

National Parks In Maryland, New York To Honor Harriet Tubman

NPR: All Things Considered

After years of effort, legislation to honor abolitionist Harriet Tubman with national parks in Maryland and New York has passed Congress.

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Story by Donna Owens

MELISSA BLOCK, HOST:

The abolitionist Harriet Tubman will be honored with not one but two national parks. Congress passed legislation to create those parks in the final days of its session. This comes after years of effort and will protect Tubman's legacy in Maryland, where she was born, and in New York where she lived and died. Donna Marie Owens reports.

DONNA MARIE OWENS, BYLINE: Harriet Ross Tubman, called the Moses of her people, was born circa 1822 on Maryland's Eastern Shore. After escaping bondage, she later liberated her family and freedom seekers via the Underground Railroad, a network of safe houses.

DONALD PINDER: Because Harriet just knew that there was something fundamentally wrong with slavery.

OWENS: That's Donald Pinder, president of the Harriet Tubman Organization in Cambridge, Maryland.

VALERIE ROSS-MANOKEY: She was something else.

OWENS: Inside a tiny museum filled with photos, art and historical documents we meet several Tubman descendants. Valerie Ross-Manokey is 78. As a child, she recalls worshiping with relatives and hearing a Negro spiritual that some historians believe Tubman used to help guide slaves on their journey north.

ROSS-MANOKEY: The church doors open and you heard in a real deep low voice people singing "Go Down Moses."

OWENS: Paul Robeson recorded this version.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "GO DOWN MOSES")

PAUL ROBESON: (Singing) When Israel was in Egypt's land, let my people go.

ROSS-MANOKEY: And as they came down the aisle very slowly, very erect, proud - proud black people - and louder. And when they got to the front, there was a huge sound that was all the voices singing let my people go, let my people go.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "GO DOWN MOSES")

ROBESON: (Singing) Let my people go.

OWENS: Manokey says the park effort for Tubman, whose heroic deeds ranged from leading a Civil War military raid to fighting for women's suffrage, has taken nearly two decades. Last year President Barack Obama established a national Tubman monument in Maryland. It helped pave the way for two national historical parks. Maryland's national park will incorporate former plantations and an Underground Railroad stop. In Auburn, New York, where the abolitionist spent 50 years and died in her 90s, highlights will include her home, church and burial site.

Patricia Ross Hawkins is a great-niece.

PATRICIA ROSS HAWKINS: We have been saying as a family for years that you have to tell the whole story, and you cannot just tell what happened in New York and what happened in Maryland. You have to tell the combined story.

OWENS: Senator Ben Cardin of Maryland and other lawmakers introduced the bipartisan legislation in Congress.

SENATOR BEN CARDIN: I was surprised to find out there really has not been a historic park designation for a woman, let alone, African-American woman. And Harriet Tubman is clearly one of our real heroes.

OWENS: The Congressional budget office estimates both parks will cost \$12 million. The National Park Service says the final tab may be lower, due to existing staff and resources. No official opening date has been set for the national parks. However, a Tubman visitor center in Maryland is expected to open next year.

For NPR News I'm Donna Marie Owens in Baltimore.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "GO DOWN MOSES")

LOUIS ARMSTRONG: Now when Israel was in Egypt land, let my people go. Oppressed so hard they could not stand, let my people go.

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