

Culpeper-born artist to show 'Spirits of Clifton Farm' as part of D.C. exhibit

By Allison Brophy Champion, The Daily Progress, Charlottesville, VA - Feb 12, 2015



contributed photo by Kathy Ellis

Hubert Jackson creates art as a way to honor the memory of those who went before him, including countless slaves buried in unmarked cemeteries across his native Virginia.



The Culpeper-born artist, in fact, discovered inspiration, and materials, in an old slave cemetery in Rixeyville for a recent painting going on display Friday in Washington, D.C.



Jackson's, "Spirits of Clifton Farm," is among the featured works at Pepco Edison Place Gallery's new 100-piece exhibit, "Light of the Ancestors." The gallery hosts a Black History Month opening reception Friday night from 6 to 9 p.m.

Jackson's featured multi-media piece was inspired by a visit to Clifton Farm in Culpeper County, an 1845 homestead where slaves once worked and lived. In creating the work, he met with the farm's modern day owner, Kathy Ellis, and visited the restored slave cemetery on site, overlooking the Thornton River. They

collected tree bark and other vegetation that was then incorporated into the painting.

"I could actually feel the people who once lived there," Jackson said, noting that the cemetery is located on a hillside, as was typical, in an area not suitable for farming.

Highly textured while almost glowing with its deep blue acrylic hues, "Spirits of Clifton Farm" is a semi-abstract piece with a vertical composition, representing spirituality, said the artist. Jackson used tree bark to depict the spirits while adding African burial symbols to the painting in which an outline of the main house at Clifton rises in the back.

"These are the people we will never know, scattered on all the farms and plantations throughout Culpeper County, which had among the highest number of slaves in the 1860s," he said.

Jackson, who grew up a few miles outside of the town of Culpeper along Sperryville Pike, said he's always been interested in African American history. He noted a lack of learning about that as a student attending the formerly segregated George Washington Carver High School, from which Jackson graduated in 1961.

"We didn't learn too much about the Civil War at Carver even with the school being located right on the Cedar Mountain Battlefield," he said.

Jackson went on to earn a master's degree from Howard University before spending more than three decades teaching art in Washington, D.C. public schools. He retired to Colonial Beach, and in his travels back and forth to this area, found himself passing by various Civil War battlefields. The artist's recent paintings take a botanical, supernatural view of the War Between the States. Jackson believes spirits still exist in the ground and trees.

"I think about all the people who fell and were left on these battlefields and wanted to honor the missing," he said of others in his recent series of "Spirits" paintings including "Spirits of Chancellorsville," "Spirits of the Wilderness" "Spirits of Brandy Station" and "Spirits of the Piedmont."

Born 1943 in Culpeper, Jackson is the grandson of the late Rev. J.J. Jackson, pastor at Good Hope Baptist Church, and brother-in-law of the late Roscoe H. Ford, a former police sergeant for who the Culpeper Police Station is named.

Hubert Jackson is a prolific artist who has exhibited extensively. He is working on an upcoming show in July at the U.S. Embassy in Rome at which his Virginia "Spirits" paintings will be displayed.

Ellis, owner of Clifton Farm, has taken careful and deliberate steps to preserve and document the slave cemetery established on the farm of her ancestors, the Criglers, who owned 13 slaves per the 1860 census. An archaeologist documented the burials in conjunction with the state department of historic resources, using GPS to pinpoint the exact location of 10 grave sites.

"We hope it is safe from ever being lost," Ellis said. "We keep a path mowed to the site, brush and leaves cleaned off of the graves. There are very old daffodil beds there that bloom in the spring, some Lenten roses that bloom early, and some ferns. Someone who loved the people there planted those flowers long, long ago."

She believes her ancestors treated their slaves fairly, perhaps due to the fact that the Criglers themselves were indentured servants a century earlier. Ellis said a descendant of a Crigler slave told her that during Jim Crow, her father had told her, "If you get into trouble, go to the Criglers for help." Ellis said she regrets, however, that her family never worked to change the system of slavery.

An important African American relic, the cemetery at Clifton was included as part of the text developed when the 170-year-old homestead — likely built with the assistance of slaves — was placed on the National Register of Historic Places about seven years ago.

Since moving back to the family home, Ellis has been open and inviting to those interested in learning about its history, including Mr. Jackson. She and her husband will attend Friday's opening in D.C. at which the painting inspired by a piece of their home will be on display. Ellis described the art as evocative.

"It has a voice," she said, noting that she liked the title of the exhibit, The Light of the Ancestors.

"Ancestors aren't frightening ghosts, but those who have gone before us, shedding light on our own life's path," she said.

There are 10 ancestors in "Spirits of Clifton Farm," to match the number of graves in the river cemetery.

"The ancestors encircle and support the house in a neutral way, they have never given their consent to do so," Ellis said. "There is no joy in it. It just is."