

Neglected Civil War memorial inspires black heritage event



From left, assistant history professor Jahi U. Issa and developer Tony Riddick talk with local historian Charles Skinner Jr. on Wednesday at the site of a black Civil War memorial in Hertford, N.C. BARBARA J. WOERNER | SPECIAL TO THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

By **LAUREN KING**, The Virginian-Pilot
© June 25, 2007

HERTFORD

On a corner across the street from First Baptist Church and what was once a whites-only cemetery is a modest monument in honor of black Civil War soldiers.

The marker, erected in 1910 by the widows of those local soldiers, is thought to be the oldest of five in the country.

"We were real pleased that someone recognized we had something to visit in Hertford," said Charles Skinner Jr., a local historian.

With the help of Horace C. Reid Jr., Hertford's mayor pro tem, Skinner said, a plaque explaining the history was posted behind the monument a few years ago.

But over the years, Skinner said, the memorial fell into a state of disrepair, and one day he saw the top of the monument askew from the base, a victim of vandalism. He was pleasantly surprised, however, when he saw it partly restored two years ago.

Only recently did Skinner learn that Tony Riddick, a local developer, was responsible for that restoration and painting.

Riddick said he frequently saw children climbing on the structure and jumping off. Riddick paid for the work and said he hoped his efforts would inspire others to take pride and make additional improvements in the community.

"These black women, especially, made a bold step to put this memorial up," Riddick said. "We're doing our part to help their vision."

Riddick's efforts were reinvigorated after he gave a tour of Hertford to Jahi U. Issa, an assistant professor of history and political science at Elizabeth City State University, two months ago.

"He drove me around and casually pointed at this and said it's the Black Civil War Monument," Issa said, patting the marker. "I became intrigued."

That night he researched it and became so fascinated that he returned to the memorial at 1 a.m.

"I said we had to celebrate this," he said.

"I went to Tony, and he said, 'Let's do it.' "

The pair have worked to put together Saturday's Northeastern North Carolina African American Heritage Festival, which will be from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m. at the monument. It is free and will feature arts and crafts, food, music, and multicultural activities, including African drummers, Civil War re-enactments, a jazz band and possibly a visit from a West African king.

"There are a lot of family reunions here, so people are accustomed to coming here, but they kind of bypass the history of this area," Riddick said.

The festival is an attempt to "reinvigorate the culture," he said.

Issa and Riddick hope the festival also will help fundraising efforts to make improvements around the monument. Issa said he envisions a small dome over it - reminiscent of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. - and the addition of bricks engraved with each veteran's name.

For details about the festival, call (252) 426-7474.