

## Correction and Clarification

October 7, 2010

### “Confusion over history of Md. cabin museum”

*The Washington Post*  
Monday, October 4, 2010,

**Note:** Information recently developed and distributed by others about the **Montgomery County Department of Parks** and our work requires amplification, correction, clarification, and commentary. This analysis is provided to ensure an accurate, complete, and balanced perspective is available to those who are interested in, engaged in, and care about our work and purpose.

**Text in bold** in the left column is the subject of clarification, correction, or commentary in the right hand column.

#	Article	Correction & Clarification
1	In 2006, at the height of the housing bubble, Montgomery County paid \$1 million to buy a two-story colonial in North Bethesda with a log cabin jutting out on one side. The house had been on the market only a couple of months, but county officials felt compelled to act quickly: This might be their only chance to save the real Uncle Tom's Cabin - the former home of Josiah Henson, the model for the title character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's seminal antislavery novel.	The historic name for this property is the Riley House, and the common, or popular, name has long been “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” The popular name for this property has always referenced the title of the novel written in 1852 by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The property references the novel because the novel was inspired by the 1849 autobiography of Josiah Henson, a real person, who lived on the plantation property while enslaved.  There is no “...real Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” Uncle Tom is a fictional character; Josiah Henson was a real person.
2	"I seriously doubt the county would have spent upwards of \$2 million if they had known the cabin was not the real Uncle Tom's Cabin," said David Rotenstein, who was on the county Historic Preservation Commission at the time of the purchase.	Staff would have recommended this purchase regardless of whether Henson lived in or slept in the extant structure. The property is the location where he was enslaved. The historic Riley dwelling is all that’s left of the large plantation that is now mostly a mid-20 <sup>th</sup> century subdivision. In 2006, staff recommended and the Planning Board agreed that the Riley plantation on which Josiah Henson was enslaved was an important interpretive opportunity to discuss Josiah Henson’s life, slavery in Maryland, and the transition from Henson’s real

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		life to Stowe’s fictional, groundbreaking abolitionist novel.
3	Henson does refer to spending at least one night in the Riley kitchen, but it was probably not in the room that survives.	Staff agrees. This fact does nothing to detract from the significance of the site.
4	A 2008 analysis of the tree rings on the cabin's logs found that the cabin wing was built around 1850 - more than a decade after Henson had fled the United States for Canada, where he established a fugitive slave community called Dawn.	Staff undertook the dendrochronology study as one of its first exercises upon owning the property. While it is not possible to always date log structures, the effort was successful. The 1850 date of the log wing reveals that the log wing is a pre-Civil War structure. Architectural drawings of the house from the 1930s also reveal that the structure used to contain a loft in the interior above the kitchen, but that the loft was removed in the 1930s. Log kitchen wings with lofts were typical antebellum structures on plantations in the southern Mid-Atlantic, although they are rare today.
5	That inconvenient truth presents an immediate challenge to county officials: what to call the place.	There is no inconvenient truth. History is history. All public information generated by the Department of Parks --tours, website, printed materials, etc.— reflects the fact that the log wing was built in 1850 and functioned as a kitchen with loft and has been represented as such since the data was revealed. Staff has believed since 2007 that the site’s name ought to reference Henson.
6	The site's official name is still Uncle Tom's Cabin Special Park. But starting in 2007, parks officials began referring to it as the Josiah Henson Historic Site (formerly Riley House/Uncle Tom's Cabin). The name change has not been formally approved and is awaiting public comment.	It takes an act of the Planning Board to change a Park’s name. The master plan now in progress is the perfect opportunity to reconsider the park name. Staff is recommending the park be renamed Josiah Henson Special Park.
7	The purchase of the Riley House, which is now open to the public only rarely, was "driven by oral tradition" and not rigorous research, Rotenstein argued. "As a taxpayer, I'd like to see the money spent elsewhere. As a historian, I'm torn. I am not trying to minimize the property's historic significance, but the county needs to be more careful about what it designates as historic."	This resource has been a historic site designated on the county Master Plan for Historic Preservation since 1979. The research upon which that designation was based, included: Montgomery County land records, wills, Henson’s published autobiographies, published records of county history, and published regional histories.

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		<p>The most important source was Henson’s autobiographies, published over several decades and added to as he aged. His first narrative, published in 1849, is the third most widely read slave narrative in the world. That autobiography, in combination with his later narratives that name his owner as Isaac Riley, document Henson’s life on this particular plantation. Historic maps and Riley descendants confirm that the structure that stands is the Riley house on what was the Riley Plantation.</p> <p>At the time of acquisition, staff had the autobiography that described Henson’s own dwelling as a “log hut,” and part of a “village” of such structures. The staff who presented the building’s historic significance to the Planning Board on the day of its approval for acquisition on January 5, 2006 described the existing structure as the Riley house with attached log kitchen, not as Henson’s dwelling. Prior to dendrochronology, the age of the log kitchen was unknown. Other written documents and other parties, both within county government and outside of it, repeatedly made statements that tied the attached log structure to Henson’s dwelling - this was not based in fact and perpetuated the myth.</p>
8	<p>The decision to spend millions on the property was prompted in part by a public outcry over the possibility of losing the site to development. Newspapers, including this one, seized on the story of the real cabin being on the verge of destruction.</p>	<p>Acquisition to make it available to the public was essential. The public interest is served by the County’s investment in saving this important resource and making it publicly accessible. As noted above, there could be no “...real cabin...” since Uncle Tom’s Cabin is a fictional place.</p>
9	<p>Those who voted for the acquisition based on a misconception were not available to talk about it.</p>	<p>The Planning Board voted for the acquisition. The staff who presented the historic significance of the resource to the planning board as the Riley House with attached log kitchen, which was thought at that time to have been slightly older than it actually was.</p>
10	<p>Floreen said it was "discouraging" to know the council pushed to buy the Riley House based on inaccurate information, but she doesn't believe the purchase was a mistake.</p>	<p>The purchase is not a mistake. The plantation where Henson was enslaved is the right setting to discuss the life of this extraordinary man, the fact that slavery was a vital force in Maryland (a Union state), the great novel that arose out of Henson’s life story and changed the course of this country,</p>

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		the struggle for emancipation, and many other aspects of history. Historical information about this site and its structures continues to be sought and collected, and staff through the Master Planning process has developed 5 major interpretive themes that will interpret Henson, the slave experience, and the interconnection between Henson’s life and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s literary masterpiece.