

## **Asheville Friend on Front Page of ACT Mountain Section**

Our Bob Smith (executive director of the Asheville-Buncombe Community Relations Council) is pictured (and quoted) on the front of the "Mountains" Section of the AC-T (Friday, February 5) in a feature story regarding the legacy of slavery in Western North Carolina.

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VANCE SITE LOOKS AT WNC's SLAVERY HISTORY -- AC-T -- February 5, 2010, page B1

WEAVERVILLE — Slavery in Western North Carolina isn't the most comfortable topic to talk about, but Tammy Walsh doesn't think people should avoid it.

And to get the conversation started, Walsh is giving people a glimpse behind the big house on the hill every Saturday in February at the Vance Birthplace Historic Site, home to North Carolina's Civil War Gov. Zebulon Vance. She hopes the program, "Behind the Big House," brings the issue of slavery in WNC out into the open so people can have a frank discussion about a history that is often neglected or ignored.

People's breathing changes at the mere thought of slavery, said Bob Smith, executive director of Asheville-Buncombe Council of Community Relations, a group that strives to develop mutual respect with a focus on ending discrimination.

But, Smith said, in order to move beyond "the elephant in the room," people need to acknowledge slaves were "chattel" and "property."

Accomplishments by African-Americans have been a part of WNC's history since the 1700s, yet there is little acknowledgement on any of the historic markers or sites, according to Deborah Miles, executive director of the Center for Diversity Education in Asheville.

Miles said the setting is notable because the National Park Service didn't talk about slavery at any of its Civil War sites until 1995. A program like this at a state site on an important historical figure raises the question in public, making it less likely to be dismissed.

And programs like “Behind the Big House” can make people question the role of ancestors as slaves or slave owners and elected leaders, Miles said. This may lead to uncomfortable questions of “how ‘unearned privilege’ might still exist in a merit-based society.”

“I believe that the more we understand about the past, the more tools we have to shape the future,” she said.

## **Day to day**

Slaves made up 15 percent of the population of Buncombe County in the late 18th Century.

Farms in the region were relatively small in scale so the hierarchy of domestic workers and field workers was not as developed as in the plantation system, according to Walsh. There were fewer numbers of slaves to specialize in particular jobs, so they may have worked both in the fields on the farm and at other jobs in town, depending on the time of year.

But slaves in North Carolina generally had more interaction with slaves on other farms, often looking there to find a spouse, and could travel to different farms to court or visit during their limited free time.

The story becomes tangible when visitors tour the historic site in Weaverville. The modest two-story, five-room home David Vance Sr., the governor's grandfather had built on the hill is misleading. It's not a McMansion by today's standards, instead it's a modest home. But, according to Walsh, documents indicate the family was

wealthy enough to own up to 19 slaves at one point, which wasn't typical in the region.

The two-room slave quarters, a building originally owned by Robert Patton and relocated from its original location in Swannanoa Valley, had a fireplace, wooden floorboards, two windows with no panes and two doors. If people wanted light, the windows and doors had to remain open, even in winter.

There were three cabins with at least eight people per one-room dwelling the size of a medium-sized car.

## **Making history real**

Occasionally, Walsh takes her show on the road to schools at teachers' requests.

One request came from Sandy Tarantino, a fourth-grade teacher at Francine Delany New School. She said the most important thing about the "Behind the Big House" outreach program her students saw were the documents that let them to connect the dots in a factual manner.

Tarantino said her students' reaction to the program was largely horror.

"It makes the abstract concrete," Tarantino said. "You start to picture families. You start to picture a grandmother. When you make content like that place-based and put that in the context of where a child learns and where a child lives, it makes it more relevant."

The program is based on information culled from primary source documents like court records, wills, letters and diaries, among other sources. And, Walsh said, this makes the program real and indisputable because it puts a face and a name to the

people affected by slavery.

## **Going forward;**

The legacy of slavery and the Civil War still have lingering impacts in the region, in the statistics on income, positions of power and authority, housing and education trends, Miles said.

But Smith said African-Americans cannot continue to use slavery as an excuse.

“A lot of empires were built on free labor. Subjugating people, exploiting people,” Smith said. But, since African-Americans overcame slavery, “We can overcome anything.”

Instead, African-Americans should use it as inspiration and to demonstrate that they have learned something so they may “never be slaves again, particularly in our own mind, which is where we have to free slaves from.”