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Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Visitor Center Opens to the Public

Baltimore, MD (March 16)—On Saturday, March 11, the new Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Visitor Center officially opened to the public, one day after the nationally-recognized Harriet Tubman Day and commemorating the 104th anniversary of her death. Designed by GWWO, Inc./Architects of Baltimore, Maryland, the new \$21M center offers a unique opportunity for visitors to immerse themselves in the story of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. While one of the most famous figures of the resistance movement with significant name recognition, little is known about the details of Tubman’s life. Through an immersive experience—developed through a successful collaboration of architecture, exhibit, and landscape designers—the new Tubman Visitor Center provides visitors with the most historically accurate information available and encourages them to experience the landscape and sites where Tubman lived and operated on the Underground Railroad.

Located in Church Creek, Maryland, the 17-acre site was chosen due to its proximity to Harriet Tubman’s birthplace—less than 10 miles away—and its location within the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, which has changed little since the early to mid-1800s and recalls the landscape during Tubman’s time, an integral part of the interpretation. An open-air picnic pavilion with stone fireplace and serving area and memorial garden with three-quarter mile walking path are also located within the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park.

The 15,000-SF facility—spread over two buildings, one exhibit and one administrative—features a series of exhibit galleries, orientation theater, museum store, information desk, research library, offices, and support spaces. Engaging displays and exhibits include information on Tubman’s role as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, her work as a freedom fighter, humanitarian, leader, and liberator, the landscape of the Choptank River Region and how it shaped her early years, and the importance of her faith, family, and community. Designed to achieve LEED Silver certification, the new center incorporates a bio-retention pond, vegetative roofs, rain barrels, and other sustainable features.

As the gateway to the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway—a 125-mile driving tour through the landscapes and waterscapes of Maryland’s Eastern Shore that includes 36 historically significant sites related to the Underground Railroad—visitors now have a central place for orientation and to learn more about Tubman before they embark on their journey, resulting in a more impactful and memorable experience.

“To have been involved in a project that is so pivotal to our nation’s history has been an honor for all of us at GWWO” said Alan Reed, FAIA, LEED AP, GWWO President & Design Principal. “Seeing the impact of the new visitor center on Tubman’s descendants and that which it will have on visitors as they learn more about Tubman’s heroism, selflessness, and spirit, makes us proud to have played a small part in carrying her legacy forward for generations to come.”

The Tubman Visitor Center is managed and operated through a partnership between the Maryland Park Service and the National Park Service. Principal partners are the Maryland Office of Tourism, Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Maryland Park Service, National Park Service, National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, and the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway.

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Design Narrative

The design for the new Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Visitor Center, *The View North*, expresses the importance of traveling northward to escape the circumstances of slavery through an integrated site, building, and exhibit design. GWWO, Inc./Architects of Baltimore, Maryland, nationally-recognized specialists in the design of visitor center and interpretive facilities, has created a comprehensive visitor experience that begins the moment visitors enter the site from MD 335, continues through the visitor center, and culminates as they tour the memorial garden.

Conceived as a series of abstracted forms that can be interpreted in many ways—from the farmstead vernacular of the region to stations along the Underground Railroad—the new Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Visitor Center immerses visitors in the story of Tubman’s life.

Joined by a shared entry plaza and terrace, the two structures of the complex, one exhibit and one administrative, frame the view north. The space between the buildings grows wider as visitors venture north—a metaphor for freedom—and the view to the south is truncated by the splay of the buildings, suggesting a sense of oppression similar to that associated with the slaveholding states. The three exhibit volumes are clad in zinc panels that will develop a patina that is self-healing and fades over time. The number three, as represented by those volumes, memorializes the fates of the enslaved in the region: be sold, stay in fear of being sold, or run away.

Just as the journey north was not a perfectly linear one for runaways, the design of the interpretive spaces allows visitors to take detours away from the main route to discover and learn. Views out offer a constant connection to the Blackwater landscape, the memorial garden, and freedom, enhancing the overall interpretive experience.

Upon leaving the center, visitors are directed to the memorial garden where they are offered a direct route north, that then weaves through the site via various loops and returns—similar to Tubman’s circuitous routes and illustrating her willingness to return to the region. Views along the pathway change from wooded areas to fields and marshes, all of which were part of the daily life of the free and enslaved at the time.

About GWWO

GWWO, Inc./Architects is a full service architectural firm that specializes in the planning and design of cultural and educational facilities that enrich the human experience through responsible design that is inspirational, evocative, and progressive. Since our founding, the firm has been involved in the design of over 50 visitor centers, museums, and interpretive facilities. Select projects include the Port Canaveral Exploration Tower, Cape Canaveral, FL; Pikes Peak Summit Visitor Center, Colorado Springs, CO; Donald W. Reynolds Museum & Education Center and Ford Orientation Center at George Washington’s Mount Vernon Estate & Gardens, Mount Vernon, VA; Fort McHenry Visitor Center, Baltimore, MD; and Homestead National Monument of American Heritage Center, Beatrice, NE.

Team Members

Sidhu Associates—MEP Engineering
Faisant Associates, Inc.—Structural Engineering
Andrews Miller & Associates—Civil Engineering
WFT Engineering, Inc.—Fire Protection Engineering
TLB Associates, Inc.—Geotechnical Engineering

Mahan Rykiel Associates—Landscape Architecture
Haley Sharpe Design—Exhibit Design
Peristyle—Interior Design
USSi Inc.—Telecommunications Consulting
HCD International—Audience Testing & Evaluation
Kumi Construction Management—Cost Estimating



¹Entrance to the new Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Visitor Center

²Upon approach from MD 335, visitors are immediately afforded a long axial view to the visitor center, the meadows, and the woods beyond

³View of the new Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Visitor Center from the west

⁴A site plan illustrates the two structures of the complex framing the view north

