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Charles County gets grant for War of 1812 celebration

By Nancy Bromley McConaty
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Charles County's plans to spruce up Benedict for the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812 are slowly moving ahead with the help of a \$6,000 state grant.

The grant will help the county pay to design a brochure and develop an interpretive plan for Maxwell Hall, an 18th-century house in the village.



Maxwell Hall, an 18th-century house in Benedict, is thought by some to have been used as a British encampment during the War of 1812. (Maryland Independent File Photo)

Although no historical records link Maxwell Hall with the War of 1812, rumors persist that British invaders set up an encampment on the property when they landed in Benedict, before their march to Washington, according to local historians.

An invasion force of more than 4,400 hundred British troops landed at Benedict on Aug. 19, 1814 -- a force that occupied and burned the nation's capital several days later, according to the Benedict Cultural Resource report, which recommends ways to ensure that Benedict receives recognition during the state's bicentennial celebration of the War of 1812. Benedict served as the main anchorage for British naval ships from Aug. 19 to 30, 1814, the report states.

Benedict also was the site of Camp Stanton, a Civil War recruitment camp for African Americans.

The \$6,000 grant is part of \$250,000 in funding awarded to the Southern Maryland Heritage Area Consortium in Hughesville for several historical projects related to the War of 1812 in Charles, St. Mary's and Calvert counties, said Roz Racanello, SMHAC's executive director.

The consortium's mission is to enhance the economic activity of Southern Maryland by combining heritage tourism and economic development with cultural and natural resource conservation and education, according to the group's Web site.

"We're really pleased to have this grant for Charles County," Racanello said. "It's a funding priority because of the War of 1812 bicentennial celebration that is coming up. We expect a pretty big multi-year celebration. We've got significant sites in Southern Maryland."

Last year, Charles received a \$2,500 Preservation Maryland grant and a \$1,000 SMHAC grant to conduct the Benedict Cultural Resource report. The document -- prepared by local historians Ralph E. Eshelman, Donald G. Shomette and G. Howard Post -- describes archaeological sites, architecture and landscapes that harbor evidence of Benedict's story, said Cathy Thompson, county community planning and program manager.

Benedict is included in the 300-mile land and water Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail, which traces key battles in the War of 1812. The trail begins at Fort McHenry, in Baltimore, winds through Virginia, the District and Prince George's County, and ends in Southern Maryland.

Maxwell Hall, originally known as Maxwell's Seat, was built in 1764 by George Maxwell, a wealthy tobacco merchant, according to local historical records. The county uses house for meetings and occasional trolley tours sponsored by the county, said Tom Roland, county assistant director of public facilities. In the future, the county plans to open the house for special events and feature interpretive displays that will tell the story of Maxwell Hall and the county's role in the War of 1812, he said. The county purchased Maxwell Hall a couple of years ago for \$791,500, using money from Maryland's Program Open Space, Roland said. The 670 acres that surround the house were purchased for \$3 million in the 1980s, he said.

Edwin Swann and his late wife, Marion, historically restored the house. The couple bought the property in 1980 and hoped that it would one day be purchased by someone who wanted to preserve it, Thompson said.

Maxwell Hall was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974.