

**Wednesday, Nov. 3, 2010**

## **Uncle Tom's Cabin purchase raises questions**

I read with a smile on my face — Montgomery County has done it again. They've spent over \$2 million to purchase "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in Bethesda because of its historical significance. Of course, "Uncle Tom" never lived in the place at all and it turns out that the "cabin" at the end of this house is nothing but a former kitchen of a house that had nothing to do with him at all.

What else would one expect of our "history." We are also the same county that displayed the wrong coat of arms for the Montgomery family for over 150 years before our "historians" discovered it.

In these times of layoffs, furloughs of county employees and not enough money to go around, this is the typical waste of our tax money by our county officials.

Funny, I don't remember then asking any of us whether we thought it was a good idea to purchase this place at all. Actually, it's not funny at all.

Tom Pinckney, Gaithersburg

There were a few mistakes and misconceptions in the article, ["Uncle Tom's Cabin origins questioned," Sept. 22]. First, the county purchased the property after careful historical research had proven that this was the plantation where Josiah Henson was enslaved and that the main house had been constructed around 1800. It was never claimed or implied that Josiah Henson actually lived in the log kitchen attached to the house. This house was remodeled in 1936, not "rebuilt" as the article states.

It is not important that this is not the "cabin" of the fictional character "Uncle Tom." What is important is that this was the plantation and the "big house" where a slave grew up who wrote an autobiography that was read by a woman who was so moved by his personal story that she incorporated it in a novel that so influenced the public mind that it caused people to rise up in indignation.

The Rev. Josiah Henson became such an important person that he was introduced to both Queen Victoria and President Hayes. Canada issued a postage stamp in his honor and has made a historic museum of his house there that is visited by as many as 15,000 a year.

Susan Soderberg, Germantown

**Wednesday, Sept. 22, 2010**

## **Uncle Tom's Cabin origins questioned**

**Former chair of Historic Preservation Commission says site was never home to Josiah Henson**

by Alex Ruoff | Staff Writer

Did Uncle Tom really live in a cabin that still stands today in North Bethesda? No, say an independent historian and the site's former owners.

David Rotenstein, a former chairman for the county's Historic Preservation Commission and currently a consulting historian, said the log cabin-style kitchen structure famously located at the Uncle Tom's Cabin Special Park on Old Georgetown Road in North Bethesda never was home to Josiah Henson, the man who inspired the namesake character in the novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and was built long after he fled a life of slavery there.

Reports from dendrochronology tests — the study of tree rings to determine the age of a plant — performed by Montgomery Department of Parks staff have shown the log cabin structure, formerly a kitchen, was built around 1850 — 20 years after Henson's autobiography states he was sent away from the Montgomery County plantation.

Rotenstien said this discovery seriously devalues the site — purchased in two parts by Montgomery County for \$1.72 million in 2006.

"I question whether or not it's good public policy to spend public resources on something that turns out is not what they thought it was," he said. "This was supposed to be Uncle Tom's cabin."

According to a Washington Post report from 1979, former owner of the property Marcel Mallet-Prevost claimed the historic value of his home was "overblown."

County department of parks museum manager Shirl Spicer said the site holds significant historic value outside of the log cabin kitchen. "Henson's footprints are there; without a doubt that site will help us learn more about our history and the man behind the story," she said. "That's the value of it."

The re-built 1936 home adjacent to the cabin was built around the frame of the 19th-century "big house," Spicer said, showing historians the outlines of Isaac Riley's home.

Spicer said the value of property isn't found in Uncle Tom's cabin, but in its connection the real abolitionist and local legend, the Rev. Josiah Henson.

"Outside of his connection to Uncle Tom's cabin, he was an extraordinary man whose story is important," she said.