

Upcoming L&C Exhibit to Shed Light on Rocky Fork Community

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Lewis and Clark Community College's upcoming Rocky Fork Exhibit will be an exciting, multimedia learning experience for students and community members alike.

The exhibit, entitled "Let the Church Say Amen: Rocky Fork Church in Voice and Vision," will begin with an opening celebration from 6-9 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 12 in the Hatheway Cultural Center Gallery on L&C's Godfrey campus.

The Rocky Fork Exhibit is presented by the Mannie Jackson Endowment and Center for the Humanities and is a Lewis and Clark Arts and Humanities Project, with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Lewis and Clark Community College Foundation.

The exhibit's opening celebration will feature Mannie Jackson and other guest speakers, a gospel choir, refreshments and more. The program will begin at 7 p.m.

The exhibit, which will run from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily Thursday, Feb. 13 through Friday, March 21, will focus on the Rocky Fork settlement.

"This exhibition is a way of honoring the multi-layered and complex history of the legacy of the descendants of Rocky Fork," said Jim Price, L&C professor and exhibit curator.

Secluded in an area of southwestern Illinois at the confluence of the Piasa Creek, the Rock Fork Creek and the Mississippi River, the Rocky Fork community offered solace and a sense of permanence to African-American freedom seekers in the 1830s. This community grew as a network of people gathered to support each other and aid those seeking their way along the Underground Railroad.

Some came through the Underground Railroad, which has already been documented and identified in the Alton and Godfrey regions. However, the Rocky Fork community remains mostly a "secret" in the histories of slavery and abolition regionally, statewide and nationally.

Local historian Charlotte Johnson helped ensure Rocky Fork's place in history. Because of the proposal she wrote and submitted to the United States National Park Service, the current Rocky Fork area is a National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom site.

"People often don't realize until their old age how important the stories of their parents and grandparents are to defining a time and place," Johnson said. "Through journals and photographs, newspaper articles and government documents, we begin to form an idea, but it is the stories, the moments of triumph and tragedy, of ordinary living and extraordinary circumstances, that breathe life into our understandings of who and what our community is and has been. This exhibit helps to do that for a rocky, once wood-covered crevice of land right here in our midst.

"It has been fascinating to watch Rocky Fork's story unfold, to be researched and mapped, accepted as a U.S. National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom site and finally to be presented to the public," Johnson said. "We should all

take the time to document our stories, to share the wonder and commonplace of our lives.”

L&C’s Rocky Fork Exhibit will shed light on this unique community by showcasing oral histories, the photography of L&C faculty member Jeff Vaughn, newspaper clippings, historical artifacts and more. The exhibit will also feature an adaptation of Rocky Fork New Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The AME church served as a focal point for the community and survives today.

Lewis and Clark Community College has been instrumental in bringing together community members who can trace their descendants to a very early period of Rocky Fork history. Ongoing projects in oral history, quilt exhibitions, historical research and archaeological mapping have been initiated in the last 20 years.

The exhibit will fuse together historical, regional, spatial and oral concepts to provide the public with an understanding of the complexities and subtleties that existed in the region from 1816-1877. It will also bring together renowned scholars on the subject to discuss freed people of color and their impact on local history.

By tracing the natural beauty of the area while exploring the genealogy and heritage of the descendants of the Rocky Fork area, the Rocky Fork Exhibit will highlight a combination of voices, imagery and historical artifacts, creating a way of exploring the history of the region while also examining the way in which that history is still present.

In 2011, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) announced Lewis and Clark as one of the first six two-year colleges ever to receive Challenge Grants.

These competitive grants aim to help raise endowments to strengthen humanities programs at community colleges, encourage the development of model humanities programs and curricula, and broaden the base of financial support for humanities on two-year college campuses.

To date, more than \$1 million has been raised through the support of the matching grant, Jackson and numerous community members. Jackson is also working closely with Lewis and Clark to provide his vision and leadership toward the completion of the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities at the Historic Lincoln School in Edwardsville.

Those wanting more information about the exhibit can contact L&C Media Specialist Louise Jett at (618) 468-3220 or ljett@lc.edu