

Archaeological Dig Unearths Hopes for a Civil War Museum

By Jennifer Lenhart, Washington Post Staff Writer, Thursday, January 5, 2006

Windswept and rocky, the knobby point overlooking the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal in present-day Potomac provided a strategic lookout but little shelter for the Union soldiers who fortified the spot in 1862.

Beginning that winter of the Civil War, soldiers of the 19th Massachusetts Infantry are believed to have guarded this Montgomery County site on the C&O, then an important commercial route parallel to the adjacent Potomac River. From their perch, Northern soldiers attempted to keep Confederates from crossing the Potomac from Virginia into Maryland.

Off duty, soldiers went down the slope and away from the bluffs to a roughhewn encampment built of logs covered in dirt and shaped in the form of a Greek cross.

Such an encampment was known as a blockhouse, a common site along the C & O during the war. Nine such fortifications punctuated a 25-mile stretch of the Potomac between Great Falls and the Monocacy River.

Inaccessible and wild, the Potomac site has languished, a little-known, off-trail excursion in Montgomery's Blockhouse Point Conservation Park, just off River Road. It was rarely visited, except for the occasional Civil War historian or relic hunter who knew the path from the private horse farm abutting the park.

Then, just a few years ago, a group of archaeology enthusiasts came ready to break a sweat in pursuit of long-forgotten history. An ongoing archaeological dig at Blockhouse Point park, led by county archaeologist Jim Sorensen, has uncovered Civil War-era buckshot, clay pipe bowls, a bayonet part and other artifacts.

The dig has shed light on daily life in a Civil War soldiers' camp and pushed to the forefront the idea that Montgomery should have a Civil War museum.

A museum to accompany the dig site is desired because there really is no place in the county to go to appreciate its Civil War history, said Don Housely, retired chairman of the Wheaton High School history department and a dig volunteer.

The long-range goal is to have an authentic site where students can learn about Civil War-era Montgomery, Housely said.

Full commitment to a museum is up to the County Council, which has not scheduled any action on the issue, but the county has been purchasing parcels of land adjacent to the park, said archaeologist Sorensen, of the county Park and Planning Department.

The county has been acquiring the property from a private horse ranch called Callithea Farm. The farm, just across from the intersection of River Road and Signal Tree Lane, is on land adjoining Blockhouse



County archaeologist James Sorensen holds a Civil War-era bayonet from the canal dig site.

Point park. The museum, or any building, cannot be built in the park, a county conservation area where permanent structures are not permitted.

The county has purchased about 80 percent of the land that would be needed for a museum and is expected to own the full tract in the next year or two, Sorensen said.

Other Montgomery Civil War sites, at Sandy Spring and elsewhere, commemorate safe houses and other significant places where escaping slaves sought safe harbor as they journeyed north along the Underground Railroad.

The proposed Civil War museum and interpretive center would display artifacts uncovered at the encampment along with hands-on, educational displays.

The numerous artifacts collected so far are being catalogued and studied by Sorensen.

"We found a .30 caliber rimfire cartridge, one of the first cartridges that was made by the Remington company," he said. "We found a percussion cap and a lot of nails and things like that, and the clay pipes and a horseshoe."

Sorensen and his volunteers have uncovered the outlines of the cliff-top bunker and the crude earthen soldiers' shelter. Old chunks of charred wood have raised speculation that the encampment might have been torched in one of the many raids Confederate troops staged on Union encampments along the C&O.

"We've found a lot of things related to the camp," said Sorensen. "It really is a fantastic Civil War camp."

While the museum is still just a proposal, Housely and other amateur historians and dig volunteers are trying to learn everything they can about the Blockhouse Point fort. Housely began his retirement last winter by starting to research a history of Montgomery's blockhouses. He is combing archives for soldiers' diaries and letters that tell about their interaction with other military units and local residents.

Other history buffs have found letters and archival materials relating to Muddy Branch fort, not far from Blockhouse Point park, that describe slaves coming to the fort for safe harbor, and slave owners coming to find them, Housely said.

Robert Gould Shaw, colonel of the all-black 54th Massachusetts Regiment, which was portrayed in the movie "Glory," was with the 2nd Massachusetts Infantry stationed at Muddy Branch fort before his promotion to the 54th. Studying Shaw's letters from Muddy Branch has inspired Housely to keep looking for similar materials from Blockhouse Point.

Ultimately, he wants to see a greater acknowledgment of Montgomery County's role in the Civil War.

"It seems natural that we had a role, since we're on the border with Virginia, and the Potomac is a natural crossing place," said Housely, a lifelong county resident. "There's a lot of stuff around here that you don't think about that is actually connected with the Civil War."