Archaeologist retraces steps of Underground Railroad pioneer

Henson site reveals ‘strategies of resistance, adaptation and survival’

By PAUL LAGASSE

Dr. Julie King has become the “go-to” expert on the archaeological evidence documenting the early life Charles County native and former abolitionist Josiah Henson. But according to King, the story of how that came about had to do with timing, persistence and a little luck.

King had recently joined the faculty of St. Mary’s College of Maryland as an associate professor of anthropology when she was contacted by Michael J. Sullivan, a local developer with a passion for historic preservation and interest in Charles County history.

“I was looking for opportunities for my students, and the King said she was interested,” said Sullivan.

The site of the Henson family compound, where the Freedom Division, a branch of the Underground Railroad, was based in southern Charles County, is now under Sullivan’s stewardship.

The Freedom Division was a network of safe houses and support for escaped slaves on their journey to freedom. The family compound, located within the Ellicott City National Battlefield Park, is being developed into a museum and educational center.

The site is the first of three planned projects around Charles County, with a second project planned for the Henson Site, a historical site near Indian Head, and a third project for the Henson’s Freeburg site.

The Henson Site, located near the Indian Head Naval Support Activity, is a site that King had visited in the past. She had previously studied the site for its archaeological potential and its potential as a teaching tool.

“Josiah Henson was a very important figure in African American history,” said King.

Along with the Henson Site, the site of the Henson family compound is also being developed into a museum and educational center. The site is being developed by the Maryland Commission on Civil Rights and Liberties, which is a non-profit organization that promotes civil rights and liberties for all citizens.

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By CHARLIE WRIGHT

Indian Head hosted the third Annual Support Activity South Potomac (COMREL) Council meeting on Tuesday, as local government officials and naval officers gathered to share the progress of various military entities.

“COMREL is an organization that brings together military leaders from different entities to share information and resources,” said Sullivan.

The organization is also known for hosting annual meetings, which are attended by local government officials and military leaders from different entities.

“This year, we are excited to host the third Annual Support Activity South Potomac (COMREL) Council meeting,” said Sullivan.

“In addition to sharing information, we are also excited to host a military appreciation event,” said Sullivan.

The event will feature a range of activities, including a military appreciation event, a military appreciation event, and a military appreciation event.

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he wanted to find Charles County's first court house,” King recalled. “At the time, there was an assumption in historical circles that no one was ever going to find it, but he was persistent, and he wanted to meet.”

King met Sullivan at Casey Jones restaurant in La Plata to hear his pitch. “He told me that he had hired a surveyor to do all this research and he had narrowed it down to 50 acres. After talking to him, I realized he understood the costs involved in archaeology because he’s a businessman and a land developer. He had an archaeological mind.”

King agreed to undergo the research and, to her surprise and delight, within three weeks she and five students had found the remains of the courthouse under a soybean field along Spring Hillstown Road, in a small clearing. “By 2006, it was about 75 percent excavated,” King recalled. “In the end of it, said King, “But Mike said, ‘Oh no, we have other sites to find.’”

Next on Sullivan’s list was Zekiah Fort, where Lord Calvert had constructed in 1686 alongside Zekiah Swamp for the “Underground Railroad.”

King recalled that third archaeological adventure Thursday evening at a presentation at the Indian Head Pavilion. Above right, Curtis Smith, councilman of the Town of Indian Head, introduced King at Thursday’s presentation.

“From a historical perspective, the remains of the fort offer promising clues into understanding what people were doing here in the 17th century,” said King. “There is evidence to suggest that this site was used throughout the 1700s.”

In 1784, U.S. soldiers built a way to supply food and water to the men of George Washington’s Army. King explained that the soldiers made a ramp up to a ridge near the slave quarters to supply the men who were camped out there. “At that time, there is no reason to believe the food was taken to the slaves in the quarters,” she said.

In 1795, after Josiah Henson’s brother-in-law, Joseph Patterson, died, Henson purchased his own freedom and that of his wife and children in Kentucky. “Now his way up to supervising the slaves of Newman’s farm,” King said. “The remains of the site show the site had been improved and that there were more buildings on the site. The remains of a well and a chimney from the 1700s suggest the site was used throughout the 1700s and 1800s.”

In 1796, the future abolitionist was employed by the Bostwick family, and he was directly involved in the Underground Railroad. “The Bostwicks used a network of friends and others in the area to help slaves escape to freedom. The remains of the site show that there were more buildings on the site, and that the site had been improved,” King said.

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