

# Dahlgren Heritage Museum

## Deck Log

### The Story of Ira and Gladys West

Ira and Gladys West are a King George County couple with pioneering careers as two of the first black scientists for the United States Naval Weapons Laboratory in Dahlgren. The couple and family members were given a private showing of the new “Pioneers of the 20th Century” exhibit featuring their story on Thursday, July 14. Their guide was Gillian Both who, along with fellow 2022 University of Mary Washington (UMW) Historic Preservation graduate Jennifer Glazebrook, researched and designed the exhibit. The Wests relived their professional journeys, which began in the 1950s, and were reminded that by the time they retired decades later, they had not only broken social barriers but also had contributed to many scientific breakthroughs.

Their guide artfully led them through their journey from their humble beginnings - the outskirts of Richmond for Ira and a farm in rural Dinwiddie County, Virginia, for Gladys - through their elementary and high school years - noting how Ira set up a barber's chair to earn money while in high school - and then on to higher education – with Ira attending Virginia Union University while Gladys followed her dream, studying at Virginia State College (now Virginia State University) and completing a PhD at Virginia Tech at 70. In both cases, their college studies were key to their securing positions at Dahlgren.

Both continued the journey through Ira's 35-year and Gladys' 42-year careers, the Wests reminiscing about their involvement in high-profile Navy programs that pioneered innovations which continue to keep America safe and still impact our everyday activities to this day.

Their guide also relayed the “rest of their story” outside of Dahlgren — their first meeting, their marriage, their raising of a family, and their community involvement.

Both underscored how they continued to satisfy their quest for life-long learning by giving back to the community, visiting classrooms to tell their story, and Gladys' many recognitions for her career contributions — from the Air Force to the Prince Philip Foundation in the United Kingdom, and even in pop culture.



**West Exhibit Panel**

# The Wests cont'd.

The Wests and their family enjoyed retracing their journey and they hope it will inspire others. As Gladys notes in her autobiography, “It Began with a Dream,” she has always lived by quotes like this one from Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mary Oliver: “Always keep some room in your heart for the unimaginable.”

On July 28, 35 people attended a forum at UMW-Dahlgren Campus to reflect on the exhibit, which is now on view at the Dahlgren Heritage Museum, 3540 James Madison Pkwy in King George from 10 a.m. – 4 p.m. Friday – Sunday. After a reception, the attendees were invited into University Hall for a program that featured a welcome by Ed Jones, president of the Dahlgren Heritage Foundation, followed by three speakers.

The first speaker was Kathy Walseman, a teacher at Dahlgren School and a longtime friend of the Wests. Kathy spoke about the impact the Wests have made on her classes throughout the years by sharing their story.

Next up was Mrs. Both, who showed a short video of the exhibit and demonstrated some of the features, such as the interactive iPad that hosts a Q&A with the Wests.

The final speaker was Dr. Karen Sherry, Curator of the Virginia Museum of History and Culture in Richmond. Dr. Sherry discussed the book and traveling exhibit she developed, which feature a segment on the Wests. The book, which is included in the Dahlgren Heritage Museum’s West exhibit, is titled “Determined: The 400-Year Struggle for Black Equality.”

While the Wests were unable to attend in person, they were joined by daughter Carolyn to view the event online. Carolyn provided a summary of the family’s impressions of the exhibit and thanked the museum and the people who worked to make the exhibit a reality. The evening was closed by Ed Jones thanking those who came to the first post-COVID lockdown forum and inviting them to the next forum, featuring a panel to discuss the Museum’s new mobile exhibit “The Navy Lands at Dahlgren” currently on display at the UMW Dahlgren campus.

This exhibit was generously funded by a grant from the Community Foundation of the Rappahannock River Region.



West Family At the Museum

**We've changed the date for our Murder Mystery Dinner Theater – Join us April 15, 2023 at Estate at White Hall Vineyard for all the fun! Watch for tickets on Eventbrite after the first of the year. Hope to see everyone there!**



- Join Our Crew! [Click here.](#)
- To make a tax deductible donation, [click here.](#)
- Visit us on the web: [www.dahlgrenmuseum.org](http://www.dahlgrenmuseum.org)
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Thank you for your support of the Dahlgren Heritage Foundation! With your help we are educating the community on the Dahlgren story, running a museum, and working towards hosting more interesting and exciting events.

We wouldn't be able to do any of this without you. We look forward to another great year, and we are thankful for your membership. Donate by

mailing a check to: P. O. Box 816, Dahlgren, VA 22448 or visit

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### Upcoming Events:

Oct 19 – Meet Lt. Col. Jonathan Smith, U.S. Space Force, 19<sup>th</sup> Space Defense Squadron @ Estate at White Hall Winery, 3668 White Hall Rd, King George – 4:30 – 6 p.m.

Nov 29 – Giving Tuesday – Your donation on this annual day of giving helps the museum fund history and educational programs for our community