marker erected by Town as part of Chestertown Unites Against Racism program.

From the year 1642 until the end of the Civil War in 1865, slavery prevailed in Maryland. During that period, this harbor is where human beings captured from Africa were enslaved and transported to be bought and sold for the profit of free labor.

Following the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, African-Americans continued to suffer gross injustices and subjugation. The Town of Chestertown recognizes this and holds in highest esteem the contributions attained under duress by the enslaved men, women, and children.

In sorrow and regret for these past atrocities, we recognize that upon the backs of many of Chestertown's African-American ancestors, this Town and County were built and flourished.

We honor them here.

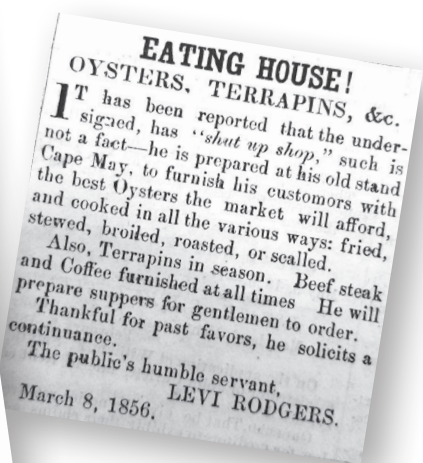
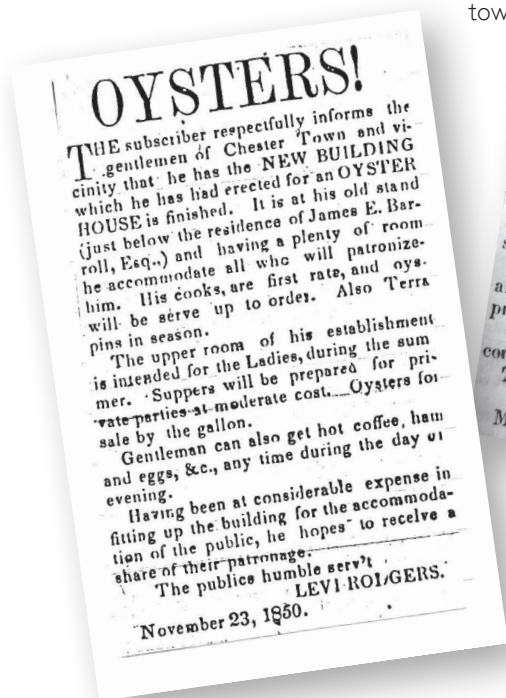


2. 202 & 210 South Water Street (Private Residences)

In 1849, Isaac Boyer and Levi Rodgers, both free blacks, bought houses in Scott's Point. Boyer, a drayman, bought the house at 210 South Water Street from his friend, Thomas Cuff (see #3). Rodgers, a former slave, bought the ca. 1740 house at 202 South Water Street. This house, he announced in the *Kent News*, Sept. 8, 1849, he had "neatly fixed up and is prepared to serve" as the Cape May Saloon, an oyster house restaurant that thrived



there throughout the 1850s. Rodgers also operated a Chestertown/Baltimore freight shipping business from the nearby town dock.



Top: Levi Rodgers's house, ca. 1984. Here: Ads placed by Levi Rodgers for his Cape May Saloon, *Kent News*, November 23, 1850, and March 8, 1856.

3. 104, 106, & 108 Cannon Street (Private Residences)

These three sites were part of the property of Thomas Cuff. Of these buildings, his own residence at 108 was the first built, about 1810, and is the only original one remaining. Born in 1785, Cuff was a prominent free black businessman. In 1819, he bought the roughly quarter-acre parcel where 108 Cannon Street stands and lived there until his death in 1858. A highly successful entrepreneur, Cuff bought and sold real estate to both blacks and whites. In 1832, he bought four acres running from his property down to the waterfront, and soon acquired another five or six acres adjacent to these. As a result, he became the owner of all the land running along the river—in effect owning the major portion of Scott's Point. In his younger years, Cuff and Samuel Perkins (#26) operated a herring fishery on the Chester River. He was one of the founders of the African American Methodist Church, originally located at



Thomas Cuff's house at 108 Cannon Street today.



Left: Maria Bracker's ad for her new ice cream, cake, and lemonade "saloon," Kent News, June 6, 1857. Below: Maria Bracker's home at 104 Queen Street prior to renovation.



106 Cannon Street. He is believed to be buried in the church's old graveyard behind 106 and 108 Cannon Street.

Cuff also bought and freed slaves, including some family members. His daughter, Maria Bracker, lived at 104 Cannon. She was arrested for moving to Chestertown from Delaware, because Maryland law at that time prohibited free blacks from moving into the state, but was released because the one-year statute of limitations had passed. She announced in the *Kent News*, June 6, 1857, that: "Maria Bracker is now prepared to accommodate ladies and gentlemen with ice cream, cake, and lemonade, prepared every day from 11 a.m. until 10 p.m. Her saloon is on Cannon Street, between Queen and Water. Families can be supplied by the quart or gallon, or molds, pound or sponge cake by the pound."

4. 105 South Queen Street *(Private Residence)*

Peter Jones (father of James Jones, #10), a sailor from Barbados, settled in Chestertown in 1800 and operated a hotel at this location into the 1850s. He was the first businessman to sell ice cream in Chestertown. He also advertised in the local newspaper that he sold “excellent whiskey.” The plat of Chestertown in the 1860 Martenet’s Map of Kent County shows that Jones also owned two other properties, both adjacent to Levi Rodgers’s property in Scott’s Point.



5. 107 South Queen Street *(Private Residence)*

This property was bought in 1796 by Henry Philips, a former slave who had purchased his freedom from Thomas Smythe, owner of the Water Street mansion, Widehall. Philips used his building as both a residence and a store. He also had a license to sell “good West Indian rum, good cider, and Madeira wine” at a concession for the popular horse races at Downs Crossroads (now Stepne Manor). By 1804, he was reported to be the wealthiest African American man in



the county. Today, the Philips house is not visible: a late 19th century house was moved to the front of the lot and attached to the original structure.

