

**The Harriet Tubman Museum (Permanent Exhibit)****Executive Director: Cynthia Mullock****Website: <https://www.harriettubmanmuseum.org/>****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v8i2.298>**

Renowned abolitionist Harriet Tubman, who escaped slavery in her home state of Maryland, summered in Cape May, New Jersey, in the early 1850s. There she worked small jobs in hotels and houses as a cook and a laundress to help subsidize the Underground Railroad and the journey to freedom of other enslaved people.

Situated between Lafayette and Franklin Street, the Harriet Tubman Museum in Cape May is located in a restored nineteenth-century parson's house next to the Macedonia Baptist Church. It tells the story of Harriet Tubman's journey to freedom, and how it intersects with the once-bustling African American resort town in Cape May. The Lafayette neighborhood of Cape May became a haven for African Americans seeking to summer on the Jersey Shore. Today, the museum tells visitors not just about Tubman, but also about the history of Black activity in the town starting with the founding of the first free Black community in the 1820s up to today.

Opened on Juneteenth 2021, the current exhibit space is relatively small but has ample room to grow. The house tour takes about an hour to discuss the importance of Cape May to Harriet's fight for freedom, the people she met, and more. I had the pleasure of taking the tour with a guide named Ross, who brought life into the space by sharing his knowledge of Harriet.

**Exploring Harriet's Legacy**

Born Araminta Ross in 1822 on a timber plantation on Maryland's Eastern Shore, Harriet eventually took her mother's name to honor her. Struck on the head as a child, Harriet suffered migraines. Still, shortly after her marriage to John Tubman in 1844, Harriett and her two brothers escaped to Philadelphia. But securing her own freedom was not enough. She soon returned to help others escape. Then, in 1861, she joined the Union Army as a nurse, using herbal remedies she had

learned from the elder women back on the plantation where she had been enslaved. Tubman even became the first woman to lead a major armed expedition in the war and guided a raid at Combahee Ferry, liberating hundreds of enslaved people.

### Why New Jersey?

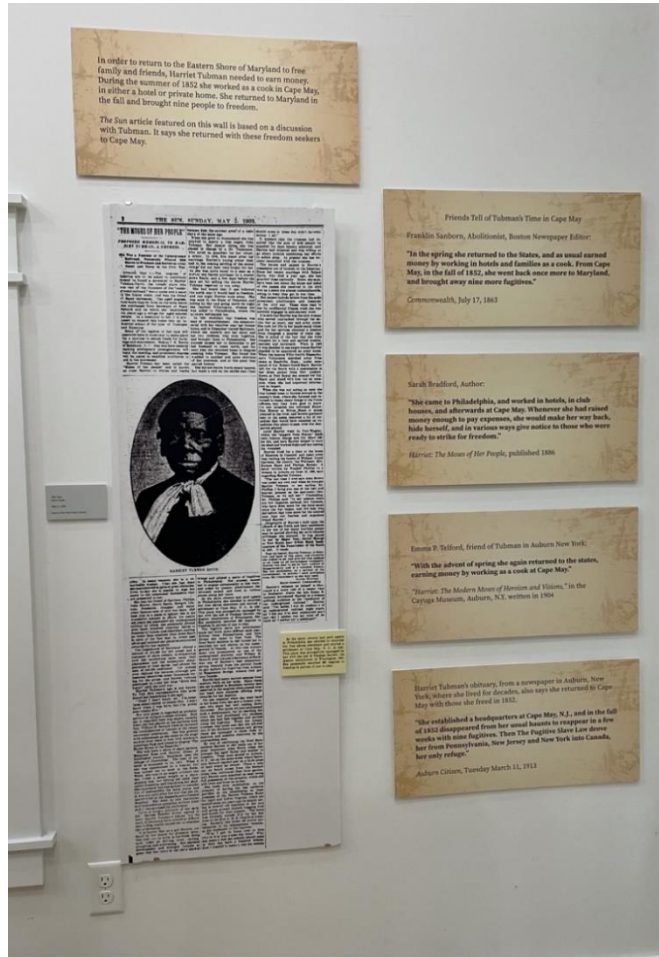
While New Jersey was the last northern state to fully end slavery, abolitionists within the state also played an ample role in creating safe havens for enslaved people seeking freedom. At the museum, a display of the treacherous and often fatal Atlantic Slave Trade leads into a space with a pair of shackles donated by the Macedonia Baptist Church's Reverend Robert O. Davis and his wife, Carolyn. These iron shackles are a reminder of the bondage and inhumanity of the slave trade. Adjacent to the shackles is a map of New Jersey with communities along the Delaware River that have extant Underground Railroad sites, a geographic expedition Harriet completed over 13 times.



Courtesy Jessica Solomon

**Exhibit Highlights**

On the far end of the museum exhibit space are quotes from newspapers with discussions of Harriet and freedom seekers arriving in Cape May and the timeline of her work to finance the journey to freedom. For example, in the newspaper *Auburn Citizen* from Tuesday, March 11, 1913, her obituary highlights her creating her “headquarters at Cape May NJ, and from the fall of 1852 disappeared from her usual haunts to reappear in a few weeks with nine fugitives. . . .” These newspaper headlines and articles are a precise way of knowing Harriet’s connection to New Jersey.



Courtesy Jessica Solomon



Courtesy Tim Hawk

Walking into the exhibit space, we see a bust of Tubman made by Philadelphia sculptor Kate Brockman on display. The sculpture is called “Fearless in Fear: A Young Harriet Tubman.” The bust depicts Tubman around the age when she worked in Cape May in 1852.



Courtesy Jessica Solomon

As mentioned, Harriet spent several years living in nearby Philadelphia as a freedwoman along with her brothers. Also living in Philadelphia, though originally from New Jersey, was Dr. James Still. Still was a historian and an operative for the Underground Railroad known as “the Black Doctor of the Pines.” Dr. Still’s legacy and Harriet’s impact are outlined by Dr. Still’s brother, William Still, who compiled more than 800 accounts of the journey to freedom from the perspective of formerly enslaved people into a book entitled *The Underground Railroad*, published in the 1870s. A Cape May local, Emily Dempsey, donated the copy on display at the museum after finding the book in the rafters of an old house in town.

Though the Harriet Tubman Museum is small, it has an enormous impact currently and massive potential to grow. This informative space is the first step in revitalizing Cape May’s Historic Black District by highlighting the importance of representation.

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