

Resident determined to revive historic Timbuctoo neighborhood



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Columnist Kevin Riordan writes about issues affecting South Jersey.

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The simple gravestones stand eloquently in the hush of the little hillside.

There's history here in Timbuctoo; you can see it in the old-fashioned names on the gravestones (Theophilus, Ephraim) of the Civil War veterans and in the rural, almost Southern look of the place.

The history is alive and well in this black hamlet in Westampton, in the person of Mary Giles Weston, whose family has owned property at Rancocas Road and Church Street since the early 19th century.

It's alive, too, in Elizabeth Crawley and Elmira E. Nixon, two gracious ladies who also have deep roots in this corner of old Burlington County, near the Rancocas Creek.

Weston, who's 69 but doesn't look it, gives me a tour of "Buctoo," as it's often called, on a recent sunny afternoon.

Where once a full-fledged community thrived, there's now only the graveyard, a church, a handful of well-tended houses and a couple of cottages so long abandoned that they're slowly collapsing back into the earth.

Weston is determined not only to get the neighborhood cleaned up, but to get it the recognition it deserves



AVI STEINHARDT/Courier-Post
Mary Giles Weston (left) visits a Civil War cemetery in the Timbuctoo section of Westampton and (above) takes in some of the neighborhood's almost Southern charm. Weston has persuaded the township's historical society to erect a historical marker there.

"This could be an awesome little community," says the retired Willingboro teacher, who has persuaded the Westampton Township Historical Society to spend \$1,000 to erect a historical marker for Timbuctoo.

Dating to the late 18th or early 19th century, and once home to 150 people, Timbuctoo is one of a number of South Jersey communities -- some extant, others lost -- where free blacks and freed and escaped slaves lived, worked and worshipped.

"I've always had an interest in how people came to be where they are," Weston says. She's traced her own family back 200 years; she shows me a series of fragile, yellowed, hand-written legal documents about her Timbuctoo property.

"It's really nice to have that sense of connection . . . it's a feeling of belonging," says her 46-year-old son Guy, a health-planning consultant.

"The history of Timbuctoo gives you a whole new sense of what Burlington County was like 150 years ago," he says by phone from his home in Washington, D.C. "It's a completely different picture. Blacks are always seen as having been in shackles (then)."

Nixon and Crawley don't go back that far; they're 92 and 75, respectively. But both are blessed with vivid recollections of the Timbuctoo of long ago.

I chat with them at Nixon's pleasant home in Mount Holly, in a meeting arranged by Janet Curran of the Westampton Historical Society.

"We were all raised together," Nixon says.

"One big, happy family," adds Crawley, who knows whereof she speaks: She was one of 15 children.

Nixon's father worked in a meat-packing plant, and Crawley's was a farmer. They both remember houses with no indoor plumbing or electricity.

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KEVIN RIORDAN/Courier-Post
Elizabeth Crawley (left) and Elmira E. Nixon grew up together in Timbuctoo. Both have vivid memories of their neighborhood.

Oil lamps," says Crawley. "It wasn't easy. But we had a lot of fun."

"Her mother made baking-powder biscuits and yeast-cake rolls," Nixon says.

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"You could smell it all through the house," Crawley laughs.

At Christmas, they harvested evergreen and holly boughs and fashioned them into wreaths and decorations for downtown Mount Holly.

"Precious memories," Nixon says. "How they linger."

One of the reasons the historical society will erect the marker -- plans are to do so in February, in conjunction with Black History Month -- is to make sure the public is better aware of how special Timbuctoo was -- and is.

"It's so rich in history," Curran, 62, says. "Timbuctoo was freedom to people. It's where freedom began."

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