6. Sumner Hall, 206 South Queen Street

In 1882, William Perkins (#23) and 27 other black veterans of the Civil War received a charter for Charles Sumner Post #25, Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.). After meeting in various locations around the county, the veterans and their families constructed this building around 1908. It is one of just two African American G.A.R. veterans' halls still standing in the U.S. After the death of the last Civil War veteran in 1928, the building became a meeting hall, performance venue, and office space for other groups. The Centennial Beneficial Lodge #9 Society, active in the civil rights movement, owned



the building from 1950 to 1958 when it was sold to Elmer Campher (#1) for use as a church. By 2002, the building was slated for demolition. Fortunately, a coalition of preservationists, foundations, and



philanthropic citizens saved and meticulously restored the building to its original condition.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it was returned to community use in 2014— operating as Sumner Hall, a non-profit educational organization and museum.



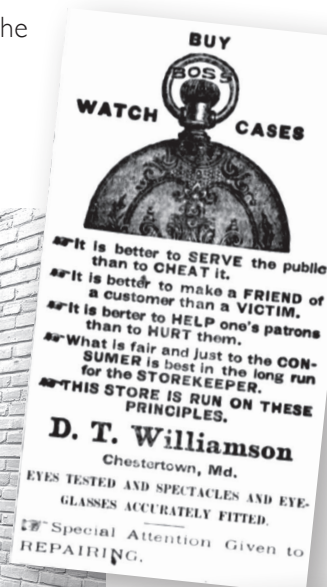
Top: Sumner Hall prior to renovation, ca. 2004.. Middle: Sumner Hall today. Bottom: Meeting of the Centennial Beneficial Lodge #9 at Sumner Hall, ca. 1950, courtesy of Chesapeake Heartland: An African American Humanities Project at Washington College.

7.102 South Cross Street

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the doorway below was "6 West Cross Street" and, today, is the side entrance to the Bordley History Center. From 1887 to 1895, D.T. Williamson and his brother owned and operated a full-service jewelry store here serving both blacks and whites. An 1890 ad in the *Chestertown Transcript* boasted, "It is the talk of the town. Everybody says that Williamson has the freshest designs, the newest goods, the lowest prices..." On March 28, 1895, the *Chestertown Transcript* reported that

D.T. Williamson passed away from consumption (as tuberculosis was then called). The obituary described him as "prominent among his race," educated, a good debater and speaker, intelligent, and energetic. Within a year, his brother, A.E. Williamson, met with financial problems and moved to Wilmington, but he managed to continue the business until 1903. In September 1910, after a massive fire laid waste

to most of Cross and High Streets, the Bordley family purchased the site of the Williamson store, incorporating it into their rebuilt haberdashery at the corner of Cross and High Streets.



D. T. Williamson, the colored jeweler, of Chestertown, died at his home on Monday night at 12 o'clock, of consumption. He had for several years suffered with brochial trouble, which later on developed into consumption. He was prominent among his race, was educated to a degree rarely enjoyed by colored men in Kent, was a good debater and speaker, intelligent and very energetic. For six years he conducted the jewelry business in Chestertown. The deceased was 37 years of age. His brother will continue the business. Funeral services will take place this, Thursday afternoon at James M. E. Church.

8. Janes United Methodist Church, 120 South Cross Street

In 1831, local African Americans founded their own Methodist church. Land in the 200 block of South Queen Street (see #18) was donated by Thomas Cuff (# 3). William Perkins (#23) and James A. Jones (#10) were among the founders. Janes Church (named for Bishop Edmund S. Janes in 1867) occupied two other buildings before the current structure was erected on Cross Street in 1914. It was designed and built by members of the church using handmade concrete bricks.

Clockwise: News article announcing dedication of second Janes Church in 1867; news article announcing laying of the cornerstone for the current Janes Church in 1914; Janes Church today; second Janes Church located at South Queen Street and Railroad Avenue, ca. 1907, burned in 1914.

DEDICATION.—Janes' M. E. Church, of this town, was dedicated by Bishop Janes on last Sunday. Two colored excursions from Baltimore and one from Centreville contributed greatly to the immense throng present on the occasion. The house is a neat frame building, 36 by 56 feet, and cost about \$6,000, of which about \$800 remained to be raised. Of this sum about \$550 were realized in cash and subscriptions, leaving the church nearly free of debt.

LOCAL AFFAIRS.

Laying Corner Stone.

The laying of the Corner Stone of the new colored M. E. Church of Chestertown, on Sunday afternoon, 23d of June, inst., was attended by a large assemblage of persons, all of whom appeared to take great interest in the beautiful ceremony.

The proceedings were opened with prayer by Rev. J. T. Murray—Lesson by Rev. Mr. Massey.

The solemn and impressive ceremony of laying the Corner Stone was performed by Rev. Mr. Quigg, in his own dignified and appropriate manner.

Rev. J. T. Murray delivered the Address with great power and effect. The Address was indeed chaste and beautiful, eloquent and able. All were edified and delighted with the intellectual treat bestowed upon them by the speaker.

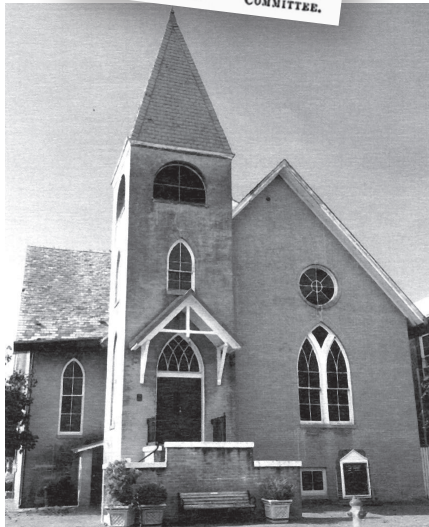
The Committee of Arrangements, Pere Chambers, James A. Jones and William Perkins, acknowledge, with gratitude, the generous contributions received in behalf of the enterprise.

To their white friends they return many and especial thanks for their kind and liberal assistance.

