
October 17, 2011

Editorial, Oct. 18, 2011: Statehood play drama

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Month after month, West Virginia is staging events to mark the 150th anniversary of the Civil War in Appalachia -- and to commemorate convulsive actions that ripped the Mountain State away from slaveholding Virginia during the war. Another free public program is set for tonight at the Civic Center's Little Theater.

At 6 p.m., historians John Alexander Williams, John Stealey and Cicero Fain will lead a panel discussion -- followed at 7 p.m. by an unusual play, "A New Home for Liberty," written by former state Supreme Court clerk Tom Rodd. The drama recounts equality victories by West Virginia's first black lawyer, plus stormy debates at two Wheeling conventions that led President Abraham Lincoln to approve statehood.

Actors in the play are an array of West Virginia political figures: former Rep. Alan Mollohan, former state Supreme Court Justice Larry Starcher, circuit judges Tod Kaufman, Jay Hoke and Gary Johnson, Delegate Cliff Moore of McDowell County, Kanawha Magistrate Kim Aaron, Deputy Attorney General Paul Sheridan and others.

A public reception will follow the play. The following morning at 11, the Mountain State Bar and the play sponsors will host a follow-up discussion titled "Race, Law and Voting: Was Creating West Virginia Worth It?"

Free public events like these help West Virginians understand the historic struggles that created today's Mountain State. We hope many interested folks attend.

A similar learning experience occurred last week at the State Archives reading room when Parkersburg historian Philip Sturm outlined extensive slavery that existed in three West Virginia locales: the Kanawha Valley, the mid-Ohio Valley and the Eastern Panhandle. Some facts:

In the 1850 census, one-fifth of Kanawha County's population consisted of slaves (3,140 out of 15,353). By that time, Wood County's previous slave plantations had declined, because runaway slaves could swim or wade the river to slave-free Ohio, where prejudice was strong but

abolitionists would help them travel further north to freedom.

Dr. Sturm spotlighted the common practice of plantation owners and their foremen of impregnating slave women, often to produce valuable slave children to be sold like livestock.

Historical knowledge is a valuable part of education. If you aren't already scheduled to attend tonight's humorous Jim Dent Dinner that supports the Kanawha Pastoral Counseling Center, a rewarding alternative is available at the Civic Center drama.