



RONA KOPELL

On the trail of Harriet Tubman

By Bo Smolka
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I'm crouched along a creek bank near Linchester Mill on Maryland's Eastern Shore, trying to stay low as the last light of dusk is swallowed up. An escaping slave might have crouched in this exact spot, waiting for the cover of darkness to make a harrowing dash to the Leverton House about a mile away.

Linchester Mill and the Leverton House — a documented Underground Railroad safe house — are two of 45 stops on the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway, a scenic, DIY-tour in Maryland and Delaware that highlights the Underground Railroad and its most famous conductor.

Tubman is enjoying a spike in popularity with the release of "Harriet," a major biopic starring Tony Award-winning actress Cynthia Erivo. This comes a few years after the US Treasury under President Obama announced plans to have Tubman replace Andrew Jackson on the \$20 bill, although the Trump administration has put that on hold. And it comes two years after the \$21 million Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Visitor Center opened in Church Creek, Md., not far from where Tubman was raised.

Born Araminta Ross in 1822, Tubman took her mother's name after marrying John Tubman, a free black man. She escaped slavery in 1849 and settled in Philadelphia, returning to Maryland about a dozen times to deliver some 70 others to freedom.

Relying on keen knowledge of the local terrain and waterways, incomparable guile, and the compassion of area Quakers, Tubman guided many passengers all the way to St. Catharine's, Ontario. That put them beyond the reach of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, a federal law requiring police to return escaped slaves caught in their jurisdiction.

"I never ran my train off the track," Tubman famously said, "and I never lost a passenger."

The Tubman byway covers roughly 225 miles from the riverside town of Cambridge — about 85 miles southeast of Baltimore — to Philadelphia, traversing geography that has changed little since Tubman's time.

The Choptank River still spills into the Chesapeake Bay near Cambridge. Miles of fields are still farmed, tabletop-flat terrain interrupted by the occasional stand of maple, oak, and loblolly pine. Ospreys still nest and bald eagles still soar over fingers of brackish water that define Maryland's Eastern Shore.

Stops on the byway are well marked, and a printed brochure and downloadable app make for easy, informative navigation.

The small, storefront Harriet Tubman Museum in Cam-



DENEEN L. BROWN/WASHINGTON POST

Top: A mural of Harriet Tubman in Cambridge, Md.; Left: A historic marker in Bucktown, Md., stands outside the property once owned by Edward Brodess, where Harriet Tubman (above) was enslaved.

slave broke free. The overseer hurled a 2-pound weight toward the man, striking Tubman. The injury fractured her skull and caused Tubman health prob-

lems the rest of her life.

Proprietor Matt Meredith, whose family has owned the store and surrounding land for most of the past four centuries, shows me a weight, about the size of a hockey puck, like the one that struck Tubman. Tours are available by appointment.

Driving the two-lane ribbon of road north from the Bucktown store in early autumn, I'm framed by browning cornstalks on both sides, but this area's link to the water is omnipresent. Fishermen try their luck off a bridge while the call of gulls echoes overhead. Suddenly a great blue heron bursts out of the roadside marsh grass.

The byway has a stop at Choptank Landing, less than a mile from where Tubman's parents lived in a crook of the river known as Poplar Neck. That's where Tubman executed her own escape and where she returned to lead three brothers north on Christmas night 1854.

The water was an impediment to slaves who couldn't swim, but free black mariners involved in shipping lumber and crops from this area proved to be a key conduit.

Escaping slaves also relied heavily on the area's abolitionist Quaker population, including Jacob and Hannah Leverton, whose former house sits down a dirt driveway in the town of Preston.

"We don't know if Tubman was in that house," said Kate Clifford Larson, a Massachusetts-based Tubman biographer, "but we do know that some enslaved person who was running away was in that house."

A sign near the byway marker announces "No trespassing," but current owner Mick McCrea says, "It's sort of open by appointment."

McCrea says visitors have been known to rub the bricks of the house, overcome with emotion.

"I've had people take photographs of . . . the North Star, and the way it shows up over the house," he adds. "It all has to do with the directional use of the Underground Railroad."

The byway threads northeast to Wilmington, Del., where Tubman-Garrett Riverfront Park pays tribute to Tubman and Thomas Garrett, a Delaware Quaker credited with helping more than 2,500 slaves escape.

At the park's entrance, the sculpture "Unwavering Courage in the Pursuit of Freedom" by Mario Chiodo shows Garrett holding a lamp and pointing the way, while Tubman stands beside him, a baby in her arms and escaping slaves crouched behind her.

Garrett's arm and Tubman's gaze point north — toward Pennsylvania and freedom.

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Tubman-related sites

Harriet Tubman National Historical Park, Auburn, N.Y. Tours are available from the visitors center near the Harriet Tubman Residence, where she lived her later years. She is buried at nearby Fort Hill Cemetery. (www.nps.gov/hart)

National Museum of African American History & Culture, Washington, D.C. The three-year-old museum has become one of the most popular of all Smithsonian museums. An exhibit on slavery and the abolitionist movement includes Tubman artifacts. (nmaahc.si.edu)

National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, Cincinnati This museum sits on the banks of the Ohio River, a dividing line between slave states and free states. Topical films are shown in the Harriet Tubman Theater. (www.freedomcenter.org)

bridge — not to be confused with the state park visitor center — should not be missed, especially with the addition of "Take My Hand," a 14-foot tall mural of Tubman installed behind the museum this year by local artist Michael Rosato.

A photo went viral showing a 3-year-old girl touching Tub-

man's right hand, which seems to reach out from the wall.

"Anyone who steps out that back door is amazed," museum volunteer Bill Jarmon says. "It knocks you right off your feet."

The mural has proved to be a boon for the museum, which charges no admission but receives a portion of proceeds on reprints, available inside.

Ten miles south of Cambridge, the 10,000-square-foot visitor center at Harriet Tubman State Park documents Tubman's work along the Underground Railroad — the clandestine route that escaping slaves used as they headed north — but also her accomplishments as a Civil War nurse and spy, and her role in the push for women's suffrage.

Opened on March 10, 2017 — Harriet Tubman Day — it has drawn more than 215,000 visitors, surpassing its projected annual attendance of 75,000.

Tubman's childhood was spent enslaved on the Brodess Farm just a couple of miles away. No buildings remain, but a roadside plaque documents the site's significance. From there, it's a short drive along the byway to the Bucktown Village Store, refurbished in the late 1990s to commemorate Tubman's "First Act of Defiance."

At the store on an errand, the 13-year-old Tubman was ordered to help tie up a slave who had left his farm without permission. She refused, and the



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