

Honoring the Legacy of an Abolitionist Hero

The Josiah Henson Visitor Center Opens in Maryland

By Karen Schulte and Matt Velky

The Montgomery County Department of Parks has recently completed an important restoration and expansion project at the Josiah Henson Museum and Park in North Bethesda, Maryland. The historical property, which honors the life and legacy of noted abolitionist Josiah Henson, now features a new visitor center to complement the park's early 19th-century home and mid-19th-century log kitchen. The home and kitchen have also been fully restored and transformed with comprehensive new exhibits and interpretive elements.

Set within a busy suburban community just outside Washington, D.C., the park preserves approximately three acres of the former Isaac Riley plantation, where Henson was enslaved for many years until he escaped to Canada in 1830. The historical home—known as the Riley-Bolton House—and log kitchen wing are the only remaining

building remnants of the plantation. With the rehabilitation of both structures, along with the addition of the new visitor center, the Department of Parks is now able to offer a comprehensive chronicle of Henson's life, as well as an overview of what life was like as an enslaved person on a 19th-century Maryland plantation.

An Inspired Leader

Born enslaved in 1789 in Charles County, Maryland, Josiah Henson was separated from his family at a young age. He labored on the Riley plantation from 1795 until 1830, when he escaped to Canada with his wife and four children by following the Underground Railroad.

Henson, who had become a Methodist preacher while still enslaved, established a Black settlement in Canada, and began his remaining life's

work as an abolitionist. He travelled and lectured widely, and as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, he assisted many others to escape. In 1849, Henson published his autobiography, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself*. The book is widely believed to have inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-selling novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Transforming the Plantation Site

The Riley-Bolton House is estimated to have been constructed between 1800 and 1815. Between 1850 and 1851, the log-house kitchen wing was added. The wood-frame home was renovated in the late 1930s in a Colonial Revival style. Both buildings appear on the National Register of Historic Places and serve as the centerpiece



The Josiah Henson Museum and Park features interpretive exhibits in the restored home and log kitchen, as well as throughout the grounds of the former plantation.

of the park experience for visitors. Recognizing the significance of this historical place and Henson's remarkable life, the Montgomery County Department of Parks determined that a comprehensive restoration was in order, along with the addition of a stand-alone visitor center.

The county selected the firm of Ziger|Snead Architects, supported by the mechanical/electrical engineering firm of Mueller Associates, to design the renovation of the historical buildings, as well as the new visitor center. Additional design consultants include Floura Teeter Landscape Architects, AMT Engineering for civil engineering, Simpson Gumpertz & Heger for structural engineering, and Jensen Hughes for fire and life safety systems.

The home and log kitchen wing now accommodate exhibits, created by Proun Design, that detail Josiah Henson's life, what it was like to work as an enslaved person on a plantation, the risks of escape, and the journey along the Underground Railroad. "This museum and park honor a man who was truly remarkable," says Steve Ziger, FAIA, a partner with Ziger|Snead

Architects. "It was important to place the visitor center on the site in such a way that it would reinforce exploration and discovery. Together, the buildings are scaled as a village of small houses.

"The family house is clad in white, so we decided to design the exterior of the visitor center in a dark cedar shake material that related to the log kitchen, as a way of referencing and honoring Reverend Henson. The form of the visitor center also works in dialogue with the house and kitchen. We used plywood on the interior of the visitor center, which speaks to the craft and materiality of the kitchen. Outside, there is seating crafted from locally hewn trees, which is also a visual reference to the kitchen."

Ziger notes that the house and the kitchen are part of a larger historical site, which also informed the overall approach to preparing the property for more visitors, including school groups. "We worked closely with Floura Teeter, the landscape architect, to devise a path to orient visitors. It was challenging to work around the site's many architectural remnants, including an old road that was discovered. It is interesting

to have this log kitchen, house, and the archaeological remnants of this important site set within this busy community context."

A Delicate Installation

Ziger says the interior restoration work also required a meticulous design approach, as the home and kitchen remain as the most important historical elements. "Mueller Associates was challenged to incorporate the mechanical systems and make them disappear," he adds.

The original plans had to be consistently modified because, once the walls were opened up, it was a Pandora's box. The historical home contained several levels of structural design. Given that the home was built and modified during different eras, the structural methods were inconsistent, with some joists running from north-to-south, and others from east-to-west. Some were even wooden logs supporting the first floor, as irregular as they were when chopped down in the forest. Each joist had to be field-measured. The walls featured a maze of studs and cross-members.

Through diligent field inspections, the architecture and engineering teams devised a series of clever and customized solutions to modernize the home. The design team also worked closely with the contractor, CFI Construction Corporation, to adapt the design as existing conditions were revealed. Mapping new systems to fit within the complex structural web was critical to ensuring that they remained concealed and invisible to the public. To minimize interventions that would detract from the home's historical integrity, Mueller's team also converted an unused basement into the mechanical room, housing equipment away from public view while allowing for ease of access and maintenance.



New exhibits chronicle Henson's life, and describe what life was like for an enslaved person working on a 19th-century plantation.

“This was a delicate installation, as so much about the building was unknown,” says Dan Carmine, PE, LEED AP, Mueller’s project manager. “During construction, as walls were opened and more of the structure was revealed, we had to quickly redesign much of the ductwork routing. The building itself is an artifact, and preservation was a priority.”

Revealing History Through Design

The 3,000-square-foot visitor center accommodates a theater that introduces visitors to Henson and the property with a short orientation film. The theater doubles as a meeting space that is available for community use. There is also a ticketing area, gift shop, and restrooms. Visitors arrive at the new center first, then view the exhibits in the Riley-Bolton House. The interpretive exhibits extend to

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the outdoors; the park remains open to the public even when the museum is closed.

“Our team was very proud to help reveal, through design, the incredible

stories that are inherent in these buildings and this site,” says Ziger. “It’s powerful when architecture can become part of the storytelling, along with the exhibits. This property is an important reminder of the history we all share. We’re creating an environment that will inform generations.”

“This is a public museum that celebrates the challenging and inspiring life of the Reverend Josiah Henson, who inspired the fictional character of Uncle Tom,” says Shirl Spicer, countywide museum manager for the Maryland-National Park and Planning Commission, Department of Parks, Montgomery County. “This museum helps bring his autobiography to life, and describes what a life of enslavement was like in the 19th century.”

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Housing the mechanical equipment in the basement helped keep new systems hidden from the public.



As construction began and the home’s structure was revealed, engineers quickly adapted the renovation design to install new systems carefully within the historical building.