

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



An Afternoon with Harriet

A visit to the Harriet Tubman Museum, Cape May, NJ

By Jane Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

At the Harriet Tubman Museum we were greeted by the bubbly and personable Crystal Hines. She was decked out in superior fashion, paying homage to her African ancestry –from her braids to her toes – and admitting that the crystal bedazzle on her dress was fitting given her name. Hines is a grade school physical education teacher by profession, but she said that working at

the museum gives her a chance to go all out and dress up.



During our visit Crystal transformed into Harriet Tubman to tell her heroic story. Following our tour she shared that she aspires to be a professional historic story teller; in my opinion she has achieved this goal.

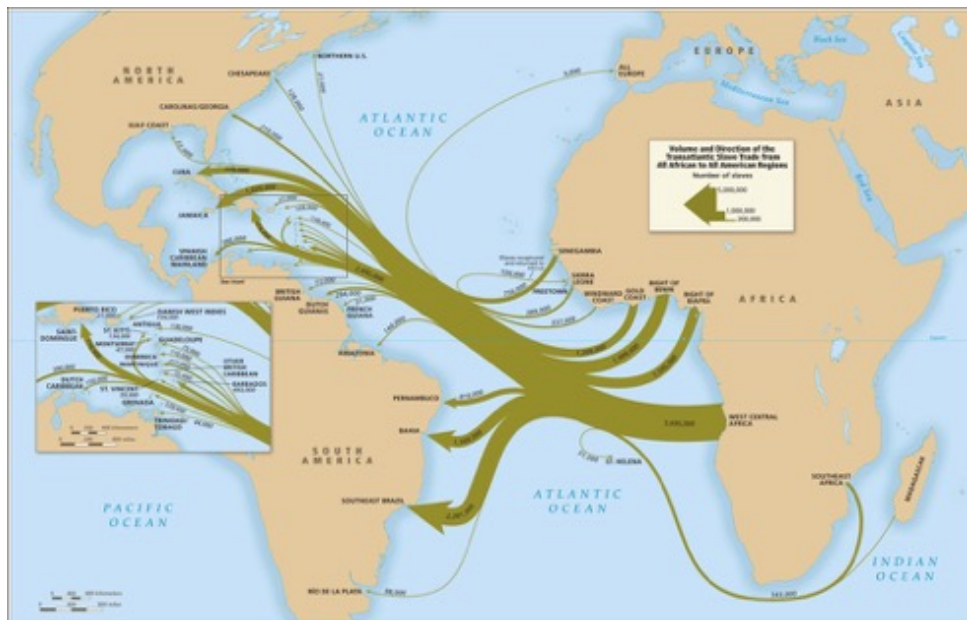
The Macedonia Baptist Church congregation was founded in 1892 at the corner of Lafayette and Franklin Streets. Next door to the church was the Howell House, built decades earlier 1850. Philadelphia merchant George Howell donated the building to the congregation in 1909. Until the 1940s ministers lived in the house, which later fell into disrepair. In 2015, congregants began to work on its revitalization. I am not clear at what point it was decided it would become the Harriet Tubman Museum, but it opened in its new role, in the midst of the COVID pandemic, on June 19 (Juneteenth) after 40 years of neglect.

The museum's first display is dedicated to the establishment of the museum. Reverend Robert O. Davis was the pastor of the neighboring Macedonia Baptist Church for 47 years, beginning in 1961 and serving during the turbulent and dramatic civil rights movement.

Reverend Davis had a passion for sharing African culture and exploring its many refinements. Among the displays at the museum is his collection of African masks and a photo of a mosque he used to show the highly developed civilizations from which enslaved people originally came. He wanted congregation members and the local community to embrace their African ancestry and to feel pride in their roots.

Crystal taught us the importance that black churches played in the Afro-American community for slaves seeking freedom. By way of illustration she recruited a fellow visitor to lead us in "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," and explained how the slaves used the words for secret messaging. "Swing low" denoted hiding, "sweet chariot" was code for the horses and buggies that aided escaping slaves, and "carry me home" meant freedom. Using song she engaged us as we began our trip through the museum.

Opposite the wall dedicated to Davis are maps showing the slave routes and the millions of people who travelled the many pathways to the New World. South America and the West Indies were the first regions to receive slaves, and eventually twelve and half million people would endure the trip into bondage.



A map of the Underground Railroad was also displayed. This road was not composed of iron rails; rather it was a network of people who offered safe houses and assistance to slaves moving northward to freedom



New Jersey communities with Extant Underground Railroad sites. Map by Michael Siegal, Rutgers Cartography 2001. On display Harriet Tubman Museum.

When we entered the largest of three rooms in the museum, Hines introduced us to

aspects of the auction of slaves as "property." On display were wrought iron shackles from Davis's collection. This is where our focus was directed to Araminta Ross (Harriet Tubman's birth name). In a most unusual sale the entire Ross family was purchased as a family by Edward Brodess. This was not common and the buyer's rationale can only be surmised.

