

Honoring what lies beneath

Reenactors, descendants trust that Timbuctoo's lessons won't be forgotten.

By Alfred Lubrano
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

What's special about Timbuctoo can't be readily seen.

The value of this nearly 200-year-old historic village of former slaves and free African Americans in Westampton Township, Burlington County, lies below the surface.

Artifacts of the lives of the people who lived there are buried under decades of dirt. In a cemetery, the bones of soldiers from the Civil War-era Sixth Regiment U.S. Colored Troops also lay in the ground, undisturbed by progress and nearby suburban sprawl.

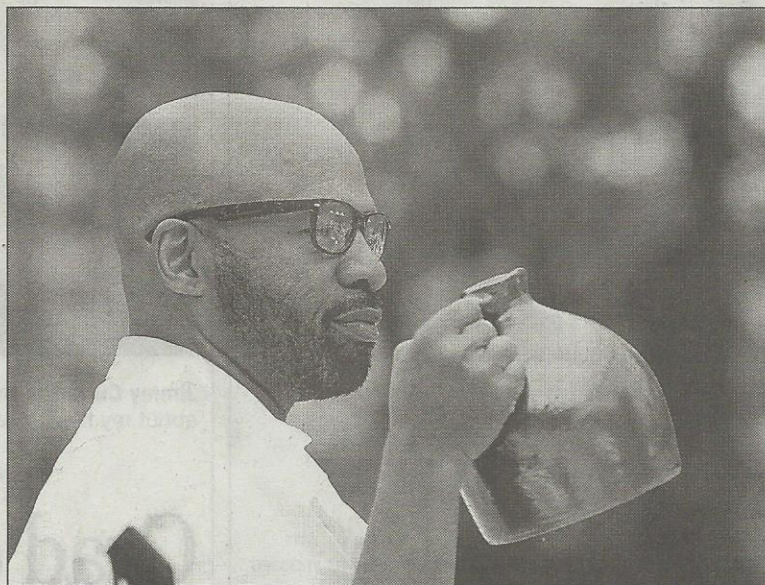
On Saturday, about 100 people flocked to this stretch of trees and meadow, fully aware that what lay beneath their feet made the soil sacred and the day special.

Regiment reenactors fired muskets into the air to commemorate the soldiers who fought for equality. And people who can trace their ancestry to this quiet, untouched spot by the Rancocas Creek took time to speak about their connection to this place.

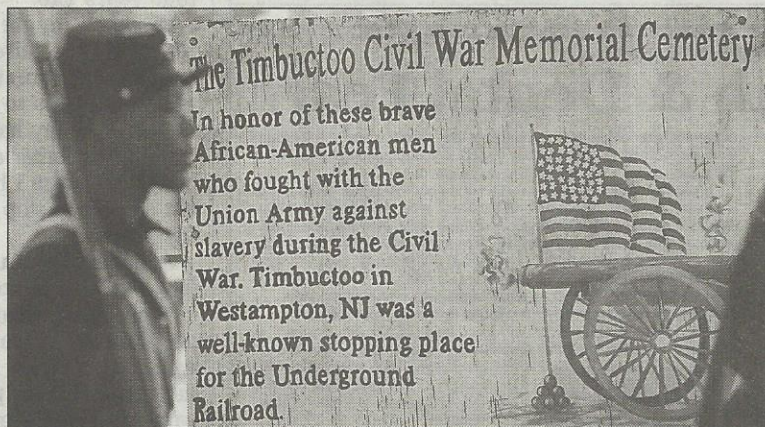
"It's unique to sit under a tree and know your ancestors touched it, or maybe even planted it," said Guy Weston, a descendant of people who lived in Timbuctoo some 30 years before the Civil War.

His relatives purchased an acre of Timbuctoo in 1829 for \$30, he said.

People forget that many free African Americans lived in New Jersey in the 19th century never having been enslaved, said Weston, 56, who runs a Washington nonprofit that supports people with HIV and AIDS. Timbuctoo's population peak was 125 residents around 1850, he said.



Guy Weston, a descendant of people who lived in Timbuctoo, holds a jug found there during an archaeological dig. DAVID MAIALETTI / Staff Photographer



Reenactor Samir Burrell of Trenton, portraying a soldier in the Sixth Regiment U.S. Colored Troops, standing by a cemetery sign Saturday.

They built a school, an AME Zion Church, and the cemetery. To gain a better understanding

of those who lived there, archaeologist Christopher Barton of Temple University has led excavations

of the area.

He and his team have found bits and pieces of pottery, china, and other artifacts from people who lived there from the 1820s till the 1940s or so.

Life was hard there, he said, as people learned the "negotiation of poverty," Barton said in a brief speech to the crowd.

He spoke of the power of the African American women who helped their families survive by preserving food for winter. The women and their men and children lived difficult lives amid storms, and destitution, and the horrifying intrusions of runaway-slave catchers from the South, who knew Timbuctoo to be an important stop along the Underground Railroad.

Timbuctoo is not merely a historic site, but an unincorporated community in Westampton Township.

That sense of permanence pleases people, who would like to know that the lessons Timbuctoo teaches won't ever be forgotten.

"It's very important people in this area know its history," said visitor Rick Isolda, 61, an attorney who lives in nearby Willingboro.

"Because it's Memorial Day weekend, I'm here to honor the soldiers, along with the memory of my father, who was a veteran also."

Isolda brought his 6-year-old daughter, Catherine, to show her something important in this small preserve of pottery and bones.

"I try to find a way to tell her," Isolda said, "that this is hallowed ground."

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