

JAMES R. BURGESS JR. FAMILY

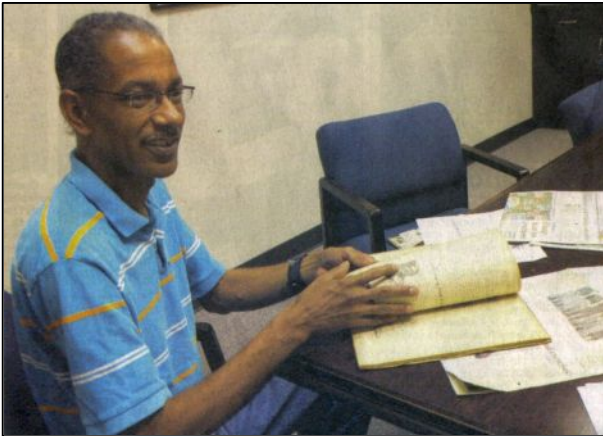
BURGESS UNCOVERS ANCESTORS' HISTORIC LEGACY

By Megan Trotter

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN

Sunday, 8 September 2013

PUTNAM COUNTY – Steve Burgess of Illinois was visiting Burgess Falls with his father, James R. Burgess Jr., about 20 years ago when it struck him that his family shared their last name with the falls. As his father had grown up in the Algood area, he wondered if there was a reason for it.



“While we were there, I asked him, is there a connection between (our family and the falls) or is it just a coincidence? He didn’t know, and I just thought it was kind of odd,” Steve said.

(Pictured: Steve Burgess flips through the book “come Out Fighting: The Epic Tale of the 761st Tank Battalion 1942-1945,” which includes a chapter on his father, James R. Burgess Jr.).

He decided to do some research and what he found fascinated him. His great-grandfather, Isaac, was actually a slave of Charles Burgess, who owned the falls and later donated it for the creation of the state park. Steve even uncovered a receipt for the sale of his great-grandfather.



“That’s something that many families of color don’t have. They can’t even go back that far,” said Charlene McClain, who works at the Tennessee Tech Volpe Library and has helped Steve uncover some of his family’s history.

Isaac married a slave from a neighboring White Plains Burton family and the pair was able to later purchase their own land and start a family.

(Pictured: James R. Burgess Jr.)

“They came from prominent families, and I think that they saw families living good and they wanted part of that dream, too” McClain said.

“that’s where the tenacity came from. It’s proud heritage.”

And the proud heritage continued with Isaac's son, Jim Burgess. In his day, the school set aside for African-Americans only went through elementary school. Jim went before the county board with a delegation and petitioned them for funds to start an African-American junior high school. A newspaper clipping says that Jim "made one of the most intelligent pleas the Court ever heard," and ultimately the council voted almost unanimously to grant \$1,000 to establish a junior high school. The clipping also says that after the vote, "Jim and five of his aides came to the bar and sang two spirituals and strutted out happily, successful ambassadors."

Jim's son – Steve's father – was a part of the first graduating class from this Darwin



(Pictured: Steven's father, James R. Burgess Jr., was part of the first graduating class of Darwin School. He's pictured here in the front row, in the first seat on the left, along with his brother, George Burgess, who is seated fourth from left).

School in 1938. It wasn't until just recently that Steve learned how much more his father had contributed to the legacy of his family – and the history of African-Americans in the United States.

Steve knew that his father has served in the Army during World War II and in Korea, however since he never talked about his service, Steve had no idea of the history. He didn't find out until after James' death, when he started flipping through an old book that had always been in the house: "Come Out Fighting: The Epic Tale of the 761st Tank Battalion 1942-1945." Steve was surprised to find his father's picture in the book.

Turns out that James was a member of this battalion, which was the first African-American armored unit in U. S. Army history.

"Blacks were basically regulated to service positions and whatnot (at this time) so for them to actually be in combat and fighting was something," Steve said. "Apparently they were on the front lines for about 183 days straight, which was highly unusual."

Not only that, but while in the European Theatre of Operations, they captured, destroyed or aided in the liberation of more than 30 major towns, four airfields, three ammunition supply dumps, 461 wheeled vehicles, 34 tanks, 113 large guns, one radio station and numerous individual and crew-served weapons. The unit's casualty rate was nearly 50 percent while fighting horrific weather conditions and battling overwhelming enemy forces. James himself actually jumped, fully-clothed, into a river in Austria to hook a cable onto a submerged tank so that it could be pulled out.

“And my dad didn't swim,” Steve said.

The battalion was later awarded a Presidential Unit Citation for Extraordinary Heroism.

Now Steve is working to honor his father further. Three and a half years ago, he started the process to try to get a courthouse named after his father in Illinois, where the family settled after James left the Army to become U. S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Illinois. After a lot of legal discussions, Steve was denied the naming of the courthouse, but offered the naming of a post office in Champaign, IL, close to where James went to college.

“My dad always said that 50 percent of something is better than 100 percent of nothing,” Steve said.

