

HARRIET TUBMAN UNDERGROUND RAILROAD BYWAY

Where Ordinary People Did the Extraordinary



On Maryland's Eastern Shore, in Dorchester and Caroline counties, a remarkable effort is underway to understand the importance of slavery in the American story through the lens of the Underground Railroad. Here, Harriet Tubman was born into slavery, escaped, and returned time after time to lead relatives and friends to freedom.



Slavery was a large part of the nation's economy until the Civil War. By the 1840s, the abolition movement, a major force advocating against slavery, had become quite vocal and attracted tens of thousands of members. Sympathizers, free blacks and slaves had formed an active network of clandestine routes and safe houses by which enslaved people attempted to escape to freedom. The secret network came to be known as the Underground Railroad, the nation's first civil rights movement.

The Underground Railroad was particularly active on the Eastern Shore.

Numerous sites in Dorchester and Caroline counties are associated with events or people who were involved with the Underground Railroad. When an agricultural recession brought hardship to the area in the 1830s, many farmers sold their slaves, breaking up families forever, as men, women, and children were sold to landowners in the South. As dangerous as it was to attempt to escape, the prospect of being sold motivated an increasing number of slaves to risk their lives for freedom, including Harriet Tubman. The conditions in Dorchester and Caroline counties set the stage for some of the most daring escapes and rescues of the Underground Railroad. Over the two decades preceding the Civil War, hundreds of enslaved people fled from farms, plantations and shipyards, by loosely following an old Native American footpath that paralleled the Choptank River, the route of the byway.

Today, the 125-mile driving route transects a landscape that remains much as it was in the mid-19th century. The route links together some 20 documented sites of Underground Railroad activity, many of which are associated with Harriet Tubman. Now, a diverse coalition of leaders has developed a corridor management plan for the route; the first step to attaining federal designation as an All-American Road.



How Was the Byway Plan Created?

A coalition that is representative of a diverse group of stakeholders in both counties and from the State of Maryland guided the planning and provided direction to the consultant team. At key points during the process, well attended public workshops were held at multiple locations to ensure the broadest range of input for the plan. Major landowners were active participants, as were leaders from economic development, tourism, planning, community revitalization, heritage areas, and conservation programs.



Why a Byway Plan?

Growth is coming fast to the Eastern Shore, but change happens incrementally—a few acres here, a demolition there. Unless there is a conscious strategy to retain areas worthy of preservation and conservation, the familiar landscape—the views from the byway or the traditional character of tightly knit towns—can easily be lost.

Few people know what makes these fields, town edges and historic farmhouses different from others and important to the nation's identity. Only through interpretive programming—storytelling—can one understand what happened in Dorchester and Caroline counties. A plan affords the opportunity to analyze what is important to preserve and interpret, and where development and growth might be accommodated without compromising the historic significance of the region.

Vision: Ten Years From Now...

The Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway reveals the complex, courageous and inspiring stories of those who risked everything to escape slavery themselves or to assist others seeking freedom. Much of the landscape here remains as it was in the 19th century, enabling visitors to imagine the flight of the escaped as well as the lives of the enslaved—tending fields, digging canals, and fearing separation of their families as result of slave sales. These stories of ordinary people who did extraordinary things, including Harriet Tubman, the most well-known Underground Railroad conductor, connect emotionally with residents and visitors through stimulating interpretive programs, exhibits, and tours that immerse them in the landscapes and change their perspectives on slavery, freedom and acts of conscience. The presence of this powerful narrative draws increasing numbers of visitors to Dorchester and Caroline counties, where they find rewarding experiences, comfortable services, and a place to contemplate the broader meanings of slavery and freedom. These visitors add economic vitality and quality of life to the byway's communities and heighten local appreciation for its resources.



Five Goals and Strategies to Attain the Vision



GOAL: INTERPRETATION – *Engage people in understanding slavery on the Eastern Shore and the quest for freedom via the Underground Railroad—exemplified by Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and countless others—and its relevance to our own times.*

The central organizing feature of the byway is interpretation and two major programs have been identified as priorities:

The first is to produce a high-quality audio program. Audio unleashes the human imagination and allows for many voices and perspectives to overlay in the telling of a complex story. The audio program will balance the stories of well known American heroes like Harriet Tubman with those of the many other ordinary people who did remarkable things, often risking their lives. It will draw from newspapers, court records, oral histories, known events, and interviews with residents, many of whom are descendants of those who were enslaved and those who were active in the anti-slavery movement. Once produced, the audio program can be delivered in a variety of ways—including downloadable digital formats.

The second interpretive priority is to develop a unique wayside system. The Underground Railroad story is ephemeral, inspirational, and non-linear. It has inspired poets and artists. In that spirit, the wayside system is envisioned to work in conjunction with the audio guide and convey in text and sound the relevance of sites to the larger story. The waysides would be unique, yet they would not distract from the settings being interpreted. Currently, 17 sites are suitable for installations, including Madison, Bucktown, Mt. Zion United Methodist Church, Jacob Leverton House, Poplar Neck, and the Courthouse Square in Denton.

The Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park's proposed visitor center will serve as a crucial

trailhead and orientation point for byway travelers. Visitors to Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge are a large potential audience for the byway and visitor center, and planning is underway to enhance existing refuge trails with wayside exhibits on Tubman's interaction with the natural environment. As interpretive programs and plans for the byway are developed, they should be integrated and coordinated with interpretive planning for the visitor center and exhibits at Blackwater NWR. The byway management organization, the refuge, and the state park should integrate interpretive themes, messages and media as the corridor management plan is implemented to ensure a seamless visitor experience.



