

Splattering Mud at Village Restoration

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Don't attempt to visit Old Bethpage Village Restoration (OBVR) the weekend of August 15-16 to enjoy the historic nineteenth-century bucolic village or watch old time base ball. The site is being taken over for a "Tough Mudder" (TM) military-style, obstacle course event, which anticipated as many as 17,000 participants to wallow through waist-high "Mud Mile," an ice cold "Arctic Enema," "Electroshock Therapy" — some 20-such obstacles. Many are in the heart of the historic area on a 10-mile course that runs within 10 yards of some of the historic home (see *Newsday*, "Mud, sweat, fears," July 31). I cannot imagine a more outrageously inappropriate event for OBVR and its 51 buildings dating from the 1700s and 1800s. I fear that TM will defile the jewel of the county's history museums.

Participants pay \$100-\$220 for the TM event and the anticipated 5,000 spectators, \$20-\$40, depending on when they purchase tickets. Nassau County will receive only \$30,000 for the use of the site (and \$20,000 promised to repair any damages). This is a pittance--perhaps 1-3% of the total receipts that the profit-making Tough Mudder organization expects to receive. The two holes TM digs in the Restoration's grassy fields may be refilled, but the new grass they plant will not be seen for months.

Contrary to the implications in Nassau County's July 20 press release, TM does not contribute any of its receipts directly to the Wounded Warriors. It only "incentivizes" participants to give to the charity. (See Wikipedia's entry on Tough Mudder.) The county anticipated more than "\$2.5 million in economic benefits" for hotel stays and other participant expenditures from the event (doubtless a wildly inflated figure), but given OBVR's location near the county line, Suffolk County is likely to receive more of any such economic benefits than Nassau.

In 2014, the Museum of American Armor was built on OBVR property. The Nassau County Historical Society did not welcome the twentieth-century intrusion, but became reluctantly resigned to it because the Armor Museum was situated a considerable distance from the restoration area. Now, however, tanks, trucks, and other World War II vehicles maneuver on some weekends in the historic area on the field opposite the church (see *Newsday*, "Tank Heaven," July 28).

Not very long ago, Nassau County boasted one of the finest public history museum systems in the country. Museums interpreted various aspects of local history, e.g.: natural history at Tackapausha; geology, archaeology, and native American Indians at Garvies Point; African-American history in Hempstead; and the Gold Coast at Falaise in Sands Point. The jewel in the crown of the system was Old Bethpage Village Restoration (OBVR), a living history museum recreating a mid-nineteenth-century crossroads village. Selected houses and other structures facing demolition were relocated to the former Powell farm and OBVR opened in 1970. When Nassau's museum system was accredited in 1973, the American Association of Museums praised it as it "a most unusual and possibly unique, example of county financed educational services." Currently, OBVR receives a coveted Great Experience for Members (GEM) award from the American Automobile Association, one of only five sites on Long Island to receive this designation. That designation was not for World War II tanks nor splattering mud.

The Nassau County Historical Society (NCHS) has supported the county museum system for many years. For example, the NCHS donated the tidal Saddle Rock Grist Mill, which Louise Eldridge bequeathed to the Society in the 1960s, to the county museum. It raised funds in the mid-1980s to construct a replica of the original Mineola Fair office building at the Fair Grounds at OBVR. The Society helped pay to move a ca. 1810 Hempstead house to Old Bethpage in 1993, where it is to be interpreted as Dr. Searing's office.

Fiscal constraints in recent years have resulted in severe museum staff reductions, while deferred maintenance and general neglect of Nassau County's historic properties have taken their toll. The NCHS has been distressed at the decline of the county's museum system and deterioration of its sites. The Saddle Rock Grist Mill has been closed for more than a decade. At Old Bethpage, the Bedell house had to be razed because of neglect before it could be opened (which earlier was the fate of the Coles house). After eleven years on site, the Searing house finally opened in 2014, but does not yet have the essential historic interpretation plan.

The Long Island Convention and Visitors Bureau and Sports Commission is responsible for bringing Tough Mudder to Old Bethpage Village Restoration. A Bureau spokesperson stated, "We would love to see this as an annual event on Long Island." If this indeed is their plan, we hope they find a better location in the future. Tough Mudder risks wrecking havoc on the Restoration. Holding the TM event at OBVR indicates how little importance the current county administration places on maintaining and preserving its once exemplary history museums. Currently, OBVR and the other county museums inevitably face damage by neglect.