

Press Release- from the Nanticoke Historic Preservation Alliance (1/8/2020)

“Blacks of the Chesapeake” featured at Handsell Annual Meeting February 9

For more than a dozen years, the Nanticoke Historic Preservation Alliance has been building an organization committed to the history of three cultures—Native People, African Americans and European settlers-- that once lived in what is known as the Indiantown, just north of Vienna in Dorchester County. At that location, visitors will find an important brick house that as recent as 2006 was covered in ivy and whose history was long forgotten by local folks. Today, it is known as its historic name of “Handsell” and listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a designated Heart of Chesapeake Heritage Area. In 2019 over 885 tourist and local residents visited Handsell and the Chicone Village, a replica native dwelling built on the site to honor the original residents of the Indiantown area, the Nanticokes. Another 620 interested persons have listened to the Guide by Cell program which “tours” individuals through the history of the site on their own cell phones.

As a commitment to the NHPA’s mission, the 2020 NHPA Annual Meeting will be held on Sunday February 9 at 3 p.m., at the Robbins Center, Dorchester County Historical Society. The event is free and open to the public. Warm soups will be served along with other refreshments and snacks. Following a brief meeting and slide update of the Handsell restoration progress, the featured speaker will be Vincent Leggett of the *“Blacks of the Chesapeake Foundation”* who will speak of the legacy of African Americans on the waters of the Chesapeake.

As a young boy growing up in east Baltimore, Vincent Leggett was introduced to the Chesapeake Bay by weekend fishing trips with his father. *“I caught the spirit of the Chesapeake,”* he recalls, *“There was a freedom that came with being on the water, away from the asphalt and concrete.”* For more than thirty years, Leggett has roamed the expanses of the Chesapeake waterfront, tirelessly interviewing people, “hanging out and mixing up” with waterside residents.

In 1984, Leggett began the “Blacks of the Chesapeake Project” documenting the contributions of Black Watermen on the Chesapeake Bay. In 1999 the organization established the Blacks of the Chesapeake Foundation which was dedicated to sharing the legacy of African American achievements in the seafood and maritime industries, preserving and conserving the environment and promoting the success of the seafood industry in the mid-Atlantic region.

In 2000, working in conjunction with U.S. Congressman, Wayne Gilchrest, and Mr. Leggett spearheaded the effort to have the Blacks of the Chesapeake recognized as a local legacy project. The centerpiece of the submittal to the Library of Congress was Mr. Leggett’s two publications, Blacks of the Chesapeake: An Integral Part of Maritime History (1998) and The Chesapeake Bay Through Ebony Eyes (1999). Leggett’s seminal research project, “Chesapeake Underground: Charting the Course to Freedom”, (2000) began examining the extent to which the Chesapeake Bay and its

many tributaries were used to spirit bondsmen to the freedom utilizing the secretive trail which became known as the Underground Railroad.

In 2002, he was appointed and commissioned an “Admiral of the Chesapeake Bay” by former Governor Parris N. Glendenning, “for bringing to the light the many contributions of African Americans to the seafood and maritime industries in the Maryland.”

Leggett served as the historical consultant for the “Black Captains of the Chesapeake Documentary Film” (Steve Berry) which aired on Maryland Public TV, The “Black Watermen’s Documentary Quilt “(Dr. Joan Gaither) and the Captain Eldridge Meredith: A Quintessential African American Waterman film and project.

He has served on the Advisory Committee for the John Smith Trail, and the Star Bangled Banner Bi-Centennial Celebration. During 2014, served as a Maryland Humanities Scholar, Leggett depicted the character Charles Ball, watermen, and run-away-bondsmen, who bravely fought in the War of 1812 at Fort McHenry in Baltimore. In addition, he served an expert in the national broadcasted PBS Documentary film, The War of 1812.

Mr. Leggett served on the Advisory Committee for the Harriet Tubman, National Park and Maryland Visitors Center which opened in Dorchester County in 2017 and also served as Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Wiley H. Bates Legacy Center in Annapolis. He earned a B.S. Degree in Urban Planning and Community Development at Morgan State University and a Master’s Degree in Public Administration at Central Michigan University. Mr. Leggett currently is the President and CEO of The Leggett Group USA, an Annapolis-based Government Relations and Lobbying Firm.

Information on the NHPA annual Meeting and the organization’s activities can be found at restorehandsell.org.