

## Swimmers win first sectional title in team history

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David Nahan/CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE

Janis Washington White and Rudy Von Coln, caretaker of Union Bethel Civil War Veterans Cemetery, look at the grave of her ancestor, James S. Washington. Both are part of a documentary to be screened Feb. 15 at the Cape May branch of the Cape May County Library in the old Franklin Street School.

## UNION BETHEL CIVIL WAR VETERANS CEMETERY African-American burial ground topic of documentary; screening set Feb. 15

By CRAIG D. SCHENCK  
Cape May Star and Wave

ERMA — Tim Millaway recently completed a documentary film about Union Bethel Civil War Veterans Cemetery called “Whispers from the Forgotten in Lower Township, New Jersey.”

The film is scheduled for its Garden State debut at 1 p.m. Feb. 15 at the Cape May branch of the Cape May County Library in the former Franklin Street School.

The event will include a panel discussion with descendants of some of those buried in the cemetery in the spirit of Black History Month.

“This film explores the history of the cemetery, its significance to the local African-American community and the efforts to restore and preserve this important historical site,” said Millaway, a member of the Lower Township Historic Preservation Committee.

The 33-minute documentary focuses on an important African-American burial ground that is home to the graves of 16 war veterans and many others.

The film premiered Jan. 4 on Philadelphia’s Access Channel, PhillyCam, and also will be screened June 24 at a Cherry Hill library.

The cemetery is located off Tabernacle Road in the Erma section of the township.

According to the Black Cemetery Network, the graveyard was founded in 1831 to serve a community of freed African Americans living in a rural wooded area. Most members of the community were farmers, and some had been formerly enslaved.

The earliest burial in the cemetery was in 1834 and the latest in 1947. Over the years, various



David Nahan/CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE

Among those buried in the cemetery is the Rev. Edward C. Turner, who played a role in the Underground Railroad with Harriet Tubman. Sixteen veterans of the Civil War were laid to rest in the graveyard off Tabernacle Road in Erma.

groups have participated in efforts to restore the cemetery and preserve it.

In 2018, the Lower Township Historic Preservation Commission took over the care of the cemetery and is the caretaker today.

The cemetery is notable for the 16 veterans of the Civil War, 15 of whom served in the U.S. Colored Troops and one in the U.S. Navy.

Millaway said the documentary “unveils the forgotten stories of African-American heroes who fought for freedom and equality,” noting it “delves into the history of the sacred ground, shedding light on the lives of those who were marginalized and silenced.”

Millaway said beneath the weathered headstones lies a rich

tapestry of history, often overlooked and forgotten.

“The documentary takes viewers on a journey through time, exploring the lives of African-American soldiers, families and community members who called this cemetery their final resting place,” he said. “Its stories uncover Civil War veterans who fought for the Union, its connection to the Underground Railroad and the challenges faced by African Americans in the 19th century.”

Millaway, 62, who owns a vacation home in Diamond Beach with his wife, Christine, is a film producer dedicated to bringing history to life through Milkyway Films

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## Inflation among 2025 challenges for Lower Twp.

Mayor outlines new projects, noting costs continue to rise

By RACHEL SHUBIN  
Special to the Star and Wave

VILLAS — After running unopposed and being re-elected for another four years, Lower Township Mayor Frank Sippel is ready to tackle infrastructure projects, recreation upgrades and state mandates.

Sippel delivered his annual State of the Township address Feb. 3, looking back on accomplishments in 2024 and previewing what the community can expect in 2025.

“Each and almost every year, we make infrastructure the number one priority for the township, including renovation of parks and playgrounds, and that’s not going to change for 2025,” Sippel told the Star and Wave.

The township has about 23,000 residents and is home to beaches, restaurants, small businesses and the Cape May County Airport. Township Council prioritizes roadway improvements and making the area a safe place to call home.

Planning for the year ahead is not without its challenges, including balancing the municipal budget and keeping the tax rate down.

“The toughest [issue]

is the cost of doing business,” Sippel said. “With everything we do, [from] receiving bids for paving and infrastructure [like] replacing stormwater drains, and the price of materials, the [costs] are going up a lot.”

Another challenge is the rising cost of state employee health insurance.

“It’s increased by 18 to 20 percent the last couple of years and we’re expecting another increase for 2025,” he said.



SIPPEL

### Community projects

Township parks and playgrounds are being renovated this year. The \$4 million David Douglass Sr. Memorial Park project will expand the parking lot and add lights, a bathroom building, decorative footpath along Cape May Canal and an observation deck. The memorial will also be redesigned and relocated.

