***Hidden Heritage a Surprise to Many***

By Kristen Milton

As the final hours of the sixteenth annual Heritage Days ticked by, many visitors scrambled to squeeze in one more stop—often wondering how so many historical gems had remained hidden so long. “This is such a prize that people don’t even know about,” said Andrew Nader of Potomac as he gathered brochures on other area historic sites following his family’s June 30 tour of several Poolesville locations. “We have to read up and just go, take advantage.”

Nader moved to Potomac eleven years ago from Connecticut, but until a Heritage Days pamphlet made its way to his home—wife Gayle wasn’t sure where she picked it up—he had no idea so many interesting sites were close at hand. With more awareness, Nader said, Montgomery County’s history could draw people as “The Freedom Trail” attracts Boston tourists. Since sixteen-year-old Aaron admitted to finding the afternoon “cool” in spite of his initial reluctance—“It was really interesting to know that these things are still here”—Andrew Nader hoped his handful of maps and brochures would lead to other summer outings.

Heritage Days, hosted by Heritage Montgomery, is a two-day free event that this year featured thirty-four historical and cultural locations from Hyattstown Mill on the county’s northern border to the C&O Canal’s Lockhouse 10 on the southern. Attendees chose from offerings that included hikes, children’s activities, concerts, and author lectures.

Not far from the Naders on June 30, the Schramm family, Poolesville Elementary PTA president Kevin, wife Kristina, and eight-year-old Kaitlyn, closed out Seneca Schoolhouse, still grouped around its cast iron stove as the festival’s 4:00 p.m. ending time passed. Kristina Schramm said Kevin had spoken repeatedly over the years of his fourth grade field trip to the school and his intention to visit again. “It made such an impression on him, and he really wanted Kaitlyn to see it,” she said; nonetheless, this was the family’s first trip to the site only minutes from the school Kaitlyn attends daily, and Kristina wasn’t sure why. “People get so involved in their lives, and they just forget what’s there,” she said.

Birthday parties, athletic games, and other activities fill the weekends of many young families, Kevin Schramm volunteered as explanation. Schramm dived into his first Heritage Days weekend with both feet, serving as a docent at Poolesville’s Old Town Hall on June 29 before his turn as tourist the next day. “It was great,” Schramm said. “You get a sense of time, that life wasn’t always iPads.”

While schoolhouse docent Laura Davis said most of the weekend’s approximately one hundred visitors were young families, Schramm estimated that seventy-five percent of visitors during his hours at the town hall/bank building were county retirees. Many were Civil War buffs drawn by the 150th anniversary of local events connected to the Battle of Gettysburg.

That description could have applied to Bob DeFraites of Kensington, who had the John Poole House to himself during his stop with wife Colleen. It was their first time participating in Heritage Days. “It looks authentic,” DeFraites observed of the 1793 log cabin as he eyed merchandise on the shelves and a post box near the counter illustrating the structure’s joint uses as store, post office, and gathering spot. “It’s amazing that it’s still here…This is where everything happened [in town].”

“We’ve driven through Poolesville lots of times on our way to White’s Ferry or Leesburg,” Colleen DeFraites said, but never had reason to stop before. Colleen said that while she was not the history buff her husband was, she enjoyed seeing how people lived in the past. In the John Poole House, she admired the handmade 1836 coverlet on a rope bed. “I’m glad I didn’t live then though,” she said. “I guess they’d throw me out since I don’t sew. I couldn’t make us anything to wear!”

Linda Roberts of Beallsville has lived Upcounty for nearly all her sixty-six years but visits Heritage Day locations every year to listen to lectures by authors and experts as well as take in the sights. “This time it was a review, but next time it might be something new,” she said. Roberts was joined June 30 by Susan Rice, a college friend who, after more than forty years of Upcounty visits, moved to Beallsville last year. “Every once in a while she pulls me over to see something I’ve been ignoring all my life,” Roberts said with a laugh, remembering how Rice had spotted a tombstone in the wall of the Friendly Thrift Shop—a holdover from its life as a Methodist church.

Carter Van Devanter of Poolesville, decked out in an apron for her role as docent at Seneca Schoolhouse, hoped that more county residents could catch the spirit of Heritage Days by making use of the resources around them. “We just had a big group of locals from Poolesville who had never been here in eight years,” Van Devanter said. “It’s too far to go to D.C. to tour and you’re using time and gas; why not tour in your own backyard?”