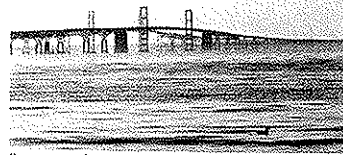


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## Cambridge, Maryland's uncommon destinies



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Posted by: Hudson

By **Renee S. Gordon**

"My claim against the U.S. is for three years' service as nurse and cook in hospitals, and as commander of Several men (eight or nine) as scouts during the late war of the rebellion, under directions and orders of Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War, and of several Generals."

--H. Tubman's 1898 Petition to the US Government

The Eastern Shore's Dorchester County Maryland, founded in the mid-1600s, is one of America's historic gems. The county has been the site of numerous historic events and has been home to more than its share of individuals whose lives and actions have impacted the nation's history. Dorchester is literally heart-shaped and is bordered by the Choptank River on the north, the Chesapeake Bay on the west and the counties of Caroline, Sussex, Talbot and Wicomico. It was named in honor of the Earl of Dorset a close friend of Maryland's founding family. [www.tourdorchester.org](http://www.tourdorchester.org)

The earliest recorded exploration of the Chesapeake took place in 1526 when the Spanish sailed into an area that appeared on later maps as Santa Maria. The first English explorer is believed to have been Captain John Smith 82 years later, followed in 1631 by the founding of a trading post and colony on Kent Island. Documents indicate that Europeans settled the Dorchester area by 1683 adjacent to the Nanticoke Indian Path.

Scholars continue to debate which factors helped shape the region's unique African American history and the fact that more fugitives escaped from this area than anywhere else in the country. What we do know is that in the first years of colonization most blacks, both enslaved and free, came from Virginia. This was of brief duration and soon the vast majority of slaves were brought directly from Africa as opposed to having been "seasoned" in the islands. The Royal African Company's monopoly of the African trade was rescinded in 1698 and the number of Africans being brought into the region exploded.

As early as 1639 the Colonial Assembly passed a law forcing all blacks in the colony to serve, "durante vita," as slaves for life. At this time the colony's total population did not exceed 400 so obviously they were institutionalizing the slave system to facilitate the growing number of tobacco plantations. By the onset of the Civil War African Americans made up 40 percent of the Eastern Shore's population with 20 percent being held in bondage. [www.easternshore.com](http://www.easternshore.com)

Cambridge, one of the oldest cities in Maryland, was originally the home of the Choptank Indians and the city, though founded in the 17th Century, was incorporated in 1796 and is situated on the site of the former Choptank Reservation. On July 1, 2003 Cambridge was designated as being a Maryland Main Street city and the 1,750-acre Cambridge Historic District contains 672 structures and one object of historic significance. The city is a great base for exploring the area and its history through a series of interactive tours.

James A. Michener, author of "Chesapeake," deemed Historic High Street one of the most beautiful streets in the nation and patterned his fictional city after Cambridge. High Street is lined with elegant homes built in the 1700s and 1800s.

The Harriet Tubman Museum and Educational Center, 424 Race Street, interprets the life and legacy of Dorchester's most famous resident through informational panels, photographs and a mural. Born Araminta Ross c. March 15, 1822, it is in this region that she was nurtured, grew and acquired and honed the skills that would enable her to become an UGRR conductor, nurse, soldier and Union spy. Here she learned the values of freedom, faith, family and community that would sustain her throughout her life. A gift shop on the premises is filled with books and educational materials.

There are several ways to trace Harriet's footsteps and each of them offers a special way of looking at Cambridge in the antebellum period.

The 65-ft. Skipjack Nathan of Dorchester offers scheduled heritage tours aboard Maryland's state boat. The traditional skipjack, the preferred Chesapeake Bay boat for oyster dredging, incorporates a 3-ft. draft, wide beam, and large, triangular sails. The sail up Cambridge Creek and in the Choptank River is a wonderful experience and the narrated tour takes you into the world of an 1850s port city.

