

# R · FRIENDS OF THE · ROBESONIA



Winter 2018

Volume 38 Issue 1

Friends of the Robesonia Furnace, Inc. PO Box 162 • Robesonia, PA 19551-1230

## Black workers and their Families at the Robesonia Furnace

*Randy Gartner*

George Ege established the Robesonia Furnace in 1794. Prior to that he ran the Berkshire (Reading Furnace) in South Heidelberg Township. He also owned Charming Forge. It has been established that Ege owned slaves but it is not clear when he acquired them. He may have acquired them when he purchased Charming Forge from his Uncle, William Henry Stiegel who owned slaves. The Gradual Abolition Act, which called for the elimination of Slavery in Pennsylvania was passed in 1780. It was the first colony to pass such an act. People who owned slaves could keep them, however new born slaves became indentured servants who would be freed at age 28. I have read that slaves helped build the Ironmaster's mansion at the Furnace between 1804 and 1807. According to records of the time, Ege owned 10 slaves. They worked at the Robesonia Furnace and at Charming Forge. Ege built and lived in the mansion at Charming Forge. Some of the slaves worked as servants in the house. Some worked at the farm and some at the forge. Ege had a slave named Tom Nelson whom he entrusted with large sums of money which he transported from Charming Forge to the bank in Reading. Nelson also drove Ege in his carriage to meet George Washington at the Stouch Tavern in Womelsdorf in 1794. We know that some of the blacks working for Ege were baptized and later buried at St Daniels Lutheran Church. We are not sure what happened to the blacks Ege owned after his death. Though we do know the ones born after 1780 received their freedom after age 28.

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*Randy Gartner*

I haven't been able to find records of blacks working at the Furnace during the Henry P Robeson era. What we do know is that after the Civil War, there was a migration of southern blacks to the North where many obtained work in the iron making industry. Floyd Umbles was a descendant of one of these families. He was born in Robesonia in 1905. When he was 12 years old, Floyd and other young boys were hired to work at the Furnace because some of the workforce had gone to fight in WWI. Growing up, Floyd was good friends with Clarence Koch. Both lived at the Furnace and their fathers worked there. Floyd's grandfather was Johnny Walker who they called "Pappy". He was also the grandfather of Jim Carter who lived in this area for many years. I remember Jim because he played poker with my Dad at Luke Koch's Atlantic gas station where Tony's Pizza now sits. Jim also hung out at Berle Eiceman's Garage after Luke's Atlantic was sold. I had the pleasure of meeting Floyd back in the early 1990's when he attended some of the Furnace Festivals. He became friends with my Mom and one time took us on a walking tour of the Furnace Ruins. Floyd and his sister, along with other black children attended the Robesonia Furnace School and later the "new " school in town. Both of them played on the high school basketball teams. Floyd told me that blacks were treated no different than white workers at the Furnace. If you did the same job as a white person, you got paid the same. He said black and white families didn't socialize after work, but for the most part got along well. Floyd's family moved to Canton , Ohio to work in the steel mills after the Furnace closed. When he retired, he moved back to Berks County.



**Membership Renewal Form**  
*(Check your mailing label for your current date of membership)*

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Spouse \_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Yearly Amount Level		One Time Amount Level	
\$ 10.00 ____ Individual	\$ 25.00 ____ Contributing	\$ 100.00 ____ Life Member	
\$ 20.00 ____ Family	\$ 50.00 ____ Sponsor		
*Memberships for 2017 expired Dec. 31, 2017		*All donations are tax deductible	

Please make checks payable and send along with Membership Form to Friends of the Robesonia Furnace, P.O. Box 162 Robesonia PA 19551-0162

**Sign Up A Friend!** How about sharing with a friend or sending them a gift membership?



# Friends of the Robesonian Furnace 2018 Annual Dinner



Ozgood's Restaurant  
5:30 PM  
Tuesday March 20, 2018

- 5:30 - 6:30 Cash Bar
- 6:30 - 7:15 Dinner
- 7:15 Speaker –TBD
- 8:00 - BUSINESS MEETING
  - . PRESIDENT'S REPORT
  - . TREASURER'S REPORT
  - . ELECTION OF OFFICERS

