

Henson home expansion project gets state funding

by Kate S. Alexander, Monday June 1, 2015

This story was updated at 3:45 p.m. June 1, 2015, and corrected at 3:35 p.m. June 9, 2015. An explanation follows the story.

The historic North Bethesda home of 19th-century abolitionist Josiah Henson will soon be open more regularly as a historic park, with a museum and interpretive program focusing on Henson's life and slavery in Montgomery County. State funding is helping that expansion.

Maryland lawmakers awarded the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, Montgomery County Department of Parks, a \$100,000 earmark, or bond bill, this past session to help complete the Josiah Henson Park project.

According to documents submitted for the bond bill, the project is estimated to cost \$9.85 million. Plans call for converting the site into a historic and cultural park and turning the historic house on the property into a museum. The park and museum will have indoor, outdoor and multimedia exhibits; a film; and a research library.

The park features the Riley/Bolton House, the former home of Isaac Riley who was the plantation owner and owner of Henson while Henson was a slave.

According to the Parks Department, after years of enslavement, Henson escaped to freedom in Canada on the Underground Railroad. He later published his autobiography, "The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave," which is credited with inspiring Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

The Parks Department has owned the house since 2006. It's listed on the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places. It's also a stop on the service's National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program.

In 2010, the Parks Department adopted a master plan for updating the park.

Currently, the park is open for guided group tours and special events, such as the upcoming Montgomery County Heritage Days this month. For Heritage Days this year, the park will be open June 28.

Museum Manager Shirl Spicer said the project will allow the park to be open on a regular schedule and offer a more interactive learning experience. She said the project is expected to take several years to complete, but the park will open for tours and special events as the work progresses.

To help fund the project, the Montgomery Parks Foundation is running a capital campaign. Nina Aplebaum, the grants manager for the foundation, said the goal is to raise \$2 million.

The state money will go toward the overall project costs for planning, design, construction, repair and renovation and capital equipping of the park, she said.

While the Parks Department sought \$275,000 from the state, it received only \$100,000. Aplebaum said there are plans to seek additional bond-bill funding in future years.

An earlier version of this story said the park's Riley/Bolton house is where Josiah Henson spent most of his youth and was held as a slave. Actually, where Henson lived and slept on the plantation has not been confirmed, according to the Parks Department.

