



City removes Dight name in favor of honoring its first Black fire captain

IT'S CHEATHAM AVENUE NOW



Minneapolis' second Black fire chief, Bryan Tyner, speaks at the renaming ceremony in Longfellow on March 17. "I'm just so happy to see this day finally here," said Tyner. >> [Photo gallery and more at LongfellowNokomisMessenger.com.](#) (Photo by Tesha M. Christensen)

By TESHA M. CHRISTENSEN

Dight Ave is no longer named after a man who launched a crusade to bring the eugenics movement to Minnesota and wrote fan letters to Hitler. Instead, it has been renamed to honor John Cheatham, a man born a slave who served as the

city's first Black fire captain.

A ceremony was held on March 17, 2022 at 38th Street and Cheatham Avenue to mark the name change. Members of his family, many of whom still live in the neighborhood, were present.

Lifetime Longfellow resident Tammy Crockett said, "It was awesome" to see

the new name be unveiled, honoring her great-great-great-uncle.

Her grandson, 11-year-old Levonte Stephens, helped during the ceremony when the new name was unveiled from behind the old one. "It was fun to pull the rope off," he said.

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DISTRICT CHANGES DUE TO CENSUS

Area boundaries move for state and city representatives to reflect population shifts

By CAM GORDON

The state and city redistricting processes have concluded, and thousands of Minneapolis residents will be in new legislative districts for the upcoming Aug. 9 primary and Nov. 8 general elections.

At the state level, a panel of five judges released a court-ordered final map of legislative districts on Feb. 15. The Minneapolis Charter Commission approved new city ward and park district boundaries on March 2.

The city council is scheduled to approve the precinct boundaries before the March 29 deadline. Once approved, those same precincts will be used for all elections until the next redistricting that will follow the 2030 census.

Because the state legislature was unable to agree on new boundaries for state and federal legislative districts by the required date of Feb. 15, that responsibility fell to the five judges appointed by the Minnesota Supreme Court, whose map includes new boundaries for all state and federal legislative districts in the state.

DISTRICT CHANGES >> 5

Hockey players saw resurgence coming

By MATTHEW DAVIS

As a Minneapolis Storm youth hockey player, Zander Zoia realized he and his teammates had a chance to compete with the state's best someday. Zoia said his last youth team gained a lot from facing squads from hockey powerhouses in Edina, Maple Grove, and Wayzata.

"It was cool being able to play them, so we know what level we could play in the state," Zoia said.

Zoia and his Minneapolis high school varsity co-op hockey teammates brought Minneapolis hockey back to the high school state level this month. Minneapolis beat Delano 3-1 on March 2 to end a 28-year state hockey drought for public schools in the city.

"We knew it as soon as summer training started," Zoia said. "We knew we had the talent to do it."

The Minneapolis co-op formed in 2010 amid the city schools dropping hockey programs. This year's squad hopes this state tournament will grow hockey in the state's biggest city.

HOCKEY PLAYERS >> 5

Little Sock's adventures resonate in pandemic

Nokomis couple write sequel together

By JAN WILLMS

Like everyone else, a sock needs a friend. And with that in mind, Kia Heise and Chris D. Park wrote their second children's book "Little Sock Makes a Friend."

The book by the Nokomis neighborhood couple is a sequel to their first book, "Little Sock," where young readers learn about Sock City, the exciting place where lost socks gather.



Little Sock has ventured to Sock City, but he finds there are some things to do that just are better with a friend. So in this second book in the series, he sets off to make one.

Park and Heise decided to make the theme of their first book an answer to the age-old question "What happens to lost socks?" That book focuses on the bravery of trying new things and opening up to new adventures. Their second book shows young readers that even though it might be scary, it is worth it to reach out and make a new friend.

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Get tips on how to create a food forest

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DRIVE & RIDE 'Under the Hood' literally goes under the hood

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Minneapolis educators strike for 'safe and stable schools'

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ABOUT CAPT. JOHN CHEATHAM

John Willis Cheatham was born a slave in St. Louis, Mo., on Jan. 15, 1855. He was freed on Jan. 1, 1863, when the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect. Shortly afterwards, his family moved to Minneapolis where he attended school. After graduation he held a number of jobs, including porter and church sexton.