The cash contributions amount to \$300 and subscriptions to about \$700, making together about \$1000 contributed.

Size of Church 56 by 36 feet, with basement 8 feet and a few inches high; with two rooms in basement, one 24x36 feet, to be used for a Primary School room, and the other 18x36 feet, to be used for the social meetings of the Church. Audience room 36x42 feet, 16 ft. ceiling, with vestibule and end and side galleries, to cost about \$4000.

COMMITTEE.



9. 300 block of Cannon Street

For much of the 20th century, this part of Cannon Street was home to numerous thriving African American businesses: Charles Smith's restaurant, Harold Jones's barber shop, Buzz Johnson's barber shop, Frazier's barber shop, Francis Martin's laundry, Lucille Warren's beauty salon, Jen Philip's beauty salon, Elijah Smith's Tavern, Sam Hoxter's Tavern, Claire Jackson's candy store, Wright's restaurant, Commodore



Top right and clockwise: Lucille Warren, beauty shop owner; Harold Jones's, barber shop; Commodore Electric store front, and Jimmy Commodore with Mary C. Grinnell inside his store.

Electric, Clark's dairy store, Lillian Blake's church, Hunter's Bar, and the Brite Printing Company. None of these businesses exists today; the area remains a mixed residential and commercial area.





Compliments
of
THE 332 TAVERN
Prop., Samuel G. Hoxter
332 CANNON STREET
Chestertown Maryland

JONES SNACK BAR
"A Good Place To Eat"

Mrs. Nora Jones, Manager

346 CANNON STREET
Chestertown

HOLLYWOOD INN
We Specialize in Home Cooking
Prop. Landrus Wickes
Elizah Smith, Jr.
339 CANNON STREET
Chestertown Maryland



Top left and clockwise:
Charles Frazier's bar;
Advertisements from
Cannon Street stores;
Smitty's Bar owned by
Charles & Elijah Smith;
Frazier's barber shop.

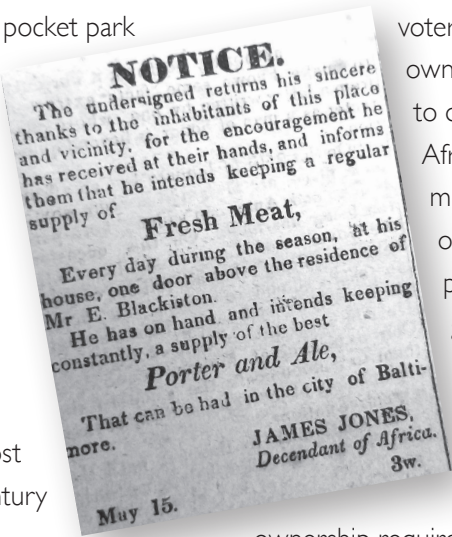
10. Southeast corner of Mill and Cannon Streets

Now home to a pocket park and the Town's maintenance yard, in the 19th century, this corner was owned by James A. Jones, a grocer, butcher, tavern owner, and money lender. He was one of the most successful 19th century African American businessmen in Chestertown. In 1871, Jones devised a clever, legal method to get around the local law requiring

voters to be property owners, a bald attempt to disenfranchise African American men. He sold a single one-foot-square plot of this corner ground to 51 local African American men for \$5.00 in order to satisfy the property ownership requirement. Other landowners also made similar sales. As a result, dozens of African American men were enfranchised and the property requirement was eventually dropped.

One block northwest of here, at the corner of Cannon and Kent Streets is 111 South Kent, where Jones was born to free black parents in 1803. He died in 1894, and county property records list the house at this address as built in 1920, suggesting the 1803 residence no longer stands. But some of it may remain: in the 1970s, during a renovation, removal of an

James Jones's ad for his butcher and tavern businesses, Chestertown Telegraph, May 15, 1829; Jones's residence at 111 South Kent Street as seen today.



11. Hilda Hopkins Way

Less than a full block northwest of Mill Street is Hilda Hopkins Way, named by the Town in honor of “Miss Hilda,” the last African American homeowner and resident of South Water Street. Miss Hilda raised her family of five children at 222 Water Street, while working as a housekeeper for local white families. She was well known to anyone who walked their dogs on Water Street: She kept dog biscuits in a mailbox attached to her front gate. Her three daughters still live in Chestertown.



Hilda Hopkins at her South Water Street fence.

12. The Faith Life Church, 434 Calvert Street.

The Faith Life Church, one of several predominantly African American churches in Chestertown, is in a largely African American residential neighborhood and is well-known for its outdoor services.



13. 204 North College Avenue

Now the location of a private home, this is the site of the original Garnet School, a school for African American students. It was named for Henry



Above: Emma Miller seated. Right: Elmer T. Hawkins. Both courtesy of Chesapeake Heartland: An African American Humanities Project at Washington College.



students, but also, in 1923, became Kent County's first and only high

abolitionist born enslaved in Kent County, who became nationally and internationally known for his fiery oration and was the first African American to preach in the U.S. House of Representatives chamber. The Garnet Elementary School opened here, across from Bethel A.M.E. Church, in 1916, largely due to the efforts of Mrs. Emma Miller, the county Superintendent of Colored Schools from 1911 to 1922. The school continued to educate elementary

