

## Study captures Benedict history

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From a British invasion to a recruitment camp for African-American Civil War troops, the sleepy little hamlet that is present-day Benedict has seen its share of action.

The county's cultural resource study of Benedict highlights the importance it played in both local and national history and recommends ways to ensure that the town receives recognition during the state's 200th anniversary celebration of the War of 1812.

Completed in the fall, the 234-page study will be used as Charles County's resource guide when preparing for Benedict's role in the bicentennial anniversary of the war, said Cathy Thompson, the county's community planning program manager. The study outlines historic events that occurred in the Colonial port town during the last 300 years, including the British land invasion in 1814 and the establishment of Camp Stanton, a Civil War recruitment camp for African-Americans.

The document — prepared by local historians Ralph E. Eshelman, Donald G. Shomette and G. Howard Post — also describes archaeological sites, architecture and landscapes that harbor evidence of Benedict's history, Thompson said, adding that the report contains several recommendations on how to preserve and promote the town's heritage. The recommendations will serve as the county's guide on how to develop plans for the anniversary of the war that will kick off in 2012 and offers suggestions on how to plan for future development in the town, she said.



Historical markers in Benedict note some of the highlights of the town's 300-year history.

*Photo courtesy of the Southern Maryland Studies Center, College of Southern Maryland James C. Wilfong Collection*



A fisherman in Benedict in the 1940s holds up fish he caught in the Patuxent River.

*Photo courtesy of the Southern Maryland Studies Center, College of Southern Maryland General Collection*

"Benedict is going to receive a lot of attention because of the War of 1812 anniversary and we want to be prepared for that," Thompson said. "We need to know what resources we have and with the War of 1812 celebration looming this is a good time to work on those resources."

Benedict is included in the 300-mile land and water Star Spangled Banner National Historic Trail that traces key battles in the War of 1812 that will start at Fort McHenry in Baltimore, wind through Virginia, Washington, D.C., Prince George's County and end in Southern Maryland, said Donna Dudley, the county's chief of tourism. The five segments of the trail include the British water advance and withdrawal on the Patuxent River and the British land march and withdrawal from Benedict in Charles County to Washington, D.C., where troops burned down the White House. Other notable historical events that occurred during the war that are included along the trail are the battle of North Point and the defense of Hampstead Hill in Baltimore.

"Benedict has a wonderful history that goes way back," Dudley said. "It's not obvious in terms of signage and buildings but it was the site of the only ground invasion of a foreign enemy in the United States. The terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the attack on Pearl Harbor were by air. These were ground forces that invaded the United States and they landed in Benedict. It's an important component of the Star Spangled Banner National Historic Trail and doing a cultural resources study is the perfect first step [to make sure Benedict is highlighted during the bicentennial celebration]."

The recommendations in the study include conducting an archaeological survey of Camp Stanton and the 1814 British Army encampment sites, surveys of historic sites pertaining to the War of 1812 and the Civil War, including the 18th-century house, Maxwell Hall that is now owned by the county, and performing archival research on the records of the U.S. Colored Troops who were stationed at Camp Stanton during the Civil War, Thompson said.

The document also suggests that the county create a Web site where research findings can be posted and blogs, video presentations and other media are readily available to draw the public into the project.

The study recommends that the county hold a history appreciation day in Benedict where residents can help locate historic sites and share photographs of some of the buildings, people and events that were once important to the town's culture.

Oral histories could also be recorded that could be used as the basis for a comprehensive folklore and oral history program, Thompson said.

The county should consider creating a brochure and walking map of the town that would steer visitors to historic structures, themes and sites, according to the resource study. Interpretive signs and roadside markers should be installed that would work hand in hand with the brochure and map.

The study also recommends that the county should work closely with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources to research and interpret the historical significance of Camp Stanton and

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the War of 1812 on state land and erect a memorial to the black soldiers who served and died at the camp.

All of the recommendations are sound but the economy is drastically slowing down preparations across the state for the War of 1812 celebration, Dudley said.

"The current economic climate and shortage of funds are slowing down the process for a lot of us," she said, adding that grant funding is the fuel that normally launches projects such as the Star Spangled Banner National Historic Trail.

"Our usual sources of money have mostly been decimated and there aren't many alternative funding sources out there right now. Hopefully, the economy will improve and we'll get back on the right track," Dudley said.

People who live in Benedict will be asked to participate as the county slowly begins to implement some of the recommendations of the study, which was funded by a \$2,500 Preservation Maryland grant and a \$1,000 Southern Maryland Heritage Area Consortium grant, Dudley said.

"There has to be a meeting of the minds on how to best tell the story of Benedict and how to pay for it," she said.

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### **To learn more**

*The 234-page Benedict Cultural Resource Study is available at Charles County public library branches and online at*

[www.charlescounty.org/webdocs/pgm/publications/planning/benedict%20study.pdf](http://www.charlescounty.org/webdocs/pgm/publications/planning/benedict%20study.pdf).