

## Discovering local roots of slavery

By Joyce Kelly/Daily News staff

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WHITINSVILLE —

Whitinsville and slavery may seem like an unlikely pairing, but as residents learned Saturday, the small New England village had its role to play in the trade.

"When we talk about the history of the mill villages ... America's history is not black or white, it's extremely gray," said Chuck Arning, a lead ranger with the National Park Service.

"It's important we understand our history and our heritage and get perspective on it as we move into new ways of seeing things," said Arning.

About 25 local residents learned about Whitinsville's relationship with slavery Saturday.

"We want to get people talking about these sensitive topics that people have not talked about for some reason," Arning said.

They discussed entrepreneurial spirit in Whitinsville and early connections to selling products to plantation owners in the South.

"Folks here made scythes (a hand tool for cutting grass) and heavy hose for tilling soil, bought by plantation owners for slaves to work the fields. With the money they made, they had capital to build their own cotton textile mill," Arning said.

Workers here also made machinery for textile mills, which processed cotton picked by slaves, he said.

The group toured the 1826 Whitin Brick Mill on Saturday, discussed the business of slavery and the economy of the Blackstone River Valley with Brown University historian Seth Rockman.

In addition, the group watched "Traces of the Trade: A story from the Deep North," a 2008 documentary by Katrina Browne exploring her family's slave-trading past at the Alternatives Unlimited, Inc. building.

Browne, a descendent of the Bristol, R.I., DeWolf family, traced her roots and found her relatives were the largest slave-trading family in U.S. history. They brought more than 10,000 Africans to America in chains, she said.

"When I saw this film, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival this year, I thought it would be a great film to use to start working with different historical organizations in Massachusetts," said Pleun Bouricius, program officer with Mass Humanities in Northampton, which presented the film in collaboration with local organizations like the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor.

"It's important to start thinking about our physical environment," Bouricius said. "A beautiful mill village or a beautiful house museum, all the articles (inside) are made at a cost. We have a complex history economically and morally."

Browne's documentary is personal and provocative, Bouricius said.

Before she embarked on a mission to learn about her family's past, Browne knew her relatives included writers, professors and Episcopal ministers.



Melissa Ostrow/Daily News staff  
WHITINSVILLE (October 18, 2008) -Brown University historian Seth Rockman led a discussion on the business of slavery and the economy of Blackstone River Valley prior to the Civil War at the Whitin Brick

"It never occurred to me to ask how (we) got so established," she said during the film.

In the film, one DeWolf family member recalled historians in Bristol, R.I., telling him that the slave trade should be viewed in the context of the times.

"I say, it was an evil thing, they knew it was an evil thing, and they did it anyway," he said.

Responding to a question from one audience member Saturday evening, Rockman said there is evidence those involved with the slave trade knew it.

"It was a moral problem then, just as it is now. Just like blood diamonds are now part of our national consciousness, there was a great deal of consumer awareness in (that period) too," with some groups in New York refusing to wear cotton unless it was certified as grown by free workers, Rockman said.

In addition to this Saturday's meeting, Mass Humanities has held programs in Sheffield and Boston (where a lot of cotton merchants lived) and will continue the series at the Lowell National Historical Park on Saturday, Oct. 25; the House of the Seven Gables in Salem (which had a thriving salt cod industry) on Nov. 8; and the New Bedford Whaling Museum on Feb. 12. All communities on the tour have links to slavery, according to Bouricius.

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