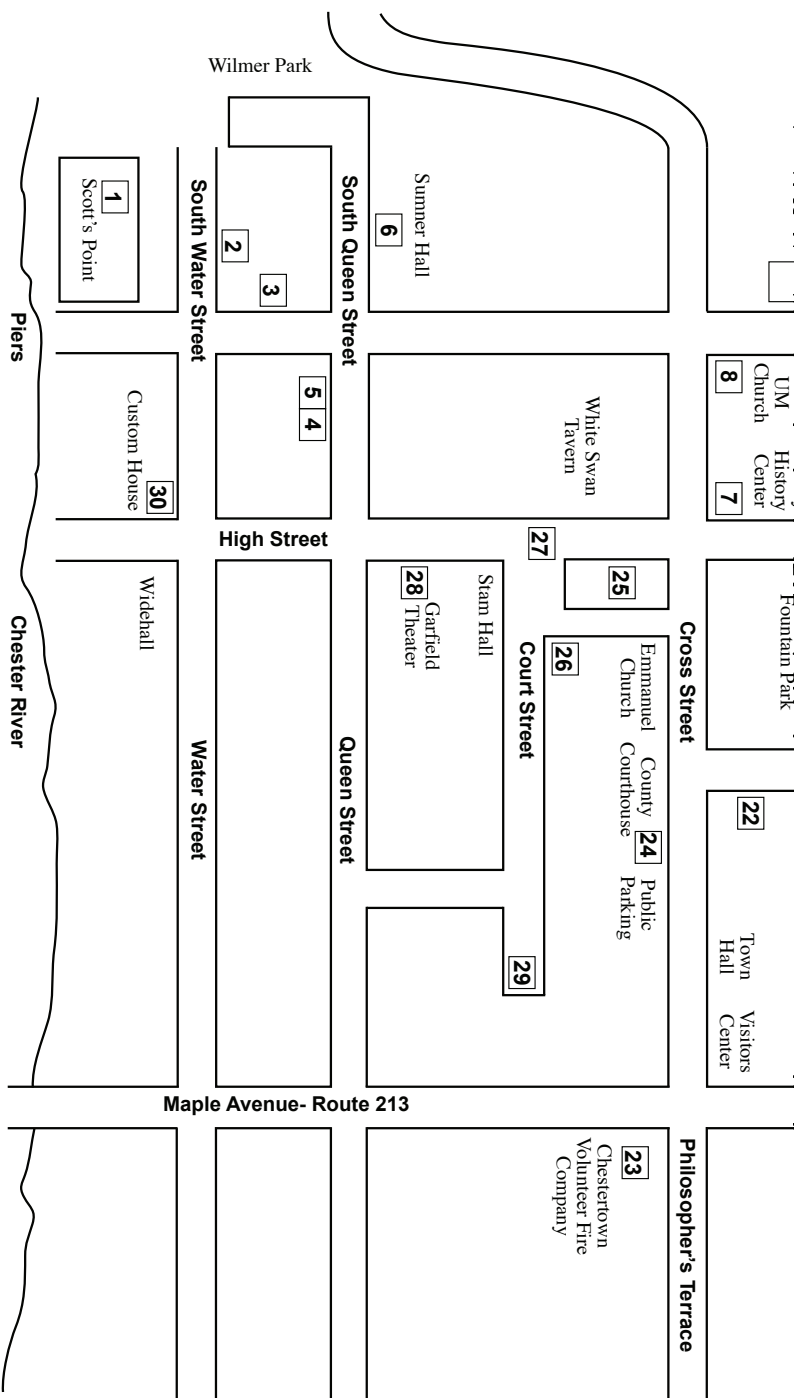
school for African American students. Garnet High School graduated its first class of five students in 1925, and one year later the legendary Elmer T. Hawkins succeeded George T. Grant as principal, a position Hawkins held for 41 years. By 1929 there were 89 students attending Garnet High School, and by 1939 this had doubled to 180 students. Prior to Garnet's opening, schools for black children had been held in churches or in one-room schoolhouses throughout the county.

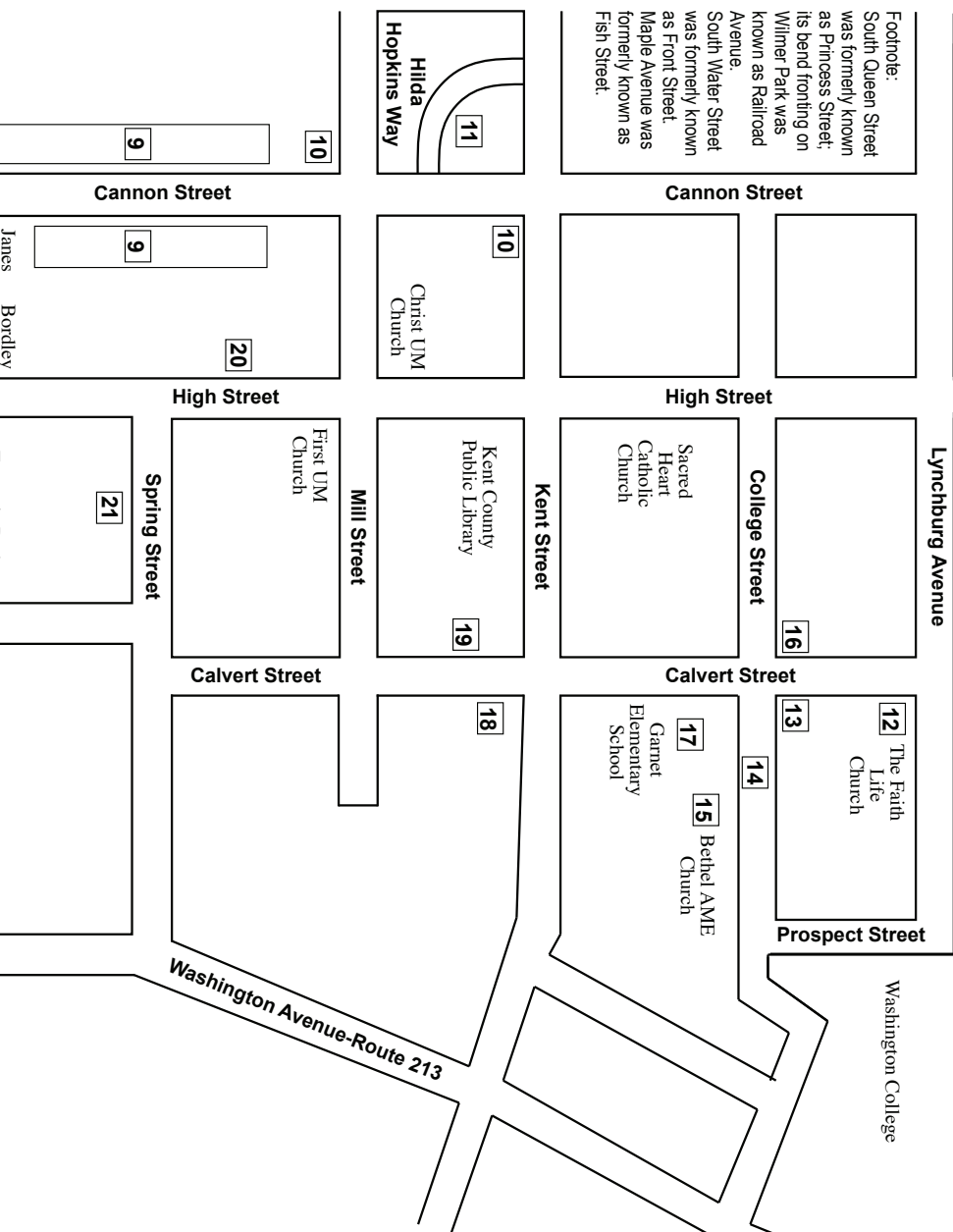
14. Street Mural, 200 block of North College Avenue

