

Westampton to form Timbuctoo committee to enhance historic African-American village site

By Joe Green Staff writer | Posted: Monday, June 1, 2015 4:45 am

WESTAMPTON — Township officials are forming a committee to think up ideas to make historic Timbuctoo more of an educational attraction.

The Township Committee recently approved a measure to create the unpaid nine-member group charged with advising the governing body on further improving the site.

Timbuctoo was a village created near the Rancocas Creek by former slaves and free blacks in the 1820s. In a sense, the village was South Jersey's microcosm of the struggles and aspirations of blacks, not only during slavery, but for generations afterward.

The site near the Rancocas Nature Center consists of little more than a cemetery in which black Civil War veterans were buried. Archaeological digs have unearthed thousands of artifacts.

Officials want to make sure the site is preserved — and to pursue other activities, such as displays and tours.

The Timbuctoo panel will brainstorm and come to the Township Committee with ideas, Mayor Carolyn Chang said. It will not make decisions on its own.

The plan is to include an archaeologist, historian, descendants of Timbuctoo villagers, and “others who have expertise in history,” Chang said.

Only the descendants must be township residents, she said.

There is no real timeline for when the committee members will be chosen and appointed, but it may take place in a few weeks, the mayor said.

“Their greatest pursuit is to ensure the site is preserved,” Chang said. “We’re certainly not interested in having the site sold to a developer.”

Chang would like to see something akin to the walking tours at sites such as Colonial Williamsburg or Mystic Seaport, albeit on a smaller scale.

“I envision school field trips and camps, things that help imagine what (Timbuctoo) was like at one time,” she said.

The committee also can research possible grants for bringing assets to the location.

Mary Guiles Weston is one resident who is especially excited about the venture. Weston's great-great-great-grandfather, John Bruere, bought land in Timbuctoo for \$30 in 1829.

Although she didn't grow up in Westampton, Weston came full circle and moved to the site of her ancestors' home.

Like so many other residents, her idea of what Timbuctoo once was is still forming. Her journey was just beginning when she found the site of the old village.

"When I came, I found that there were people in this town who cared about it enough to improve it," Weston told the Township Committee at its last meeting.

She hopes that image will become more defined, and that she'll get some help from her son.

Guy Oreido Weston is a history buff who has researched Timbuctoo, along with the challenges black Americans face in tracing their lineage because of slavery, among other topics.

His works include an article in National Genealogical Society Magazine in which he discusses ways blacks can trace their ancestors from before the Civil War.

Records from free black communities are one source. In his article, Weston points out that he was shown the original 1829 deed to Bruere's Timbuctoo property, among other records.

It's not that Timbuctoo hasn't already drawn attention. A May 23 event, "A Celebration of Timbuctoo," included lessons for visitors on the town's history.

The event, Chang said, was the culmination of months of work by a volunteer ad hoc committee. Its members will be invited to become part of the new committee as well.

Schoolchildren and others also have come to witness and learn about the digs seeking more artifacts. They included a Temple University display in which kids could dig for items hidden in a sandbox.

The hands-on experience can go a long way in helping children understand what archaeology and similar pursuits are all about, Chang said.

"It's one thing to lecture children about it," she said, "but it's another thing for them to dig for (items). They're going to learn a lot more from that."

There are still other things in the works, Chang said.

"We have gotten interest from Rutgers-New Brunswick's history department," she said. "I'm looking forward to forming a relationship and working with Rutgers and others who have worked on Timbuctoo in the past."