

North Bethesda site to be featured in TV series

By Peggy McEwan August 29, 2012

Josiah Henson Special Park, a site unknown to most Montgomery County residents, is going to get some national attention soon.

“Time Team America,” a national television program produced by Oregon Public Broadcasting and airing on PBS, had a crew at the North Bethesda park from Aug. 13 to Aug. 15 filming archaeological work being done there for a episode that will air next year on the show.

“This is an unusual site because it was located in the middle of suburbs. Most archaeological sites are remote; this one is under the feet of people that may not know it was there,” said Bruce Barrow, Oregon Public Broadcasting series producer. “Also, the story of Josiah Henson is such a powerful story. It’s very much about Josiah and slavery.”

Henson’s story is an important one, said Mary Bradford, director of the Montgomery County Department of Parks.

“What makes this extra special is this was the residence of Josiah Henson. He lived in slave quarters somewhere on this property,” Bradford said at the site Aug. 15.

The park, formerly known as the Isaac Riley Farm, is where Henson lived as a slave from 1795 to 1830 before he escaped to Canada, established a fugitive slave community and wrote his autobiography based on his life on the Riley property, according to the Montgomery Parks Web site.

“Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ basing her fiction on his memoir,” Bradford said. “In terms of the history of this county, he is a pivotal figure because of his influence on this major piece of fiction. It galvanized the abolitionists.”

Nestled on almost an acre and a half of land, the park includes a small, white clapboard house situated just off Old Georgetown Road, south of Nicholson Lane. It is hard to spot because trees and the angle of the driveway help hide it from commuters speeding by. The house was built between 1790 and 1815, with an addition put on in the 1930s.

Attached to the house is a log cabin that county historians think was added after 1820 for use as a kitchen, according to the Web site.

In the log cabin, “Time Team America” crew members and Montgomery County Department of Parks archaeologists and volunteers were lifting up the floor, hoping to find clues to link known history and educated guesses, signs of the former kitchen that Henson wrote about in his book.

Their work was rewarded: Archaeologists found compacted dirt consistent with that of a floor.

“They are pretty confident they found the floor that would have been there when Josiah Henson lived [on the plantation] in the 1820s,” Barrow said.

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Outside, archaeologists were digging where they thought they might find artifacts, usually the site of a dump or privy, while others screened the excavated dirt looking for remnants of the past.

“Time Team America” scientists brought with them years of archaeological experience and modern technology that allowed them to perform remote sensing of the site and, with permission, on neighboring yards.

When filming for the TV series, they collaborate with archaeologists who are currently excavating sites, advancing the ongoing research with technology, expertise and additional help, according to PBS’s Web site. Filming for each show lasts three days.

In addition to the Montgomery County site, the team will work at Crow Canyon, Cortez, Colo.; Badger Hole at Badger Hole, Okla.; and Camp Lawton in Jenkins County, Ga.

Parks archaeologist Cassandra Michaud said the team at Josiah Henson Special Park was also hoping to find signs of a village of huts the enslaved population lived in, of which Henson wrote.

“We did find a concentration of quartz rock that would often be used for foundations,” she said.

The original plantation was thought to have fluctuated between 200 and 500 acres, Bradford said. It stayed in the Riley family until 1921, when it was sold to the Luchs family, who created Luxmanor Corp. and sold sections of the property as lots to be developed. They sold the house and land now called Josiah Henson Special Park to William and Lavinia Bolten, who owned it from 1936 to 1950. The last owners were Marcel and Hildegarde Mallet-Prevost, who purchased the home and land in 1963 and sold it to Montgomery County Parks in 2006.

Fifteen students, 10 from Montgomery County, also worked on the project, participating as members of a weeklong field school outreach program funded by the National Science Foundation.

“The idea is to introduce the students to STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics] through the science of archaeology,” said Alexandra Jones, head of the field school. “The kids had a lot of fun performing science.”

The site is open to the public eight times per year, Michaud said.

“The goal is to create a museum dedicated to the interpretation of slavery in Montgomery County in this house,” she said.

Josiah Henson Special Park is located at 11420 Old Georgetown Rd. in North Bethesda. It will be open to the public for an Emancipation Day celebration from noon to 4 p.m. Nov. 4. Admission is free. For information, call 301-650-4373.

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