

Roberts helps people learn how to speak of the dead

Work allows families to trace historical roots

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David Roberts knows some dead people. He knows where they are buried. He knows who they were, where they came from and who they were related to. Making inventories of cemeteries gives a person that ability.

Roberts was recognized last month by the St. Mary's County commissioners for several projects and his ongoing work in genealogy.

For those who found an ancestor through the electronic index of the St. Mary's Beacon newspaper or learned where their great-grandfather is buried, Roberts may have had a role.

He is a vice president of the St. Mary's County Genealogical Society and has been the editor of its newsletter for the past 15 years. The quarterly publication produces information on cemeteries, local church histories, how to do genealogy and the migrations of Marylanders to Kentucky.

But the society doesn't limit its genealogical work to those living in St.

Mary's. "We take everybody from Maine to Texas and everyone in between," he said.

Tracing a family history might seem intimidating to



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Staff photos by JESSE YEATMAN

David Roberts, former teacher at Chopticon High School, was recently congratulated by the St. Mary's County commissioners for his work in historic preservation. He has been the editor of the St. Mary's County Genealogical Society's newsletter, the Generator, for 15 years.

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might seem intimidating to someone who's not fond of research projects. But there should be a natural curiosity for someone to find out who they came from and where, he said.

"Start with what you know. If you don't know anything, start with a relative," he said. Ask them questions. Ask parents about their parents. Go layer by layer, he said.

"Don't leap backward and don't try to be famous. Everybody wants to be related to a famous person," he said.

There are free resources such as census records, church records and Internet resources like www.findagrave.com, which has comprehensive lists of names, and even headstone photos, from cemeteries.

As Roberts, 67, researched his own genealogy, he found out there was a mass migration of oystermen from South Long Bay, Long Island, N.Y., to the Patuxent River and he "came up [with] relatives galore who live in Hollywood," he said.



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Roberts is proud of his award from the United States Colored Troops Memorial Monument Committee. He is also a member of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War.

Roberts came to St. Mary's from Long Island to take a job at the new Chopticon High School in 1965 as a social studies teacher. "I was in the first group that taught in the brand new building," he said.

He was here for about two weeks and then started looking into the county's history, first at its role during the Civil War. He read about Point Lookout, which was a prisoner of war camp for Confederates that opened after the battle of Gettysburg. Then he became interested in St. Clement's Island and the founding of Maryland.

He left Chopticon High School in 1978 to start work at the new Leonardtown High School. He retired from full-time work in 1990, but still teaches a class at the Leonardtown campus of the College of Southern Maryland.

Roberts is also a member of the Sgt. James Harris Camp 38 of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War. Harris was a black soldier for the Union army from St. Mary's County. He later received the Medal of Honor in 1874.

There are five United States Colored Troops buried at the cemetery of Zion United Methodist in Hermanville. Two of the five have standing headstones and Camp 38 is trying to get headstones for the others, Roberts said.

Very few blacks or poor whites of that time could afford headstones, he said.

His work researching the families that left Southern Maryland for Kentucky determined that the migration began in 1785, he said. "basically looking for new

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determined that the migration began in 1765, he said, "basically looking for new land. The land here was wearing out" from intensive tobacco cultivation. Crop rotation and fertilizer later rejuvenated the soils.

Related families from Kentucky and St. Mary's have held reunions occasionally. The last one was in 2006 and it seems "the grave is picking up some of the people," Roberts said.

In his award for historic preservation, the commissioners noted Roberts' work indexing the Beacon.

Roberts pointed out that was not a volunteer effort. Librarians at Lexington Park dug up a federal grant to pay Roberts to produce the index. People can now search the Beacon from 1850 to 1892 by family names, places and specific subjects online through the library's Web site.

"I sat there and read the paper and I knew what I needed to index," he said. "It took over two years to finish that project, but I wanted it to be as accurate as possible." The Beacon was printed from 1839 to 1984.

"I'm in awe of what he does," said Harold Willard, member of the St. Mary's County Historic Preservation Commission.

"We want our grandchildren to know the history of St. Mary's County," said Commissioner Daniel H. Raley (D) and work from people like Roberts helps preserve it.

jbabcock@somdnews.com