

Mr. Diggs of Delanco

By Alma Jordan



At the beginning of the 20th Century, an era marked by racial intolerance, a young man arrived in Delanco who was to help dispel stereotypes. Those who knew him remember him as a kind and gentle soul, a hard-working entrepreneur, and a role-model for their children.

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Honored in 1973 as Delanco's Citizen of the Year and by Burlington County in 1977 as Senior Citizen of the Year, the town of Delanco honored him again in 2010 with a one-act play called, simply, "Mr. Diggs of Delanco". This is his story.

Edward Diggs (1882 – 1979):

Edward Diggs was almost certainly born on May 28, 1882 in rural Spotsylvania County, Virginia (Near Arlington and Washington) to foundry worker Henry Diggs and his wife Rebecca, a free black woman. He claimed he never had a birth certificate. Later in life he frequently exaggerated his age to suit his purposes, though he consistently used the date 1882 as his birth on official documents. As a young boy, he often played in the nearby fields where the Civil War "Battle of the Wilderness" had been fought.

After the death of his father, young Edward, his brother Clayton, and his mother Rebecca moved to the village of Charleston, in Willingboro Township, New Jersey. Rebecca remarried, to one George Collins, who, like Henry, was a foundry worker. It is not known whether they met and/or married in Virginia or in New Jersey.

George Collins worked for the R.D. Woods Company, located in Camden, which operated a foundry in Florence, Burlington County, N.J. For a time, the Collins family lived in a section of Camden that is now in Pennsauken. Census records show that their neighbors on both sides were white families.

George moved with his family to Florence, where George worked in the foundry. In the 1900 federal census, Edward was listed as Edward Collins in Florence, using the surname of his step-father. The census indicated that, in addition to Edward and Clayton, listed as having been born in Virginia, there were two younger Collins children who had been born in New Jersey. In his 20s, after he went out on his own, Edward changed his name back to Diggs.

In 1901, at age 18 or 19, Edward had an operation on an abscessed left knee at Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia. The operation may

have saved his leg, but with the unfortunate result of a stiffness that affected his leg the rest of his life.

To Delanco and his first job

In 1905 at age 23, Edward moved to Delanco to work for Dr. Henry K. Weiler and his wife Annie as handyman and coachman, hitching and driving a coach with horses. He was one of the few black residents in the town, a distinction he held for most of his life. Mr. Diggs later drove motorcars for the doctor; the first Cadillac and Oldsmobile to be seen in Delanco.

Dr. Weiler's sister, Mrs. Carrie Dennis Stiles married in Delanco then moved to live in the islands of the Caribbean. Between 1912 and 1914, Dr. Weiler visited her, bringing his car and driver with him by steamship. Edward drove for the doctor both in Cuba and Puerto Rico.

Edward Diggs registered for the World War I draft in 1914. It was noted on his draft card that he had a stiff leg and a medium build, brown eyes and black hair.

Mr. Diggs worked for Dr. Weiler for 17 years until the doctor's death in 1921. Afterwards, Edward is reported to have worked at the Keystone Watch Case Co. in Riverside for five years. He was also known to have worked for the Krusan family for about nine years at their substantial home on Delanco's riverbank and in the Adirondacks. Later he is reported to have worked for the WPA during the Great Depression.

Mr. Diggs Delanco Home

In 1928, Mr. Diggs purchased a modest two-story home (half a double) at 519 Buttonwood Street in Delanco from the widow Annie Weiler for \$1,000.

Mr. Diggs was also a competitor of sorts. "Spanish Pool" was a competitive form of checkers played by African American men in the 1930s and 1940s in barbershops, stores and on street corners in Detroit, Atlanta and New Orleans. Mr. Diggs loved to play, and

frequently could be found playing the game at the home of his friend Robert W. Conway in Beverly, N.J.

Ed Diggs enjoyed eating clams and oysters, drinking elderberry wine, smoking cigars and laughing. In 1942, he started a business as the local "fish man", selling fish and vegetables from his truck in Delanco and other nearby towns including Beverly, Riverside, Moorestown and Palmyra.



