

Montgomery County conference draws history buffs

Sunday January 27, 2013 by St. John Barned-Smith, Staff Writer

Indiana Jones would have had no trouble fitting in at the Montgomery County History Conference.

Genealogists, archaeologists and a slew of local historians gathered at the Johns Hopkins University-Montgomery County campus in Rockville to talk shop and discuss Montgomery County history this weekend.

Around 150 amateur and professional historians attended the event, which covered “all facets of Montgomery County History ... from prehistory to present day,” according to Montgomery County Historical Society Executive Director Tom Kuehhas.

This year, the conference explored a broad swath of issues, such as Montgomery County’s relationship between agriculture and its burgeoning biotech presence. There was talk about African-American genealogy, past struggles with desegregation in the 1960s, the Civil War and other similar themes.

Connie Morella, a former U.S. representative for Maryland, shared her experience teaching in rural Montgomery County in 1957 during a panel discussion about desegregating Montgomery County Public Schools.

She moved to Maryland with her husband, who was studying law at Georgetown, and she found a job teaching in Poolesville.

“It was a great shock to me, particularly as a northerner. I was not accustomed to the fact there would be any protest where there would be integration,” she said in an interview before her presentation.

“It was a very difficult situation to handle and teach at the same time,” she said, describing an environment with angry parents and nervous students.

Elaine Amir, the executive director of the Johns Hopkins University-Montgomery County Campus, talked about the university’s efforts to promote collaboration between different scientists, businesses and everyday people.

“We’re really trying to foster translational science,” she said. “Doing science, but for the purpose of commercializing it and bringing it out so it affects the population.

“I’m excited there’s a forum for discussing this,” she said of the conference.

Maria Tarasuk of Montgomery County Public Schools talked about how the school system has tweaked its social studies agenda and the way it teaches.

At a morning session in the conference, Glenn Wallace talked about the work he has done at Monocacy Cemetery, cataloging the lives of people buried there, including Confederates and a lone Union soldier. He has posted information on all 5,472 graves there.



"I just want to make sure everyone's legacy is somehow posted on the Internet so generations from now people will be able to find them," he said in an interview before his session. "I think everybody has a legacy to share in life," he said.

Modern-day archaeologists also were on hand to share their discoveries. Cindy Pfanstiehl of Montgomery College discussed the archaeological work she has done in Clarksburg.

Though the town is a quiet community now, it served as a major stop on the road between Georgetown and Frederick, she said. A ledger and an inventory at a local inn have been valuable in helping understand the commercial environment of the time, she said.

"We have a really good sense of what residents of Clarksburg [were] consuming," she said — dishes, pipes and even the wines and spirits that were sold.

Robyn Smith, who teaches genealogy at Howard Community College, talked about learning about her family's history as slaves in Maryland.

It's difficult for the descendants of slaves to research their past, she said. "To get past 1870, you have to find the slave owner," she said.

Maryland had the largest number of free blacks at the time of the Civil War, she said. There were more than 83,000 here, liberated by owners after the Revolutionary War, or who purchased their freedom, or were born free.

And Mary van Balgooy, the executive director of Peerless Rockville, shared information about "Women Who Dared" — women whose contributions to society were more notable given how much they had to fight the attitudes of their times.

"Most people didn't know the first computer programmers were women," she said. And Clara Barton, famous as "The Angel of the Battlefield" for her work as a nurse during the Civil War, was the first woman to organize relief in such a big way, van Balgooy said.

Linda Gabriel Deutsch was at the conference in a long flowing gown and sported a 19th-century hairstyle, ringlets included.

She was part of a four-person troupe performing "The Star-Spangled Banner and All Its Cousins," a narrated concert with music from the time of the War of 1812.

The goal, according to Katherine Mack, another performer, was "to make that period come alive."

Stagecraft has changed dramatically since plays and concerts were performed 200 years ago, she said. Audiences weren't as polite, and concerts and plays were held outdoors or by candlelight.

Songs — even ones we know today — were sung differently as well, she said. After decades sung in ballparks and graduations, Americans know the tune of "The Star-Spangled Banner" differently than it was at its inception.

"It's very hard to relearn a song you know so well, let me tell you," she said.