

Essay for Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Monument

Submitted by
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January 7, 2014

It was an honor to engage with the legacy of Harriet Tubman and to participate in the Scholar's Roundtable in November of 2013. The discussions stimulated by the questions provided were both illuminating and thought-provoking. I was heartened to learn that more community leaders and interested—and not so interested—parties would be included in future vetting processes. As I indicated during our discussions, inclusion should cover a wide range of voices and opinions, sympathetic as well as challenging. Often, the challenging participants force new ideas and lay paths for new directions.

“Ownership” of the legacy of Harriet Tubman is shifting away from the local community as they realize that her story is both a national and global treasure. Within that context, however, Tubman will always remain an important local icon and I believe it would benefit both the National Park Service and the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Monument to be very mindful of Tubman's local importance. Tubman's legacy can be used to strengthen and empower the local community, particularly those whose families have been rooted on the Eastern Shore for generations.

For this essay, I will elaborate on each of the four questions posed to the scholars or reiterate points I believe are important to the interpretation of Tubman's significance. Many of the points I raise around literacy or religious freedom, for example, move beyond the literal story but were not part of the original questions

posed for the Roundtable Scholars. State laws and regulations as well as slaveholder conventions shaped the lives of Tubman and the people who surrounded her on the Eastern Shore, enslaved and free. It is important to provide the local, county and state context which is often missing from the Tubman narrative. This is particularly important given the ambiguous and changing nature of slavery both across the state of Maryland and in association with the state's relationship to other slave states. Few absolutes exist around slavery in Maryland. By setting the Tubman story within such a narrative frame, the visitor will be better able to understand the outside forces that dictated Tubman's world.

1. Building Communities

Although the official histories of the local Black churches take shape largely after emancipation, it is important to direct emphasis toward the Black community that was there in Dorchester County during Tubman's time. These community members gave shape to Tubman's life and offered aid during her active years working through the Underground Railroad. One of the most important research questions should be directed toward understanding the free black community that was there during Tubman's time and into which she married when she wed John Tubman. That research would contribute important new scholarship that has been missing from the Tubman narrative. This is particularly true for the area around the Choptank River between Skeleton Creek and Marshy Creek where Tubman's father and mother had been living among the free blacks in the area, as well as the area near Mt. Pleasant Church.

Even though Tubman spent the greater part of her life away from Maryland, it is this land in Dorchester and Caroline Counties and this state that gave shape to the woman that she became. The family bonds forged in Maryland were extremely important to her. She was influenced by her nuclear family, particularly her father, even though the family was forced to live apart. The heartbreaking story of the Christmas escape, with Rit on the lookout for her children coming for Christmas dinner provides an important glimpse into the family bonds they were able to build despite and in the face of slavery. This is an important point to highlight. Often, slavery as it was conventionally presented, particularly by labor historians, overlooked or minimized the very deep human relationships that were formed. Evidence of the family bonds repeatedly emerge through slave narratives and Tubman's story is no different. Therefore, emphasis on family ties and local community bonds should be woven throughout the Tubman interpretation. These two factors define the motivating forces that shaped Tubman's later life. Further research is into the lives of Blacks clustered in the Madison, White Marsh, Smithville areas of Dorchester County should further define Tubman's world and the experiences of the free blacks who lived there. This work, in turn, should bring a different understanding of how free blacks were operating on the Underground Railroad on the Eastern Shore (see LaRoche).

Separate black churches did not flourish on the Eastern Shore, although there was a pre Civil-War AME church in Cambridge, in part because of restrictions and convention prohibiting such religious gatherings. Once slavery ended, black churches were among the first institutions to formally emerge. The congregations that formed the early black churches, however, were together and anchored in black communities

and perhaps in white churches before the war. Again, conventional history has not delved into pre-Civil war congregations but the early histories of Malone's and Bazzel Church, for example, might prove fruitful in this regard. A deeper analysis of the black community existing during Tubman's time will draw the current community that has continued to reside on the Eastern Shore into the Tubman narrative even though at the moment, there is incomplete understanding of the genealogical record.

2. Anchoring the Spirit

"The ghostly immanences and apparitions" is a local story that will need to be developed from local understanding. I think the use of the term, "Tubman's 'Unseen Presence'" used in Question 2 is misleading. The Tubman interview in Blassingame's *Slave Testimony* (461) says: "Her whole soul was filled with awe of the mysterious Unseen Presence, which thrilled her with such depths of emotion, that all other care and fear vanished." By this sentence, I would understand that Tubman is referring to and was inspired by the higher power and presence of God both in nature and beyond.

Tubman's larger spiritual life can be understood through her life's work and dedication. In *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, Sarah Bradford (54) includes a testimonial letter from Franklin Sanborn in which he observed that Tubman's "dreams and visions, misgivings and forewarnings, ought not to be omitted in any life of her, particularly those relating to John Brown." Bradford says of the "dreams and visions mentioned in this letter, the writer might have given many wonderful instances; but it was thought best not to insert anything which . . . might bring discredit upon the story.