“We’re anticipating getting at least half the money from the county through the open space project,” Sippel said.

Renovation of the Diamond Beach Park playground was completed in 2024, which Sippel said is a positive accomplishment. Improvements included

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## Rally shows solidarity with U.S. immigrants

Dozens protest ‘racist,’ ‘violent’ policies of Trump administration

By CRAIG D. SCHENCK  
Cape May Star and Wave

RIO GRANDE — “ICE and the Border Patrol are just tools of violence, criminalizing people simply for existing,” Sandy Bove’ said Feb. 6 following a rally to support immigrant rights the previous day. “We believe in collective liberation, that none are free until all are free and we will continue to organize.”

Community members, advocates and allies gathered Feb. 5 at the intersection of Routes 9 and 47 in Middle Township to show solidarity with immigrants and demand protections for all.

Cape May County In-divisible held “We Stand with Immigrants” aimed at bringing awareness to human rights and called for an end to the raids, deportations and other “racist and violent policies of ICE (Im-

migration and Customs Enforcement) and the Trump administration.”

President Donald Trump signed multiple executive orders Jan. 20, shortly after being sworn in for his second term, targeting immigration. He ordered the military to the border, prohibited migrants from making advance appointments with border officials, suspended parole programs and forced migrants to wait in Mexico while their asylum cases are heard, according to national news outlets.

Border Patrol agents were ordered to deport those who illegally cross the border immediately and conduct “expedited removals” for people found throughout the United States. Deportation flights began Jan. 23 for the more than 6,000 detainees

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# Township Council amends fees for use of off-duty police

By RACHEL SHUBIN  
Special to the Star and Wave

VILLAS — February is typically one of the quieter months in Lower Township, but a lot is happening behind the scenes.

During a meeting Feb. 3, Township Council introduced an ordinance amending the administrative fees for off-duty police services. "In 2024, we enacted [a resolution] that increased the hourly rate that officers received when they worked extra duty contract, a contract when they're off-duty and not working for the department," solicitor Louis Belasco said. "The original rate was \$60 through contract negotiations. The new collective bargaining agreement that was executed with the police department increased that rate to \$85."

The \$25 increase is the only change in the ordinance. Belasco said that when Chief Financial Officer Lauren Read and the finance department ran the numbers, the \$5 administrative fee didn't cover the taxes the township would incur.

"We were essentially subsidizing those extra duty events," Belasco said. "In speaking with Lauren Read, she suggested that we increase the administrative rate from \$5 to \$7."

Belasco noted that Read also identified an issue with the charge imposed for ex-

tra duty events using Lower Township Police Department vehicles.

"Previously, it was indicated that these extra duty events would pay \$50 per day for the use of the township's vehicles," Belasco said. "That expense is actually covered by statute."

According to Belasco, there are state regulations based on the type of vehicle that should be charged.

"In this case, it increases the rate to \$22.91 an hour and Lauren's suggestion was to increase to \$23 an hour to be consistent with the requirements outlined in the state statute," Belasco said. "Even though a vehicle might not be driving, it's on while these officers are working these extra duty details. There is use incurred with these vehicles, so it's appropriate to increase that as well."

Belasco said the ordinance includes language noting that the township runs the program but council could choose to designate a third-party vendor.

"If you recall, we also went out to request for proposals to manage this program for the township," Belasco said. "That is set to be included in the bids and proposals we receive."

Currently, council can award a contract with a third-party vendor or reject the offers. The ordinance's second reading and public

hearing were scheduled for Feb. 19.

### Fire district elections

In other news, Louis Conley Jr., secretary of Fire District II, spoke to the council regarding fire elections.

"Fire district elections are coming up, and I come here every year to remind everyone that the commissioners have a budget that has to be voted on every year by the public," Conley said.

The election is scheduled for 2 to 9 p.m. Feb. 14 at the fire district firehouse. Conley noted that the other two fire district elections in the township are held simultaneously at the firehouses.

"We have two questions on the ballot this year, to approve the budget, and the second is we need to buy another firetruck and that seems to be an unending story," Conley said. "We can do that without raising the taxes, which is outlined in the balance."

Councilman Tom Conrad asked Conley to clarify that Town Bank has no tax increase for 2025.

"If you want to be [really] technical, there is a hundredth of a cent increase purely by virtue of the way it works," Conley said. "If you turn that into \$100,000, that would be \$10."

