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Stafford to study slavery locations

BY VANESSA REMMERS / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Stafford County will take a closer look at a part of its history from which the physical traces are disappearing.

Stafford is using a \$14,475 grant from the Virginia Department of Historic Resources to pay for cultural resource services that will identify and collect information on the slavery-related sites in the county.

The work will be one of the few of its kind across the state, according to University of Mary Washington Historic Preservation Professor Douglas Sanford. David Edwards with VDHR said that he hasn't seen an effort like this in the northern region.

Bids on the recently issued request for proposals will be accepted through Aug. 26.

For matching shares, the county will provide \$7,000 from its general fund while UMW's Center for Historic Preservation will contribute \$3,840 using money from the Silver Companies' contribution to the center's slave housing project in Virginia.

County, UMW staff and volunteers will also provide a combined \$10,656 in in-kind services, according to the grant application.

The one-year grant will not translate into a permanent position, but is expected to help add to the county's and state's inventory of slavery-related sites. It also will help the Stafford Historical Commission, which reviews development proposals, make more informed recommendations to the county planning office and the Board of Supervisors.

The winning bidder is expected to make special efforts to identify resources in development areas specified in the county's current Comprehensive Plan and the county's various redevelopment plans.

"It is really about knowing what we got. It is always great because it raises awareness of what you are looking at," said Architectural Review Board Chair Tanya Gossett, who gave input on the RFP. "We really haven't necessarily been good about looking at these sites."

Discussions over a deteriorating slave-related structure on the Sherwood Forest property, the site of a potential mixed-use development, prompted the county to seek the grant. Walton International Group, the owners of the approximately 1,190-acre Sherwood Forest tract, have spent nearly \$200,000 to stabilize the 1840's manor house and separate kitchen house, according to company officials. Walton officials have previously explained to Stafford Historical Commission members that their plans include the eventual restoration of Sherwood's historic home and to preserve about 50 acres around it that include outbuildings and an old cemetery.

But the discussion raised questions about how many other slave sites existed in the county and their conditions.

"We really don't have a good handle of how many survived and what condition they are in. We know in most cases the overwhelming majority are gone. They weren't built to stand the test of time," said Sanford, who was part of the Sherwood Forest discussions and has studied slave sites throughout Virginia.

In addition, Sanford said, Stafford's rapid growth and the county's 350th anniversary played a part in raising awareness of the need for a more extensive study.

"It was realizing that Stafford County had not given as much attention to African-American history," Sanford said.

Even though attention has been paid over the past several years to the county's African-American story, the tangible resources associated with enslaved people have received less attention and are rapidly disappearing, the request for proposals stated.

According to the RFP, the several hundred to the few thousand slave houses in Stafford diminished since the end of the Civil War, especially in recent decades with rapid suburban and commercial development. There are now only a few surviving examples.

UMW faculty and staff from the Center for Historic Preservation and Department of Historic Preservation have documented five slave-related buildings in Stafford. Two of those five are in critical or worse condition, according to the RFP.

Anita Dodd, chair of the Historical Commission and member of the Cemetery Committee, said that the Cemetery Committee has identified ten slave cemeteries.

“The hope is that along with gathering the existing information, there will be additional information added to it as well. It is a document to be used by other researchers to study African-American history,” said Dodd, who also provided input on the RFP. “It could certainly bring the residents of Stafford County awareness of those buildings and what they were used for. So it could generate more signage, plaques, more public identification.”

The winning bidder will dig deeper than just giving standard archaeological information. While working with an advisory panel of local experts, the consultant will be expected to identify about 30 slavery-related sites and conduct research to find the human ties behind the structures. Those 30 sites will include 20 architectural resources and ten cemeteries.

At the same time, UMW student aides under Sanford will be working with U.S. Census data to provide a social and cultural context of slavery in Stafford to add to the consultant’s survey work.

The final report must be completed by June 15, 2015.

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