When these turns of somnolency come upon Harriet, she imagines that her 'spirit' leaves her body, and visits other scenes and places, not only in this world, but in the world of spirits. And her ideas of these scenes show, to say the least of it, a vividness of imagination seldom equaled in the soarings of the most cultivated minds."

Bradford's comments began the characterizations of a spiritually possessed Tubman on the edges of sanity. Bradford related one of Tubman's descriptions, "which no human imagination could have conceived, it would seem, unless in dream or vision. There was a wild poetry in these descriptions which seemed to border almost on inspiration, but by many they might be characterized as the ravings of insanity. All that can be said is, however, if this woman is insane, there has been a wonderful 'method in her madness'" (56). So from the beginning of Tubman's public persona, Bradford destabilized understanding and derided Tubman's spiritual life. Kate Clifford Larson (43) is a less harsh: "The head injury also coincided with an explosion of religious enthusiasm and vivid imagery in the young slave woman. Tubman broke out, often unexpectedly into loud and excited religious praising of a life-time of potent dreams and visions that, *she claimed*, foretold the future. Some of her dreams eventually took on an important role in Tubman's life, influencing not only her own course of action but also the way other people viewed her" (emphasis added). Larson lays the spiritual quality of Tubman's life at the feet of her head injury and bundles the dreams together into the symptoms of temporal lobe epilepsy which helps explain them away. Does that diagnosis, if true, diminish or explain away this very consistent spiritual quality of Tubman's being?

Although historians eschew presentism, a spiritual reading of Tubman's prophetic

dreams and forebodings can be easily understood through the lens of contemporary spiritual rhetoric. In today's society, "gut reactions" are highly valued. The gift of prophecy, whether through the form of dreams or visions knows no ethnic boundaries and springs from a universal understanding of spiritual awareness. Characterizing Tubman's spirituality along ethnic traditions or merely as a result of a head injury should be carefully considered. I would suggest that all the sources such as Blassingame, Conrad, Bradford and other interviews, be reread and rethought in a quest to gain a *serious* and accurate interpretative understanding of Tubman's spiritual life.

3. Paths Toward Freedom and Resistance

As was mentioned at the roundtable, Tubman returned to both Dorchester and Caroline Counties for her rescue missions. Of all the questions, current scholarship has shed the greatest light on this subject. Once the project gains a better understanding of the workings of the free black communities on the Eastern Shore, this question can be answered with greater accuracy. Two locations that also deserve further scholarship are Baltimore and Cape May. Although it is clear that Baltimore is an important transit point for Tubman, few details have emerged. Is there more that can be learned about her work in Baltimore? Is there more to Cape May than merely using it as a place of employment?

4. Sharing Knowledge

As I mentioned during the scholar's roundtable, I am quite troubled by the

sentence: “Though illiterate, Tubman’s intelligence and acuity are evident . . .” If this project can begin to address, deconstruct, and correct the general tendency to conflate the inability to read or write with a lack of intelligence, that would be a true contribution. Although no anti-literacy laws appear for the State of Maryland, evidence of attempts to acquire literacy on the part of the enslaved was met with severe and violent punishment. Maryland slaveholders often operated by convention rather than law. Both education and literacy were restricted. One rumor had it “that a [N]egro school-master at Cambridge had been spirited away by the ‘Georgia buyers.’ As preventives of [N]egro schools these things were quite effective” (Wright 1971: 207).

The absence of anti-literacy laws against the enslaved population does not connote acceptance of literacy for the captives. In their narratives, Frederick Douglass, J. W. C. Pennington and Josiah Henson discuss the punishments that befell them when the slaveholder learned of their attempts to learn to read. The withholding of literacy is very different from the inability to acquire literacy and I believe that those distinctions must be clearly drawn and the point clearly reinforced in order to better understand Tubman and the imposed constraints placed on her life and on the lives of blacks in the region. The question of why slaveholders felt the need, indeed were compelled to withhold literacy from those they held in slavery is a deep and important line of inquiry and reveals the tacit understanding of the intellectual capacity of those held captive in bondage. The same can be said by extension to the uneven policies around education for the black population of the state and on the Eastern Shore. These are important contexts that must be explored in order to give an accurate picture of life on the Eastern Shore and in

the State of Maryland before the Civil War. One author asserts (and I am sure there are others) that “the General Assembly invariably greeted all efforts to promote a ‘liberal common school education’ by rebuffing them. Too much education among the masses [black and white] could prove dangerous to the control exercised by the oligarchy” (Wagandt 2004: 51)

Final Words

There is a genealogy of memory radiating from Bazzel Church in the 1860s to the Tubman Organization, which is now being handed off to the National Park Service. The community in Dorchester County has always celebrated Tubman’s legacy and kept her memory alive in their own way. In part, this important local narrative grew out of African American families and churches and their networks. The struggle went forth on behalf of the local people to preserve her memory, however imperfectly. Black church groups have maintained her memory and the threat of a purely secularized Tubman might be a worrisome prospect. The torch of Tubman’s light was carried forth from here and should continue to radiate out from here to all corners of the globe, from this place. It is now time for Dorchester County to officially give Tubman to a world that adopted her years if not centuries ago.

