

HISTORY

Preserved

“We’re such a current culture and society, we don’t think about ordinary people

doing extraordinary things back in the day,” said **Nancy Piwowar**, who says she’s “become the go-to person for local history” in her hometown of Plainfield, NJ.

Piwowar, a retired letter carrier, now spends much of her time involved in the history of her community, from preserving historical landmarks to researching genealogy.

“I just want people to recognize what’s around them,” the Branch 396 member added.

Except for her time earning a bachelor’s degree in art history from Wilson College in Pennsylvania, the carrier has spent her entire life in north central New Jersey, where she enjoys delving into the region’s history as a “local public historian” rather than an academic historian.

When Piwowar joined her branch after starting as a letter carrier in 1980, she became interested in the local union’s history. Before retiring in July 2018 after 38 years of carrying mail, she served her branch as vice president, shop steward and Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) representative. She has continued in her position as branch treasurer since her retirement.

When developers came calling in the 1980s to develop the land across the street from her house that was a known Revolutionary War encampment, she helped fight to preserve it. “I’ve always been an activist,” she said.

Then one of her friends recruited her to join the Historical Society of Plainfield.

When the society realized that composer John Philip Sousa’s first concert after leaving the Marine Corps was in Plainfield in September of 1892, it put together a centennial concert in 1992. Piwowar did a lot of research for it—in the old-fashioned way. “That was in the days before the internet,” she said, adding, “I always like to put the pieces of the puzzle together.”

Surprisingly, history wasn’t always Piwowar’s favorite school subject growing up. “We weren’t really taught the local stories,” she said.

Lately, she’s focused on the early 20th century. With the historical society, the retired carrier has been researching the casualties of the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-1920 among World War I veterans from Plainfield. Piwowar recently was contacted by the family of a WWI veteran named Martin Kane, who died in October 1918 at Fort Hancock in New Jersey. After an explosion of the Morgan Munitions Depot that killed dozens of people, he had been sent to guard the area. There was not enough food and water, and he soon succumbed to pneumonia related to the flu.

Kane was Irish American; he had been in the United States for only three years when he was drafted and entered the U.S. Coast Guard. Two members of the veteran’s family, who are in Ireland and the United States, found Piwowar through an online exhibit. They already had done some research, but they wanted help from the carrier in getting concrete information so the soldier could have a proper burial place.

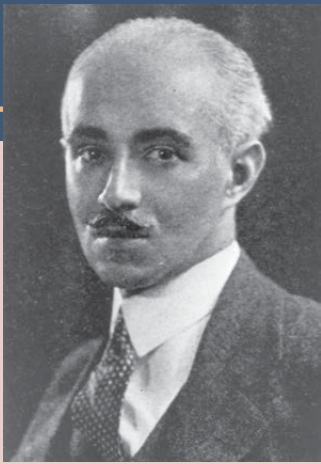
“We’ve been emailing back and forth,” she said. “We’re trying to get this man a tombstone that he deserves after 102 years.”



Nancy Piwowar



The Drake House Museum, run by the Historical Society of Plainfield



Architect Julian Abele (I) was believed to be the chief designer of the Trumbauer/Abele Greenhouse complex at Duke Farms (above). Piwowar also was instrumental in getting the Bedminster African Burying Ground (below, I) recognized as a historical site.



Piwowar has reached out to Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-NJ), whom she has met in the past through NALC events such as congressional

breakfasts, to see if she can help. The congresswoman's office has reached out to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs on behalf of the family.

Piwowar says that if people were to look it up, they would realize that a lot of places have interesting histories, especially as regards her postal brethren. "I think people have taken letter carriers for granted all these years," she said, adding, "I think this year has changed a lot of opinions. We have a lot to offer in our communities.

"I'm sure there are letter carriers all over the country who could tell stories," she continued. "Libraries don't think about asking retired letter carriers for oral histories. We have knowledge of history that others don't have."

That history, she says, includes noticing the geography on mounted routes, as well as seeing things change over the years—for example, knowing where farms existed before the land was developed.

Piwowar is an advocate for, and researcher of, local history and historic preservation, especially of the contributions of African Americans to north central New Jersey.

She is a member of the City of Plainfield Cultural and Heritage Affairs Advisory Board. "We're consulted on certain artistic issues," the carrier said. The board helps the city give grants for

local organizations to put on concerts and events.

The carrier also serves as the president of the Board of Trustees of the Historical Society of Plainfield, which manages the Drake House Museum, an 18th century colonial house. The society is a private-public partnership with the city of Plainfield. The board gives grants and provides tours, especially for school visits and Girl Scouts and Eagle Scouts. Piwowar says she especially enjoys answering kids' historical questions.

For many years, Piwowar has worked with local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) units for two major causes.

When there was a plan to demolish the Trumbauer/Abele Greenhouse on Doris Duke Farms, the carrier joined in protests that prevented the structure's destruction. The greenhouse is historically significant as one of the earliest known designs of Julian Abele, one of the first African-American architects, who designed most of the Gothic buildings on the campus of Duke University in North Carolina, as well as the Philadelphia Art Museum. The carrier realized the connection between the architect and the museum there years ago during an NALC event, where she saw a sign mentioning Abele's design contributions.

Meanwhile, since 2013, Piwowar has been an historical research consultant to the local NAACP units for the Bedminster African Burying Ground Preservation Project, trying to preserve one of the earliest African-American burial grounds. She happened to be off work one day when a friend invited her to a meeting with the NAACP and concerned neighbors to learn more.

