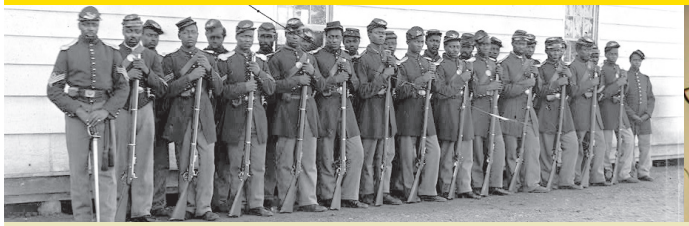
Crossroads & Culture

African American Heritage

Montgomery County, Maryland



AFRICAN ARRIVAL

Traditional African artifacts

Since the arrival of settlers and enslaved people to Maryland in 1634, Africans and their descendants have formed a powerful presence shaping the land, its economy, and its culture.

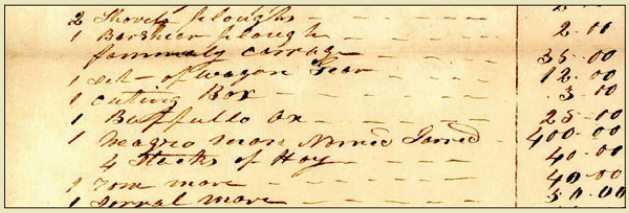
Arriving from the Gold Coast and Senegambia regions of Africa, and later from the Caribbean, a mélange of cultures merged in Maryland bringing skills in agriculture, animal husbandry, metalworking, and domestic trades from their homelands.

Cowrie shell bags

While forming nearly half of the colony's population on the eve of the American Revolution, many contributions of black Marylanders would go largely unrecognized until the emergence of figures such as Benjamin Banneker, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman in the 1800s.

Today, visitors can walk in the footsteps of Montgomery County ancestors, tracing their lives and stories from bondage to freedom, from segregation to civil rights when visiting the county's museums, parks, sites, and historic communities.

DAYS OF ENSLAVEMENT



A close-up of an inventory or list of property from December 1837. Image: Montgomery History

Montgomery County was founded in the mid 1700s with a diversified economy based on small-scale farming and manufacturing. Enslaved people labored here, but in smaller numbers than in counties surrounding the Chesapeake Bay that were involved in large-scale transcontinental trade.

Skilled laborers worked as blacksmiths, millers, and stone cutters, while other workers toiled in the fields and did domestic work. As farming changed from labor-intensive tobacco to grains, the use of enslaved labor diminished here while the demand for workers to drive the plantation economy of the South increased. In the decades leading up to the Civil War, many Montgomery County slaves were shipped off to Mobile, Natchez, and New Orleans. Here they were sold to the formidable indigo, cane, rice, and cotton plantations of the Gulf Coast states. The threat of being "sold down the river" was a powerful tool used to dissuade escape, as most who went south were never seen again.

Outbuildings in Brookeville

An early cabin

Living in small cabins and spaces in the main houses and outbuildings, people worked long days, year-round. On Sundays, a day of rest, they could usually worship and/or visit with neighbors or family. Many people often had the latitude to hunt, fish, and plant and tend their own gardens to supplement food allowances and make extra money. Traditional African American crops such as sesame, peanuts, rice, squash, pumpkins, and yams were among garden crops. Cooks blended African cooking styles with Native American and European created a unique Mid-Atlantic cuisine enjoyed today.

The enslaved also faced many physical hardships that included separation from family members, injury, and even death. Despite this, many African American traditions – music, celebrations, church, community, and a strong sense of history – were kept alive and thrive today.

SOWING THE SEEDS OF FREEDOM

Enslaved families fleeing. Image: Harper's Weekly, 1864

The Quaker (Religious Society of Friends) villages of Sandy Spring and Brookeville became the first settlements in the county where free-black populations took root. The Quakers openly questioned the practice of "owning" another person, and at the Maryland Yearly Meeting in 1777, they outlawed the holding of enslaved people. While some Quakers opposed slavery privately, others actively supported escaping to freedom and abolition.

