

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - January 24, 2008

Civil rights and wrongs in Montgomery County in 2008

by Wayne Goldstein

What did you do on Monday, the day of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 78th birthday celebration? Was it just another day at work, or just another holiday? Or did you attend a celebration of the life of the most important civil rights leader of the 20th century? I spent Monday observing a civil rights demonstration. Actually, I observed FIVE civil rights demonstrations that day, as I was invited to watch as a group of more than a dozen residents of the Sandy Spring Farm Road community traveled around the county to deliver a message. We visited five state, county and Planning Board officials in Bethesda, Takoma Park, Rockville and Montgomery Village. These desperate residents wanted these officials to hear of their plight in front of their own homes, homes that the Sandy Spring residents emphasized that they did not themselves have. In fact, the school bus we rode on was accompanied by a 16-wheel truck towing a flatbed on which there was an outhouse, a bed, a table and two chairs, along with a 20-foot long banner which read: "Since you won't let us live on our land, we thought perhaps we could live on yours."

The group included young children, who climbed onto the bed, sat at the table or on the floor of the flatbed, heroically trying to sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" five different times. One of the most poignant speeches was the one given by 85-year old Robert Awkward, who stood tall and straight, unbowed by time, as he told of first moving to this community in 1923. He could not believe that the road he had used and taken for granted for so many decades had just "disappeared" one day. He hoped he would see access to his land restored before he died, land on which his child, her husband and their children would one day build a house, but he wasn't sure if that would ever happen.

Does this situation yet shock the conscience? In the winter of 1964, events did just that, when the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC) was looking to expand Cabin John Regional Park. This agency talked of condemning about 1/3rd of the homes in the kinship community of Scotland, which stretched along Seven Locks Road between Democracy Boulevard and Tuckerman Lane, in order to add the land to the park. In an August 1965 news article, the president of the Scotland Civic Association recounted:

"We just couldn't do anything. Our hands were tied. We didn't know how to deal with the obstacles before us." In February about 75 residents of the surrounding white subdivisions met to organize a "Save Our Scotland" committee. Led by Joyce Siegel, a housewife who lives [off of Democracy Blvd.] Scotland's neighbors have provided the expert help the community needed. The most significant result to date is a \$78,400 [\$500,000 in 2006 dollars] Federal grant to help Scotland solve its housing problems. The money will be used by Scotland Community Development, Inc., a non-profit corporation formed by Scotland residents and their neighbors to replace Scotland's ramshackle dwellings with new homes. After combining small parcels of land, the corporation plans to apply for long-term low-interest Federal loans to build the houses.

"The continuing effort of the committee...has led to...Forty churches cooperated to collect 800 signatures on a petition asking [MNCPPC] to defer the park acquisition plans. The Commission agreed to do so pending approval of a neighborhood development plan...[WSSC] voted to extend sewer service to the Scotland AME Zion Church, which overlooks the settlement and serves as a community center."

On April 22, 1968, another article began: " 'I'm so happy I don't know what to do,' Melvin Crawford told several hundred friends of Scotland, Md. and government officials who gathered yesterday... to witness ground breaking for 100 long-sought new homes... The event climaxed three years of effort for the 50 families of the Montgomery County settlement whose roots in the land along Seven Locks Road are 100 years deep...On hand for the occasion were a number of their affluent neighbors and other County residents determined to see

Scotland rebuilt rather than flattened to make way for more white suburbanites. Construction is soon to begin of 100 townhouses to replace substandard housing in what will be a pioneer low-income project for Montgomery.

" 'Scotland community is an example of how a number of people and institutions - many of them incompatible only a few years ago - can involve themselves in the problems of a community and work together to solve these problems,' [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Robert C.] Weaver told the gathering. The new Scotland's main road will be named after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. [who had been assassinated on April 4, just 18 days before], with others dedicated to the late David Scull, former County Council president, and Joyce Seigel, the young Bethesda housewife who organized the original Save Our Scotland Committee three years ago."

I may later tell you a similar story of what happened to Tobytown, off of River Road in Potomac, and to Emory Grove, near Montgomery Village, after the County came in and condemned the ramshackle houses in these African-American kinship communities, including an iron crate, ordering the residents to fix the violations or get out, but giving them no help at all. I will mention how in December 1965, David Scull, then president of the newly-created non-profit Emergency Homes, provided a rent-free trailer home to the man living in the iron crate. When this temporary, emergency arrangement was found in violation of County ordinances, a group of 30 protesting "the Council's failure to provide low-rent housing... carried signs saying 'If Trailers Are Fit For Business, Why Not For Emergency Residence' for 2 1/2 hours in front of the County Council Building, on a January day in 1966.