On March 13, 1888, John Cheatham was one of 37 men appointed to the Minneapolis Fire Department by Frank L. Stetson, chief engineer. Although the records aren't entirely clear, Mr. Cheatham was, if not the first African-American firefighter in Minneapolis, certainly one of the earliest. He had a distinguished career within the department, holding several positions of responsibility and receiving numerous promotions. He began as a pipeman and was promoted to driver after three years. Less than three years later he was promoted to lieutenant. On Jan. 1, 1899, he was promoted to captain.

John Cheatham and his wife, Susie, owned a home at 3020 20th Avenue. Their four children, Ethel, Bertha, Gilbert and Wesley, attended South High School, and the family belonged to Bethesda Baptist Church. On June 16, 1906, Susie Cheatham died from typhoid; she was 46 years old. Within a year of her death, John Cheatham found himself at the center of the one controversy of his career.

In 1907, John Cheatham and two other African-American firefighters (Lafayette Mason and Frank Harris) were placed in charge of the Minnehaha Fire Station located at the intersection of 45th Street and Hiawatha Avenue. Their appointment met with resistance from some local residents who circulated a petition demanding that the men be replaced by White firefighters on "general principle." That move was "strenuously resisted" by another group of residents who circulated a petition in support of the firefighters.

An article in the Minneapolis Journal detailed the excellent records of Cheatham, Mason and Harris. The article noted that Cheatham had "distinguished himself" in the House of the Good Shepherd fire and said that there was "no man on the books of the department who can show a better record."

Cheatham's response to the situation was straightforward. He said that all he wanted was "a chance to educate my children and get them started right." He described the move to replace him as "drawing the color line and drawing it stiff."

Cheatham's supporters were successful, and John Cheatham remained at the Minnehaha Fire Station until his retirement. He died on Aug. 15, 1918, from chronic endocarditis at the age of 63. He is buried next to his wife and his daughter, Ethel. Ethel died on April 16, 1911, from tuberculosis; she was 25 years old.

Info from: <http://www.friendsofthecemetery.org>



A renaming ceremony was held on March 17, 2022 at Dight Ave. and 38th Street as the name changed to Cheatham Ave. to honor the city's first Black fire captain. After Cheatham, there wasn't another one in Minneapolis until the 1990s. The fire department was not desegregated until the Minneapolis Legal Aid Society filed a lawsuit in 1971 that former Judge LaJune Lange worked on when she was a law clerk for U.S. District Judge Earl Larson. Lange has helped uncover the history of Cheatham and fire station #24. (Photo by Tesha M. Christensen)

CHEATHAM AVE. >> from 1

Crockett lives a few blocks away from the renamed street, and can point to the homes her relatives have lived in nearby over the decades since John Cheatham's parents chose to settle in Minneapolis. They left Missouri after the Emancipation Proclamation when John was eight. Crockett said she didn't know much about John Cheatham until she received a call as genealogists worked to track his descendants down. Then she started researching him - and Charles Dight whom the street was named after previously. Her grandchildren attend Friendship Academy of the Arts down the street (3320 E. 41st St.), and she feels proud to know they will be on a street named after their family member.

"It's nice to have history and be a part of it," stated Caprice Stephens, who bought her grandparent's house a few blocks away.

This street name is "a recognition of my connection," said Crockett. "It makes me feel more connected."

John and his wife, Susie, lived at 3020 20th Ave. in Corcoran and their four children attended South High School. He worked at Fire Station #24, a station built in 1907 at 45th and Hiawatha to house the city's Black firefighters and to support the station at Minnehaha and E. Lake Street (now the home of Hook & Ladder Theater & Lounge). The station was closed

in 1941 and transitioned to private ownership and industrial use.

Many forgot about its first use. Much of the history of the station was lost until former Fourth Judicial Judge LaJune Lange heard about it from an elder, and began working to pinpoint its location. It took her two years, but she worked with the city to have the building at 4501 Hiawatha designated a historic structure in January 2022. It is currently occupied by Adventures in Cardboard, and still has the original lockers.

START OF RECONCILIATION FOR ST. JAMES AME

St. James AME Church (3600 Snelling) has been asking the city to rename Dight for over a decade. The church sits between Dight and Snelling, and has for 107 years. Half of the church's 85 members live in the neighborhood and half live elsewhere. Throughout the years, the relatives of John Cheatham, the Websters (who lived at Snelling and 36th), McIntoshes, and McDavies, have attended the church.

