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A focus on the Shore's history

U.S. park is proposed for slave route, Tubman site

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Cambridge

For decades, the people who came to trace the route of the Underground Railroad and the life of Harriet Tubman arrived on tour buses from New York and other urban centers. From black churches and civic groups, pilgrims came to see for themselves how Tubman led slaves to freedom, scooping up dirt from her designated birthplace.

Recently, though, more and more visitors - predominantly white - are coming from Maryland's Western Shore to travel the back roads of Dorchester and Caroline counties in search of Tubman's legacy.

Acknowledging growing interest and local support, the National Park Service is proposing that Eastern Shore sites associated with Tubman and her work freeing slaves be declared the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historic Park. Federal park planners are expected to release a draft report for public comment by the end of the summer. A final report will be submitted to Congress by the end of the year.

The proposal is a victory for Maryland natural resources and tourism officials, who waged an uphill battle to persuade federal officials that sites here are as significant as those in Auburn, N.Y., where Tubman lived for nearly 50 years and died in 1913. New York officials are also pushing for several sites there to be designated national historic sites, including Tubman's two-story brick home, the church where she worshiped and her grave.

"We could have taken the easy way out and just dealt with New York," said Barbara Tagger, a National Park Service official based in Atlanta. "But what shaped Tubman was Maryland."

The report will propose that the Auburn buildings be declared the Harriet Tubman National Historic Park.

What made Maryland's case so difficult for state officials to argue was the absence of historical structures. Original safe houses, where Tubman hid slaves, are gone or are privately owned.



Subdivisions have been built over former plantations. Even the site of her birth is unclear.

"Auburn has the buildings, but Maryland has the landscapes," said Kristin Saunders Evans, assistant secretary of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. "That's a hard sell."

Yet Tagger said during a visit to the Eastern Shore she was struck by the "cultural landscape."

"Maryland's uniqueness to this story is the land and providing the feeling of what it was like when Tubman was there," Evans said. "She used these waterways. She walked this way."

And, she added, Maryland had shown its support by establishing a driving tour through the Underground Railroad region and committing to construction of an \$18 million visitor and research center across the road from Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. It is expected to open in 2013, the 100th anniversary of Tubman's death.

"People have embraced the idea, and partnerships are already in place. Those are the kinds of things Congress wants to see," Tagger said.

For John Creighton, a retired schoolteacher and amateur Underground Railroad historian, recognition from the National Park Service would provide much-needed support for volunteer tour guides and restoration enthusiasts.

"Right now, it's a grass-roots, mom-and-pop type thing that needs professional marketing to help draw crowds. African-American organizations have carried the torch for years, but there aren't a lot of people who like to do this," he said.

Creighton and JOK Walsh have spent years reviewing sketchy public records, trying to piece together Tubman's family tree and the details of her birth, her escape from slavery in 1849 and her daring forays to free family and strangers. There have been tantalizing peeks into Maryland's part in the slave trade and the conflicts between pro-slavery Dorchester County and the anti-slavery Quakers of neighboring Caroline County. But more often, evidence just prompts more questions.

Take, for example, the date and place of Tubman's birth.

Tubman was born Araminta "Minty" Ross on a small plantation in Dorchester County, the daughter of Ben Ross and Rittia Green, slaves of different masters. A 2 1/2-hour walk separated the two, but historians speculate Green might have been allowed to stay with Ross in the final days of her pregnancy. A notation in the ledger of Ross' owner shows a \$2 payment to a midwife on March 15, 1822. Is that when Tubman was born?

"We've had many discussions, pro and con, about what the evidence shows," said Creighton, shaking his head. "The fact is, we may never know."

Also complicating matters is the transient nature of slave trade and that long-held stories about Tubman's exploits don't always match maps and period documents.

"John and I pore over the records. Every little word means something," Walsh said.

Over nearly a decade, Tubman guided countless slaves to freedom, leading her to boast, "I can say what most conductors can't say. I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger."

But she was more than that: a Civil War scout, spy, suffragette and nurse, who established one of the early homes for aging black people.

Nita Settina, superintendent of Maryland's parks, said it's important for Maryland to recognize "this 19th-century woman who stood for her beliefs and was selfless and courageous."

The visitor center would include a library, artifacts and a life-size statue of Tubman in a memorial garden, Settina said, "a gift to young people and adults to be inspired to live their lives the way she did."

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