In August 2020, the Town, as part of its Chestertown Unites Against Racism program, authorized the painting of this street mural "We Can't Breathe" in this predominantly African American neighborhood.



Volunteers painting street mural "We Can't Breathe" in front of Bethel A.M.E. Church, September 19, 2020. Courtesy of Chesapeake Heartland: An African American Humanities Project at Washington College.





15. Bethel A.M.E. Church, 237 North College Avenue

Bethel A.M.E. Church purchased the land where the church now stands in 1878. Among the original trustees were William Floyd, a sailor, and David Blake, a laborer. The church has long been important in uptown African American life. In early 1962, Bethel's pastor, Rev. Frederick

Jones, Sr., invited the Freedom Riders to Chestertown and to use Bethel as their base. Two busloads and several carloads of Freedom Riders arrived in February to rally in support of integration and other civil rights. Joined by some local people, they marched the length of High Street from Bud Hubbard's whites-only restaurant to the waterfront. That first march became ugly when beer drinkers from Bud's and others began assaulting the protestors, breaking up the demonstration. Later that day, about 50 black Chestertown



men returned to Bud's, but police turned them away, preventing a brawl. In spite of the alarming start, the Freedom Riders remained in Chestertown for several weeks, meeting with local supporters and demonstrating. Their efforts helped lead to improvements such as the theater, bowling alley, and skating rink dropping official segregation by 1963. But some businesses remained resistant. For example, rather than welcome black customers to their

soda fountains, Stam's Drugstore (then at 215 High Street) and the Chestertown Pharmacy (then at 329 High Street) simply removed the stools. Today the former Stam's Drugstore is a luncheonette welcoming all residents and visitors, and the former Chestertown Pharmacy is being renovated as a restaurant and returned to its original 1880s façade.



Opposite: Details of Bethel A.M.E. Church façade;

Below: Stam's Drugstore and Chestertown Pharmacy, ca. 1950s.

Freedom Riders in Chestertown, February 1962.



16. College Avenue and Calvert Street

This African American neighborhood dating to the 19th century, on upper Calvert Street and College Avenue, was home to Charlie Graves's Uptown Club, a bar and dance hall opened in the late 1940s that enjoyed soaring popularity, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. The Uptown Club offered live music and attracted visitors from all over the Eastern and Western Shores.

Among the performers on the famous Chitlin' Circuit brought to town by the Uptown Club in its heyday were B.B. King, Fats Domino, James Brown, Etta James, Chubby Checker, Ruth Brown, Little Richard, Otis Redding, Ray Charles, Wilson Pickett, and Patti Labelle. Local bands included Jazz Johnson's band and the Highlighters.



Top right: Claude Gilbert outside the famous Uptown Club, courtesy of Chesapeake Heartland: An African American Humanities Project at Washington College. Clockwise: Anna Turner, Uptown Club employee and server; Uptown Club, ca. 1982.

The Uptown Club closed in 1988 and the building was later demolished; Charlie Graves, who was born in 1919, died in 1990.

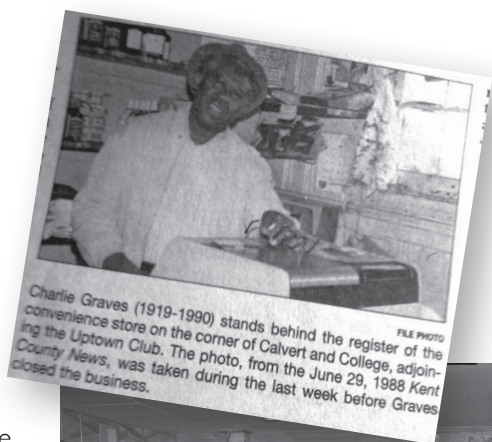
Graves was a respected figure in the community. In 2014, his daughter, Monica

Graves, described him in an email to the *Kent County News*: "My dad was an advocate for voter registration and



equality," she wrote. "In the '60s, '70s, each election day he would use his vehicles to take people to the polls. The restaurant would provide lunch specials for those waiting to go to the polls. He was a diligent worker for the Democratic Committee in Kent County. He assembled a convoy of men and boys in the immediate community and surrounding areas to attend the March on Washington in 1963."

She also recalled her father opening the dance hall space for the local unions of Campbell Soup and Vita Foods to have their meetings there and providing lunch services at both factories for a time. He also "always tried to help whenever he could," she wrote. "He helped people in the community find jobs and housing and supported the local churches in their fundraisers. He provided advice and guidance to others in the community that were



Charlie Graves (1919-1990) stands behind the register of the convenience store on the corner of Calvert and College, adjoining the Uptown Club. The photo, from the June 29, 1988 Kent County News, was taken during the last week before Graves closed the business.



Charlie Graves on June 29, 1988, one week before he closed the Club and its related businesses; counter at the Uptown Club's luncheonette.

looking to start their own businesses."

Charlie Graves and his famous Uptown Club were celebrated at the first Legacy Day festival in 2014. Now an annual event celebrating African American heritage, Legacy Day is held each August and is a joint production of the Historical Society and Sumner Hall.

