

UNCLE TOM'S MONTGOMERY COUNTY CABIN

By Michael Richman
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NEARLY A CENTURY AND A HALF ago, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a sentimental anti-slavery novel in which the book's principal character, Uncle Tom, was a faithful slave killed by a cruel master.

An instant success, the book sold 300,000 copies within a year of its release in 1852 and remained a bestseller until after the Civil War.

By delivering a passionate indictment of slavery, the book had intensified North-South antagonism in the prewar era. Northerners sympathized with the plight of slaves, while outraged Southerners questioned the book's accuracy. Upon meeting Stowe at the White House in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln greeted her as the "little woman who wrote the book that made this great war."

Uncle Tom's Cabin is linked to one of the Washington area's greatest historical secrets. The model for Uncle Tom was Josiah Henson, a slave for more than 30 years on a 500-acre plantation in what now is Bethesda. Unlike his fictional prototype, Henson escaped along the Underground Railroad into Canada, where he became a defiant abolitionist, celebrated evangelist, author, prosperous businessman and founder of a community, church and school for other former slaves.

Henson died in 1883 at 94 after publishing memoirs in 1849, 1858 and 1877 that provided some of the best narratives of slave life in American history.

All that remains of the plantation is a log cabin attached to a small, colonial-style house off Old Georgetown Road just south of Tilden Lane. During Henson's time, the cabin probably was the kitchen for plantation owner Isaac Riley, according to Roger Farquhar's 1962 book, *Historic Montgomery County, Maryland*. The extent to which Henson lived in the cabin is unclear, but his memoirs note that he slept

at least one night in the cabin, which contained a second floor or loft.

"After putting my horse in the stable," Henson wrote, "I retired to the kitchen, where my master told me I was to sleep for the night... that crowded room, with its earth floor, its filth and stench. The Negroes present were strangers to me. Full of gloomy reflections at my loneliness and the poverty-stricken aspect of the whole farm, I sat down... thinking how I could escape from the accursed spot."

Since 1963, Marcel and Hildegard Mallet-Prevost have owned the 1.25-acre property, which includes one of the few late 18th century frame homes standing in Montgomery County, says Mike Dwyer, historic resources manager for the Montgomery County Park and Planning Commission.

Last renovated in the 1930s, the house and cabin are on the county's Historic Preservation Master Plan. But few area residents know that the dwelling exists, Dwyer says, because it is privately owned and obscured on all sides by large maple and pine trees.

"We have very, very few eyewitness accounts of life in Montgomery County in the early period but certainly very vivid and detailed descriptions of one little corner of Montgomery County," he says, referring to the Riley plantation.

Josiah Henson wrote those descriptions.

Henson was born in 1789 in Port Tobacco in Charles County, Md., and sold as a child, separate from his mother, to Adam Robb, a tavern keeper near the Montgomery County Courthouse in Rockville. The county then had a population of about 18,000, of whom one-third were slaves, according to the Montgomery County Historical Society.

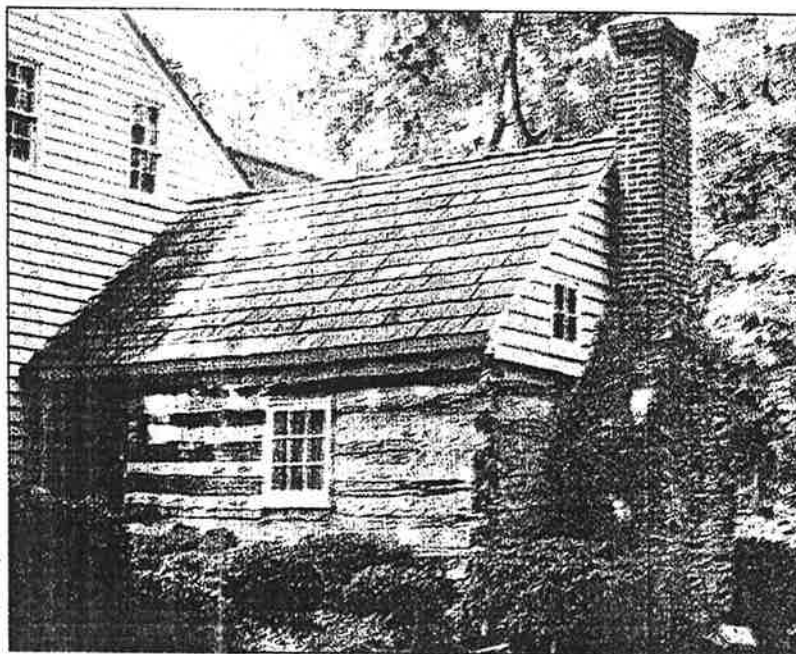
Robb soon traded Henson, in exchange for a horse-shoeing job, to Riley, who owned Henson's mother. The tall, strong and unusually alert Henson, nicknamed "Sic," gradually gained Riley's confidence. His owner moved him from plow to horse boy to overseer and then to "market man," a role often reserved for whites in the family.

Riley occasionally sent Henson, who could not read or write, to Georgetown and Washington markets to bargain with whites for his master's produce at top prices.

"There may be some question if [Henson] had a greater business savvy than Isaac Riley," says James Henson, a resident of Ellicott City, Md. Josiah Henson was an uncle of James Henson's great-grandfather. "Certainly, you just don't let any loyal, obedient slave bargain for prices and bring the money back."

Riley also took advantage of Henson's fighting brawn. Henson once wrote that a "tyrannical, barbarous" man named Bryce Litton got the better of Riley during a fight at a local tavern and that Riley called on Henson to rescue him.