Boats embark from Long Wharf the city's port of entry for goods and slaves and auctions were held along the waterfront. Just as the port was an entry into slavery it also functioned as a way to freedom as the enslaved gathered information from visiting sailors and hid aboard ships leaving port. [www.skipjack-nathan.org](http://www.skipjack-nathan.org)

The "Finding a Way to Freedom" driving tour takes you through the heart of the Chesapeake, along the new Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway and deep inside her world. This tour may be done in its entirety or you can stop and spend time at sites of particular interest. Currently there are 28 stops. [www.harriettubmanbyway.wordpress.com](http://www.harriettubmanbyway.wordpress.com)

Tours begin at the Dorchester County Visitor Center in Sailwinds Park. The facility is designed to replicate a ship sailing into the wind. On the lower level there is a museum that orients you to the history of the area. [www.tourdorchester.org](http://www.tourdorchester.org)

The Dorchester County Courthouse was constructed in 1854 on the site of an earlier structure. The auction block that was on the lawn was the site of the sale of Harriet's niece Kessiah and one of Tubman's most daring escapes. Samuel Green, a free black UGRR agent, was tried here in 1857 and sentenced to 10 years for owning a copy of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," the biggest selling book of the era. One year later Hugh Hazlett, an Irishman, was sentenced to 44 years in prison for his role as an UGRR conductor.

The Bucktown Village Store is one of the most iconic sites on the byway. Here Harriet received the blow to her head that resulted in health problems including narcolepsy and visions. The store is not original but has been replicated on the original foundation.

A historic marker indicates Brodess Farm, her childhood homesite. Recent research has shown this was not her birthplace as once believed.

From 1810 until 1830 black slaves and freedmen hand dug this seven-mile canal through the marshes to float timber to Madison Bay. Harriet and her father worked here and it is believed that here she learned her knowledge of the woods and marshes and the survival skills she employed later in life.

Church Creek was a maritime center in the early 1800s. At this location black workers help retrofit clipper ships to outrun British patrols capturing slavers as late as the 1830s and helped forge the cauldrons and shackles to be used on board.

Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge is 27,000-acres of woodlands, tidal marsh and freshwater ponds. The landscape looks almost exactly as it did to freedom seekers as they set out on their journey of liberation. Visitor options include the Wildlife Drive that is also accessible to cyclists and walkers, a photo blind, four additional trails, a 20-mile paddling trail and guests can hunt, fish and crab. Within the refuge you can view bald eagles, endangered Delmarva fox squirrels, ducks, geese, and the annual migration of more than 35,000 snow geese. [www.fws.gov/blackwater](http://www.fws.gov/blackwater)

I like to end the drive at the single lane Bestpitch Ferry Bridge spanning the Transquaking River. This wooden bridge provides a panoramic view of the marshlands that once hid escapees. Harriet also spoke of being sent here at the age of six to trap muskrats. It does not take much imagination to picture this tiny girl in the murky water longing for a better life, longing to be free.

When Harriet Tubman stepped out of Dorchester County she stepped into history and she remains a role model for justice seekers everywhere.

On November 1, 1864 Maryland freed its enslaved population but failed to grant full citizenship to blacks. At the end of the Civil War black churches used as schools were burned in Dorchester County and for the next century the struggle for equality would go on in subtle ways. In 1963 Gloria Richardson and the Cambridge Nonviolent Action group established the first homegrown campaign for equal rights beyond the borders of the Deep South. After a confrontation between the police force and the protestors the National Guard was summoned. Ultimately Attorney General Robert Kennedy helped reach the "Cambridge Accord" promising school integration and equal access to housing and jobs. The Cambridge Civil Rights Walking Tour takes visitors to the relevant sites with a narration of the events.

Cambridge, Maryland is ground zero for information on Harriet Tubman and the city presents a series of events and activities in her honor. Chesapeake College in conjunction with other institutions hosts a yearly Harriet Tubman UGRR Conference that is open to the public and information is available online. [www.tubmanugrr.net](http://www.tubmanugrr.net)

Cambridge is a three-hour, one-tank of gas, drive from Philadelphia. History lives here and you absolutely must visit. [www.ci.cambridge.md.us](http://www.ci.cambridge.md.us)