Councilman Joe Wareham said he had the opportunity to attend the fire district swearing-in and award cer-

emony in January.

"We say all the time that the volunteers drive this community, but to be a volunteer firefighter you're volunteering your time and your first responder double duties," Wareham said. "It takes a unique person to do that and I want to thank all [three] fire districts for their services."

### New police officer

Patrolman Austin Cushman was sworn in during the meeting by Mayor Frank Sippel. His wife, Anri Cushman, held the Bible and his cousin and fellow officer Michael Harkin pinned on his badge.

"Austin Cushman is a lifelong resident of Lower Township and a 2013 graduate from Lower Cape May Regional," Police Chief Kevin Lewis said. "He joined the U.S. Navy in January 2018 and graduated from Hospital Corpsman A school in December 2018."

Cushman also attended Dental Assisting C school, finishing basic dental laboratory technician school in September 2019.

"Patrolman Cushman was stationed at a naval hospital in Yokosuka, Japan from October 2019 to December 2023," Lewis said. "He separated honorably from the U.S. Navy in January 2024 and was hired as a full-time police officer by the Lower Township Police Depart-

ment in August 2024."

Cushman graduated from the basic force of police officer training at the Cape May County Police Academy in January.

### Blackley retires

The council awarded a proclamation of retirement to Donna Blackley.

"Donna began her career with Lower Township Fire Bureau in 2000," Sippel said. "She became a secretary

to the fire bureau, and attended fire inspector school in 2003 and took the fire official course."

Blackley attended fire investigation school in 2013 and was named Lower Township fire official in February 2015.

"[We] congratulate Donna on a well-deserved retirement," Sippel said. "Thank you for your dedicated years of service and Lower Township wishes you success in all future endeavors."

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## Union Bethel

Continued from Page A1

and Designs. "We specialize in creating high-quality television programs, animated documentaries and feature-length films that explore the rich tapestry of human history," the Cherry Hill resident said.

He and assistant director Tom Coyle produced the project for the Lower Township Historic Preservation Committee, noting it was a team project but "I was the guy who knew how to make stuff."

### "Better story than I could ever imagine"

Millaway said they were planning to make a simple film documenting the cemetery after meeting caretaker Rudy Von Coln, but a Facebook post drew the attention of four area women who are descendants of people laid to rest there.

"This project began with a simple encounter: a conversation with the caretaker of a neglected cemetery. Hearing his stories ignited a passion to document this forgotten corner of history," Millaway said. "However, a Facebook post unexpectedly brought forth descendants of those buried within, their voices adding a profound depth and urgency to the narrative."

He interviewed Janis Washington White and Wanda Wise Evelyn of Rio Grande, Emily Dempsey of West Cape May and Shirley R. Wilson of Wildwood.

"They were just fantastic," Millaway said. "Their personal stories revealed the remarkable impact of these forgotten heroes on their families and communities, underscoring the critical importance of preserving our shared African American history."

Millaway said he learned that important people in the Underground Railroad, such as Edward Turner, are buried in the cemetery.

"These are things that are not totally documented, because African American lives were not really documented well then," he said. "It turned about to be quite a stimulating story and ended up being a better story than I could ever imagine."

Millaway said the project is part of the committee's message of preservation.

"That's why we exist, to try to keep those things that are very important from being forgotten," he said. "Through this film, I aim to illuminate the interconnectedness of our past and inspire a deeper understanding of our collective heritage."

Others featured in the film, which was shot at the Fishing Creek Schoolhouse, are Pary Tell, chairwoman of the his-



David Nahan/CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE

Caretaker Rudy Von Coln, Janis Washington White, filmmaker Tim Millaway and assistant producer Tom Coyle at the Union Bethel Civil War Veterans Cemetery.

torical committee; Paul Schulte of the Builder's Club; and Stephen Larsen, a playwright who

wrote "Other Side of the Jordan," a play about the Underground Railroad in Cape May.

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DATE	HIGH		LOW	
	A.M.	P.M.	A.M.	P.M.
12	7:49	8:14	1:12	2:00
13	8:27	8:51	1:54	2:36
14	9:02	9:27	2:34	3:09
15	9:37	10:03	3:12	3:42
16	10:12	10:40	3:51	4:14
17	10:48	11:19	4:33	4:48
18	11:26		5:18	5:23
19	12:01	12:07	6:06	6:01

### MOON PHASES

Full moon: Feb. 12 - last quarter: Feb. 20

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