

Tubman Underground Railroad center on Shore gets funding

Construction slated to be complete by 2013

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Harriet Tubman has long inspired a deep sense of pride among Marylanders, especially in the rural communities of the Eastern Shore, where the former slave was born and led dozens to freedom on the Underground Railroad.

While her story is taught to schoolchildren across the country and a small storefront museum here pays homage to Tubman, descendants and historians have been waiting to see her memorialized in a grander fashion. The state announced Tuesday that it had secured enough money for a state park and visitor center bearing Tubman's name, cheering advocates for the long-planned project. It is slated for completion in 2013 — the 100th anniversary of Tubman's death.



Members of the Ross family, who are direct descendants of Harriet... (Baltimore Sun photo by Barbara Haddock Taylor)

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"It is awesome," said Valerie Manokey, 75, Tubman's oldest-living descendant in Maryland and a retired teacher's aide from Cambridge. "It's like something inside you that was growing, and you knew someone would see the significance and it would blossom and now you see the buds on the tree. I pray that I'll be here to see it."

Lawmakers praised Tubman's legacy during this year's General Assembly session, when some proposed sending a statue of her to the National Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol. Legislation proposed in the House and Senate would have swapped Tubman in for John Hanson, a Southern Maryland merchant and early president of the Continental Congress who himself owned slaves. It failed to gain majority support.

Already in downtown Cambridge, the Harriet Tubman Museum and Educational Center tells the story of her life on the Brodess Farm in Bucktown. Artifacts and paintings illustrate how she eventually ran away to Pennsylvania and helped free others. But Tubman supporters have pushed for more than two decades for the state park and visitor center, lobbying for a large-scale, state-sanctioned commemoration that highlights Tubman's relationship with nature and the rural Maryland landscape that she navigated on freedom missions.

In 2007, the state acquired 17.3 acres of land for the state park, located about 10 miles south of Cambridge and adjacent to the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. But without federal funding — a prospect that grew dimmer as the economy worsened — it stalled.

The state ultimately used \$8.5 million in funding from the Federal Transportation Enhancement Program, a discretionary fund awarded to states from the U.S. Department of Transportation. The rest of the \$21 million project will be paid for with other federal grants and state money.

"It's a large amount of money in a very tough fiscal time," said Kristin Saunders Evans, assistant secretary for land resources at the state Department of Natural Resources. "It's been piecemeal putting this together over several years."

The 15,000-square-foot visitor center will house an exhibit hall and interactive displays, with walking trails and a spiritual reflection garden on the grounds.

"It's been a long time coming," said Clara Small, a history professor at Salisbury University who has studied Tubman and African-American history on the Eastern Shore. "We're cognizant of the fact that the state has no money. The federal government has no money. So it's just relief and joy to know that it's finally happening."

Tubman was born a slave in Dorchester County circa 1820. She escaped slavery when she was 27, and for more than a decade acted as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, a network of abolitionists who ferried slaves northward toward freedom. Accounts estimate that she made more than 10 trips back to Maryland to rescue other slaves from bondage. Tubman later served as a spy during the Civil War. She died in New York in 1913.

"Harriet Tubman was willing to work through the darkness and the cruelty of her time to move her neighbors forward and her country forward," said Gov. Martin O'Malley, a Democrat, in announcing the funding at the museum. "There is no more powerful story."

Donald Pinder, president of the Harriet Tubman Organization, which operates the museum and has pushed for the state park and visitor center, said he hopes the project helps push forward other efforts that have stalled.

In 2009, the National Park Service endorsed a plan to designate sites associated with Tubman in Maryland and New York as part of its system, but the plan has failed to attract the formal consideration of Congress. U.S. Sens. Barbara Mikulski and Ben Cardin, both Democrats, are leading the effort for federal designation of land in Dorchester, Caroline and Talbot counties. The federal government has already named a byway that follows the paths of the Underground Railroad — stretching from Maryland to Canada — after Tubman.

State officials said Tubman's life story will serve not only as a teaching tool, but they hope her legacy will be an economic incubator, drawing an estimated 200,000 annual visitors to the state park and drawing \$20 million per year into the local economy. The construction phase of the project will create about 225 jobs, with 10 full-time employees staffing the center.

"The state has always been talking about this — forever," said Pinder. "Finally they put the money up first instead of talking. There's not a more deserving lady."