



# 2008 Ghost Walk

Ghosts played by Mike Lavarney, Gail Lewis, Kelly Lewis

## The Story of John W. Jones

Elmira is such a small town, but with such a large place in the history of the United States. I wonder if the people who lived here in the 1850s realized how important their town was, or if the living today realize it either. There are so many internationally famous names with connections to Elmira: Mark Twain, Mal Roach, Ernie Davis, but there are also many other names, local names, that should be better known to the world and to the residents of this city. One such name is John W. Jones. John Jones was a man of courage and conviction, an African-American man who came to Elmira in 1844 as an escaped slave, and within years, he became a conductor on the Underground Railroad and associated with some of the important men in Elmira's society and history: Thomas K. Beecher, Jervis Langdon, Simeon Benjamin, James Robinson, William Yates, and Riggs Waltrous. By the time the need for the underground Railroad ended, John Jones had helped over 800 slaves escape to freedom.

John Jones was born on the Elzy plantation in Leesburg, Virginia, on June 21, 1817. John's father was sold to another plantation before John was born, but his mother was part of his life until the day she died. It was John's mother that instilled a deep desire of freedom within him, telling him stories of how others escaped north, to a place where there was no slavery, by following the direction geese flew in the spring.

As far as plantations go, the Elzy plantation, then run by the aging Sally Elzy, was about as good as it could get for someone who was a slave. While there was no denying that the slaves were treated as property and had no control over their own lives, Sally Elzy did not permit her slaves to be abused. Sally took a liking to John when he was a boy and he worked in the house throughout his youth. As an adult, he worked in the fields with the other slaves.

By 1844, Sally Elzy's health was deteriorating rapidly and there was concern about who in her family would inherit the plantation and by extension the slaves who lived and worked there. There was no question that whoever followed her as owner would not treat the slaves nearly as well as she had. In June of that year, with his mother long dead, John devised a plan with his two step-brothers, Charles and George, Jefferson Brown, and Thomas Stewart to escape before Sally died.

On June 4, 1844, the five men stuffed their pockets with food, and each, carrying a knife and a gun, escaped together from the plantation under cover of night. They swore to themselves and each other that they would fight to the death any slave catchers before allowing themselves to be returned to slavery. In Maryland, they put their promise to the test. They were found by slave catchers. John and his friends drew their guns first and were able to escape with their lives, but the experience left them wary of anyone else they met as they made their way north.

The five men walked over 600 miles over the course of fourteen days, most of it under cover of darkness. On July 5th, they arrived at the farm of Nathaniel Smith in Elmira. Smith welcomed them, offered them food, and a place to rest -- in the family house -- over night. Jones and his friends gratefully accepted the meal, but, still suspicious of strangers following their encounter in Maryland, opted to sleep in the Smith barn. That night, the five men took turns keeping watch, guns at the ready, while the others slept. By morning, they came to realize that Nathaniel Smith



# 2008 Ghost Walk

## Ghosts played by Mike Lavarney, Gail Lewis, Kelly Lewis

was an honorable man and an ally. Ultimately, John decided to remain in Elmira where he finally was free and felt safe.

Over the next few years, John took many odd jobs to earn money: he cut wood for Mrs. John Culp, he worked in Seth Kelly's candle store, he was a janitor at Miss Clara Thurston's School for Girls. John wanted an education, but even though Elmira was more welcoming of African-Americans than many other cities and had an active anti-slavery community, Blacks were not permitted to attend public school. However, Clara Thurston's father, Judge Ariel S. Thurston, befriended him. Under the judge's patronage, John was able to get the education he longed for, learning to read and write in one of the schools that had previously declined him entrance.

In 1847, Jones was appointed the sexton of the First Baptist Church, where he was employed for the next 43 years. He became an assistant to Sexton Whittlesey for the Main Street and Second Street cemeteries, and took over completely upon Whittlesey's death.

