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Fact or fiction?

By **JESSICA WIANT**, Journal Staff Writer

MARTINSBURG - Legend and fact are a little muddled when it comes to the existence of caves underneath old buildings in Martinsburg.

So what is the legend? Lore has it that a series of Martinsburg's oldest buildings were built over natural caves as an escape route or a good hiding place, say, in case of an attack from American Indians, said John Di Carlo, who has portrayed Adam Stephen at different events.

It is believed that tunnels exist between the Adam Stephen House on East John Street, another old house at 301 East King St. and the old Swartz Mill in East Burke Street, as well as other homes in the neighborhood, Di Carlo said. An entrance was rumored to exist at the foot of a hill just west of the Adam Stephen House by a sycamore tree.

The tunnels could have been part of the Underground Railroad or even used as hideouts by train bandits, The Journal has previously reported. They may have been used for moonshine storage, Di Carlo said. Legends even get more extreme - was a skeleton found at the entrance of one of the tunnels?

"As time goes on, things get a little more mythical," Di Carlo said.

The fact is that tunnels or caves in some form do indeed exist beneath the home of Adam Stephen, Martinsburg's founder, and the home on East King Street, said Keith Hammersla, curator at the General Adam Stephen House Triple Brick Museum.

The tunnels proved a safety hazard and a nuisance to those who lived in the homes back in the 1940s and 1950s because children ran and played in them, said Hammersla. Fearing lawsuits or worse, owners filled in the caves at their access points in the cellars of the Adam Stephen House and 301 E. Burke St.

Some of the town's older residents even remember playing in the caves, or tunnels, said Hammersla. From the low-lying dirt, board and stone cellars of the Adam Stephen House and 301 E. King Street, a caving club called Tri-State Grotto has been digging on and off for about 10 years.

"We rent this tool called a whacker," Di Carlo said. "We're finding things that match up to legend."

The tunnels are there.

The one at the East King Street house goes at least 40 feet down into the ground, Di Carlo said. Tri State Grotto started digging there in 1995, Hammersla said, and at the Adam Stephen house around about 2000.

Do they connect? What artifacts were left behind when the tunnels were sealed? These are some of the questions Tri-State Grotto, of which Di Carlo is a member, is

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trying to find out.

To find out more, the group enlisted Jeff Bray of Maxwellton GeoSolutions, Ltd. Gray's company, based in Lewisburg.

Through another of the grotto's members, John Pearson, Bray heard about the caves of legend and volunteered his services, said Pearson, also of Lewisburg.

Bray uses a \$75,000 gravimeter (a little rectangular machine that measures about two by one feet and weighs only about 10 pounds) and a process called microgravity to measure for relative gravity drops that indicate caves. Wednesday Bray measured around the circumference of the stone Adam Stephen House and analyzed the preliminary data on site amidst a group of eager Tri-State Grotto members.

The data needed more adjustments before definitive results could be announced, Bray said, but there did seem to be a drop in gravity levels on the same side and just down from where Tri-State Grotto had been digging in the cellar.

If the cave is where the gravimeter may indicate, it would be following a path to where the entrance is rumored to have been, Pearson said, and that means the group has been digging in the right direction to get to the entrance.

Bray will finish analyzing his data today and sending the members the results, he said.

For Bray, microgravity has become a full-time job. The process can also be used for other geologic evaluations such as to find mine lands, quarries, landfills and archaeological sites.

Why did he get into the business?

"I thought it was a cool way to find caves," he said.

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