Two years ago, on Reverend King's Birthday celebration, MNCPPC issued a press release: "The Montgomery County Planning Board invites the public to a deed transfer ceremony at the historic site and former home of Josiah Henson, a slave that served as Harriet Beecher Stowe's model for her novel on slavery, 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.' ...Last week, the Montgomery County Planning Board unanimously and enthusiastically approved a \$1 million real estate contract to purchase the historic site to assure its preservation for future generations."

In Josiah Henson's 1849 autobiography, "The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself", he wrote: "In the course of the summer of 1828, a Methodist preacher, a white man of some reputation, visited our neighborhood, and I became acquainted with him. He was soon interested in me, and visited me frequently, and one day talked to me in a confidential manner about my position. He said I ought to be free; that I had too much capacity to be confined to the limited and comparatively useless sphere of a slave" and then said he, "I must not be known to have spoken to you on this subject, yet if you will obtain Mr. Amos's consent to go to see your old master in Maryland, I will try and put you in a way by which I think you may succeed in buying yourself."

"I succeeded so well, that when I arrived at Montgomery county, I was master of two hundred and seventy-five dollars, besides my horse and my clothes...Some time was spent in the negotiations for this affair, and it was not till the 9th of March, 1829, that I received my manumission papers in due form of law. I was prepared to start immediately on my return to Kentucky, and on the 10th, as I was getting ready in the morning for my journey, my master accosted me in a very pleasant and friendly manner, and entered into conversation with me about my plans. He asked me what I was going to do with my freedom certificate; whether I was going to show it if I were questioned on the road.

"I told him yes, that I supposed it was given to me for that very purpose. "Ah," said he, "you do not understand the dangers to which you are exposed. You may meet with some ruffian slave-purchaser who will rob you of that piece of paper, and destroy it. You will then be thrown into prison, and sold for your jail fees, before any of your friends can know it. Why should you show it at all? You can go to Kentucky in perfect safety with your pass. Let me enclose that valuable document for you under cover to my brother, and nobody will dare to break a seal, for that is a State prison matter; and when you arrive in Kentucky you will have it all safe and sound."

This seemed most friendly advice, and I felt very grateful for his kindness. I accordingly saw him enclose my precious piece of paper in two or three envelopes, seal it with three seals, and direct it to his brother in Daviess County, Kentucky, in my care.

"It was not long before Charlotte [my wife] began to tell me with much excitement what she had heard, and to question me about how I had raised the money I had paid, and how I expected to get the remainder of the thousand dollars I was to give for my freedom. I could scarcely believe my ears; but before telling her how the case exactly was, I questioned her again and again as to what she had heard. She persisted in repeating the same story as she had heard it from my master's letters, and I began to perceive the trick that had been played upon me, and to see the management by which Isaac R. had contrived that the only evidence of my freedom should be kept from every eye but that of his brother Amos, who was instructed to retain it till I had made up six hundred and fifty dollars, the balance I was reported to have agreed to pay.

"Indignation is a faint word to express my deep sense of such villainy. I was without the means of setting myself right. The only witness to the truth was my friend Frank, who was a thousand miles off; and I could neither write to him, nor get any one else to do it. Every man about me who could write was a slaveholder; and what chance had I to be believed, or to get evidence to the truth. In this dilemma I resolved not to deliver the paper to Amos, and told my wife I had not seen it since I was in Louisville."

The Farm Road starts immediately to the right of the Sandy Spring Slave Museum, and it is reputed to have been part of the Underground Railroad. With such immediate and unequivocal symbolism, it is no reach at all to consider the parallels of the physical slavery of Josiah Henson and the great, great, great grandparents of the children I watched on Monday, to the economic slavery that they and their parents and grandparents are now experiencing.

In this riveting drama, who might be Isaac R[iley], the master who cheated Josiah Henson? Who could be the Methodist preacher? Where is the larger community which came to help their hurting neighbors in Scotland, Tobytown, and Emory Grove? Has Montgomery County, as well as its government, grown so callous and indifferent to such things in the last 43 years? Who will help these people reclaim their rights, their road, their land? Will you? Go to <http://www.savesandyspring.org/> if you will.