## OFFICERS:

PRESIDENT : ABBY WERTZ  
 VICE PRESIDENT : RANDY GARTNER  
 TREASURER : BILL WILLIARD  
 SECRETARY : FRANCES YOH  
 BOARD : NANCY SNYDER  
           NORMAN BRUNNER  
           BARBARA BREININGER

NEWSLETTER: KEITH RENTSCHLER  
 COMMITTEE CHAIR– LUCILLE PUTT  
 LONG RANGE PLANNING– CALVIN YOH  
 CONTACT LUCILLE PUTT FOR MORE INFO AT  
 610-693-5968

## Registration Form

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

_____ Roast Turkey w Gravy	<b>\$21.00</b>
_____ Chicken Cordon Bleu	<b>\$23.00</b>
_____ Black Diamond Steak	<b>\$25.00</b>

Please Circle Choice

All meals include Choice of House or Caesar Salad, Vegetable du Jour, Roasted Rosemary Potatoes, Fresh Baked Rolls, Fountain Soda, Coffee, Tea, and Dessert [ Cheesecake ].

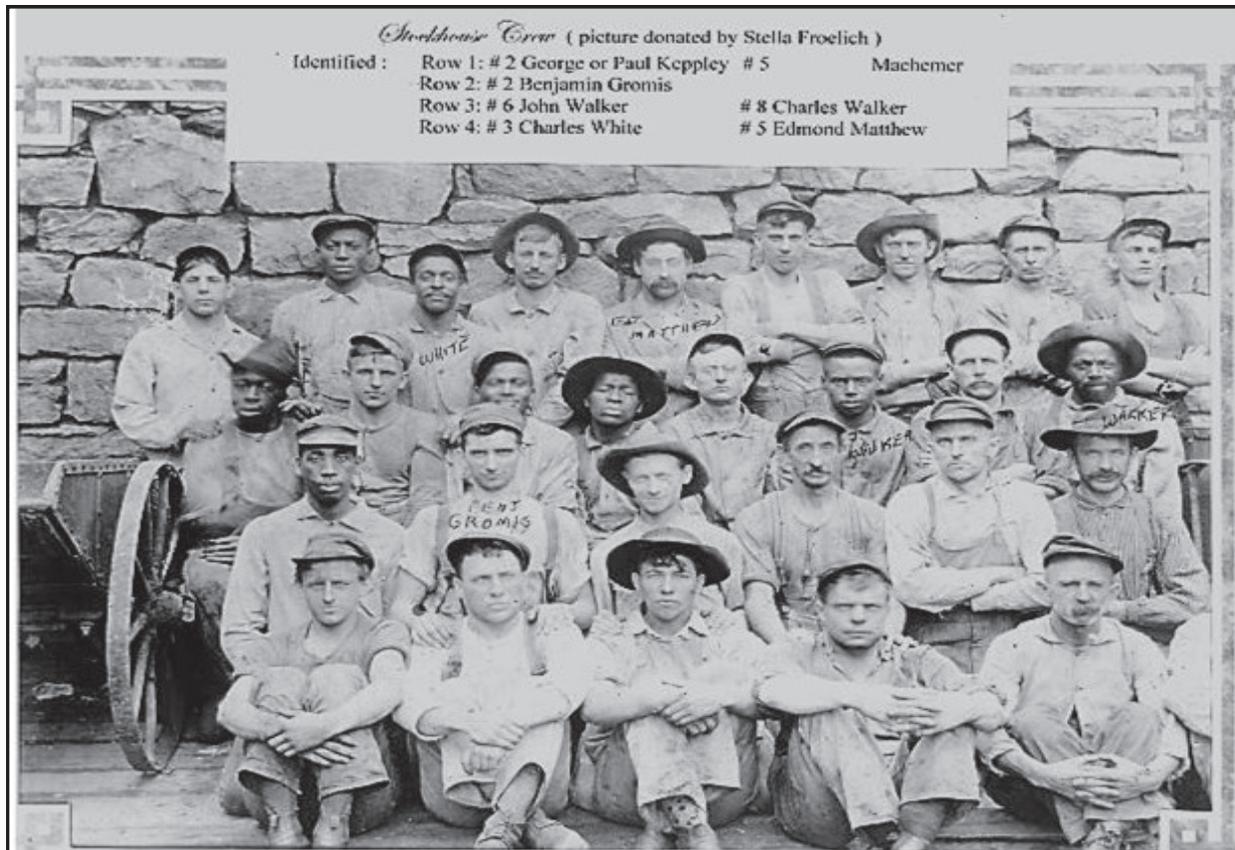
REGISTRATION DEADLINE TUESDAY, MARCH 13, 2018

