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Dipping into the Past: Independence Day Event Explores a Revolutionary Raritan

NEW BRUNSWICK – Much like its ever-shifting current, the Lower Raritan River’s identity is continually changing and evolving.

While today’s channel has become a hub for industry and recreational activities; centuries ago, it was a crossroad for the American Revolutionary War – a hotbed for maritime battles, piracy and stories of legend.

This will be the substance of a July 7 presentation during the Middlesex County Improvement Authority’s “Days of Fun Along the Raritan River” event at Boyd Park in New Brunswick.

During his address, speaker Douglas Aumack, an assistant curator with the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission, will share a profile of the Raritan in the late 18th Century, when British soldiers foraged its shores, Continental fighters were embedded in the nearby Watching Mountains and General George Washington led a retreat through bordering New Brunswick.

The presentation is one component of a more than six-hour Independence Day affair hosted by the City of New Brunswick, in partnership with the Crossroads of the American Revolution and the MCIA. Event organizers are planning for a reenactment, a concert, a film, a boat show, a Declaration reading and fireworks.

Attendees will also have an opportunity to learn about some of the river’s more modern uses: as a sports venue, a backdrop for river festivals and as an artistic muse.

“The Lower Raritan is such an asset in so many ways; it has the ability to unite all different walks of life, promote healthy living and holds several clues to the rich history we pride ourselves on here in New Jersey,” said Middlesex County Freeholder Charles E. Tomaro.

The July 7 gathering gave New Brunswick a chance to leverage funds from a New York/ New Jersey Harbor Estuary grant, awarded to the MCIA last fall for the purpose of advocating general estuary use and care.

Using that grant money, the MCIA gave several municipalities lining the Raritan’s banks, to include Highland Park, Piscataway, Edison, Woodbridge, Perth Amboy, East Brunswick, Sayreville and South Amboy, the option to host their choice of activities centered on the waterway. That list ranged from New Brunswick’s preference of a historic presentation to a river art program, estuary bird watching, a stream critter identification tour and more.

“One of our main objectives with this grant is to bring public awareness to the river’s access points,” said Denise Nickel, a Senior Project Manager for the MCIA’s Economic Development Department.

For its part, Crossroads of the American Revolution is a Trenton–based organization working to assist communities, organizations and citizens in preserving the state’s rich Revolutionary history. Their area of jurisdiction in New Jersey spans 2,155 square miles into 212 municipalities and across 14 counties.

The July 7 event is expected to kick-off at 4 p.m. with Crossroad’s presentation beginning at around 8 p.m. and a dazzling fireworks display at 9:20 p.m.

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