His achievement in Freemasonry

On October 20, 1943, Edward became a 33rd degree Prince Hall Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite Mason for his exceptional service to Freemasonry. The honorary 33rd degree is the highest Freemasonry offers.



In 1943 Mr. Diggs also purchased a tract of land in Mt. Laurel, N.J.

During World War II, Edward worked at Fort Dix as a laborer for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, at which time he secured a Social Security number through the Railroad Retirement Board.

Mr. Diggs 1946 driver's license, his Masonic certificate and other documents from the 1940s before 1949 list his address as 412 Buttonwood, a block away from the house he owned at 519 Buttonwood from 1928 until his death. Perhaps houses had been renumbered.

Mr. Diggs used his truck to collect rags, cardboard and paper, scrap metal, heavy items, antiques and junk until his retirement. We are told he also set it on blocks to power a saw in his back yard. He drove his truck and his car up until 1970 when his old car stopped running.

Mr. Diggs was admired by the white children in Delanco, who often helped him on his route and gathered on his front porch on warm evenings. He was kind to them, encouraged them to study hard and stay in school, serving as a surrogate parent to a few.



Edward takes a wife at age 67

In 1949, he met Bettina Burrell in Avalon, N.J. She was 27 years his junior. Edward was there as a driver for one family and Bettina as housekeeper of another. He proposed to her on a boat while they were fishing. Edward and Bettina were married on December 10, 1949, in Moorestown by the Rev. V.S. Griggs.

From his marriage until his death, they lived on Buttonwood, the house he had owned since 1928. Edward and Betty maintained a loving home and had a devoted relationship: Edward, working outside the house and Betty, taking care of the home inside. Records have not revealed that the Diggs ever had any children.

Mr. Diggs on Philosophy and Religion

Edward Diggs described himself as a "middle of the road" person. He was a man of few words and quoted as saying he "attended his own business." In a *Burlington County Times* interview published January 11, 1972, he told a reporter, "If I see something I don't like, I walk around it. I don't worry about it if I can't do nothing with them... I just let it go."



Mr. Diggs was a religious man. In 1906, shortly after coming to Delanco, he and his step-father George Collins were founding members of St. James Baptist Church in Beverly City. Later, he became a regular at Second Baptist Church in Moorestown, worshipping at Dobbins Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church in Delanco when his arthritis was bad. He was a regular member of the Delanco Senior Citizens Club.

Honored Later in life

In 1973, Edward was honored by Delanco Township as “Citizen of the Year.” In 1976, he participated in Delanco’s Bicentennial tree planting

celebration. At that time he claimed to be the oldest resident of Delanco. This may or may not have been true. In 1977, the Burlington County Office on Aging named him the Burlington County Senior Citizen of the Year. By that time, Mr. Diggs was crippled with arthritis and mostly confined to a wheelchair. In his declining and lean years, he and his wife never complained, but remained religious and dignified. This Delanco “town institution” was loved and respected by his neighbors.

Mr. Diggs died of bronchial pneumonia in Zurbrugg Hospital in Riverside in 1979 and was buried in Odd Fellows Cemetery, Burlington N.J., on October 20th. Ed Diggs played loose with his age. His headstone lists his birth as 1867, which would have made his age 112 when he died in 1979, the age given on his birth certificate (based on family-supplied information, not other official documents). Betty lived on quietly and died in 1995. She is buried next to her Eddie.

Researched and compiled by: Alma Jordan

SOURCES:

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N.J. Driver’s License #431921 3/30/1949,
N.J. Marriage Certificate #42136,
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ORAL INTERVIEWS:

Thomas Johnson 10/5/2007; Virginia Miles 8/15/2007; 12/14/2007;
7/8/2009; Tom Van Emburgh 6/5/2009; Alice Smith 8/6/2008;
8/18/2009; The Delanco community 10/1/2010