Please make checks payable and send along with form to:  
 Friends of the Robesonian Furnace, PO Box 162, Robesonian, PA 19551

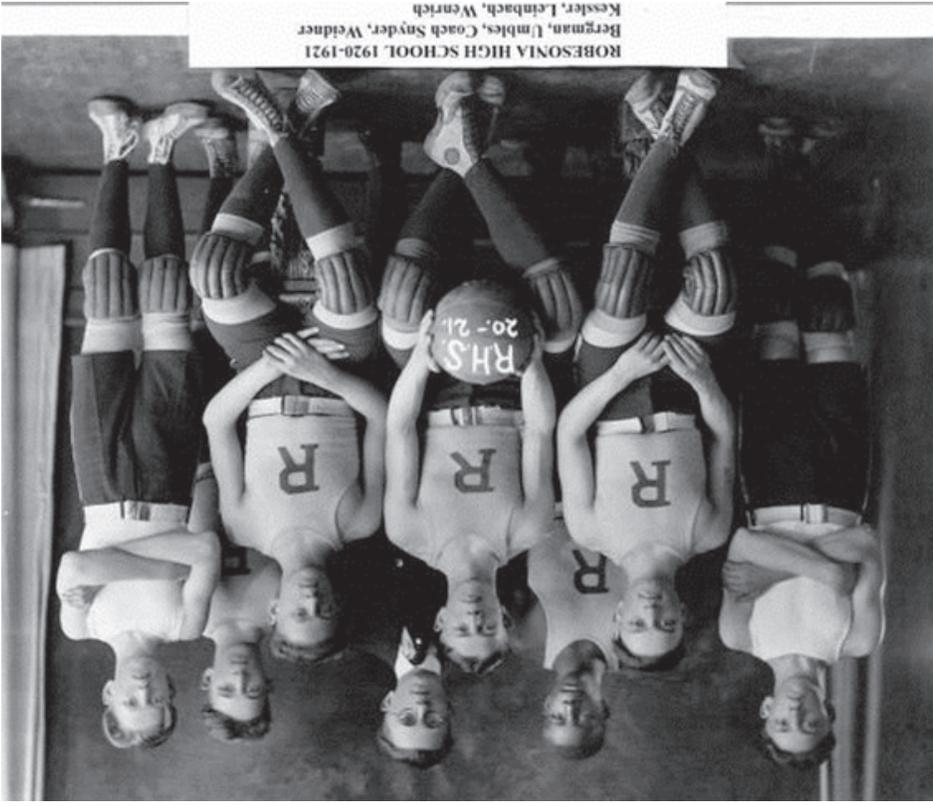
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According to Floyd, there were 34 Black Families living in the Robesonia area between 1910 and 1934. Several of the black's who went to Robesonia High School went on to successful careers. One that Floyd remembered was Ella Bannister who later worked for the Department of the Interior. Mabel Gordon Valentine, graduated from West Chester Teachers College and later became a principal in the West Chester School System. Floyd Umble's nephew Alan Page played for the Minnesota Vikings and later became a justice on the Minnesota Supreme Court. Although Page wasn't born in Robesonia, his roots were here.

My mother, Wanda Gartner has compiled a lot of information on the Black families who worked at the Furnace. This information includes family trees, newspaper articles and pictures. If you want to learn more about the Black Families who lived in Robesonia and worked at the Furnace, then you need to visit the Furnace Museum. Contact Randy Gartner @ 484-955-7381 to visit the Museum or take a tour of the Furnace Ruins.



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P.O. Box 162  
Robesonia, PA 19551-0162



ROBESONIA HIGH SCHOOL, 1920-1921  
Bergman, Limbles, Coach Snyder, Weidner  
Kessler, Leinbach, Wenrich