In 1850, Jones became a conductor on the underground railroad. Elmira was the only regular agency between Philadelphia and St. Catharines in Canada. Escaped slaves would travel from the south hidden in boxcars trying to make their way to freedom in the north. Many stopped over in Elmira, where John would hide them in his home and the homes of other abolitionists, making sure they were safe until they could board a 4am "freedom car" bound for Niagara Falls. Most men had enough money to defray their costs while the Anti-Slavery Society would pay the way for women, children, and men who could not pay their own way. Whenever Jones needed money to support his endeavors, he could rely on Jervis Langdon to give him all the cash he needed. Jones helped over 860 slaves escape to freedom, none of whom were recaptured. And, while this was a remarkable feat done with the support of many, many people, including some of Elmira's most notable citizens, the vast majority of the residents of the city had no idea any of this was happening.

In 1856, Jones married Rachel Swails. Together, they had two sons, James and John. In 1859, Jones became the sexton of Woodlawn Cemetery. The first grave he dug was for early pioneer, John Hendy -- the same John Hendy who was Mrs. John Culp's father, the woman for whom he chopped wood when Jones first came to Elmira.

When the civil war POW camp was established in 1864 across from Woodlawn Cemetery, two and a half acres in the cemetery were set aside to bury Confederate soldiers who died in the camp. Although a bitter enemy of the institution of slavery, Jones was a man of compassion and gave proper burials to 2,973 Confederate soldiers, only 7 of whom were listed as "unknown." In fact, Jones's records were so accurate and meticulous that the United States Government declared the burial site a national cemetery in December of 1877.

After the Civil War, Jones remained sexton of Woodlawn Cemetery. He bought the house at 1219 College Avenue where he resided until his death from pneumonia on December 26, 1900. Since then, Elmira has honored his memory and his achievements by turning his home into a museum. Whenever we begin to take our city for granted, never forget the remarkable achievements of this former slave and how Elmira played a role in his helping hundreds of men, women, and children find the freedom they deserved.



# 2008 Ghost Walk

Ghosts played by Mike Lavarney, Gail Lewis, Kelly Lewis

## The Story of Ernie Davis Jr.

Ernie Davis Jr. died too young. He was a young man of unlimited potential, and in his 23 years, he accomplished great things. He is probably best known around the world for his skills on the football field, both for Elmira Free Academy and Syracuse University, but many people right here in Elmira forget that he also led EFA's basketball team on an unprecedented 52 game winning streak -- a New York State record that wasn't broken until nearly ten years later by a team lead by a future star, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. While at EFA, he also earned varsity letters while on the baseball team. Talented in three sports, what Ernie is known to the world for, and one of the reasons he was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame, is because he was the first African-American to win football's Heisman Trophy.

But it isn't just for his superior athletic gifts that we still talk about Ernie Davis Jr. today -- he had great courage in the face of racism and bigotry, and he remains an inspiration to all athletes, regardless of the color of their skin. He displayed that same courage when facing his diagnosis of cancer. It's hard not to wonder how much more he might have achieved had he not succumbed to leukemia.

Ernie was born on December 14, 1939 in New Salem, Pennsylvania. He never knew his father. His parents separated shortly after Ernie was born, and not long after that, Ernie's father was killed in a car accident. When Ernie was only 14 months old, his mother took him to her parents in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, to be raised. Despite the hard life in this coal town, Ernie's grandparents instilled in him the values of loyalty, discipline, religion, and the importance of education. These values guided Ernie throughout his short life. There aren't a lot of details known about Ernie's early years. He had a mostly unremarkable childhood when contrasted to his remarkable high school and college athletic career.

In the summer of 1952, at the age of twelve, Ernie's mother came back for him along with her new husband, and the three moved to Elmira. While Ernie deeply missed his grandparents and his friends in Uniontown, Elmira provided him with opportunities to grow into the star athlete he became. His natural gifts as an athlete first became evident his first summer in Elmira when he joined the city's Small Fry Football League as a member of the Superior Buick team. He was already much more physically mature than most of the other kids in the league, so he was assigned to play lineman where his size would be a benefit when tackling opposing players. Although he would preferred to play halfback and run the ball, he never complained. He loved the game and played the best he could. He never used his size or greater size to pummel other players. In fact, during one game that year, rather than tackle another team's quarterback, he simply picked up the other boy and held him until the whistle was blown.