After a lot of work, the bill has gone through the Senate and is now waiting on the House's vote. After that, it will just need the president's signature to be official. Steve is hoping his years of hard work for this honor will be rewarded in the near future.

“(Your ancestors) did not give up,” McClain said with a smile. “You've got that, too, Steve. That tenacity is in your bloodline.”

As he waits for word on the post office, Steve hopes that his father would be honored by having a building named after him, even though he was a humble man.

“He was a trail blazer,” Steve said.

“But he wasn't waving a flag, saying, ‘Hey, look what I did! It was just, ‘I'm going to work hard and try to accomplish this.’... So I don't really know how my dad would feel about his family (trying to honor him), but right before my dad passed away, he was a Rotary Club member for 30-some years and they gave him a lifetime achievement award, and he was really proud,” Steve said. “He was already sick, but he got up the strength to go to that luncheon. He really, really felt good about accepting it. So if (this post office naming) came to be, I think he would be really proud.”

McClain added, “I really believe deep in my heart that he would be glad to know his life counted, that he accomplished many goals and that it didn't go unnoticed.”

*Read more African-Americans in the News at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>

SENATE APPROVES BIPARTISAN LEGISLATION

TO HONOR JAMES R. BURGESS, JR.

JAMES R. BURGESS JR. POST OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Mark Kirk (R-IL), U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL), and U.S. Representative Rodney Davis (R-IL) celebrated Senate passage last night of bipartisan legislation to **designate the U.S. Postal Service facility at 302 East Green Street in Champaign, as the “James R. Burgess Jr. Post Office Building.”** The measure was passed out of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government

Affairs just on Wednesday, and now moves to the House of Representatives for consideration.



“James Burgess distinguished himself as a leader in the first African-American armored Battalion to enter World War II, and he later served the people of Illinois as Champaign County State’s Attorney and as a U.S. Attorney,” Kirk said. “I hope we can soon bring greater recognition to Mr. Burgess’ achievements in service of our country and our state.”

“This measure will honor Mr. Burgess’ distinguished record of service, and help ensure that his trailblazing accomplishments continue to inspire future generations of Illinoisans,” Durbin said. “I hope that the House of Representatives will swiftly take up and pass this bipartisan resolution so we can enact this fitting tribute to a true American hero, and complete the effort undertaken by **Mr. Burgess’ loving son, Steve, and family to honor this longtime public servant.**”

“I’m pleased that we’ve moved one step closer to honoring James R. Burgess,” Davis said. “Since James’ passing in 1997, his son, Steve, and many others in Champaign-Urbana have looked for ways to commemorate the achievements of his life. Naming this building after him is but a small token of our gratitude for his service and I am hopeful that the House will soon follow suit and help Steve complete the journey he started years ago.”

James R. Burgess Jr. was born on December 19, 1915 in Algood, Tennessee and served more than twenty years in the Army, playing a critical role in a largely unknown part of American military history as a leader of the 761st Tank Battalion, the first African-American armored unit to enter battle in World War II.

At age twenty nine, Mr. Burgess was a First Lt. in command of one of the six companies who served under General George Patton in Europe. Upon his retirement from the U.S. Army he had reached the rank of Major.

Soon after leaving the service in 1962, Burgess moved his wife and two sons to Champaign so that he could attend law school at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign where he graduated three years later as the only African-American in his class. He was elected Champaign County State's Attorney in 1972 and is still the only African-American to be elected county-wide in Champaign County. Later, he was appointed as a U.S. Attorney for a large section of downstate Illinois.

JAMES ROBERT BURGESS, JR.

b. 19 December 1915, Algood, Putnam Co., TN – d. 22 June 1997, Champaign, IL

Wife: **Doris (Murray) Burgess**

Father: **James Robert Burgess Sr.** (1874-1955)

Mother: **Ida B. Burgess** (1880-1975)

Grandfather: **Isaac Burgess** (1846-1911)

Grandmother: **Eliza (Burton) Burgess** (1849-1913)

Born in 1915, James Burgess was reared on a farm in Putnam County, Tennessee. He attended Darwin High School and went to Junior College on an athletic scholarship. Mr.

Burgess pitched for semi-pro baseball teams. **He married Doris Murray and they had two sons.**



Mr. Burgess entered the Armed Forces in 1941. A World War II veteran who was in combat with the 761st Tank Battalion, Mr. Burgess went on to serve as a special agent in the Counter-Intelligence Corps. He retired in 1962 as a major.

Mr. Burgess was a 1961 graduate of the University of Maryland with a BA degree and earned his law degree from the University of Illinois College of Law in 1965. After serving as an assistant state's attorney in Chicago and Champaign, Mr. Burgess was elected State's Attorney of Champaign County in 1972.

He was the county's first African American state's attorney and was believed to be the first African American elected to this office in Illinois. He was appointed in 1977 as U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Illinois, later designated the Southern District. Based in East St. Louis, he served in that position until his retirement in 1982. Mr. Burgess was a member of the American, Chicago, Champaign Seventh Federal Circuit and Illinois State Bar Association. He was also a member of the American Trial Lawyers Association.