100 DOLLARS REWARD.

ABSCONDED from the farm of the subscriber near Seneca Mills, in Montgomery county, Maryland, on the night of the 16th inst. a negro man named Davy, aged about twenty five years, about five feet 11 inches high, likely and well made, and of a light black complexion. He was lately purchased, at his own request, by the subscriber, of Mr. Edward W. Coleman, then living near Seneca. Davy, it is believed, went off with several other slaves living in his neighborhood; and will endeavor no doubt to get to Pennsylvania.

The subscriber will give fifty dollars for his apprehension and delivery to him, if taken in the State of Maryland; if taken out of the State and secured, he will give one hundred dollars.

ROBERT DICK

July 29—3tawtw

Runaway advertisement

By the 1820s, Sandy Spring had established the first church for newly emancipated slaves, the Sharp Street Church, which stands today with its Odd Fellows Lodge. In the second half of the 1800s, greater mobility, self-reliance, and the formation of kinship communities such as Holly Grove along Norwood Road and Cincinnati along Brooke Road laid the foundation for a greater autonomy. While many of the farms and cabins known to the enslaved have vanished from the landscape, visitors can still see a few surviving examples, such as Oakley Cabin in Olney and Harper Cabin in Wheaton, and can take a walking tour of Brookeville to learn about enslaved and free-black life and work.

Anna Maria Weems of Rockville disguised herself as a coachman and fled to join her family in Canada

The Underground Railroad (UGRR) emerged in the county to help enslaved people find their way north to freedom in Pennsylvania, Canada, and beyond. Escape was made by whatever means possible – on foot through marshes, by boat, even in stolen carriages. "Conductors" worked in towns and at rural houses guiding people north. Here, the C&O Canal, B&O Railroad, well-developed roads north, and proximity to the major cities of Georgetown, Washington, D.C. and Baltimore offered opportunities for escape. The "stations" offered on the UGRR are still scattered throughout the county, and visitors can experience an UGRR escape hike at Button Farm Living History Center in Germantown and at Woodlawn Museum in Sandy Spring.

Josiah Henson was enslaved on the Riley plantation in what is now N. Bethesda. After nearly 40 years as a slave, Reverend Henson made the dangerous journey from bondage to freedom, ultimately founding the Dawn Settlement in Ontario, Canada. His published life story provides a startling look inside the life of an enslaved man and inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe's landmark novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. A visit to the Josiah Henson Museum and Park reveals Henson's story through archaeological explorations and is a reminder of the times and trials that ignited the War Between the States.

Pictured on Front: Patrick Warren, formerly enslaved in Poolesville, served in the 4th United States Colored Infantry (pictured), an African American unit that took part in Sherman's Carolinas Campaign. Photo: Library of Congress
Pictured on Back: Hand-wrought farm tools

FAITH, FAMILY AND FREEDOM

In November 1864, Maryland abolished slavery and delivered the promise of freedom as heralded in Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Shortly thereafter, newly freed people emerged with surnames different from those of their former owners, revealing long-held kinship ties previously unacknowledged during times of enslavement. They settled on lands deeded or purchased from former owners, like the Haiti community along Martin's Lane in Rockville that was carved from acreage of the Beall-Dawson farm. Other communities such as Prathertown, Brownstown, and Howard Chapel took their names from former bondsmen who settled there.

Local schoolchildren

Families often purchased and settled land side by side, creating communities with shared labor and resources. One feature unique to these post-emancipation settlements was the establishment of a church-school-benefit hall complex. The church provided spiritual strength and values, the school offered education, and the benefit hall offered insurance, loans, and other support. Today Martinsburg, on the western fringes of the county, with Warren United Methodist Church, the Loving Charity Hall, and its "Negro School" survive as the last African American community in Maryland where this important architectural grouping remains.