Harriet Tubman’s life story exemplifies her altruism, not only toward her family but also toward her fellow man. The challenge is to present this humanitarian woman in a way that honors her extraordinariness within the commonplace occurrences of her life. In Sanborn’s (55) endorsement letter, he goes on to say, “she has accomplished her

purposes with a coolness, foresight, patience, and wisdom, which in a white man would have raised him to the highest pitch of reputation.” How did an enslaved woman who was never taught to read or write, find nobility, courage and honor inside a system of chattel slavery? Given the limitations imposed by her lack of literacy, how was she able to consistently and so effectively outthink and outmaneuver her oppressors? These are not frequently probed questions that when asked and answered will strengthen interpretations of her life.

Selected Annotated Bibliography

Blassingame, John w. ed. *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1977.

Contains an interview with Tubman.

Bradford, Sarah T. *Harriet, The Moses of Her People*. Electronic edition of the 1886 original. Chapel Hill: Wilson Annex, University of North Carolina, 1995.

_____. *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*. Auburn, NY: W.J. Moses, 1869.

Although several recent biographies now exist, the two Bradford works will always be the entry point into Tubman's life.

Cornelius, Janet Duitman, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South*. Baton Rouge: University of South Carolina Press, 1992.

This work takes a broad look at slavery and literacy in the American South before the Civil War.

de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America, Vol. 1*. New York: Library of America, 2004.

Pages 410-11 discuss anti-literacy and slavery.

Fields, Barbara Jeanne. *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

Contains data on free blacks on the Eastern Shore that may be useful in putting the experiences of the free black population of Dorchester County in state and national contexts.

Henson, Josiah. *"Truth is Stranger than Fiction": An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson (Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom")*, From 1789 to 1879. John Lobb, ed. Boston, 1879.

Henson discusses his own quest for literacy and indicates the slaveholder's violent reaction upon discovery of Henson's attempts.

Horton, Lois E. *Harriet Tubman and the Fight for Freedom: A Brief History with Documents* New York: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2013.

This work offers another biographer's interpretation of Tubman's life. A chronology of Tubman's life, along with questions for consideration that put her life in the context of abolitionism, the Underground Railroad and the Civil War.

Humez, Jean M. *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories*.
Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.

A very useful reference volume for documents, newspaper articles and documentary references to Tubman's life.

LaRoche, Cheryl Janifer. *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014.

Contains a general discussion of free black communities and their relationship to the Underground Railroad and to the black church. Should provide useful contextual information and a frame for thinking about communities.

McKelvey, Kay Najiyah. "Early Black Dorchester, 1776-1870: A History of the Struggle of African-Americans in Dorchester County, Maryland To Be Free To Make Their Own Choices." Ph. D. diss. University of Maryland, 1991.

An important study of black life on the Eastern Shore. This dissertation provides a solid background for the establishment of black churches and education imperatives.

Okoye, Nkeiru. "When I Crossed that Line to Freedom."

Many important African American historical resources are reinterpreted in the artistic realm. This two act theatrical work demonstrates the range of interpretations that Tubman's life inspires.

<http://www.nypl.org/events/programs/2013/12/09/harriet-tubman-when-i-cross>

[ed-line-freedom](#)

Pennington, J. W. C. *The Fugitive Blacksmith ; or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States*. London: Charles Gilpin, 1849.

Pennington discusses literacy and being held in slavery in Maryland.

Wagandt, Charles Lewis. *The Mighty Revolution: Negro Emancipation in Maryland, 1862-1864*. Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 2004.

Although the temporal range is outside the Tubman years in Maryland, text that can be used to help set the context for the State of Maryland.

Wellman, Judy. "Uncovering the Freedom Trail in Auburn and Cayuga County, NY." Historical New York Research Associates, 2004-05.

This study contains information about many of the homes and places that the Tubman family inhabited in New York state.

<http://www.cayugacounty.us/Portals/0/history/ugrr/report/index.html>
<http://www.cayugacounty.us/portals/0/history/ugrr/report/PDF/5g.pdf>

Wright, James M. *The Free Negro in Maryland, 1634-1860*. New York: Octagon Books, 1971.

An overview, survey work that takes a brief look at many aspects of life for free blacks in Maryland before the Civil War.