



# History in My Backyard

## America's Oldest Community Founded by Free Black People

By Rita Thompson

Among my fondest childhood memories are visiting my great grandparents, Lewis "Pop Lewis" (1883-1972) and Geneva "Mom G" (1887-1979) Wilson. Their home on the eastern shore of Maryland, set back an acre from the unpaved road with a long dirt driveway leading to the house, lacked the modern conveniences we all are accustomed to. A pump outside the back porch provided water, the outhouse near the chicken coop, and bedrooms, each with a chamber pot and a vanity station containing a pitcher and bowl to wash up in the morning, were likely how most everyone in rural America lived during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

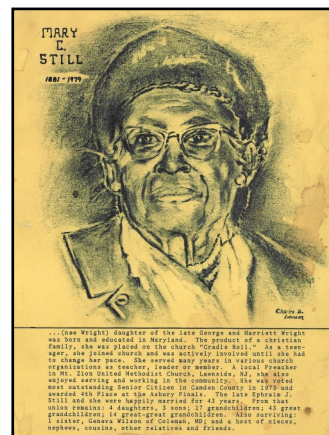
Pop Lewis had a funny way of calling for the chickens at feeding time and they would come running. One time, soon after arriving, he showed us a hen whose clutch of eggs had hatched the day before. What an adorable sight, a hen and at least a dozen little yellow fuzzy chicks. We visited for their 58<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, Pop Lewis' 87<sup>th</sup> birthday (it snowed on Easter Sunday that year and took nearly eight hours to drive home to the Bronx) and many times for no reason at all. Other family was often there too, traveling from Baltimore, Philadelphia, New Jersey, and Delaware. We feasted on crabs, ate scrapple with breakfast, some pitched horse shoes and played touch football, and all had a great time.

It was here that I first met Mom G's sister, my Aunt Cassie (Mary Cassandra Still; 1881-1979). Aunt Cassie, along with daughter Ruth and sons Carl and Norris, drove from Lawnside, New Jersey. She is the widow of Ephraim Jerome Still (1876-1941), a grand nephew of abolitionist William Still (1821-1902).

In 1938, Ephraim Still was elected mayor of Lawnside, New Jersey. Lawnside, established in 1840 during the abolitionist anti-slavery movement, is America's oldest community founded by free Black people. It was first named Free Haven, later changed to Snow Hill and then to Lawnside when the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad built a station there. In 1940, the centennial of its founding, Mayor Still described Lawnside as "a beautiful little town of neat homes and 1,500 inhabitants enjoying complete autonomy."



The Evening Sun, Sep 4 1940  
Baltimore, Maryland



Mary Cassandra Still  
1881-1979



**William Still** (1821-1902) was an abolitionist, conductor on the Underground Railroad, businessman, writer, historian and civil rights activist. He directly aided fugitive slaves and also kept records of the people served in order to help families reunite.