17. 320 Calvert Street & 300 Block of Calvert Street

Today this building is the Henry Highland Garnet Elementary School. Dedicated on September 24, 1950, it replaced the 1916 Garnet school on College Avenue, and continued as Garnet High School for another 20 years. When segregation ended and the new Kent County High School opened in Worton in 1971, all Kent County high schoolers attended the new school. The elementary students remained here with the school reclassified as an integrated elementary school.

Across from the school, the south side of this Calvert Street block was home to several black-owned and operated businesses from about 1949 through the 1980s. These included Munson's Market, Smitty's Fish Fry, and Isabelle Young's beauty salon. Today it is residential.



Above: Henry Highland Garnet Elementary School today; sidewalk medallion at its front entrance.

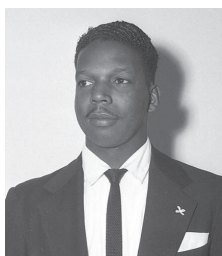
18. 222 Calvert Street *(Private Residence)*

Janes United Methodist Church (# 8) initially met in this house, which then stood on land donated by Thomas Cuff on South Queen Street in Scott's Point, across from today's Sumner Hall. When a new Janes Church was built (there have been three in all), the house became the parsonage. In the early 20th century, the house was moved to this location. Today it is a private home.



19. 200 block of Calvert Street

Originally this building was Kenneth Walley's funeral home, which served the local black community for more than 40 years. The building, now known informally as "The Yellow House," is owned by the Kent County Public Library, which allows community groups to use it for meetings.



Clockwise: Kenneth Walley; sample caskets; Kenneth Walley Funeral Home, ca. 1957. (Today Kenneth Walley Funeral Services has locations outside Chestertown and in Annapolis.)

20. 339-341 High Street

Abraham Robinson and his wife Nettie moved to Chestertown sometime in the 1890s. With Nettie as cook, they had opened a restaurant by 1907, serving oysters in season and ice cream in the summer. Well known for ice cream, Robinson sold to both blacks and whites—with blacks served on one side and whites on the other. He sold ice cream farm to farm too, and was known for the “Hokey Pokey,” a sliced section of a square block of ice cream. He was so successful that he began to invest in real estate with borrowed funds, but times were changing. New laws passed in the early 1920s regulating butterfat content of ice cream

A MAN AMONG THE OYSTERS.



— LOOK AT THE —

RISING SUN

as she peeps over Chestertown. Open your church, your halls and your homes and let her illuminate with FRESH OYSTERS and CHIPS and ICE CREAM. Come in and sit down, make yourself at home, read the daily news, eat your oysters in every style and take some home. And tell the people to come to THE RISING SUN RESTAURANT and do likewise. A word to the church for which my heart is open: If you are going to have a Supper or festival I will sell you at a reduction. Just drop me a card or phone

A. ROBINSON.
Phone No. 182. Chestertown, Md.

Abraham Robinson's ad for his High Street restaurant, Kent News, September 14, 1907.

and the packing and shipping of oysters led to the closing of most of the old-time oyster and ice cream shops. In 1924, his properties on Prospect, Calvert, and High Streets and his home on Queen Street were sold at auction. Abraham and Nettie moved their restaurant to Kent and Calvert Streets, but they never regained their former wealth. The site of the Robinsons' original restaurant now houses the Decoy Room Bottle Shop, seen below.



21. 320 High Street

This building, adjacent to Fountain Park at the corner of Spring Street, was the first Methodist Episcopal Church, which both black and white parishioners attended in the 1700s. Laid out to mimic the proportions of nearby Emmanuel Church, it was the parent church of today's First United Methodist Church, Christ United Methodist Church, and Janes United Methodist Church. Today the building houses the Nearly New Shop, a thrift store benefiting the University of Maryland Shore Medical Center, Chestertown's local hospital.



Illustration of original Methodist Episcopal Church from 1860 Martenet's Map.

22. 302-304 Park Row

This stucco building was the site of a Jim Crow-era doctor's office. The door on the left was for white patients; the door on the right was for African American patients. Today it has commercial suites on the first floor and apartments on the second floor.



302-304 Park Row today.

23. Corner at Maple Avenue, Philosopher's Terrace, Cross Street



Chestertown Volunteer Fire Company, Station 6, today.

This triangular corner reaching south to Queen Street was once waterfront: an inlet, called Barroll's Bight, curved around from the Chester River bringing boats with cargoes of fish and oysters behind and past where the fire station now stands. On that site, beginning in 1857, William Perkins's Rising Sun Saloon served both black and white customers for about 30 years. Nearby was Perkins Hall, now gone, but built by Perkins as a meeting site for the black community. Perkins's home was also here but later relocated to nearby 212 North Queen Street, where it is now a private residence.

The son of Samuel Perkins (#26),

William was following in his father's entrepreneurial footsteps when he opened the Rising Sun, and like his father, his interests extended to other businesses—in his case, lumber, coal, and ice. Within a dozen years, he became one of the Eastern Shore's wealthiest African Americans. But Perkins was more than a business leader. He was a political leader, focusing before the Civil War on abolition and afterwards on education and civil rights for free blacks. He and James Jones (#10) represented Chestertown at the first political convention held by and for African Americans in Maryland, in 1852 in

Baltimore. After the Civil War, he worked extensively to help develop schools and, in 1870, helped organize and was chief marshal for a rally to celebrate ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment giving black men the right to vote. At that rally, the prayer was delivered by his friend, Reverend

Henry Highland Garnet (#13) who was able to visit Chestertown again after abolition. In 1872, Perkins and three other Maryland men were appointed the first black trustees of the Centenary Biblical Institute, now Morgan State University.

24.100 block of North Cross Street

On May 17, 1892, James Taylor, 23, an African American accused of assaulting the daughter of his white employer, but professing innocence, was dragged from his cell at the Kent County jail (then in front of the Cross Street entrance to the Kent County



The old Kent County Jail, here ca. 1900, was built in front of the courthouse in 1883 and torn down when the courthouse was remodeled in about 1969.

