

County OKs Revolutionary War battle research

Daniel J. Kov, dkov@thedailyjournal.com 3:48 p.m. EDT August 27, 2014



(Photo: File photo)

BRIDGETON – The search for Cumberland County's believed tie to the American Revolution is on.

At Tuesday night's Board of Chosen Freeholders meeting, officials unanimously approved two resolutions calling for the study of the rumored Battle of Dallas' Landing site, which reportedly occurred along the Maurice River in Maurice River Township 243 years ago.

The approval allows the county to finally move forward with its long-planned goal of establishing historical ties to Cumberland County.

"It feels good to finally start," county planner Matt Pisarski said. "We're really pleased to finally get this thing launched. I'm hoping we get a pretty good idea where the area is."

Freeholders voted to approve a \$42,711 contract to Trenton-based Hunter Research Inc. to conduct documentary research and public outreach efforts to find out what exactly happened back in 1781 when continental troops faced off against British loyalists somewhere on the banks of the Maurice River in Port Norris.

Funding will be provided by a \$49,500 National Park Service grant the county received last year. The research firm will have between Sept. 1 and Aug. 31, 2015 to conduct its studies.

In a separate resolution passed Tuesday night, freeholders gave approval for the Cumberland County Cultural and Heritage Commission to apply to the New Jersey Council for the Humanities for a \$20,000 grant to create interpretive signage at the site.

That work will allow the county to place signage by the dock of the Bayshore Center in Bivalve.

Pisarski said the hope with that portion of the work is to ultimately increase tourism to the county.

The Heritage Commission had to apply separately for that funding, as the National Park Service does not allow in its grants funding for such work.

Officials found that out the hard way earlier this year when they had to rescind a contract awarded to a firm and consulting company originally chosen to complete the tasks.

The setback was only temporary, however, as officials were able this summer to revise the request for proposals and put the job up for bid again.

"It was the first time the county had received a Park Service grant," Pisarski said. "We were unaware of certain conditions so we had to back track."

Adhering to the stipulations within the Park Service's grants was paramount, officials said, as the county would be unable to pay for the project on its own.

Altogether, the work that is scheduled to begin this fall calls for a team of researchers to study an area along the banks of the Maurice River in the Port Norris area with pedestrian and metal detection surveys.

The group's findings, along with folklore information they hope to receive from county residents about the historical confrontation, will be compiled in either a documentary or a podcast by county spokesman Keith Wasserman, according to Pisarski.

Pisarski said a public outreach meeting will be scheduled for sometime in October where researchers hope to gather information that might help in their studies.

"A lot of local families have historical stories that are passed down from generation to generation," Pisarski said. "I think there's a lot of public interest in

the project.”

According to local folklore, at least seven loyalists died in the skirmish after they reportedly tried to force their way onto a small ship near what is now known as Port Norris.

Capt. James Riggins, who led the militia against the British loyalists, allegedly declared he was taking no prisoners during the short but gruesome Revolutionary War battle, and seven British officers were left dead.

A cabin boy reportedly escaped injury by climbing a mast, and one militia member was slightly wounded.

Reports of the battle went largely unmentioned at the time except for a brief article in a Philadelphia newspaper. However, myths of the battle were passed down among generations of Cumberland residents.

More than two centuries later, many questions — including the specific site of the burials and the exact location of the battle — remain unanswered.

Officials believe the bodies are in Dallas Landing at Port Norris, although the 40-acre site is large enough to cover a wider area.

Officials said the eventual findings would eventually link the county with the larger Crossroads of the American Revolution Association, which documents the many Revolutionary War battles across New Jersey.

“It’s a really good thing,” freeholder Tom Sheppard said of the work. “When all this research is said and done, we’ll have some real information for people to learn about what happened.”

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