

HISTORY, LIVING

Last Segregated School Revisited on Memorial Day

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Veterans at 2018 Harriett Tubman School Memorial Day Flag Raising.
Photos Courtesy: **Harriett Tubman Foundation**

Long before the first barbecues are lit this Memorial Day, maybe even before the mattress stores start selling, you can join in to help build a tradition that's new but feels as familiar as ice cream on a hot afternoon.

Held for its second year by the Harriet Tubman Foundation of Howard County, the "Memorial Day New Flag Raising Ceremony" starts at 8 am. It is free and will be held at 8045 Harriet Tubman Lane in Columbia, outside a modest brick structure that for many decades now has been a center for controversy and community.

The Harriet Tubman Building is the site of the last segregated, all-black high school in Howard County. It was built in 1948, and despite the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown versus Board of Education ruling, it remained segregated until 1965 when Howard County finally moved to desegregate.

At that point the school was closed and converted to a maintenance facility; the county choosing to build a new school, Atholton High School, rather than move white students into Harriet Tubman.

Bessie Bordenave, Class of '52, is president of the Tubman Foundation and chairwoman of an advisory committee on plans for the school, among other roles keeping her busy even after her retirement last year from 51 years in government. She has spearheaded a drive that after long efforts obtained \$1 million in county funding that is being put to use restoring the Harriet Tubman Building.

Asbestos removal made the funding necessary and has slowed progress, but the school's cafeteria is already renovated to show how it had looked while the school was operating. It can be toured by the public. Work is underway on a classroom and the gymnasium.

A "grand opening" is expected by Bordenave in 2020, after which the building will serve as an educational and cultural center, hosting Howard County Center of African American Culture activities and other events and exhibits.

Bordenave recalls her days at Harriet Tubman fondly, as do other school graduates. Despite the "second-hand equipment" everywhere at the school, the Rev. Doug Sands, class of '52, remembers it as a place of "pride." Compared with a home that might not even have running water, the school stood out as a model facility. "The first class teacher had to show boys how to use the shower, how to use the toilet."

Overall, what made the school special was "the staff and teachers," Sands says. "The reality was an abundance of care. They had to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. It was the atmosphere. Even those who did not graduate are still affiliated, are graduates." The foundation continues to honor Dorothye Craft, teacher and wife of the school's first principal, Elias Craft, with a Dorothye Craft Day each year.

The Memorial Day flag raising event was the idea of Sands, an Army veteran. During the school restoration, "The flagpole and flag were first on the premises." Sands saw a new ceremony as a way to re-unite school alumni, especially veterans, and open up the center more to the community. "The flag is a rallying point, to invite the public each year. It's very important to understand, a symbol in classrooms, a commitment to the building."

American Legion Commander Ed Hall has played a major role in organizing the flag raising ceremony, which centers on honoring service members. "It's needed because we don't recognize military people as we should," says Bordenave. She recalls that a lot of Harriet Tubman students went into service "right after graduation. They could not afford college but it was easy to get in the military."

The ceremony will start with the striking of “Eight Bells,” traditionally signifying end of a watch at sea and played to honor sailors after death. “Taps” will also be played along with the national anthem, and the “Pledge of Allegiance” will be recited.



Seen left to right, Howard Lyles, Millie Bailey, and Jenkins Odom, participants in the 2018 flag raising ceremony.

Clergy will speak along with County Executive Calvin Ball and Governor Hogan or his representative (last year Lieutenant Governor Rutherford attended). The flag will be raised, then lowered to half-mast to honor those who gave their lives in national service.

New additions this year span the ages. The color guard from Howard High School’s Junior ROTC will present the colors while Lieutenant Millie Bailey, 101 and a Woman’s Army Corp commander during World War II, will lay a wreath.

Bordenave estimates the whole process will take an hour to an hour and a half. “That’s how the military are,” she comments. “Like clockwork, it just follows suit.”

Last year Bordenave estimates that approximately 100 people attended the flag raising ceremony, including around 20 veterans. It was raining, the day after the Ellicott City floods. “They just sat in the rain,” remembers Sands. “That’s what the military is about.”

He encourages everyone to come to the event. “It’s very important to understand,” he says. “You have to be there to understand.”

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