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Celebrating South Jersey's role in the Civil War

The New Jersey Council for the Humanities has provided a grant to the Cape May Film Society to host three admission-free panel discussions on the topic of "The South Jersey Experience: Civil War Biographies." These discussions, hosted in three counties on Thursday evenings at 7:00p.m., will take place at the Burlington County Historical Society, 451 High St. in Burlington City on January 28, the Salem Historical Society, 79 Market St. in Salem on February 25, and at the Cape May Historical Society Museum, 504 Rt. 9 North, Cape May Court House on March 25. Jim Stephens, Deputy Director for Historic Cold Spring Village in Cape May, is the moderator for the three discussions.

The Cape May Film Society is proud to announce that it is the recipient of a grant from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, allowing Executive Director Tom Sims to create three admission-free panel discussions on the topic of "The South Jersey Experience: Civil War Biographies." These discussions, hosted in three counties on Thursday evenings at 7:00p.m., will take place at the Burlington County Historical Society, 451 High St. in Burlington City on January 28, the Salem Historical Society, 79 Market St. in Salem on February 25, and at the Cape May Historical Society Museum, 504 Rt. 9 North, Cape May Court House on March 25.

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"One of the first issues we'll look at is dispelling the myth that Southern New Jersey sympathized with the Confederates during the Civil War," said Stephens. The southern part of this state was very much in favor of Lincoln and the war effort in general. Some would even argue there was more support down here than there was in the northern part of the state."

Joining Stephens will be Joe Bilby, Assistant Curator for the National Guard Militia Museum of NJ and author of the book, "New Jersey Goes to War" which details some of Southern New Jersey's great war heroes.

"We will definitely get into the different units, the unique personalities, even a few idiosyncrasies," said Bilby.

According to Bilby's book, "As a result of the large numbers of casualties at the battle of Gettysburg in July 1863, the military requested civilian medical assistance. [Salem County's Cornelia Hancock] arrived at Gettysburg two days after the battle and without any official support or supplies, she helped wherever she could. Despite her innate dislike of alcohol, she dispensed with scruples and began to serve what would become a trademark 'punch' of condensed milk laced with whiskey."

William Still, born in Burlington County, was the eighteenth child of two former slaves from the south. From Bilby's book: "As a conductor on the Underground Railroad, he also worked closely with Harriet Tubman. His book, 'The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, etc.', published in 1872, is considered perhaps the most important reference on that institution."

"One of the other great stories and personalities of the war is Cape May's Captain Henry Sawyer," says Gayle Stahlhuth, Artistic Director of the East Lynne Theater Company and another panelist. Stahlhuth wrote a play about Sawyer's time as a prisoner of war and his ultimate release

as a way for Cape May school students, who first performed the play, to better understand their own history.

“There are several different, sometimes competing stories of Sawyer’s release,” says Stahlhuth, “but you get closer to a consensus the more you read about it.” She will also provide some of the grim details and spectacular encounters from a book she recently acquired about the great escapes of the Civil War, which was first published in 1885.

“One of the challenges of studying New Jersey’s part in the Civil War is that, unlike Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas, we didn’t have physical battles in the state,” says another panelist and Professor for Monmouth University, Richard Veit. “However, there were important military hospitals, graveyards, and training grounds here. Cemeteries from throughout the region tell us so much about the individuals of the war effort, such as the African Americans who received military issue headstones to commemorate their heroic achievements in ways never done before.”

The panel discussions will also be accompanied by a selection of period songs performed by Barry Tischler, who specializes in acoustic performances of historical songs. The entire presentation will be filmed for a new educational DVD that will be distributed to schools, libraries, and historical societies throughout Southern New Jersey. For more information about this program, contact the Cape May Film Society at 609-884-6700 or visit www.capemayfilm.org.

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