

[From: leonarddozier.com]

Life story of John McKee, founder of McKee City, translated to stage

Founder of McKee City made millions in land speculation

Leonard Dozier, right, of Egg Harbor City, and Rashad Wyche, of South Orange, practiced their lines during a recent dress rehearsal of 'A Gift From John McKee' at the Egg Harbor Township Community Center. The land holdings of Col. John McKee in the late 1800 stretched across the country.

Success in real estate and land speculation amounted to his owning thousands upon thousands of acres of land in several states, earning him millions of dollars and likely making him the wealthiest black man in the country at the time.

It was McKee's 4,000 acres of land in Atlantic County, however, that he found ideal for building a city in his name to give former slaves a place of opportunity.

The McKee City area is a recognized section today within the borders of Egg Harbor and Hamilton townships.

The story of McKee's life and creation of McKee City will be revealed in three performances starting Friday at Fernwood Avenue Middle School in the production of "A Gift from John McKee."

The play is an original script and interpretation of McKee by playwright and director Ken Youmans.

Cygnus Creative Arts Centre commissioned the performance as a tribute to the township's 300th anniversary and accomplishments of McKee, who was born the son of slaves in 1821 in Virginia.

Prior to moving to the new township community center in summer 2008, Cygnus got its start as an art school in the McKee City School on English Creek Avenue in 1992.

Crafting the story has taken nearly a year for Youmans, who began researching McKee's life last summer. The bulk of the information came from materials and talks with township historian June Sheridan, although Youmans said accounts of McKee are by and large difficult to find.

"Historical record is pretty scant for a guy who achieved" a lot, said Youmans, who lives in Moorestown.

Still, he managed to create a seven-scene production that runs about 90 minutes and details the personality of McKee in relationships with his daughter, an uncle and admiring protege.

"It's history and drama bonded together," Youmans said.

A cast of five actors was assembled for the show from auditions held in Philadelphia in early April. Leading up to this week, they rehearsed both in Philadelphia and at the community center.

Portraying McKee is 31-year-old Leonard Dozier.

A professional actor, Dozier uses his presence and deep voice to create an imposing McKee.

And it's only fitting that Dozier was chosen to play McKee given that he was the lone person among the cast to know who McKee was prior to auditions. Dozier currently lives in Egg Harbor City and is a 1997 graduate of Pleasantville High School.

He said being from the area has given him an obligation to give the community a quality theater experience.

"There is a feeling to make this a transcended success," Dozier said.

He described the story as McKee's "journey of wanting to be a great mind," although that doesn't come without drawbacks one experiences from success.

"He's so polarizing," Dozier said. "He's a brilliant capitalist in one sense, but then he's quite a figment of his imagination."