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Maryland's Road to Freedom Trail

This 5-mile route between Historic East Towson and the Hampton National Historic Site will provide important context of the area's history through educational markers, connections to historical sites and public art.

BY CHRISTINA STURDIVANT SANI

Tucked away in the Baltimore suburb of Towson, Maryland, is the deeply rooted community of Historic East Towson. In 1928, the neighborhood was home to about 300 Black families. Public and private developers steadily encroached on the land over the years, and just 70 families live within the six-block radius today.

When a 56-unit housing complex was proposed for construction on the edge of the community in 2017, residents organized to oppose it. Their collective efforts laid the seeds for a new trail project designed to preserve green space and highlight historic community connections along the way.

Preserving History and Green Space

On the frontlines of this battle was Nancy Goldring, president of the Northeast Towson Improvement Association (historiceasttowson.org). In the summer of 2020—in the midst of a conversation about the housing

development—someone asked what her ideal alternative would be. In response, Goldring conceived of a walking and biking trail that would not only preserve green space but also highlight the connection between East Towson and a historic estate miles up the road. Along the way, people could stop by other locations that Goldring calls “history in plain sight,” with the trail serving as a catalyst for education while promoting the physical and mental benefits of being immersed in nature.

By December 2020, she and other organizers began hosting tours of the neighborhood, including stops that would be along the path, which they called the Road to Freedom Trail. Stretching about 5 miles and including a portion of the former Maryland and Pennsylvania Railroad, the trail would begin in East Towson and end at the Hampton National Historic Site (nps.gov/hamp/index.htm).

PHOTOS: (Left) Unveiling of the Howard Cooper historical marker, one of many such signs that will be placed along the Road to Freedom Trail; (below) The Jacob House, located along the Road to Freedom Trail, was one of the first homes built by a Black landholder in East Towson.



PROPOSED TRAIL: Road to Freedom Trail

LOCATION: The route will run from Historic East Towson, Maryland, to the Hampton National Historic Site in Towson.

USED RAILROAD CORRIDOR: The route will follow a portion of the former Maryland and Pennsylvania Railroad.

LENGTH: 5 miles

SURFACE: Paved

Charles Carnan Ridgely, Maryland's 15th governor, operated the 18th-century Hampton property as one of Maryland's largest slave-labor plantations. When he died in 1829, Ridgely's will released some of the 300 people under his enslavement. One of them, Daniel Harris, is documented as the first African American man to purchase a plot of land in nearby East Towson in 1853. Over the years, it grew to become a tight-knit, segregated community with its own school, churches and shops.

In 2016, researchers embarked on an ethnographic study that documented the stories and traced the descendants of people who obtained their freedom from the Hampton plantation. Before that, “there was a great deal of focus on the mansion as its centerpiece, and not a lot of information was known about the individual identities of those who were enslaved at Hampton,” said National Park Service ranger Shannon McLucas. “So now, what we have is a far richer narrative.”

Interpretive Stops Along the Route

Installed in 2021, the Howard Cooper marker will be another significant stop along the Road to Freedom Trail. The signpost is planted in front of the old Baltimore County jail, where a 15-year-old Black child was brutally lynched by a white mob in 1885. Cooper is one of at least 40 people who have been identified as victims of racial terror lynchings in the state.

“We need to understand the connection between the legacy of lynching and its modern manifestations,” said Will Schwarz, president of the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project (mdlynchingmemorial.org). “By uniting this history in such a direct and unique way, this trail—from the Hampton mansion to East Towson—

is helping to make those connections more clear for everyone.”

Other proposed stops along the trail include Goucher College, Mt. Olive Baptist Church and Pleasant Rest Cemetery. Goldring hopes to tie the trail's landmarks together using “sound, art, consistent colors, images and symbols that guide hikers and bikers along the bucolic path.”

Steps Forward

A local nonprofit is conducting a feasibility study—with the aim of having a first draft ready by November 2023—that will include the trail's historical significance, its effects on the surrounding environment, and issues of accessibility and regulatory compliance. Following that, the planning, design and engineering for the trail are slated for completion by May 2025. The most significant construction component is a bridge over a local highway that would reconnect the Hampton site and Goucher College; Goldring anticipates this final phase to be complete by early 2029.

The community is also working with Towson University faculty and students to design a wayfinding app, which should be complete by April 2024, so visitors can “take in this history in their own time and on their own terms,” said Goldring.

Most importantly, she hopes the trail is “an opportunity to take in what is ultimately a pretty complicated history ... and if you're getting some exercise and you're able to contemplate the realities in a nonthreatening and aesthetically pleasing environment, I think that is valuable, helpful and empowering to the people who are connected to ancestors through experiences and to people who are grappling with how it happened in the first place.” •

Learn more: historiceasttowson.org/freedom-trail

For a list of the planned historical stops along the Road to Freedom Trail, check out the trail brochure at rtc.li/rtft.



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