St. James AME Reverend Dr. Tracey Gibson said, "It's progress, and we have a long way to go. It's healing." She added that it is the start of reconciliation.

"It's the mosaic of the community coalescing once again. The mosaic that is the Longfellow community is coming back together," said longtime church member and leader Stephen Dye.

Church historian Larry Burt stated,

"It's a relief to go from villain to hero. It's a great change and a relief that's not attached to our church anymore."

The church had originally suggested the 10-block stretch that runs south from 34th to 44th be renamed to recognize Rev. Noah Smith, who pastored there for about 25 years ago and is one of the "foundational stones in our community," said Dye.

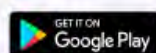
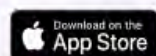
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WHO WAS CHARLES DIGHT?

Charles Fremont Dight was a doctor, a professor and a Minneapolis alderman whose efforts to promote food safety earned him a spot on the street map. He lived in a tree-house on the banks of Minnehaha Creek and believed America could and should breed humans like livestock to create a master race. He wrote fan letters to Adolf Hitler and founded the Minnesota Eugenics Society. His name stood for decades on the former Charles Fremont Dight Institute for the Promotion of Human Genetics at the University of Minnesota. The forced sterilization laws he championed remained on the books in this state until 1975.

- Paraphrased from Star Tribune columnist Jennifer Brooks, who has been writing about the movement to rename Dight Ave.

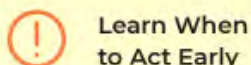
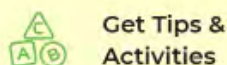
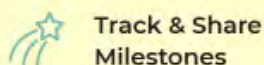
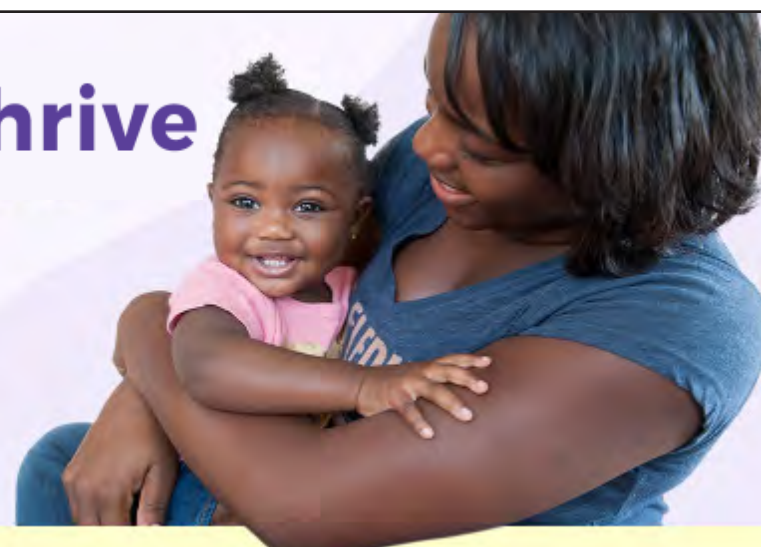
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The descendants of John Cheatham, the city's first Black fire chief, local leaders, and members of the African American Firefighters Association gather to rename Dight Ave. on March 17, 2022. >> More photos online @ LongfellowNokomisMessenger.com (Photo by Tesha M. Christensen)

CHEATHAM AVE. >> from 2

'IT'S A GOOD DAY'

"I cannot emphasize enough, Charles Dight does not and has not and will never reflect the values of this community," said Ward 12 Minneapolis Council Member and Longfellow resident Andrew Johnson.

"It's a good day because we're taking that name down. But it's a better day because of the name we are putting up. Captain John Cheatham stood up at a time when he faced tremendous racism and oppression to serve this community with honor and to protect the residents of this community. He truly is a name we should drive by, walk by, and see lifted high above us not just to lift up his legacy but as an example of how we should act and how we should move forward in this world."

"What we're doing is writing history the way it should have been written," remarked Mayor Jacob Frey.

"We are lifting up the name of John Cheatham," observed Andrea Jenkins, the first Black transgender city council president.

Minneapolis Fire Chief Bryan Tyner, the city's second Black chief, observed, "I know I stand on the shoulders of those who came before me."

