

Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park

National Park Service
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Maryland



Harriet Tubman's Act of Resistance in the Bucktown Store



Bucktown Store NPS Photo / Beth Parnicza

Introduction

Built in the 1820s, the Bucktown Store is located on Bucktown Road in Dorchester County, Maryland. This historic building is stop number 17 on the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway. The Bucktown Store is in its original location where Harriet Tubman (born in 1822- died in 1913) refused to help an overseer restrain an enslaved man to prevent his escape. The events that occurred at the Bucktown Store affected Tubman throughout her life.

The Community of Bucktown

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, Bucktown Road was part of a larger network of commerce in Dorchester County, a region known for its shipbuilding, agriculture and timber industries. These commercial ventures attracted watermen, planters, slaveholders, and other settlers looking for opportunities and wealth.

In the mid-1700s, white settlers acquired large parcels of land for farming, husbandry, and timbering in Bucktown. They purchased many slaves to work the land, and generations of families, both black and white, were raised here. From the late 1700s to the Civil War, commerce grew as more merchants and planters moved to the area. By 1794, Bucktown was placed on the county map.

During the 1700s, a few land-rich white

families owned most of the property in the Bucktown area. Over time, they sold smaller lots to other families, including the Scotts, Mills, and Brodesses. Edward Brodess Jr., who later enslaved Harriet Tubman and her family, inherited 250 acres of this land in 1823 and built his home nearby. Like some small landowners, the Brodesses had more enslaved people than they could use on their farm, so they hired them out to other farmers as temporary, extra labor. Most slaveholders in the Eastern Shore of Maryland owned less than 8 slaves, and this sometimes fostered the separation of families across two or more plantations and over long distances. While hiring out, enslaved people were provided some mobility and an opportunity to communicate with other enslaved and free blacks. While they might learn ways of escape, it also meant painful separations from loved ones.

The Bucktown Store

The Bucktown Store started business in the 1820s. After 40 years in operation, the store needed restorations. In the 1860s, the restorations included an expanded floor plan. Later, Victorian era design elements, and a porch, shown in the picture above, were added. Despite alterations, some original fabric remains in the building, including the foundation, and some of the flooring, beams, and walls. During its operation, the store sold kitchen wares, china, textiles, medicines, and dry goods like sugar, flour, and corn meal.

The Bucktown Store was managed by a succession of store keepers, beginning with Horatio North, who advertised goods for sale in the local paper in 1826. A store keeper's

house was built next door by another owner, John Mills, in the 1830s. It was the only store in operation in Bucktown until the late 1840s or early 1850s, when a store and a blacksmith shop were built across the intersection. The Scott family probably built the Big House, located southeast of the store, during the 1790s. This home is part of an original crossroads landscape that Tubman would have seen during her years in Bucktown.

Sometimes, slaveholders sent their slaves to purchase their goods for them. The Bucktown Store is where Harriet Tubman was sent to purchase goods, and on one shopping trip, she refused to help an overseer restrain an enslaved man.



NPS Photo / Beth Parnicza
Interior of the Bucktown Store in 2017. In the 1860s, restorations were added to the exterior and interior of the building. The current proprietors are the Merediths.



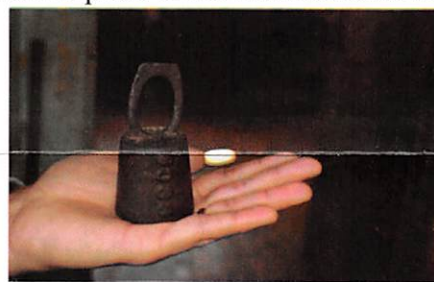
NPS Photo / Chanda Powell
Inside the Bucktown Store are a scale and counter weights that were used to weigh dry goods.

Harriet Tubman Resisted

During slavery, enslaved people resisted in various ways. Some slowed down their work, others broke equipment, some organized armed slave revolts, and others ran away. An enslaved man from the Barnett farm in Bucktown decided to leave his work and go to the Bucktown Store. An overseer from the farm followed him and ordered him to return to his slaveholder. At the same time, Tubman, who had been hired to work for the Barnett family, and the Barnetts' cook went to the store to purchase some items.

Before leaving for the store, teenaged Tubman wrapped a shawl around her head to cover her hair. When Tubman got to the store, a skirmish was taking place between an enslaved man and the overseer. The overseer held the enslaved man down and

demanded Tubman help restrain him. She refused. The enslaved man broke free and ran away. To prevent his escape, the overseer picked up a two-pound counter weight and threw it at the enslaved man. He missed and hit young Tubman in the head, instead. The devastating blow caused a severe injury that almost killed her. The weight fractured a portion of her skull, and drove a piece of the shawl into her head.



NPS Photo / Chanda Powell
Harriet Tubman was hit in the head with a 2 pound weight that almost killed her.

The Impact on Harriet Tubman's Life

Tubman received no professional medical attention and was sent back to work, still bleeding, but she was too weak and collapsed. Edward Brodess sent Tubman to her mother, Rit, who did everything she could to nurse her daughter back to health. For the rest of her life, Tubman suffered from epileptic seizures. Tubman was known to fall asleep in mid conversation, and often felt lethargic. After her head injury, Tubman had hallucinations and spiritual visions, which strengthened her connection to God.

In 1904, Harriet Tubman told biographer Emma Telford about the incident at the Bucktown Store. According to Telford, Tubman recalled that "They carried me to the house all bleeding and fainting. I had no bed, no place to lie down on at all, and they lay me on the seat of the loom, and I stayed there all that day and next." Brodess tried to sell her, but no one would buy her in that condition. Tubman remembered the buyers "said they wouldn't give a sixpence for me."

Tubman's head injury continued to give her severe headaches and seizures, sometimes causing her to fall unconscious, and experience vivid dreams and nightmares well into her elderly years. In the late 1890s, Tubman underwent brain surgery in Boston at the Massachusetts General Hospital with the hope it would relieve the constant headaches and seizures. Tubman felt some relief, but was not completely cured and continued to struggle.

Despite Tubman's disability, it did not stop her from becoming a conductor on the Underground Railroad, a Civil War scout, nurse, spy, and military leader. Tubman continued to advocate for women's suffrage as a member of the National Woman's Suffrage Association, co-founded by Elizabeth C. Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. In Auburn, New York she opened a home for elderly African Americans. Tubman's passion for freedom and equality gave her strength throughout her long life. She passed away at the age of 91 on March 10, 1913.

Sources

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