

Wednesday, Sept. 12, 2007

Civil War graveyard key to Darnestown park

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Civil War soldiers buried in a historic Darnestown graveyard could soon be memorialized soon with a small park if plans for the project move forward.

“Even though it’s a little park it will make a big difference to the community,” said Heidi Sussmann, a county landscape architect who designed the half-acre green space.

Members of the community’s founding Darne family are also believed to be buried at the historic graveyard, which is north of Gaithersburg at Route 28 and Seneca Road.

Darnestown Heritage Park is designed as a pedestrian-friendly garden park with three seating areas, artwork and several plaques describing the town’s history and its role in the Civil War.

The Montgomery County Planning Board agreed Thursday to approve \$829,600 for the park in a 2009-2014 capital improvements budget that will be submitted to the County Council and county executive for approval.

A developer, Darnestown Limited Partnership, donated the parkland in 1995 as part of the deal to build the adjacent Darnestown Village Shopping Center, now occupied by a Harris Teeter food market. A 1994 study by the developer indicated the existence of the graveyard.

In 1998, a field team of Montgomery College students led by state archaeologists confirmed that an 18th-century graveyard is buried at the site.

Unearthed graves may house the remains of at least 30 Civil War soldiers and the family of Darnestown founder William Darne, according to the team’s study.

Before that, “we only knew that the graveyard was in that area by hearsay and memory,” said state park archaeologist Jim Sorensen, who led excavation of the burial site. “We would never have been able to find the area of the graveyard without doing archaeology.” Sorensen speculated that the graveyard had been covered over by developers in the last 30 years or so. He said he thinks there could be many more graves in the area.

His group used trowels and backhoes to determine the graveyard’s outline. By digging, they found a coffin handle dated 1895 and a 69-caliber smooth bore musket shell, a type of ammunition used early in the Civil War.

County parklands — home to farmsteads, former Native American communities and early African-American settlements, as well as 22 mill sites — likely still hold many uncovered artifacts, said Sorensen.

Park archaeologists are now unearthing a Civil War blockhouse at Block House Point Conservation Park near the banks of the Potomac River below Seneca Creek and close to Tobytown, he said.

The Darnestown Heritage Park will help preserve area history and provide a gathering spot at the center of town that could host events such as the annual holiday tree lighting, a jubilant Lisa Patterson-Troike, president of the Darnestown Civic Association said after the Planning Board’s vote.

“A lot of people don’t even know where Darnestown is,” she said. “I think it will be the glue that holds everything together.”

Darnestown, settled in the mid-1700s, was “a natural point of defense” for Union troops protecting the nation’s capital from Confederate soldiers crossing the Potomac River during the Civil War, according to research by county planners and the Darnestown Historical Society.

No battles were fought there, but more than 18,000 Union troops once occupied the area, a crossroads for regiments headed to the battles of Ball’s Bluff, Antietam and Gettysburg.

Greg Clemmer — a Darnestown resident since 1986, a published Civil War author and a historian — has documented 13 Civil War regiments that camped in the Darnestown area. “Dozens may have passed through,” he said.

His preliminary research at the National Archives has yielded the name, rank, age and physical description of 15 soldiers from the 27th Indiana infantry regiment who died of disease in Darnestown in the first two years of the war, Clemmer said.

“I don’t know how many we’re going to find,” he said. “The biggest killer in the Civil War was disease.”

Clemmer, who served seven years on a county historic preservation commission, hopes for a privately funded Seneca sandstone monument listing all soldiers who died in Darnestown.

Native Seneca sandstone, which was quarried locally in the 1800s and early 1900s, and gray Black-rock from a historic culvert train bridge will be used to line the park's walkways, exhibits and a pergola, according to plans.

An area garden club, the Darne Bloomers, has promised to maintain the park's seasonal gardens, which will include sergeant cherry trees, crepe myrtles, magnificent copper beeches and two county champion trees, Sussmann said.

"The other thing about that park," Sussmann said, "it's the first step toward general improvements that could occur in that little 10-acre area — it will help set the style for things."
