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From near and far, visitors pay tribute to Harriet Tubman

Nathan Baker The Citizen May 29, 2011



Jill Connor / The Citizen

Pauline Copes-Johnson, a great-grandniece of Harriet Tubman, sets an American flag in the ground next to the grave site of Tubman at the annual memorial service in Auburn Saturday.

AUBURN — Hundreds journeyed to the grave site of famed abolitionist and Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman Saturday morning to pay respects to the beloved civil rights pioneer.

“We gather at this hallowed site to remember our heroine of yesteryear and the legacy that Harriet Tubman has left behind for all of us to share,” the Rev. Robert Linder, pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Troy, said to those who made the pilgrimage to Fort Hill Cemetery from all over the northeast to commemorate Tubman.

Thomasina Williams, co-founder and president of the Purple Hat Society Jubilee of Richmond County, traveled from Staten Island with 25 other members of the organization to pay respects to the black leader.

“This is a sacred place to us, it’s a memorial everyone should see at least once in their lives,” Williams said of Tubman’s grave. “We really wanted to be here today and be a part of this ceremony.”

Williams said the mission of the organization is to live in the spirit of Tubman by lending aid to the poor, the powerless and the persecuted. The purple hats that the members wear are symbols of their bravery and dedication to the cause.

“This woman of color did so much for a lot of people,” Williams said. “She really was our black Moses, she led people through their struggles to freedom.”

During the ceremony, attendees broke out into verses of “Go Down Moses,” a black spiritual that parallels the struggles of slaves in the 19th century with the Old Testament story of the Jewish people’s flight from Egypt.

The attendees swayed to the rhythm of the music, some with eyes fixed on the modest gravestone, others with faces raised toward the overcast sky, as hundreds of voices pierced the silence of the burial ground.

Tubman, born Araminta Ross, escaped slavery in Maryland and began guiding other slaves to freedom through the Underground Railroad, a network of safe houses between the southern United States and the Canadian border.

When the Civil War broke out, Tubman took on multiple roles in the Union Army, first as cook and nurse, then as an armed scout and a spy.

After the war, she returned to Auburn to the property she purchased from William Seward to care for her aging parents.

She became heavily involved in the local AME Zion Church and donated land to the church for the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged.

George E. Battle Jr., Bishop of the Northeast Region of the AME Zion Church, stressed the importance of handing down Tubman's legacy to future generations.

"It is important to teach the children about her and about all the things she did," Battle said. "They're going to be the ones to carry her memory on. We need to make sure to keep her spirit alive for all to remember."

Pauline Copes-Johnson, an Auburn resident and great-grand niece of Tubman's, said the graveside ceremony was moving.

"It's just wonderful that all these people came together to remember Auntie Harriet," she said. "She had such a big impact on the history and the outcome of the country."

After leaving the cemetery, the pilgrims moved to the South Street homestead formerly owned by Tubman for a banquet, speeches and services in her honor.

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