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Rediscovered cave tells of county's slave-holding history

by Matthew Smith, Special to The Gazette

Once thought destroyed or otherwise lost to history, a mysterious and legendary "cave" built in the mid-1800s has been rediscovered and explored by an interdisciplinary team in the rocky Paint Branch Gorge on the private lands of the Federal Reserve Center in White Oak.

Called the "Devil's Den" in newspaper articles dating from the 1910s, the man-made tunnel, presumably built as a mill race to force water to power a mill, has numerous oral history accounts suggesting a richer history, including serving as a stop on the Underground Railroad and as a relic of Montgomery County's slave-holding history.

Several accounts, both written and oral, suggest the cave may represent a truly unique piece of African-American history.

A 1914 edition of "With the Rambler," a series of articles written in The Washington Star between 1912 to 1927 that combined author J. Harry Shannon's love of nature and history, included a lengthy account of the origins of the millrace:

"It was designed to erect a mill there, and the mill race to be most effective would have to pass through the rock wall or rock mass," the Rambler wrote. "The man who meant to build the mill had slaves and to one very handy and able man he offered his freedom if he would cut through the rock. The slave labored with a sledge, drill, gunpowder, and fuse for many months. Before the task was done slavery in Maryland was abolished, but the tunnel cutting man kept at his work till the rock was drilled."

James Sorensen, archeologist for the Park and Planning Commission and lifelong Montgomery County resident, had heard this same account of Devil's Den's creation from his uncle, Eugene Beall.

Beall went to the Devil's Den with his mother and grandmother and played there as a child. But until now the cave remained a legend to Sorensen.

Devil's Den was lost after the forested streambed on which it is located became private property owned by the Naval Surface Warfare Research Center in the 1940s. Presumed by FRC officials to be blasted to bits when a sewer line was put in the area decades ago, the find is especially exciting for area environmentalists and historians.

"It's a fascinating piece of local history," said Bob Ferraro, president of local advocacy group, the Eyes of Paint Branch, the group responsible for the caves discovery and further study. "It adds so much to the richness of the area. [All of us on the hike] were just extremely excited."

The tunnel was discovered by accident in November by free-lance botanist and environmental activist John Parrish as he looked for rare plant species while on a specially approved hike with the Eyes of Paint Branch.

A second hike was then organized in early June with 30 local environmentalists, historians, engineers, geologists, archeologists and photographers to try to glean a better understanding of the cave and its history.

Describing it as one of the most exciting finds in his 10 years working for the county, Sorensen said that the tunnel "adds a lot to local history."

"It's interesting that the folklore was exact," he said. "The mill race reflects a historically important Montgomery County industry, milling. The legend reminds us that Maryland was a southern state where slavery existed along with everything that entailed."

Other oral history accounts suggest that the cave was a hiding place for runaway slaves during the Underground Railroad era.

Although Ferraro said that often a connection to the Underground Railroad is tacked on to stories involving slaves, he also said that streambeds were a frequent escape route for runaway slaves and that the area was known for its sympathetic Quakers.

However, one expert theorized that an underground mill race was not characteristic of antebellum mills, and may not have been built by a slave or been a stop on the Underground Railroad.

"My personal thinking is that the reason it was cut through the rock was to carry a good velocity of water, which would not have been possible with a surface mill race," engineer Richard Stowe was quoted as saying in the Backyard Bulletin, the publication of the Eyes of Paint Branch. "This velocity would have powered one of the new turbines that were just beginning to be used [instead of water-turned wheels]. This would closely date the tunnel's construction to around 1860s or 1870s, which is when the mills up in Delaware had been converted to turbines. Otherwise there would be no reason to have a tunnel rather than the usual open race."

Although the mill race was completed, the explorers could not find any sign of the mill. The project might have been abandoned or perhaps the water was carried across the stream via flume to another mill.

The tunnel was a perfect example of an ideally located mill race, Sorensen said, bridging a horseshoe-like bend in the creek and because it is on the fall line, where the piedmont plateau drops down to the coastal plain, where the loss of elevation creates powerful streams. Several other mills were located up and downstream from Devil's Den.

Adventurous explorers who braved the cave described it as being damp and cool and its walls as shining with mica and being covered with spider webs. Vulture feathers in the cave indicated recent nesting activity. It is about 30 to 35 feet long, with rock-walled chutes that extended the length of the partially caved-in tunnel to about 60 feet.