

Filmmaker gives preview of 'The Gate' in Gloucester gathering

BY SHERRY HAMILTON

Documentary filmmaker Laura Seltzer-Duny gave a preview of her latest film project, "The Gate," during a gathering held by the Fairfield Foundation at the Fine Arts Museum of Gloucester on Monday, Jan. 19, in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

The film is about contraband families—once-enslaved Africans who sought refuge behind Union lines in Hampton during the Civil War. One of those who found his way to freedom was Robert Langley Brooks of Mathews, and the film, still in production, will explore his life, from the journey he undertook to gain his freedom as a lone 15-year-old, to the emergence of a thriving contraband community in Hampton, to his career as a successful farmer and oysterman in Isle of Wight.

Featured in the film are two of his descendants, Pam Holley of Cape Charles, and Tim Savage of Hampton, along with their cousin, Sara Lewis of Gloucester, who is a descendant of the family that enslaved Brooks. The film follows the three of them as they trace their shared ancestry, including visiting gravesites in Mathews where their ancestors lie.

In the film, Savage tells how his great-great-grandfather escaped from Mathews as his white grandfather fired at

him with a shotgun because he was getting away.

"Can you imagine that?" says Savage. "It's hurtful."

Brooks rowed across the York River and made his way through the woods at night, his feet covered only in burlap, eventually finding his way to Fort Monroe, where Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler on May 24, 1861 had issued his decision not to return three escaped slaves to their owners as mandated under the Fugitive Slave Act. He instead declared them Contraband of war, and historian Dr. William B. Wiggins explains in the film that Butler had decided that, since the escapees were considered property, he was going to confiscate them.

"That was really a turning point in their lives," says Holley in the film.

Over time, more than 10,000 people self-emancipated and made their way to Fort Monroe and freedom.

During discussion following the brief film clip, Lewis said she had discovered her relationship to Holley and Savage through DNA testing. Holley said her people had known for years that there was "another side of the family," and that it had been wonderful to finally meet.

"We can't blame people today for what happened years ago," said Savage. "But I was shocked to see so many Confederate flags marking grave-stones."



Filmmaker Laura Seltzer-Duny, at left, previewed her newest documentary, "The Gate," during a Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration sponsored by the Fairfield Foundation and held on Jan. 19 at the Fine Arts Museum of Gloucester. Among those featured in the film are cousins Tim Savage of Hampton, Pam Holley of Cape Charles, and Sara Lewis of Gloucester, from left.

He said the flags "sort of bring back memories of segregation and racial hatred."

"Every day I wake up with this skin," he said. "Every

day reminds me of who I am. You have to prove yourself. That gets old."

Seltzer-Duny said she has been working on the film project for two years now and has a lot of footage, but that "it takes time to fully and respectfully give voice to both the ancestors and the descendants." She said her goal is to

premier the film at a meeting of the Contraband Historical Society in May of 2027. After that, she said, it will go to film festivals, and then to PBS.

Individuals interested in supporting development of the film may donate online by visiting theother50percent-foundation.org/chf.

Corporate sponsorships are

also available through the Contraband Historical Society by contacting executive board member Tim Rutherford at 508-776-2165 or timr@ContrabandHistoricalSociety.com or by contacting film producer Mike Mascoll at 845-843-0195 or MJ@LEVMedia-Group.co, or visiting Seltzer-FilmVideo.com/about-us.



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Guests enjoyed a luncheon after the MLK Day program held at the Fine Arts Museum of Gloucester on Jan. 19. Here, Amarah Miles-Whit of Newport News enjoys samplings from the dessert table.



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A large number of people attended the preview of a new documentary-in-the-making about formerly enslaved people who self-emancipated during the Civil War and made their way to a "Contraband" encampment behind Union Army lines. The preview was sponsored by the Fairfield Foundation and held at the Fine Arts Museum of Gloucester.

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Gloucester Library postpones Sunday's Black History Month program

Gloucester County Public Library has postponed its first Black History Month program, which had been originally scheduled for Sunday afternoon.

The Woodville Rosenwald School Foundation and the Descendants Community Committee were scheduled to have alumni share their personal stories of their experiences attending a Rosenwald School in Gloucester.

This program has been postponed until further notice.



MISSING CAT

Missing since the day after Thanksgiving in the Queen Anne's Forest area off Belroi Road, Gloucester. Her name is Lucy, almost 14 years old. If you have seen her at any time, would you please call Michele at 804-815-2850. We sure would love to know that she is safe.

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Gloucester-Mathews GAZETTE-JOURNAL
 P.O. Box 2060
 Gloucester, VA 23061

A consolidation in 1937 of the Gloucester Gazette (1919) and the Mathews Journal (1904).
 Published every Thursday at Gloucester, Virginia by Tidewater Newspapers, Inc. Periodicals postage paid at Gloucester, Virginia. Postmaster: Please send change of addresses to: Gazette-Journal, P.O. Box 2060, Gloucester, VA 23061.
 Subscriptions: \$25 per year, \$45 for two years, in Gloucester and Mathews Counties; \$31 per year, \$57 for two years elsewhere. Please allow two weeks for new subscriptions or change of address to begin. Telephone 804-693-3101 or 804-725-2191.
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