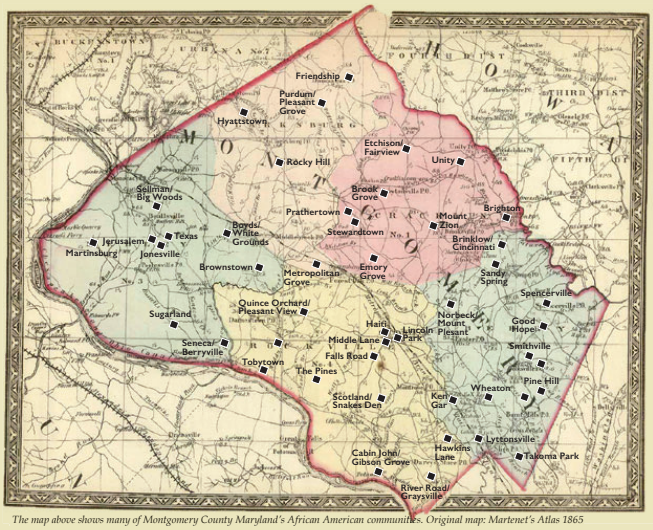
These tightly-knit enclaves promoted social advancement, self-reliance, and civic engagement amongst their members while serving as a buffer to the censuring effects of the Jim Crow era of separate and but unequal. By the early 1900s, nearly 40 African American communities had been established in Montgomery County.

Historic cemeteries can be found throughout the county.

While many of the historic African American churches remain, most are seeing declining membership and aging infrastructure. These communities are, in a way, victims of their own success. Children raised in close knit communities, learning shared values and attending the community schools, developed broader skills and moved away to areas that could provide better job opportunities.

These children grew to be among the organizers who would defeat Jim Crow and segregation and help launch the Civil Rights Movement – all legacies that can be traced back to the beliefs and values of these historic African American communities.

Visit St. Paul Community Church in Poolesville and Pleasant View Historic Site in Quince Orchard to explore the historic churches and cemeteries and learn more about these communities. Heritage Montgomery's *African American Heritage Cookbook*, *Community Cornerstones* video, and booklet feature in-depth histories of many local churches.



The map above shows many of Montgomery County Maryland's African American communities. Original map: Martenet's Atlas 1865

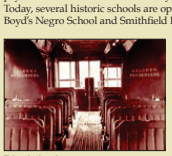
SCHOOLS AND HOUSING

In the mid 1900s, the county was quickly transforming itself into a gateway to the nation's capital. In addition to jobs in the trades and services industries, blacks found employment with the Federal government, which made the region attractive to newcomers during the "field to factory" era.

Yet, discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodation was ever-present, and limited the opportunities for many African Americans throughout Montgomery County. Black schools in the county received less funding than their white counterparts, and African American teachers received unequal pay. It was not until 1958 that county schools were desegregated. Today, several historic schools are open for tours, among them are Boyd's Negro School and Smithfield Rosenwald School.

Outdated infrastructure, including limited access to public water; open sewage; and unpaved roads contributed to the decline of traditional African American communities. Still, Blacks were sequestered by housing covenants which kept them from living in White-only areas.

With the establishment of a new charter government in the 1940s, followed by urban renewal and fair housing policies of the 1960s, the county doubled its efforts to improve the quality of life in its most impacted communities. Historically Black enclaves such as Scotland and Tobytown won much-needed public utilities but suffered the loss of family-owned landholdings to make way for public housing and other development.



Discrimination was common, as shown on this streetcar's signage.

In 1939, *Gibbs vs. Board of Education*, which was argued by Thurgood Marshall here in Rockville, overturned wage disparities between black and white teachers in the county and marked an early victory on the march to equality. A new generation of activists began to take on the status quo of the Jim Crow era in a series of local civil actions running up to the start of the tumultuous 1960s.

Follow the City of Rockville's "Lost Rockville" walking tour that features the 1930s Grey Courthouse where the Gibbs case was argued or visit Glen Echo Park, the former amusement park where activists boycotted segregation policies that denied African Americans access until 1961.

Civil Rights protesters at Glen Echo. Photo: National Park Service

PROGRESS AND PRIDE

Singers at the Warren Historic Site's annual Gospel Jubilee

Over the last half-century, the roles of African Americans in Montgomery County have seen great advancement. Blacks have served in the roles of county executive, county councilmember, police chief, and superintendent of public schools. Today, African Americans make up nearly 20 percent of the population in a county with a median household income of $100,000. Regionally, the number of minority-owned firms tops 50,000.

The stories of African American faith, family, and freedom can be explored through the historic sites and structures that stand proudly as the result of the spirits of the founders and ongoing preservation efforts throughout Montgomery County.