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Port Chicago bill becomes law

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Contra Costa Times

Posted: 10/28/2009 04:18:16 PM PDT

Updated: 10/28/2009 06:01:11 PM PDT

The story of the largest homefront disaster in World War II and the role it played in the Civil Rights Movement may soon be easier to tell as a result of legislation signed Wednesday by President Barack Obama.

Sponsored by Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, the legislation gives the National Park Service control of the Port Chicago Naval Magazine Memorial and five acres around the blast site.

The site is now eligible for federal funding for historic preservation and increasing public awareness.

The legislation ensures that the site will be maintained and remain accessible for the public, Miller said in a news release. Park service officials will work with local groups to establish a visitors center at the site of the July 17, 1944, blast off Suisun Bay north of Concord.

That night, an explosion during the loading of ammunition onto ships killed 320 sailors — 202 of whom were African-American — and injured more than 400 others.

The Rev. Diana McDaniel, president of nonprofit Friends of Port Chicago, said the idea of making a more permanent, accessible memorial "almost brings tears to my eyes."

After years of lobbying, the group is "closer to getting a sort of forgotten story" told to the public, she said.

When 50 black sailors later refused to return to work because of what they argued were unsafe and unjust conditions, they were convicted of mutiny.

The convictions fueled political pressure on President Harry Truman to desegregate the military.

A cause for the explosion, the largest disaster in Contra Costa County history, was never found. The site was made a national memorial in 1992.

Port Chicago was "truly a catalyst in continuing the Civil Rights Movement," McDaniel said. In an e-mail, Miller said he heard stories about the blast while growing up, but the civil rights aftermath was really Port Chicago's legacy.

The legislation makes it possible for the park service to dedicate rangers to provide tours and educational lessons about Port Chicago to the community, said Martha Lee, a National Park Service superintendent. Lee hopes this will happen in the next couple years.

Lee, who oversees the Rosie the Riveter National Historical Park in Richmond, John Muir National Historic Site in Martinez and the Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site in Danville, also will oversee the Port Chicago site.

The park service also will facilitate visits to the waterfront memorial, as military clearance and reservations will still be required, Lee said.

Work also will continue on creating an exhibit about Port Chicago inside a larger interpretive center in the Concord Naval Weapons Station plan, Lee said.

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