GOAL: CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION – *Support efforts to conserve and protect the byway's most important historic, natural and cultural resources.*

The land along the byway is largely held by multiple private owners. Preservation of key "view sheds"—landscape and buildings that are essential to the authenticity of the byway experience—requires a proactive effort on the part of local government, conservation organizations, and property owners. Fortunately, both counties have dedicated planning departments and agricultural land conservation programs, and several conservation and preservation agencies and organizations are active partners.

While voluntary and private stewardship actions are important, the growth projected for the Eastern Shore is such that stronger public land use policies and regulatory tools are needed if the fields and forests that are defining features of the Underground Railroad cultural landscape are to be conserved. Among the plan's recommendations:

- Implement design guidelines to encourage clustering development to preserve scenic vistas.

- Encourage development standards for towns and settled areas to promote historic resource protection/enhancement and to retain the sense of edge between town and country.
- Encourage better, more vernacular models for commercial strip development with guidelines that address format, location and size of commercial signs
- Encourage voluntary and public/private partnership efforts to improve the visual environment of the byway's commercial segments, including US Route 50 between Bucktown Road and MD Route 16.



GOAL: SAFETY & TRANSPORTATION – *Support a safe and pleasant experience for all users of the byway.*

Two-lane rural roads make up the majority of the byway route. Recommendations for safety and transportation include:

- Develop a coordinated way-finding system that is mindful of the route's circuitous nature, its overlap with other scenic byways and the state's Tourist Area Corridor Sign Program.
- Improve pedestrian facilities to make drivers aware of areas of pedestrian concentration.
- Create a Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway graphic symbol and use it to mark the route.
- Urge that all maintenance and improvements to the road and right-of-way of the byway—including bridge replacements, guard rails, sidewalks, paving, whether done by counties or the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA)—be guided by SHA's "Context Sensitive Solutions for Work on Scenic Byways."



GOAL: ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY - Support initiatives that strengthen local economies while sustaining traditional economic pursuits, agriculture and maritime industries, and retain the quality of life of byway communities.

Along the byway, town centers offer an attractive environment for businesses that thrive in pedestrian-scaled environments with authentic character. Towns will need to be proactive to attract retail and restaurants to town centers rather than along commercial strips. Recommendations include:

- Coordinate downtown revitalization efforts through an informal network of "market towns," perhaps even sharing a Main Street manager.
- Promote the substantial incentives to developers of properties in designated "Target Investment Zones" (TIZ) in Maryland's heritage areas. The byway transects two heritage areas and TIZs include Cambridge town center, Bucktown, Denton, Choptank, Preston, Hillsboro and Greensboro.
- Develop a byway business incubator/assistance program, supporting entrepreneurs whose small businesses serve visitors as well as meet resident needs.
- Promote private tour services, including cycling, kayaking, and step-on guides at the proposed Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park Visitor Center.
- Provide an opportunity for private entrepreneurs to provide visitor service at the proposed Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park Visitor Center.



GOAL: TOURISM/MARKETING - Develop and market high-quality byway experiences that stimulate positive word-of-mouth, longer stays and repeat visits.

Product development, to enhance the visitor experience, and effective marketing are key to the byway's success. Implementing the audio guide and the wayside installation system is a high priority for enhanced tourism. Other recommendations include:

- Create an easily held map guide that includes bicycle loops and walking tours of towns and hamlets along the byway.
- Create and maintain a dynamic website. It will convey the promise of the experience, and travelers are increasingly using the Internet to make the most of their leisure choices. The website is also the single most cost effective way to distribute the guide and audio tour.
- Market the byway to heritage travelers through advertising, public relations and other targeted promotions.
- Promote the byway and orient visitors to its historic sites and attractions in Maryland and beyond with interpretive exhibits and kiosks at the proposed Harriet Tubman State Park Visitor Center.
- Coordinate the establishment of a multi-state byway that reaches from Harriet Tubman's homeland in Maryland along her pathway to freedom in Auburn, New York and St. Catherine's, Ontario.
- Support the establishment of National Park Service units dedicated to Harriet Tubman in both Maryland and New York, connected by the byway.



Implementing the Plan, Managing the Byway

The Corridor Management Plan lays out clear action priorities for near term, mid-term (next five years) and longer term (beyond six years). Bringing the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad experience to life will require collaboration among local, state and federal governments, non-profit organizations, and the business community. A Byway Management Organization is being formed, with members representing both counties and their unique interests along the byway. Pending a grant award from the Federal Highway Administration, through the SHA's Scenic Byways Program, a byway manager will be hired by 2008. For more information or to find out how you can be part of this important initiative, visit:

www.tourchesapeakecountry.com

or contact:

In Caroline County:
Natalie Chabot
15 S. Third Street
Denton, MD 21629
410-479-0655
nchabot@tourcaroline.com

In Dorchester County:
Amanda Fenstermaker
2 Rose Hill Place
Cambridge, MD, 21613
410-228-1000
Amanda@tourdorchester.org

Funding for the Byway Plan was provided by the Federal Highway Administration through the Maryland State Highway Administration, the Maryland Office of Tourism Development, Dorchester and Caroline counties.

Consultant team: Mary Means + Associates, Kalback Design, Kittleson Associates, Inc., Kate Clifford Larson, Tony Cohen. Graphic design: Katherine Lenard.

Front cover image:
Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917-2000)
Forward, 1967
Tempera on masonite panel
23 7/8 x 35 15/16 in. (60.6 x 91.3 cm)
North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, Purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina
© 2007 Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York