

# Telling a Story 'That Has Not Been Told'

Pr. William Forest Park to Look at Area's African American Former Residents

By DANA HULL  
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Prince William Forest Park is funding an oral history project that will focus on the African American community that lived there before the 18,000-acre park was established.

With the help of a \$17,000 grant, two professors from Washington's Howard University will work with park officials and area residents over the next eight months to reconstruct what life was like on the land during the early part of this century. They plan to contact individuals in the area who may recall the period—specifically, the years from 1920 to 1940. Most of the land acquired to create the park had been in some families for generations, and many families were forced to relocate when the park was established in 1935.

"We're trying to tell the side of the story that has not been told," said Arvilla Payne-Jackson, a professor of anthropology and linguistics. Payne-Jackson is spearheading the project with Sue Taylor, a colleague at Howard. "We're trying to reconstruct a cultural history of what people used to do on the land, what kind of farming they did, what else they did to make a living."

During the Depression, the land that is

now Prince William Forest Park was primarily a black farming community and home to several hundred people. Many roads around Dumfries and Triangle are named for the families that originally settled the region. There are also 42 cemeteries in the park, and park officials hope to learn more about the people buried there.

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to what was going on around the park between 1920 and World War II," said Russ Whitlock, the supervisory park ranger. "This type of ethnographic study is a way of relating some relevance of the land to the visitor."

Whitlock put out a call to area universities about the proposed oral history project. He

asked for a project plan and budget and received four completed applications.

"Howard University has far more experience doing this than anyone else," Whitlock said of the historically black institution. "They are very qualified."

Five undergraduate students will work with Payne-Jackson and Taylor on the project. They say they plan to speak with curators at the Weems-Botts Museum in Dumfries, look at National Park Service land records and examine any other archival material they can find, such as letters written at the time.

But the most important aspect of the research is the oral history.

"That's where culture is," Payne-Jackson said. "Culture is transmitted through language. You can't get the details from the land records."

Whitlock said the park plans to publish a report based on the findings and to incorporate some of the history into its permanent exhibit.

*Anyone interested in participating in the oral history project can contact Payne-Jackson or Taylor at Howard University at 202-806-6854.*

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