Courthouse) by a masked and armed mob of about 60 white men. Without any trial or semblance of justice, Taylor was lynched nearby. An estimated 500 citizens witnessed the atrocity, but despite reports that the members of the mob were known, no prosecutions were conducted. *The Baltimore Sun* reported that black citizens planned a peaceful protest by agreeing to boycott any white businessman involved in Taylor's murder.

25. Memorial Park Road

This park is the site of the Monument to Colored Troops of Kent County in the Civil War. By



the 1850s, more African Americans were free than enslaved in Kent County. More than 400 local African Americans, including some enslaved, joined the Union Army. Chestertown's Parker White Post #143, the first American Legion post in Kent County started by African Americans, was instrumental in the placement of this monument in 1999. The granite obelisk, seen at the left, reads in part: These soldiers "bravely displayed extraordinary acts of heroism" and "faithfully served their country with courage & honor in an attempt to gain freedom & equality."

26. 100 Memorial Plaza

This is the first Masonic Hall built in Chestertown, in 1828. One of the original occupants leasing space on its first floor was Samuel Perkins, who operated an oyster hall here. That same year, Perkins joined with Thomas Cuff (#3) in establishing a shad and herring fishery that according to



Engraving of Masonic Hall, from Birds Eye View of Chestertown, 1907

their ad in the *Chestertown Telegraph* was "to furnish the citizens of Kent and others." Twenty-nine years later, Samuel Perkins's son, William,

followed in his ambitious father's footsteps with the hugely successful Rising Sun oyster saloon on Maple Avenue (#23).

27. Street Mural, 200 block of High Street



Volunteers painting street mural “Black Lives Matter” on September 12, 2020.

In August 2020, the Town, as part of its Chestertown Unites Against Racism program, authorized the painting of this street mural “Black Lives Matter” at the central business district of Chestertown.

28. 210 High Street



The Prince Theatre, now the Garfield Center for the Arts, was the first movie theatre in Chestertown. Originally named The Lyceum, the theatre was segregated from its opening in 1928 until the early 1960s, with blacks allowed to sit only in the balcony.



29. Court Street and Church Alley

This neighborhood was home to African American residences and businesses through much of the 20th century. A small black community, probably dating to the 1880s, populated both sides of Court Street beyond Church Alley towards Maple Avenue. A cemetery was on the north side. Queen Street was to the south, and the community may have started as rear-lot housing for servants of the families who lived on Queen Street.



Charley Williams's house, originally located on upper Court Street, was slated for demolition but saved and moved to the grounds of the Kent Museum near Kennedyville in 1974.

Charley Williams's House, was typical of the homes on upper Court Street. Moved from its original location on upper Court Street in 1974 to northeast of Kennedyville on the grounds of the Kent Museum, it is the last surviving dwelling of this now-vanished African American community. Just 16 feet by 14 feet, it was built to house two families, each half with two rooms, a loft, and a shared center chimney with vents for stoves on each side. It had doors only on one side, which faced Church Alley.

By the time of the 1910 census, this section of Court Street had grown to 12 households with a population of

42. Frank Carroll, who tended horses for a prominent local white lawyer, lived there in 1905 and died there on Christmas morning that same year. William Nichols ran a restaurant on Court Street soon after the turn of the century, until his death in 1904. The local newspaper wrote that he was "a colored citizen who held the respect of us all."

Emma Johnson lived at 202 Court Street, a part of upper Court Street. She and her neighbor, Susie Johnson, were washerwomen. Thomas Brown was a hauler, who boarded at Johnson's house. At 208 Court Street, a hardware store clerk and later a grocery store delivery man



Geddes-Piper House during its time as a multi-family apartment building, ca. 1940s. It was sold to the Historical Society in 1958 and restored.

lived; his name was John Starling. Carrie Brown, a cook at Washington College's Normal Hall, lived nearby. So did Martha Davis, who cooked for a local boarding house. By 1965, the upper Court Street neighborhood was largely gone when the cemetery property was sold to make way for the courthouse parking lot.

Even before then, the black community had stretched around the corner to Church Alley, with black ownership or occupancy of several houses there until the 1970s and 1980s. William and Elizabeth Boyer lived there in 1920. In the 1940s, the once-elegant Geddes-Piper House, ca. 1730, had fallen into disrepair and had been divided into 13 apartments;

African American families occupied several.

A local historian quotes Percy Johnson, the last black homeowner on Church Alley, recounting that he had lived in the neighborhood from after World War II until about 1981 or 1982. He remembers an enclave of a dozen families. He first lived on upper Court Street several houses to the northeast of the Williams House. His was a small frame house with a living room downstairs, two bedrooms upstairs, and a lean-to kitchen. There were also several duplexes similar to the Williams House. There was also a barn that had been converted as a home for two families.

All are gone now. Upper Court Street has law offices on the south side; its juncture with Church Alley is flanked by former law offices, now private residences. The Geddes-Piper House was sold in 1958 to the Historical Society of Kent County. It was restored by the Society's members and served as a house museum and Society headquarters until 2015 when it became a private residence once again. Church Alley is residential. No current residences are black-owned or occupied.

30. Foot of High Street

The Custom House, once the home and offices of Thomas Ringgold, a white merchant, attorney, and slave dealer, still dominates the terminus of High Street.

But it is now owned by

Washington College and is home to the Chesapeake Heartland: An African American Humanities Project at Washington College and community partners.



The Custom House, from a postcard, ca. 1910.

Resources

Historic Houses of Kent County, Michael Bourne, Historical Society of Kent County, Chester River Press, 1998; see Chapter 6, *The Black Community in Early Kent County* by Davy Henderson McCall, and individual reports on many pre-1860 houses such as Levi Rodgers, Maria Bracker. Available for purchase from Historical Society of Kent County.

The Key to Old Kent, Vol. 5, 2011, Lucy Maddox, *A Liberal Share of Public Patronage: Chestertown's Antebellum Black Businesses*. Available through Historical Society of Kent County library.

