

Schuylkill River documentary draws crowd in city

BY BEN WOLFGANG (STAFF WRITER BWOLFGANG@REPUBLICANHERALD.COM)

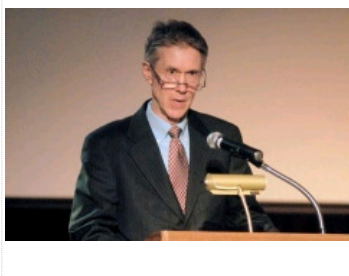
Published: March 28, 2010

Font size: [A] [A] [A]

E-MAIL THIS  SHARE THIS



The Schuylkill River's importance to the American Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and commerce spanning hundreds of years was the focus of a documentary Saturday night at the Sovereign Majestic Theater, 209 N. Centre St., Pottsville.



More than 100 people came to see "Our National Heritage Episode One: The Revolutionary River," the first in a series of documentary films on national heritage areas across the country.

Telemark Films LLC, Noank, Conn., an award-winning film company, is producing the series, and the "The Revolutionary River" premiered last weekend in Philadelphia before coming to Pottsville.

Executive Producer Michael Fitzgerald said the film series will "tell the story of America," a story that is directly tied to the Schuylkill River.

"The industry up and down the river was revolutionary," Fitzgerald said just before the film began. "Heritage areas are places that have some very unique characteristics."

The Schuylkill River National and State Heritage Area was officially recognized as such by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in the 1990s, and Congress adopted a similar resolution in 2000.

Kurt D. Zwikl, executive director of the heritage area, said the organization agreed to take part in the documentary under one condition.

"If, and only if, we could be the first of the series," he told the audience during his opening remarks.

The film focused on "the birth, the death and the rebirth" of the river, which, like other rivers across the country, saw its beauty shattered and the drinkability of its water compromised through industry, particularly the mining of anthracite coal.

"People just used the river as a dump" during the Industrial Revolution, Fitzgerald said. "It literally turned into black scum."

Following World War II, officials and community leaders began to pay greater attention to the Schuylkill River and other waterways, recognizing their importance to the region.

The film described the cleanup efforts, culminating with the Clean Water Act of 1977, which mandated all water be treated and completely cleansed before being returned to rivers.

The film focused not only on the river and its aesthetics, but also on the strategic importance it held during the American Revolution, with many key battles fought not far from its banks.

The history lesson was a welcome surprise to many in the crowd.

"I thought it (the film) would be more of an environmental look at the river, but it was the history of it, too, leading up to the environmental part," said Penny Hunt, who traveled with family and friends from Spring City, Chester County, to see the documentary.

She and her husband live "down river" from Pottsville, she said just after the film ended.

"I thought it was excellent," she added. "I hope it has a wide distribution. I think they