The small plot of land, which has an unknown number of unmarked graves of Americans from the post-Revolu-

tionary War era, was purchased for \$3 in 1801 by a free black man, Robert Aaron, and two slaves known as Rick and Yaff. The three men wanted it as a resting place for themselves and their Black neighbors. The land is believed to be the first in the state owned by slaves.

Piwowar stepped in to help research Aaron after learning that he did not have a will. As a landowner, it would be unusual for him not to have had a will, she said. The carrier soon discovered a citation for a will and was able to play a part in helping save the property from destruction. In 2016, the land was marked with a historical plaque explaining its significance.

Because of her work, Piwowar received a Humanitarian and Historian Award from the Tri-City branch (encompassing Summit, Vauxhall and Springfield, NJ) NAACP in June 2019.

"As we move forward in the spirit of our freedom-fighting ancestors, we must again pause, reflect, remember and never forget that our freedom did not come without a struggle," Tri-City NAACP President Raiford Daniels said at the awards ceremony. He went on to congratulate Piwowar and the other honorees for their "extraordinary examples, even in the face of doubt and defeat."

"It was humbling," Piwowar said of receiving the award. "By recognizing me, they also recognize the sites and the people that came before me and the people who I researched. I want people to have respect [for others] and provide people with dignity."

Piwowar has helped get sites in her state added to a "most endangered" list, including a Catholic church that was designated as a historical site in 1985. The process is "complicated but worthwhile," the carrier says.

In addition, Piwowar has authored

Postcards for the missing lamp posts stolen from the Plainfield post office

several local articles in the *Encyclopedia of New Jersey* and assisted writers with historical research. Because of her work with the Drake House, she was able to help a writer in Ohio with research material about the Drake family's move from New Jersey to Ohio in 1788.

In postal circles, Piwowar's name is known for her role in helping to track down stolen antique post office lamp posts in Plainfield in the mid-1990s.

It all started when she was having lunch in October 1995 with her Branch 396 president, **Michael Breslin**, who told her that the antique lamp posts had just been taken from the Plainfield post office during a renovation of the facility's exterior.

"I got upset," she said. "How could someone steal off the post office?"

So Piwowar got to work: "I researched the lamp posts, and I made a wanted postcard" that described the twin 1915 neoclassical bronze lamp posts, each 10 feet tall and weighing 300 pounds.

"I sent out hundreds of postcards," she said, and she went to antique shows to see if she could locate them or get clues. Breslin, who remains the branch president, noted that he even tagged along with Piwowar to check out some places to make sure that the lamp posts had not been turned over for scrap metal.

Because that was in the early days of the internet, when someone told Piwowar, "You have to put this on the Web," she didn't know what that meant. So, continuing her old-style shoe-leather search, she met with a local police detective, who was investigating the case along with postal inspectors. Soon, the county estab-

Help find a piece of Plainfield's history!

You can help the U.S. Postal Service and City of Plainfield, NJ recover the lampposts stolen during the week of Oct. 23, 1995.

The two matching 1915 neoclassical bronze lampposts are 10 ft. tall and weigh about 300 lbs. each. At the time of the theft, they were painted black and one globe was broken.

Citizens who have information about this crime can call the 24-hour hotline at **1-908-654-TIPS** to speak to a *Crime Stoppers* operator.

Callers do not have to identify themselves to be eligible for the reward.

Your assistance in returning these important pieces to their original location in front of Plainfield's Post Office is most appreciated!

CRIME STOPPERS HOTLINE
1-908-654-TIPS!

Up to \$5,000 Reward Offered



If you have any information, please call 24-hour
CRIME STOPPERS HOTLINE 1-908-654-TIPS!

lished a Crime Stoppers hotline, along with an offer for a \$5,000 reward—rare for an artifact.

Media outlets picked up the story, including *The New York Times* and NBC.

Someone eventually called Crime Stoppers with a good lead, and detectives tracked down the thief and recovered the antique lamp posts.

"It was quite an experience. We got him," Piwowar said. "Everyone was happy in town," and motorists would honk their horns as they passed by the post office.

"They're still out there today," she said of the lamp posts, adding that "people still refer to me as the 'lamp post lady.'"

Breslin said that Piwowar has "always been doing things like this" to help with the preservation of history and has empathy for the plights many groups face. "When you really look at it, she's doing it from many different aspects," he said, adding, "She doesn't want anyone to forget this stuff. History is her thing, and she cares about injustice."

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has affected her work, with some museums and other facilities closing except for occasional outdoor events

and her research rendered more difficult because not all libraries or archives have their information online. To help out, Piwowar has partnered with a nearby library to help put on some virtual programs about local history.

There is no shortage of topics for the carrier to look into, however. "I keep getting projects and projects and projects," she said.

Piwowar especially enjoys helping people add to their knowledge of their family history, such as with the veteran's family, so family members will grow up learning a family story or legacy. "They know it's true, but they don't know where to look" to fill in the information gaps, she said.

The carrier also occasionally speaks at the Drake Museum with many members of the Drake family, who travel there to learn more about their ancestry as part of what the carrier calls "genealogy tourism."

"It doesn't heal people, but it fixes a hole in people's stories," she said of her work.

Piwowar is relentless in her pursuit of history and likes to share her knowledge. "You can't make up these stories," she said. "People don't realize what's in their back yard." **PR**