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Remembering the past *(extract)*

The 12th Annual Heritage Days Celebration features 40 diverse sites in Montgomery County

by Karen Schafer | Staff Writer

... none of these troop movements are as world famous as the blue shuttered cabin on Old Georgetown Road in Bethesda. Its former owner Isaac Riley was a typical hardscrabble farmer who kept 20 slaves to tend his 500 acres. Although the modest house doesn't represent the idea of a slave owner's home, Erickson notes, "People are mistaken to think slave owners all lived in houses like Tara in "Gone with the Wind."

The slaves' toil didn't make Riley rich, but one of his former slaves, Josiah Henson, made his farm infamous. Riley may have owned the land, but he wasn't up to the task of running the operation. By all accounts, Henson was a remarkable man running Riley's farm until he and his family fled to Canada in 1830, he learned to read and write, even penning a biography that abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe used as a reference for her novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

Docents will take visitors on a 25-minute guided tour of the house, discussing the life and times of its residents and those enslaved on the property. While still equipped with a decrepit 20th century kitchen and 1950s floral wallpaper, archeologists are busy figuring out paint and flooring materials. Hopefully, it will be ready for visitors by 2012.

And it is Henson's biography that offers important insight into Riley's plantation and the slave's plight.

"Our lodging was in log huts, of a single small room, with no other floor than the trodden earth, in which ten or a dozen persons — men, women, and children — might sleep, but which could not protect them from dampness and cold, nor permit the existence of the common decencies of life. In these hovels were we penned at night, and fed by day; here were the children born, and the sick — neglected."

Stowe was so impressed with Henson's descriptions that the infamous Simon Legree was named for local Bryce Lytton.

The then prosperous Henson returned to the ruined Riley plantation in the 1870s. His former master had since died, but Riley's wife Matilda came to the door. She could hardly believe this well-dressed man was Henson and remarked, "You've become a gentleman," and he recalled responding, "I was always a gentleman," notes Joey Lampl, Cultural Resources Manager for Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.