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Harriet Tubman Relics to go to D.C. Museum

By Stephan Salisbury
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For bibliophile and educator Charles Blockson, the mute, simple evidence of abolitionist Harriet Tubman's life - - photographs, dinner utensils, hymnal -- possess a personal power, a resonance that flows over decades.

He has maintained stewardship of these fragile relics for years, holding them, he says, in trust. Now the moment has come to place them before the larger world.

Today, Blockson will transfer his collection of 39 Tubman artifacts to the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture, expected to open in Washington in 2015, and Rep. Robert A. Brady (D., Pa.) will host a presentation honoring the gift and the donor at the Longworth House Office Building.

Brady is chairman of the Committee on House Administration, which monitors the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution, among other things. At the presentation, Blockson and museum director Lonnie Bunch 3d will discuss the gift and the artifacts and, of course, the woman behind them.

"It is an honor to be able to show the private side of a very public person, a woman whose very work for many years put her in service to countless others," Bunch said in a statement.

The occasion marks Women's History Month and the 97th anniversary of Tubman's death on March 10, 1913. (She was born into slavery about 1820 in Maryland and in 1849 escaped to Philadelphia, where she began her work as an indefatigable conductor on the Underground Railroad.) Descendants of Tubman will also attend the presentation.

Blockson, emeritus curator of the Charles Blockson Afro-American Collection at Temple University, spent several years in the 1980s documenting the workings of the Underground Railroad and is credited with pushing the federal government toward establishment of a National Park Service program commemorating and marking the road from slavery to freedom.

Blockson's own ancestors benefited from Tubman's tireless efforts and from those of William Still, the African American abolitionist and director of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society's efforts assisting those escaping bondage.

"My ancestors escaped with her and with William Still," Blockson said. "They took them right across the river into Canada. I still have relatives in Canada."

During the Civil War, Tubman headed south and labored as a spy for the Union Army. Later in life she worked hard for the enfranchisement of women.

Among the items Blockson has donated to the museum are a silk and linen shawl given to Tubman by Queen Victoria. ("Queen Victoria called her Auntie Harriet," said Blockson.) Also donated are Tubman's signed hymn book, a number of photographs (including a somber portrait of Tubman lying in state at her funeral at A.M.E. Zion Church in Auburn, N.Y.), cutlery from the Tubman dinner table, pamphlets, and other items.

"What's wonderful about this collection is that they are very personal pieces," said Jacquelyn Serwer, the Smithsonian's chief curator. "When we first saw them . . . we just felt as though she was in the room. These items will give people the opportunity to make a personal connection with one of our greatest historical figures."