He pointed out that after John Cheatham, there were no other Black captains in the Minneapolis Fire Department until the 1990s. Along with other members of the African American Firefighters Association, Tyner stated that he works to help those who come up behind him. "Continuing that tradition, continuing that progress is what I will strive to do," he said. "I'm just so happy to see this day finally here."



St. James AME Church historian Larry Burt, at left, stated, "It's a relief to go from villain to hero." With him are Reverend Dr. Tracey Gibson (center) and Stephen Dye. (Photo by Tesha M. Christensen)

EFFORT OF COLLABORATION

John Cheatham's relatives were present thanks in part to the work of researchers Cindy Lindau and Robin Macgregor, of the Minnesota Genealogy Society. Lindau learned about Cheatham after reading a column written by Jennifer Brooks in the *Star Tribune* that mentioned a search for his relatives. She thought, "I can help with that."

The search took a long time, in part, because they were working backwards. Typically, genealogists start with the now and work backwards. With this case, they started backwards with John Cheatham and sought to move forward.

"It truly is an effort of collaboration," observed Lange.

She added, "The city of Minneapolis did something very important. They gave a descendant of an enslaved family a living wage job that he could buy a home, settle in the city, make a contribution to his community, and live and earn the respect of others. Living wage jobs must continue. Single family housing must continue. And I hope that you can join me as we continue to work to uncover the stories of so many African-descendant people in the Longfellow community."

New Minneapolis Public Works Director Margaret Anderson Kelliher said she looks forward to working with residents on projects like this.

Coming next may be the renaming of Edmund Boulevard, a 10-block section adjacent to West River Parkway that honors a Longfellow developer who wrote the first covenant restrictions blocking people of color from buying property in Minneapolis.

THE CHEATHAM FAMILY

Wife Susie Rachel Robinson, was born about 1860 in Virginia. Susie died of typhoid in 1906 at the age of 46 years.

Daughter Susie Ethel, was born about 1886. She died April 16, 1911 of tuberculosis.

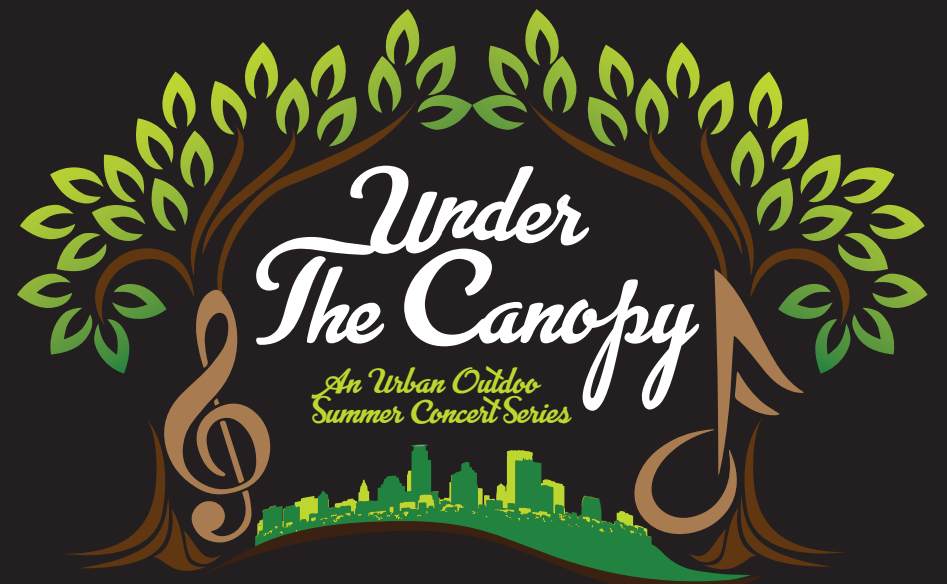
Bertha was born March 24, 1888. At age 20, she married Guy H. Stephens and they had one daughter, Margaret Elizabeth.

Gilbert Willis was born July 15, 1895. His wife's name was Louise, and he worked as a porter. He died July 4, 1923 at 27 years.

John Wesley was born Nov. 4, 1898. His occupation was moulder at Minneapolis Steel and Mch. Co.

Sister Johanna McIntosh, born 1949, had 11 children and 9 survived to adulthood. She and husband Isaac owned a house at 1215 Spring St.

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