The Key to Old Kent, Vol. 7, 2013, *A Special Edition Dedicated to African-American History*, Historical Society of Kent County. Available at <https://kentcountyhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/The-Key-to-Old-Kent-A-Journal-of-the-Historical-Society-of-Kent-County-Vol-7-2013.pdf>

History of Court Street, Kevin Hemstock, 48th Annual Historic House Tour, October 6, 2018, Historical Society of Kent County. Available through Historical Society of Kent County library.

Chestertown, Then and Now, Chestertown African American Oral History Project, Bethel A.M.E. Church, Chestertown, Maryland, undated. Available through Historical Society of Kent County library.

Kent County Abstracts, Vol. 1-10, 1729-1906, local, regional, and national newspaper references to Kent County, Maryland, compiled and edited by Kevin Hemstock, Old News Publishing, Millington, Maryland. Available on CD for purchase through Historical Society of Kent County library.

Chestertown, MD, "Freedom Riders" campaign against racial segregation, 1962, Global Nonviolent Action Database, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>

Martenet's Map of Kent County, 1860. Includes shore lines and surroundings from U.S. Coast Survey and roads and inland from actual surveys by C.H. Baker, county surveyor. Drawn and published by Simon J. Martenet, Baltimore, ca. 1860. Includes householders' names and election districts. Available through Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2002624009/>

Birds Eye View of Chestertown, Kent Co., Maryland 1907. Aerial view with inset drawings of some prominent buildings. Not drawn to scale. Created by Thaddeus Mortimore Fowler, published by Fowler & Kelly, Morrisville, PA, 1907. Available through Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3844c_pm002560/

Scott's Point Project, Site Exhibit with map and photos, Preservation Inc. Project Sponsor, Spring 1984. Available for review in Historical Society of Kent County library.

Maryland Inventory of Historic Places, Maryland Historic Trust, K--files of properties by MIHP number, property name, or property address. Available at <https://mht.maryland.gov/mihp/MIHP.aspx?Search=County&County=Kent>

The Legacy of Slavery in Maryland, An Archives of Maryland Electronic Publication, case studies with 14 Kent County African American biographies including James Jones and William Perkins, Maryland State Archives, <http://slavery.msa.maryland.gov/html/casestudies/ktcs.html>, then select "Other" tab.

Afterword

The vitality and creativity seen during this Walk continue in the businesses African Americans have founded more recently. These include the ultra-modern (a unisex hair salon; strategic business consulting; and drone photo and video production) and the timelessly valuable—a bus service that served generations of schoolchildren, a popular downtown BBQ restaurant, and a professional accounting service (based outside Chestertown, as many Kent County black-owned businesses are now).

Civic leadership by successful African Americans lives on today, too. Their roles are many, but they include, to name only a few:

- **Election** to the County Commission, Town Council, and School Board and as Clerk of Kent County Circuit Court;
- **Appointment** to the Chestertown Planning Commission, the Historic District Commission, and Chestertown Equity Advisory Committee;
- **Service** in the Chestertown Police Department, Kent County Sheriff's Office, and State's Attorney Office and as teachers, principals, and superintendent in Kent County schools and in many county government offices;
- **Creating** nonprofits like the Bayside HOYAs and Minary's Dream Alliance;
- **Founding** citizen coalitions like the African American Heritage Council and for projects like the "Black Lives Matter" street murals, saving Sumner Hall, Chestertown Unites Against Racism, and Chesapeake Heartland.

The good life in Chestertown and Kent County owes much to these modern African American business and civic leaders.

Special Thanks

Special thanks to those who shared their photo archives with us: *Kent County News*; *The Chestertown Spy*; Kim Briscoe Moody, Nivek Johnson, Irene Moore through Chesapeake Heartland: An African American Humanities Project; and Vincent M. Raimond Family Collection, and to valued friends and advisors, Kevin Hemstock, Bayly Janson-LaPalme, Kathryn Meehan, Jim Dissette, and Trish McGee.

Thanks as well to those Historical Society volunteers who shared their research, writing, editing, and design talents—and their love of our local history—in creating this 2022 edition: Jane Nevins, LaMonte Cooke, Stephanie Gosman, Barbara Jorgenson. And special thanks also to Barbara Slocum, as always, for her splendid graphic design.

About The Historical Society of Kent County

The Historical Society of Kent County, Inc., was founded 86 years ago and incorporated as a non-profit, educational society in 1958. The Society seeks to foster knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the shared heritage of our community. The Society collects and preserves the stories of all the residents of Kent County and all aspects of the rich and diverse history of our county. The Society shares this history through its research library, its museum, its programs, its publications, its events, and its website. It is headquartered at the Bordley History Center, 301 High Street, Chestertown, in a historic building at the center of Chestertown's National Historic District.



Learn more about the Historical Society of Kent County, Inc.,
P.O. Box 665, Chestertown, MD 21620,
www.kentcountyhistory.org; director@kentcountyhistory.org; (410) 778-3499.



Birds Eye View of Chestertown, 1907



Voting Rights March passing corner of Cross and Cannon Streets, ca. early 1960s.

The African American Heritage Walk is a continuing project of the Historical Society of Kent County, Inc. It was initially prepared in 2013, revised in 2015, and revised and expanded in June 2022. It is available in two formats: a brochure with a map and a short description of each site or a 40-page book with a map, dozens of illustrations, and more detailed information on each site. The brochure is available without cost at the Bordley History Center, the Town's Visitor Center, and the Kent County Department of Economic Development and Tourism. The book is available for purchase at the Bordley History Center or may be viewed or downloaded without cost at the Society's website at www.kentcountyhistory.org or by accessing the QR code here.



Support for the 2022 project was funded by Kent County and by grants from *Stories of the Chesapeake*, a program of Eastern Shore Heritage, Inc., and by the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority Grant, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and Maryland Humanities as part of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and the NEH sustaining the Humanities through the American Rescue Plan (SHARP) initiative.



© Historical Society of Kent County
Bordley History Center
301 High Street, P.O.Box 665
Chestertown, MD 21620
410-778-3499
director@kentcountyhistory.org
www.kentcountyhistory.org

Cover photo:
Charlie Graves, owner of
the legendary Uptown
Club, ca. 1988.