

WHITE COUNTY

Slave, Slaveowner Descendants Create Project

Most of North Georgia's Sautee Nacoochee Valley's African-American residents can trace their roots to slave ancestors who labored in fields, mines, mills and manors throughout the area. After emancipation, the freed slaves carved out a place for themselves and called it Bean Creek.

When current residents expressed concerns about their largely untold and rapidly disappearing history, the Bean Creek History Project was born.

According to Caroline Crittenden, Project coordinator, documents trace tiny Bean Creek to at least 1863. "The settlement is probably older. An 1835 ledger records a freed slave, 'Free Jack', as working in the gold mines. It's likely he lived at what is now Bean Creek, possibly with Native Americans who were first located there," she said.

The road leading into the tiny settlement was once part of the historic Rabun Trail and before that, an ancient Cherokee thoroughfare. Stone piles scattered throughout the area mark Cherokee burial sites.

The Bean Creek History Project, created by Crittenden and adopted by the Sautee Nacoochee Community Association History Museum, involves multiple layers the community hopes will collectively preserve and celebrate a century and a half of North Georgian African-American history.

Central to the Project is the African American Heritage Site & Nature Preserve, where the history of the area will be told from a black perspective.

The Heritage Site, part of a three acre nature preserve donated by Lillian Heptinstall Everhart on the rim of Nacoochee Valley, contains a slave cabin donated by Jim and Courtney Johnston and moved a few hundred yards, maintaining its original compass orientation and using original foundation stones.

Careful cabin restoration and reconstruction by craftsmen involves traditional methods, tools and materials. A

descendant of the original owner of the cabin gifted the project with sections of a white oak needed to match the few existing original roof shingles.

Reparations have produced an artifactual archeology of the families the cabin housed over the course of centuries. Unearthed pottery shards, cut nails and a button most likely from a U.S. officer's military uniform that fell from the rafters hint at stories untold.

In an ironic twist, a newspaper report on the 1900 Paris Exhibition came to light beneath decades of wall coverings.

Although Atlanta University professor W.E.B. DuBois swept the Exhibition with 15 gold, silver and bronze medals



A c. 1850s slave cabin, the central artifact of Sautee Nacoochee Valley's new African American Heritage Site & Nature Preserve

for his *Exposition des Negres d'Amerique*, a comprehensive portrait of slave descendants, little mention of his success appeared in reports in the States.

Sautee Nacoochee district nominations to the National Register of Historic Places include the 1862 Bean Creek Missionary Baptist Church and nearby Bean Creek Cemetery, where sunken graves, head stones and field stones mark African American resting places from early 1800s to the present.

Also included is site of the Industrial School, where generations of African American women learned domestic arts as well as to read and write. In addition to academic subjects, male

counterparts learned smithing, farming and farriering as alternatives to mill and mine labor.

Friends of Bean Creek and the Bean Creek Alliance, Bean Creek community initiatives, are seeking funds to purchase and preserve the Old Bean Creek Ball Ground, where a century of Bean Creek families have gathered for celebrations and ball games.

"The Bean Creek Ball Ground has been the onliest place we've had for over 100 years," said resident Lena Dorsey, "Been that way all our lives."

Mining operations following the 1828 discovery of gold, including a large stamp mill along Bean Creek, have partially contributed to one of the Project's biggest challenges. In August of 2003, a bout of serious illness resulted in the discovery of toxic levels of bacteria and heavy metals in most of the village's water sources, including hand-dug, bored and drilled wells, spring water and collected runoff. Residents have been forced to haul and boil water, or depend upon bottled water.

Contaminants include mercury, historically used to separate gold from ore and once so thickly present that longtime residents remember scooping it up by handfuls from the stream. The church well, only 50 feet from the cemetery, bears evidence of the arsenic used as an embalming agent before formaldehyde.

The Bean Creek Satellite Water System proposal is designed to answer the water crisis without compromising the integrity of the Historic District or eligible features, sites and structures within the community.

Descendants of both slaves and slave owners are working as one to honor Bean Creek's past and improve its future, preserving and interpreting the story of slavery in Northeast Georgia.

Further information on the cabin restoration and the African-American Heritage Site & Nature Preserve at www.sauteenacoochee.org/museum.html.