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Lecturer uses family tree to tell of slave's escape to freedom

By KAREN BLAKEMAN
Staff Writer

The lecturer, more accustomed to dealing with college students than seventh- and eighth-graders, studied the giggling adolescents on the other side of the podium.

Archaeologist and anthropologist Jimmy Johnson had come to tell the Lincoln Middle School students about the Underground Railroad, about his great-grandfather's escape from slavery, and about the abolitionist town of Quindaro, now in ruins across the Missouri River.

But the squirming and whispering students were more in the mood to think of next period — lunch — than of a time more than 100 years ago. They needed a little coaxing before they were ready to listen to the Metropolitan Community Colleges lecturer during a late-morning assembly last week.

So Johnson wooed them. He showed them a shrunken head.

It had nothing to do with Quindaro, the section of Kansas City, Kan., that Johnson had come to talk about. The head was an artifact of the Amazon.

But among students, a shrunken head is an effective attention-getter. And by the time Johnson completed his presentation, more than three-quarters of the students were ready to become amateur archaeologists, starting with the excavation of the Quindaro ruins.

Quindaro could use the work, Johnson said. Excavation began in 1988, during a successful fight to keep the historic site from becoming a landfill. Foundations of a hotel, a newspaper, stores and homes were uncovered.

But when the fight over the landfill ended, so did the archaeological work at Quindaro. The ruins have been eroding and deteriorating since about 1989. The rainy weather last summer didn't help, Johnson said.

But the fight isn't over. A state grant will provide some funds to clean up the site, and there is talk of turning the area into a historical public park.

Johnson hopes to be involved in recovery efforts. He said he has a personal tie to the area: His great-grandfather, George Washington, escaped slavery through the Underground Railroad to Quindaro.

Some historians debate whether Quindaro was an important part of the Underground Railroad. But oral histories passed down by descendants of slaves who settled in northwest Missouri and northeast Kansas leave no room for contention: Quindaro was key.

Johnson said his grandmother told him the stories, repeating them to make sure they wouldn't be forgotten. Later, Johnson confirmed pieces of the history through various records and through meetings with the descendants of Washington's owners, who were tracing their family's history at the time.

Here is the story of Johnson's great-grandfather:

Washington was born in 1840 on a Virginia plantation and given as a wedding present to the slave owner's daughter, who took him to Platte County in 1841.

The daughter was soon widowed, but remarried and moved her estate north to an area now occupied by Kansas City International Airport.

Washington planted, nurtured and harvested hemp until a January night in 1862, when he slipped away. Moving through the night and with the help of abolitionists along the way, he made his way to Parkville.

Again, he waited until nightfall, then walked across the frozen Missouri River. Caves at the foot of the river bluffs provided temporary shelter, and the thickly wooded ravines gave cover for the trek to the property of a Kansas Underground Railroad "conductor," who marked a safe trail to Quindaro with bits of cloth tied to trees.

Shortly after reaching Quindaro, Washington heard that former slaves were being recruited in Leavenworth to fight for the Union in the Civil War. He became one of the first recruits to serve in the 1st Regiment Kansas Colored Volunteers, which later was designated the 79th U.S. Colored Troops.

After the war, Washington became a farmer in Douglas County. His daughter and Johnson's grandmother, Mary Georgia Washington, became a schoolteacher. She taught in several districts in northeast Kansas and northwest Missouri, including Parkville and Quindaro.

And she passed on her father's stories to her children and grandchildren.

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