With Ernie Davis as their star player, the Superior Buick Team won the championship in 1952. In both 1952 and 1953, Ernie was named a Small Fry All-Star. This was just the beginning of the awards he would earn over the next ten years. During the same time, Ernie played basketball at the Neighborhood House, where he became a grade school all-star.

In 1954, Ernie entered Elmira Free Academy. The sports coaches there were already looking forward to his arrival, having followed the young man's successes in the Small Fry Football



# 2008 Ghost Walk

**Ghosts played by Mike Lavarney, Gail Lewis, Kelly Lewis**

League and at the Neighborhood House. He did not disappoint, winning eleven varsity letters in three sports, football, basketball, and baseball, during his high school career. It was agreed that Ernie had the combination of talent, leadership, dependability, and humility that would make him succeed in any endeavor he set his mind to. However, the one thing that really stood out about Ernie was his ability to respond under pressure. He always played his best, no matter what the score, but if the score was tight, you could expect him to put forth the extra effort to turn the game into a win for EFA. When the opposing team was obviously less skilled or talented, Ernie played well, but he never humiliated the other team by running up his scores. He always gauged his performance to the needs of the game.

Ernie split his attention evenly between basketball and football during his sophomore and junior years, but as he entered his senior year looking ahead to college decisions he would have to make, he chose to concentrate solely on football in his senior year. While other athletes with his skill coasted on their sports achievements to receive college scholarships, Ernie also gave equal attention to his grades. His attention to classes set a good example for all the EFA athletes, and he was well-loved by the school's teachers for this.

Ernie's high school football career was closely watched by college scouts from around the country. By the end of his senior year, at a time when colleges offered very few scholarships to African-American athletes, Ernie had received offers from 50 schools, including Notre Dame and UCLA. He sought counsel from coaches and family, and finally decided to accept a scholarship from Syracuse university.

When Ernie arrived at Syracuse university in the fall of 1958, African-Americans were still a minority on campus. While some of the black star athletes received acclaim for their achievements on the playing fields, they were still not readily accepted into daily campus life. Even in the north, athletes of color were rare, and stories that appeared about them in local papers had racial slants. When black athletes were on the road with their teams, they often would not be served in restaurants and they had to stay in different hotels than their white teammates. African-American athletes had to excel on both the field and in the classroom in order to prove they deserved a place at a university or college. Even with all the additional pressures put on him because of race, Ernie excelled during his college football career, both as a student and as member of the football team. Ernie was the only black member of the football team during his freshman year, and he earned the respect of his teammates, leading them to an undefeated season.

During his four years at Syracuse, he twice won first-team All-American honors. As a sophomore in 1959, Ernie led Syracuse to the NCAA Division I-A national football championship, capping an undefeated season with a 23-14 win over The University of Texas in the Cotton Bowl. He was voted Most Valuable Player of the 1960 Cotton Bowl and the 1961 Liberty Bowl. When it came time to receive his MVP award for the 1960 Cotton Bowl, Ernie was informed he could only come in to receive the award and then leave. Because of the color of his skin, he would not be permitted to attend the banquet as a whole. His teammates rallied around him, and they all boycotted the event.

In his junior year, he set a record of 7.8 yards per carry and was the third leading rusher in the country with 877 yards, having rushed 100 yards in 6 of 9 games. During his senior year, he ran



# 2008 Ghost Walk

**Ghosts played by Mike Lavarney, Gail Lewis, Kelly Lewis**

for 823 yards as he averaged 5.5 yards a carry and scored 94 points. He completed his Syracuse career by rushing for 140 yards and scoring a touchdown in Syracuse's 15-14 victory over Miami in the Liberty Bowl. His final year at Syracuse earned him the Heisman Trophy, and he was the first African-American to receive the honor.

After graduation in 1961, Ernie was set on a course for professional football stardom with the Cleveland Browns, receiving the largest contract up to that time for a rookie: three years for \$65,000 plus a \$15,000 bonus. That July, while at training camp, he discovered a swelling in his neck. Taken to the hospital, he was informed that he had a blood disorder. It wasn't until October that the doctors told him that it was leukemia. While the cancer did go into remission and Ernie did attend practice with the team during, his coaches never let him play, much to his frustration and disappointment.

