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CBMM opens Mitchell House as new permanent exhibit

On Saturday, October 23 and in conjunction with Frederick Douglass Day, the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum (CBMM) in St. Michaels, Maryland will unveil the recently restored, historic Mitchell House as a new permanent exhibit. Now located on the Fogg's Landing side of the Museum's 18-acre waterfront campus, Mitchell House will help tell the stories and history of free black laborers along the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

Originally located on Lee Street in St. Michaels, the Mitchell House was brought to the Museum several years back before undergoing restoration as a public exhibit. The left half of the house is original, with the right half a reconstruction to resemble its former state.

During the years that this house was located on Lee Street, St. Michaels was a center for oystering — with oyster houses and canneries, and growing employment for black waterman and their families. Thousands of African Americans made up one-third of the watermen by the late 1880s.

The house was once the home of Eliza Bailey Mitchell, who was abolitionist Frederick Douglass' closest sibling. Two years older than young Fred, Eliza became his friend, playmate, teacher, and co-conspirator in the kitchen and grounds of their masters' plantations. It was Eliza who taught Douglass the slave's ploy of pretending ignorance or forgetfulness in order to thwart a master.

Frederick Douglass, who was born Frederick Bailey, changed his name to avoid capture when he escaped from slavery. Born at Tapper's Corner, near the Tuckahoe River and raised by his grandmother Betsey, Douglass lived in St. Michaels between 1833 and 1836 as a slave of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Auld, the family who also owned his sister.

Eliza Bailey married Peter Mitchell in St. Michaels. Peter was born as a slave to the Hambleton family that owned Perry Cabin. Local Quakers, who advocated the abolition of slavery, convinced the Hambletons to free their slaves. Peter continued to work for the Hambletons after he was freed and, after he purchased Eliza's freedom in 1836, she worked as a farm laborer there, too. They were living in the house by 1871, and possibly as early as the 1830s.

In 1972, James E. Thomas — the great-grandson of Peter and Eliza Mitchell, became the first African-American Commissioner of the Town of St. Michaels and, a few years later, its first elected president. He was instrumental in saving the Mitchell house from demolition in 1981.

“Many of our exhibits, like Oystering on the Chesapeake and the packing house display in the Small Boat Shed — include African American history as part of the story of how people have lived and worked on the Bay,” said CBMM Chief Curator, Pete Leshner. “But none are as poignant and relevant as the Mitchell House. We are privileged to carry this rich history forward for our visitors.”

CBMM's Mitchell House exhibit will be inside and out — with an 1800s swept-earth landscape and heirloom garden, **and** the two-room building. One room will display a pre Civil War domestic environment. The other will incorporate exhibits that help explain who free blacks were and why they are so important in the story and history of the Chesapeake.

The Museum is open to the public daily from 10am to 5pm, with free general admission for Museum members whose support helps fund new exhibits like the Mitchell House. Admission for Frederick Douglass Day on October 23 is \$10 for everyone over 16 years of age, with all proceeds benefiting the Frederick Douglass statue at the Talbot County Courthouse in Easton, Maryland. For more information, visit the Museum on Navy Point in St. Michaels, on line at cbmm.org or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/mymaritimemuseum.

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PHOTOS:

The Mitchell House at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels opens as a permanent exhibit during Frederick Douglass Day on Saturday, October 23. The house was once the home of Eliza Bailey Mitchell, who was abolitionist Frederick Douglass' closest sibling and will help tell the stories and history of free black laborers along the Eastern Shore of Maryland.



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