

After buying historic home, Md. officials find it wasn't really Uncle Tom's Cabin

By [Annys Shin](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

Sunday, October 3, 2010; 7:51 PM

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.

Since 2006, state and county officials have spent another \$1 million to expand and study the property, and in recent months, Montgomery has held public meetings to solicit ideas on how to turn the old farmhouse into a public museum.

There is just one problem, though. The house on Old Georgetown Road is not the real Uncle Tom's Cabin.

The house was once home to the Riley family, who held Henson as chattel, and the years Henson spent on the 3,700-acre Riley plantation, from 1795 to 1830, did form the basis of his memoirs, which Stowe, in turn, relied heavily on. But historians have determined that Henson never lived in either the house or the cabin, which was then a kitchen. He lived in slave quarters that are long gone.

"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.

Henson does refer to spending at least one night in the Riley kitchen, but it was probably not in the room that survives. 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.

That inconvenient truth presents an immediate challenge to county officials: what to call the place. 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. So far, county residents have split into roughly two camps - those who want to keep the association with the book "Uncle Tom's Cabin" front and center, and those who say it's more important to focus on Henson, according to park and planning official Rachel Newhouse.

At a meeting last month, the planning board said it needed more time to figure out what name best tells the chapter of slave history that unfolded in Bethesda.

"It looks like they have to spend more money to make lemonade out of lemons," Rotenstein said. The buyer's remorse he has suffered since learning that Henson never lived in the cabin has only been exacerbated by the county's current budget crisis.

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."

A notable life

What is undisputable is Henson's historic significance. Born in Charles County in 1789, he rose from slavery to write a series of best-selling memoirs. In them, he described being sold to a farmer named Isaac Riley.

In 1825, Riley put Henson in charge of taking a group of slaves to Riley's brother's farm in Kentucky to keep them away from Riley's creditors. On the way, Henson passed through Ohio, a free state, where he could have settled as a free man. But he chose not to, saying he had given Riley his word that he would safely deliver his property.

In Stowe's novel, that choice made the character Uncle Tom a traitor to his race. But more recently, scholars have portrayed the real Henson as a hero.

After living in Kentucky, Henson returned to Maryland to buy his freedom, only to have Riley steal his money and leave him in bondage. Henson later fled to Canada, returning to help lead other slaves to freedom via the Underground Railroad. He died in 1883 in Dresden, Ontario, which is now home to another Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site.

Local historians argue that even without being Uncle Tom's Cabin, the Riley House offers a tangible connection to Henson and the experiences that inspired Stowe's novel.

Some say local historians knew at the time of the purchase in 2006 that Henson was unlikely to have lived in the cabin. "Anybody who worked in that field knew it wasn't slave quarters," said Judith Christensen, who was then in charge of historic preservation for the city of Rockville. "No one could ever mistake it for anything but a kitchen."

An accurate history of the site prepared by the county's preservation staff was "readily available, but no one seems to have read it," said Susan Soderberg, who was on the staff at the time and is now writing a book about Henson.

Greg Mallet-Prevost, a son of the former owners, said he also knew that Henson may not have lived in the cabin. But he was not inclined to correct anyone, because there was no

definitive proof. "You have a 200-year tradition of calling the place Uncle Tom's Cabin," he said.

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.

"People were romanticizing things a bit too much," said Gwen Wright, then the county's historic preservation supervisor. "When I gave tours or tried to talk to people about the site, I think I did my best to try to explain it wasn't a slave cabin."

But cabin fever swept over elected officials, including County Council President Nancy Floreen (D-At Large), who helped pass a resolution urging that the property be bought.

The resolution described the cabin as "a perfectly preserved slave quarter" in which Henson lived.

To pay for the property, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission applied for state funds. The application, ultimately approved by then-governor Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., Treasurer Nancy Kopp, and then-comptroller William Donald Schaefer, described the property as "an 18th century single-family residence and an attached log cabin that was once the home of Josiah Henson." It included maps that identified the house as "Uncle Tom's Cabin.

The application was based on "what I believed to be true at the time," said Bill Gries, an acquisition specialist for the commission. He said he was told "to do the best I can to acquire the property because it had this incredible historical feature."

The purchase made headlines as far away as South Africa, India and Russia, where Stowe's book is required reading in many schools.

Several experts said even if Henson didn't live in the cabin, his connection to the property makes the place worthy of preservation. "You can't point to suburban tract houses and say this evokes Riley's farm and Josiah Henson," Wright said.

Different decision?

Those who voted for the acquisition based on a misconception were not available to talk about it. Through a spokesman, Ehrlich declined to comment, and Kopp and Schaefer could not be reached.

"Had someone raised these issues, would the board members have asked questions?" said Howard Freedlander, a spokesman for Kopp. "Sure. Would they have voted differently? I can't speculate."

Several members of the 2006 county planning board, which also signed off on the purchase, declined to comment or did not recall what they were told back then. Park and planning research and designation coordinator Clare Kelly said the board was told that Henson likely never lived in the log cabin.

But on the day the board approved the purchase, a staffer described the property to board members as "the site of the infamous Uncle Tom's Cabin," according to a recording of the hearing.

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.

"I'm not sure any wool was pulled over anybody's eyes," she said. Had the council known the house was not the real Uncle Tom's Cabin, she said, it would have voted for the purchase anyway, but "we probably wouldn't have made as big a deal out of it."