In May of 1963, Ernie noticed that the swelling in his neck had returned. He entered the hospital and died two days later, never having played a professional game of football. But he is still remembered to this day for his remarkable high school and college football records and for breaking many racial barriers, allowing other athletes of color to excel.



# 2008 Ghost Walk

Ghosts played by Mike Lavarney, Gail Lewis, Kelly Lewis

## The Story of Matthew Carpenter

True or false? The town of Elmira was named after the daughter of Major General Matthew Carpenter, one of Elmira's earliest notable citizens. Do you know the answer? Do you know who Matthew Carpenter was and why he is buried in Woodlawn Cemetery?

The Carpenter family's history in the United States dates back to 1638 when William Carpenter came from England on the ship "Bevis" and arrived in Weymouth, in the then-British colony of Massachusetts. William's sons and grandsons spread throughout New England, settling everywhere from Connecticut through Long Island. Matthew's father, John, who was the grandson of William Carpenter, settled in Orange County, New York, where he became a prosperous miller. Matthew was born in Orange County on September 26, 1759, where he spent most of his boyhood.

During the American Revolution, John loaned money to the fledgling United States government and converted his mill to the production of gun powder. His factory provided large quantities of powder used by the colonialist army. Matthew was quick to adopt the cause of independence, and served as a runner for the colonialist forces until he could enlist in the army at the age of seventeen. He fought with distinction in the battles of White Plains, Fort Washington, and Stony Point, serving under General Clinton, who appointed Carpenter General after the Revolution.

After the war, Matthew came to Newtown, New York, with a group of settlers. He bought 200 acres along Newtown Creek. There he built a spacious log cabin and the area's first saw mill. He also built a wool-carding and cloth-dressing mill. An industrious man, he was also dedicated to public service. He remained active in the United States army, responsible for overseeing the training of recruits in the area. He retired from the military after the war of 1812 with the rank of Major General. He served two terms in the New York Assembly, in 1799 and again in 1823. He served on the second New York State constitutional convention in 1821 where he presented plans for the state's judiciary system which were subsequently accepted. He was appointed the town clerk by Governor Clinton -- the same Clinton who'd promoted him to general after the Revolution -- and served in that capacity for over nineteen years. He also was named the surveyor of public lands in New York.

Matthew was also a dedicated family man. He and his wife, Catherine, had thirteen children. They met and were wed in Orange County. When Matthew came to Newtown, his entire family came with him. Matthew and Catherine have the distinction of being the parents of the earliest literary woman of the area, Amira. In 1829, Amira Carpenter published a collection of poetry entitled "Lyre of Tioga." Note the name: Amira, spelled A M I R A. Sometimes you'll see it spelled a L m i r a or E L m i r a, and that's where the confusion about the name of the city of Elmira comes from.

You see, in 1808, the city council voted to change the name of Newtown to Elmira. But there are conflicting reports as to where the name of Elmira came from. Was the town named after Matthew's daughter Amira. Many people claim that to be the case. After all, Matthew was a prominent member of the Newtown community who attended council meetings regularly.



# 2008 Ghost Walk

**Ghosts played by Mike Lavarney, Gail Lewis, Kelly Lewis**

However, the town meeting where the vote was taken to change the name from Newtown to Elmira was held at a tavern owned by Nathan Teale. Nathan was also a prominent member of the community. His tavern was the site of many town meetings and council members would often gather there to discuss and debate the issues of the day. Nathan also had a daughter whose name was Elmira -- that's ELmira, E L m i r a. Many sources claim that it is after Nathan's daughter that the town of Elmira was named.

So, which is it? True or false? The town of Elmira was named after the daughter of Matthew Carpenter. Does it matter? After all, Matthew Carpenter had a long and notable life. During his 80 years, he was a Revolutionary war hero, state legislator, town clerk, successful entrepreneur. He was sought out by politicians and citizens alike for his wise counsel. Does he need one more accolade?

Matthew Carpenter died on October 6, 1839 at the home of Philo Vance in Seeley Creek, New York. Originally buried in the cemetery at Main and Church Streets in Elmira, his and his wife's bodies were moved here to Woodlawn Cemetery where a marker was placed in honor of his many achievements.