



Visit Nyack, Inc.

PO Box 100, Nyack, NY 10960 | 845.535.5046 | VisitNyack.org

For information:

Media Contact:

Bill Batson
Chair of the Nyack Bench Project
wrbatson@gmail.com
845.675.3160

Meg Mayo
Marketing Director, Visit Nyack, Inc.
meg@visitnyack.org
845.535.5046

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Nobel Prize Laureate Toni Morrison Brings a "Bench by the Road" to Nyack, NY

NYACK, NY — May 4, 2015 — Award winning novelist Toni Morrison will be adding a new location to her "Bench by the Road Project," in Nyack, New York, on Monday May 18, 2015, at 2:30pm. The Nyack Bench will honor Cynthia Hesdra, a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad who lived in Nyack in the mid-to-late 19th century.

Toni Morrison is a world-renowned American author who has received the Pulitzer Prize (1988), the Nobel Prize (1993), and the Presidential Medal of Freedom (2012). She is a resident of Grandview-on-Hudson, New York, and lives a few miles from the site of the Nyack Bench by the Road.

The name "Bench by the Road" is taken from Morrison's remarks in a 1989 interview with *World Magazine* where she spoke of the absences of historical markers that help remember the lives of Africans who were enslaved and of how her fifth novel, *Beloved*, served this symbolic role. "There is no place you or I can go, to think about...to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves," said Morrison. "There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby...there's no small bench by the road."

Morrison is the only living U.S Nobel Prize-winning novelist. In April she published her 11th novel, *God Help the Child*, which meditates on the tension between the idea of the artist and the reality of the artist herself.

The Bench by the Road in Nyack will commemorate a former slave and Nyack resident, Cynthia Hesdra (1808-1879), who became an entrepreneur and abolitionist. Hesdra was enslaved at one point during her life, yet died a wealthy woman, accumulating properties and businesses in New York City and Nyack. "The mission of the Nyack Commemoration Committee is to create a public commemoration of the experiences and contributions of African Americans in the Nyacks," said Bill Batson, Nyack author and artist, and Chair of the Nyack Bench Project. "This commemoration will be a substantive display in a public space, letting people comfortably linger to reflect upon and celebrate our local African American history."

An original sketch by Bill Batson of the Nyack Bench by the Road can be found here:

http://www.nyacknewsandviews.com/2014/11/nsl_toni-morrison-bench/

Nyack's Bench will be the 14th Bench by the Road. The other locations, with their installation dates, are:

- Sullivan's Island, South Carolina - July 26, 2008
- Oberlin, Ohio - April 23, 2009
- Hattiesburg, Mississippi - October 3, 2009
- Paris, France - November 6, 2010
- Concord, Massachusetts - May 21, 2011
- George Washington University - September 23, 2011
- First Congregational Church, UCC, Atlanta, Georgia - May 27, 2012
- Lincoln, Massachusetts - September 2012
- Mitchelville, South Carolina - October 2012
- Fort-de-France, Martinique - June 2013
- Eden Cemetery, Collingdale, Pennsylvania - April 2014
- Jackson, Mississippi - April 2015
- Middletown, Delaware - May 2015

The invited guests on Monday, May 18, include representatives from The Toni Morrison Society, the Village of Nyack, Nyack Schools, the Nyack NAACP, the Nyack and African American Historical Societies and the Nyack Park Conservancy.

Locations and start time for events on Monday, May 18, 2015

2:30pm Nyack Center, 58 Depew Ave
3:45pm Procession to Memorial Park
4:15pm Dedication Ceremony in Memorial Park

Detailed schedule with speakers, performances

2:30pm: The Bench dedication ceremony begins at the Nyack Center located at 58 Depew Avenue (corner of South Broadway and Depew).

- Speakers will include Village of Nyack Mayor Jen Laird White, Nyack Commemoration Committee Chair Bill Batson, Toni Morrison Society Co-Chairs Dr. Carolyn Denard and Dr. Craig Stuntman, and Cynthia Hesdra Scholar Dr. Lori Martin. (Dr. Martin will also be speaking about Cynthia Hesdra to an assembly at the Nyack High School at 8:00am on May 18th.)
- Sam Waymon, the Nyack College Choir, the Nyack High School Chamber Orchestra, and the Nyack High School Chorale will perform.

3:45pm: Assembled guests and students will walk to Memorial Park, led by the Nyack College Choir, in a procession that is reminiscent of a West African Maafa ritual that commemorates the loss of freedom and life caused by African slavery.

4:15pm: Procession arrives at the upper level of the park, greeted by a drum circle and the Nyack High School Jazz Band.

The bench will be placed on Piermont Avenue between Depew and Hudson Avenues. In 2010, this section was renamed Cynthia Hesdra Way. The bench sits 400 yards from property that was owned

Cynthia Hesdra from 1837 through 1859, the period when Underground Railroad activity was most intense. Nyack was believed to be the halfway point between Underground Railroad stops in Jersey City, New Jersey, and Newburgh, New York.

About Visit Nyack, Inc.

Visit Nyack, Inc., formerly known as The Nyack Marketing Association, was formed in 2012 to promote tourism in Nyack, New York. Visit Nyack, Inc., runs marketing campaigns throughout the year using radio, TV, location based advertising and streaming media to tell visitors why Nyack is “Art & Soul On The Hudson.” For more information about Nyack and Visit Nyack, Inc., go to VisitNyack.org.

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Editors, additional information for your convenience:

New York Times profile of Toni Morrison, 4/12/15: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/magazine/the-radical-vision-of-toni-morrison.html>

ALA list of most frequently challenged books 2014 (see *The Bluest Eye*):
<http://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>

Toni Morrison Society: <http://www.tonimorrisonssociety.org>

Nobel Prize in Literature: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/

Nyack Bench by the Road:
http://www.nyacknewsandviews.com/2014/11/nsi_toni-morrison-bench/

God Help the Child: <http://knopfdoubleday.com/book/204834/god-help-the-child/>

More information about Cynthia Hesdra:
http://www.nyacknewsandviews.com/2013/03/bb_lorimartin/
http://www.nyacknewsandviews.com/2014/03/nsi_african-american-entrepreneurs/