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**JAHA's African-American
History Committee to release
findings of recent project**

*Researchers explore 19th and early 20th century African-American
history in Johnstown; findings to be discussed at open meeting*

The African-American History Committee of the Johnstown Area Heritage Association has found out some exciting things about the 19th and early 20th century history of African-Americans in this area – and now, they're ready to share the findings of the project with Johnstown residents.

For this purpose, JAHA will host a breakfast meeting on Wednesday, May 21 at 8:00 a.m. at the Heritage Discovery Center in Cambria City. Special invitations have been mailed to many members of the African-American community, the media, local politicians and others, but everyone who is interested is invited to attend. A continental breakfast will be served, and the meeting is expected to last about an hour.

"This project has been tremendously successful thus far, and we're excited about all we've learned," said Rev. Ron Spence, who chairs the committee. "Now it's time to tell people about this important research, including how they can support it."

The project has been funded by a matching grant from the Penelec Fund for the Future of Greater Johnstown, which is part of the Community Foundation for the Alleghenies. To help match those funds, the Johnstown chapter of the NAACP will present JAHA with a check in support of the project. If they wish, people attending the meeting will also have the opportunity to make a pledge to help support the project's continuation.

The project has focused on three main areas:

Laurel Mountain settlement — This settlement is one of the earliest known settlements of African-Americans in the area. Located in the western part of Johnstown on Laurel Mountain, the settlement first appears in 1825 tax records, but researchers believe it was in place much earlier and are currently trying to find proof of that. Two main families, the Hershbergers and the Smiths, made up the settlement. The remains of the Brown farm, a clearing, cemetery, foundations, and daffodils marking the probable exterior walls of other structures are visible today.

The researchers have found out a great deal about this settlement and its inhabitants, including the lives of African-American Civil War veterans from Johnstown. A current focus of their investigation is the possibility that some or all of the earliest settlers were former slaves, and that they were involved with the Underground Railroad, helping slaves escape to the North.

Johnstown residents who moved to Liberia, an African country founded for freed slaves—According to a 1900 letter, the Rev. Samuel Williams of Johnstown moved to Liberia in 1853, along with 40 others, including his 90-year-old mother. His reasons for doing so were simple: the 1838 Pennsylvania constitution took away African-Americans' right to vote, and the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act made it possible for bounty hunters to capture escaped slaves or even kidnap free African-Americans and sell them back into slavery.

The researchers located a book Williams wrote about his experiences, as well as letters he wrote to people remaining in Johnstown that were reprinted in newspapers. They found that Williams started a sawmill in Liberia, and are continuing to research what happened to him and his party.

Oral history—Through the oral history portion of the project, interviews were collected from older African-Americans in Johnstown. Stories were shared by a man who ran a speakeasy in the first half of the 20th century, a woman who was forced to sing a racist song as a child in school, and a man who has a family connection with African-American flood survivor Clinton Waugh, among many others. The researchers gained a fascinating picture of multi-ethnic, multi-racial communities of the early part of the century, such as Prospect. More oral history records are currently being gathered and transcribed.

The historical research for the project is spearheaded by Mike Burke, an Americorps volunteer working at JAHA. Under the direction of JAHA Curator Dan Ingram, he has organized the project, completed much of the primary and secondary research and summarized the findings to date. Members of the committee, volunteers, interns from the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, and JAHA Americorps volunteer Andrew Baraniak have helped complete much of the work, which has been underway since September 2002.

Among the resources used by researchers were U.S. Census records, property deeds, obituaries and other newspaper records, historic maps, books, site examinations, letters, various historical archives, and photographs provided by African-Americans in Johnstown today. An archive is being created with the relevant information, including scanned photos, maps and other visual materials.

“This project has greatly increased our understanding of the African-American presence in Johnstown from its earliest period,” said Richard Burkert, executive director of JAHA.

Although the research portion of the project has not yet been concluded, JAHA is working on plans to distribute the information to a wider audience and continue the project. These plans are in a preliminary phase, but could include possible historical markers, archeological excavations at several important sites, an education program, and posting the collected materials on JAHA’s Web site.

To RSVP for the meeting, call Gwen at JAHA, 539-1889.

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