Harriet was born enslaved in 1822 and had eight siblings. Brodess separated her mother and siblings from their father, moving them to his farm in Bucktown, Maryland. Three older sisters were sold into slavery in the deep south. By age six she was hired out to work for families as a nanny. Later in life she relayed the pain of this separation from her family.



These shackles from Reverend O. Davis's collection act as a chilling reminder of the horrors of slavery and the auction

block on which slaves were traded like a commodity. Harriet Tubman Museum display.

During the development of her vocation as an abolitionist and social activist, at one point Tubman refused to assist in stopping a runaway slave. The slave's overseer threw a two-pound weight at the runaway, hitting Harriet in the head instead of its intended victim. The incident resulted in epileptic seizures that she would suffer for her entire life.

Crystal spoke of Tubman as Araminta Ross, telling us that Araminta took difficult manual tasks before escaping north, which helped in developing the physical strength necessary to survive the journey. She worked with a lumbering crew and learned paths in the forest that aided in her escape. She was given a job of trapping muskrats where she learned navigation of the swamp. These occupations became a primer for what would become her most challenging tasks.

Araminta's escape was prompted by the death of Edward Brodess. His wife would need to sell slaves in order to pay her husband's debts, and Araminta anticipated being sent into the deep south where slavery was more brutal. As a result, in the fall of 1849 she made a solo escape, finding

freedom in Philadelphia via the storied Underground Railroad.



Displayed in Museum with this description: "Carte-de-visite Portrait of Harriet Tubman 1868-1869. Source: Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture shared with the Library of Congress." Photo: Benjamin Powelson.

Crystal recruited visitors to play the roles of her parents Harriet and Ben Ross, a Quaker, two abolitionists, and lastly the famous Dr.

William Still who aided many in their quest for freedom. With her parents' blessing Araminta departed on a precarious journey northward. Each of the antislavery activists provided her implements that she needed. From the Quaker she asked for a knife to cut her bread; it was a guise as she anticipated needing it for self-defense. From the abolitionist she got transportation and a pistol. Ultimately with the help of Still she received her new name, Harriet Tubman.

After successfully escaping north, Tubman took on 13 missions to rescue some 70 enslaved people, aiding them in their pursuit of freedom by way of the Underground Railroad. This story in itself is astounding. But Tubman's tale didn't stop there.

Thirteen years after her escape, at the onset of the Civil War, Harriet's prowess was known by abolitionists; it caught the attention of powerful white Union politicians who thought her skills navigating swamps on Maryland's eastern shore had transferability to South Carolina. Tubman was recruited to assist. *"Tubman arrived in Port Royal, South Carolina in 1862 to help Union generals recruit black troops, serve as a Union spy, and nurse wounded soldiers. Perhaps her most dramatic effort to weaken the Confederacy came on June 1, 1863, when she planned and led an armed raid along the*

Combahee River, becoming the first woman to do so in U.S. military history. Tubman, Colonel James Montgomery, and the 2nd Carolina Colored Infantry burned several plantations, destroyed Confederate supply lines, and freed more than 750 people from slavery. (National Park Service: see sources)"

After the abolition of slavery, Tubman supported the women's suffrage movement. She also founded a home for "Aged and Indigent Negroes" in Auburn, New York.

Crystal engaged the visitors from the start of our journey through Tubman's astounding life. We learned of Tubman's trials and of her resilience, resourcefulness, bravery, and determination. The docent gave us a great introduction and taste for more knowledge.

We spent about 30 minutes at the museum after our one-hour tour. But there are enough displays on topics yet to be explored to support a number of additional visits. I have only scratched the surface of what was exhibited and I hope to return to learn more about Tubman and the extensive black community that once lived in Cape May.

Sources

Museum Displays and Narrative

The Harriet Tubman Museum in Cape May, New Jersey,
www.PennMuseum, Vol 64, Number 2

Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad, National Park
Service, nps.gov

Why Cape May?

Harriet Tubman worked as a cook and a housekeeper in Cape May for three summers in the early 1950s. Cape May was known to have abolitionist sentiments. "A founder of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, Stephen Smith, built a summer home in Cape May. And the Banneker House, one of the best hotels for free Black people, was located there (Penn Museum)."

(Please scroll down for visitation information)

Visiting the Harriet Tubman Museum



632 Lafayette St., Cape May, NJ 08204
Email: info@harriettubmanmuseum.org

Timed ticket entry for an hour session. Buy tickets in advance at www.harriettubmanmuseum.org
Adults \$15. Children \$10.

The best way to visit is to book your time slot online; the museum is small and this keeps the visitor size appropriate for the space. Ticket-holders are offered a guided or a self-guided hour. Although you can drop in, this is not advised since the museum may already be at its capacity at the time of your visit.

Off-Season: September 17 through Juneteenth is:

Friday 11am - 3pm
Saturday 11am - 3pm
Sunday 2pm - 3pm

Summer Season: Juneteenth through September 17

Wednesday 11am - 3pm
Thursday 11am - 3pm
Friday 11am - 3pm
Saturday 11am - 3pm
Sunday 2pm - 3pm

(For guided tours go to the Museum's ticketing page:
www.harriettubmanmuseum.org)

Last daily tour/admission is at 3pm; doors close at 4pm