An infuriated Litton ordered his house slaves to ambush and subdue Henson, whereupon Litton broke Henson's shoulder blades



This log cabin, now part of a modernized Bethesda house, probably was the kitchen of a plantation where Josiah Henson lived. He was the model for "Uncle Tom." A relative, James Henson, is at right.



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL RICHMAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

with an oak fence post. Disabled for five months, Henson could never again lift his hands above his head.

When Henson began to embrace Christianity in 1807, Riley allowed him to attend a sermon by an anti-slavery white preacher at Newport Mill, between Kensington and Garrett Park in Montgomery County. It was Henson's first exposure to the abolitionist movement.

Ironically for an antislavery movement, Henson wrote that "they would not let niggers into the meeting." Apparently receiving special permission, "at last I got in front of the door. I saw him with his hands raised, looking up to heaven, and he said with emphasis: 'Jesus Christ, the son of God, tasted death for every man; for the high, for the low, for the rich, for the poor, the bond, the free, the Negro in his chains, the man in gold and diamonds.'"

In the years that Henson served Riley, Montgomery County fell into an agricultural decline. Riley had financial hardships and nearly lost his slaves. In 1825, he sent 22 of them, including Henson, for safekeeping to his brother, Amos, in Davies County, Ky. There, Henson became a preacher and earned money, hoping to buy his freedom.

Eventually, Henson returned to Montgomery County with \$350, equivalent to \$4,800 in today's money. But Riley refused to let him go.

Henson returned to Kentucky and decided to escape to freedom with his wife and four young children. The fugitives traveled mostly by foot, reaching the shore of Lake Erie where a Scottish ship captain took them to Buffalo. From there, the family entered Canada on Oct. 28, 1830.

Henson became an active abolitionist and returned to the United States to help other slaves escape north. In the late 1830s, he and

other abolitionists bought 200 acres of land in Ontario and started the Dawn settlement, a place where runaway slaves could clear farms, create a lumber industry and build better lives.

Meanwhile, Henson traveled through New England, Canada and England preaching against slavery and sharing his dramatic life story. One person eager to meet him was Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had read his 1849 autobiography.

Stowe had heard other stories of runaway slaves when her father, a Calvinist minister, headed a theological seminary in Cincinnati. After moving to Maine in 1850, she met Henson as he was passing through New England on an anti-slavery tour.

Although some sources doubt that Henson furnished Stowe with characters for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Henson's memoirs support the belief. They note, for example, that he told Stowe of the savage Bryce Litton, who became the cruel "Simon Legree" in the book and beat Uncle Tom to death; Little Dinah, an impish slave girl on the Riley plantation who became the ingenious "Topsy," and the kind daughter of a Montgomery County neighbor who became "Little Eva."

"We went to Mrs. Stowe's house, and she was deeply interested in the story of my life and the misfortunes and had me narrate its

details to her," Henson wrote. "She was glad [my 1849 memoirs] had been published and hoped it would be of great service and would open the eyes of the people to the enormity of the crime of holding men in bondage."

"She manifested so much interest in me that I told her about the peculiarities of many slaveholders and the slaves in the region where I had lived for forty-two years."

At times, the novel's details vary from those of Henson's life. In addition to Uncle Tom's fictional death, Stowe wrote that the slave was sold from his Kentucky plantation to a New Orleans man and then to a cotton planter in Louisiana.

In real life, Henson escaped to avoid being sold into the Deep South, where working conditions were harsher than in the border states and gaining freedom was much more difficult, according to Tony Cohen, a Silver Spring resident and author of the 1994 book, *The Underground Railroad in Montgomery County: A History and Driving Guide*.

Whatever Stowe's sources, Southerners were incensed. They wrote rebuttals to local newspapers contending that the book misrepresented plantation life, and they said Stowe had never visited the South. One man even sent her a package containing the ear of a slave. To validate her story, Stowe wrote the 1853 book, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, identifying Josiah Henson as the prototype for Uncle Tom.

"She made Tom such a divine character that, if any person or institution dehumanized him, then that institution had to be horrible," says James Henson, who is writing a book on the Henson family. The family includes Matthew Henson, who accompanied Robert E. Peary on the 1909 expedition on which Peary claimed to have reached the North Pole.

"The book had the effect of incensing the South," James Henson said, "and it motivated the North to say, 'My goodness, if that institution could do something [evil] to such a wonderful man, we've got to put an end to it.'"

Stowe depicted Uncle Tom as having "characteristics of subservience," but the character was no "Uncle Tom" by any contemporary use of the term, says Edward Papenfuss, who teaches a course on race and gender at Johns Hopkins University.

The present-day image of an Uncle Tom originated from "slapstick" theater productions of the book that started before the Civil War and continued through the vaudeville era, he said. In those shows, whites playing slaves painted their faces black and showed extreme servility toward their masters.

Today, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is more popular in Canada and Europe than in the United States, says Cohen, who is completing his second book on the Underground Railroad. A museum has been established in Henson's honor at the house where he lived from 1789 to 1883 in Dresden, Ontario. Tens of thousands of Europeans visit it each year because *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is required reading in several European countries, according to Cohen.

"It's unfortunate many Americans don't know [Henson's] story," Cohen says. "There are many lessons to learn from his life—some positive, some negative. But he was a major historical figure and would hold as much interest in the minds of white people as black people."

Michael Richman is a communications manager at the Chemical Manufacturers Association in Arlington. He writes freelance articles on American history and sports.

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