A member of the First United Methodist Church of Champaign, he served on the advisory board of the church and on a number of church committees. He served as a member of the MacMurray Board of Trustees and was a lay member of the Central Illinois Conference. He served for many years on the Board of Directors of Covenant

Hospital, the Frances Nelson Health Center and was one of the founding members of the Prairie AIDS Foundation.

(1900 census 19th Civil Dist., Putnam Co., TN: Dwl: 136 - **James R. Burgess** is head of household, 45 yrs. old, b. October 1874, TN, md 2 yrs. to **Ida**, 20 yrs. old, b. March 1880, TN, 2 children born, 2 children living. Children: Bessie, 1 yr. old, b. March 1899, TN & Baby Burgess, dau., 0/12 yrs. old, b. May 1900, TN).

(1910 census 19th Civil Dist., Walton Rd., Putnam Co., TN: Dwl: 196 – **James R. Burgess** is head of household, 35 yrs. old, TN md 12 yrs. to **Ida B.**, 30 yrs. old, TN, 6 children born, 4 children living. Children: Bessie M., 11 yrs. old; Ethel J., 9 yrs. old; Charlie H., 6 yrs. old & Sarah D. Burgess, 3 yrs. old. All born in TN).

(1920 census 19th Civil Dist., Putnam Co., TN: Dwl: 32 - **James R. Burgess** is head of household, 45 yrs. old, TN, md to **Ida B.**, 39 yrs. old, TN. Children; Bessie M., 20 yrs. old; Harry C., 15 yrs. old; Dimple S., 12 yrs. old; Eula B., 6 yrs. old; **Robert J.**, 4 yrs. old & George H. Burgess, 1 10/12 yrs. old. All born in TN).

(1930 census 19th Civil Dist., Putnam Co., TN: Dwl: - **Jim Burgess** is head of household, 55 yrs. old, TN, (father born in VA, mother, TN), (23 yrs. old 1st marriage) md to **Ida**, 50 yrs. old, TN, (father born in TN, mother, KY), (18 yrs. old 1st marriage). Children: Harry, 26 yrs. old; Eula, 16 yrs. old; **Robert**, 14 yrs. old; George, 12 yrs. old & Gladys Burgess, 7 yrs. old. All born in TN. Also living in the household: Dimple Pride, dau., 23 yrs. old, TN, married, (18 yrs. old 1st marriage).

(1940 census 19th Civil Dist., Putnam Co., TN: Dwl: 1 – **Jim Burgess** is head of household, 65 yrs. old, TN, (Occupation: Farmer), md to **Ida**, 60 yrs. old, TN. Children: Ula, 26 yrs. old, (Occupation: Shirt Factory); George, 22 yrs. old, (Occupation: Attendant Filling Station) & Gladys Burgess, 17 yrs. old. All born in TN).

BURGESS DIES BEFORE SEEING FATHER HONORED

by Megan Trotter

PUTNAM COUNTY — **Steve Burgess**, an African American man who had been working to honor his father, **James R. Burgess Jr.**, for his impressive history, passed away suddenly Nov. 22 from an aneurysm. He was 55.

Steve, who lived in Illinois, had visited the Putnam County this past September while researching his family history. He found his great-grandfather had been a slave to the Burgess family — who owned Burgess Falls before donating the land for a state park. His grandfather petitioned the county board to start an African American junior high school, which became Darwin School. But it was Steve's father whom he most wanted to honor.

James was part of the first graduating class of Darwin School in 1938, and later fought in World War II and Korea where he was part of the first African American armored unit in U.S. Army history.

While in the European Theatre of Operations, the unit captured, destroyed or aided in the liberation of more than 30 major towns, four airfields, three ammunition supply dumps, 461 wheeled vehicles, 34 tanks, 113 large guns, one radio station and numerous individual and crew-served weapons. The unit's casualty rate was nearly 50 percent while fighting horrific weather conditions and battling overwhelming enemy forces. James himself actually jumped, fully-clothed, into a river in Austria to hook a cable onto a submerged tank so that it could be pulled out.

Later, when he left the Army and moved to Illinois, he would be elected the first — and still the only — African American man elected to countywide office in Champaign County in Illinois.

Nearly four years ago, Steve started the process to try to get a courthouse named after his father in Illinois. After a lot of legal discussions, Steve was denied the naming of the courthouse, but offered the naming of a post office in Champaign, Ill., close to where James went to college. He was still waiting on a vote by a Congressional committee when he passed away in November.

Now, his wife, Dawn Burgess, says she will take up the quest in his place.

“This is one of the bad moments of being a congressman,” U.S. Representative Rodney Davis, who met with Steve Burgess last year, said in an interview with the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. “You see some tragedy like this happen, and you realize that Washington doesn't work nearly as fast as you want it to. I wish we could have moved faster for Steve.”

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 3 December 2013

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