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Bedminster seeks historic listing
By SANDY STUART Staff Writer

Friends group wants 1778-79 encampment site recognized

BEDMINSTER TWP. – A dozen years after receiving national historic designation for the home of Revolutionary War Gen. Henry Knox, a local non-profit group will seek the same honor for the nearby site of Knox's Continental Artillery encampment.

The Friends of the Jacobus Vanderveer House hope to get Artillery Park, a 14-acre tract nestled within The Hills housing development in Pluckemin, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

To that end, the Friends requested \$14,500 in funding from the Township Committee to cover application costs at a meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 20. "It makes sense that because the (Vanderveer) house is on the national register, the encampment should also be on the national register," explained Ellen Vreeland of Bedminster, outgoing Friends president.

A listing on the historic register would make the Pluckemin property eligible for federal grants to continue earlier archaeological digs and to develop public education programs. The governing body agreed to pay for the application, despite concern about trying to prepare a 2007 municipal budget that doesn't increase property taxes.

Committeeman Bernard Pane said the committee "would be remiss" in not seeking protection for such an important piece of Bedminster's history. He noted that the township's official seal contains a cannon representing the artillery encampment.

'Lush With Artifacts'

Committeeman Don Cross concurred, saying he believes archaeological research should continue on the site. "All that area is just lush with artifacts," Cross said. "That's our history, and I hate to see us throw our history away." The Vanderveer House, located off Route 202-206 within the River Road Park property, is believed to have housed Gen. Knox and his family from December 1778 through June 1779. Knox's infant daughter, who died in 1779, is buried at the Reformed Church cemetery just north of the house.

The Friends are in the process of converting the Vanderveer House into a local history museum that will be a key site on New Jersey's Crossroads of the American Revolution trail. During the period when Knox was residing in the Vanderveer House, he consolidated the Continental Army's artillery equipment and 1,000 troops about a mile down the road. There, he created a specialized training school that has been described as a precursor to the West Point military academy.

'Unique And Extraordinary'

Little is left of the E-shaped academy complex except stones from collapsed fireplaces, but archaeologists have already excavated more than 190,000 artifacts from the site.

The artifacts range from metal buttons with the artillery insignia to eating utensils, musket balls and pieces of china and pottery. Many of the artifacts will be displayed at the Vanderveer House once the museum is opened. Ian Burrow, an archaeological consultant to the Friends, called the encampment site a "unique and extraordinary" place. The significance of the encampment, Burrow said, is that artillerymen "learned for the first time how to use their weapons effectively."

Historical consultant Linda McTeague said the success of Knox's vision ultimately helped ensure victory for the Americans over the British.

“At Pluckemin, the artillery was organized as a very sophisticated military unit,” she said. The E-shaped complex included barracks for soldiers and officers, an academy building, storage sheds for weapons and wagons, and an armory where weapons were repaired and refurbished.

Still Has Potential

Burrow said artifacts found on the site show the “ingenuity” of the artillery soldiers in modifying bayonets taken from captured and killed British soldiers to fit the French-made muskets used by the Continental Army.

Contrary to popular misconception, Burrow said, the encampment site is not useless once it is excavated. He said the previous archaeological dig “sampled the site; it has not exhausted its potential.”

Based on the site’s historic significance and the quality of the artifacts that were found there, Burrow expects the application process to proceed smoothly. “I have every confidence this will be approved and get on the National Register,” he told the governing body. McTeague noted that listing on the National Register of Historic Places doesn’t involve any requirement for public access. Because of the encampment location – surrounded by modern condominiums, with no public parking available – McTeague said it is unlikely to become a site open to visitors other than historians and archaeologists.

“I think most of the people in Bedminster don’t have any idea how important the site is or what’s there,” she commented. Vreeland said the Friends are interested in getting a lease to control access to the property, just as they have a long-term lease on the Vanderveer House. The tract was given to the township by the Hills Development Company.

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