

HARRIET TUBMAN AND THE END OF SLAVERY

NICKNAMED THE 'MOSES OF HER PEOPLE' FOR LEADING RUNAWAY SLAVES TO FREEDOM IN THE NORTH, HARRIET TUBMAN WAS THE MOST FAMOUS MEMBER OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD. SHE BECAME A CELEBRITY IN HER LIFETIME AND A HERO OF THE CIVIL WAR.

The Underground Railroad was a secret system of anti-slavery activists providing food, shelter, transportation, and protection for runaway slaves on their dangerous journey north. Most historians credit Tubman with personally leading more than 300 former slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad and rallying hundreds more to defect from Confederate forces during the Civil War.

The Making of a Fugitive

The year of her birth is unknown. Tubman believed it was 1825. Her death certificate gives 1815 as her date of birth, but her gravestone reads 1820. Regardless, she was born in Maryland's Dorchester County to slave parents, Harriet Green and Benjamin Ross. They named their daughter Araminta Ross. Later, when she escaped to the North, she took the name Harriet to honor her mother and mask her own identity.

She was one of nine children, many of whom she would later lead north. Slave traders often purchased young slaves in Dorchester County, and they routinely separated members of slave families. Traders took away two of Tubman's siblings, and it's likely that the painful loss of her sisters drove her later to work with the Underground Railroad.

At just 5 years old, Tubman was taken from her home to look after a white infant. When the child cried, Tubman was whipped, leaving



Harriet Tubman led hundreds of slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad.

Wikimedia Commons

scars on her neck and back for the rest of her life.

As a young girl, Tubman bounced between several households, serving various masters and mistresses. She fled one home after getting caught stealing a lump of sugar. She hid in a pigpen for days, fighting the swine for scraps of food until she grew so hungry that she returned to face punishment at the hands of her mistress. Later in life, Tubman would sum up the indignities of her childhood by saying she was "a neglected weed, ignorant of liberty."

She often fought illness in her childhood, but as she grew older, the "sickly" young household girl grew stronger and even became a fieldhand. On a secluded plantation during her adolescence, Tubman attempted to warn an escaping slave that his master was nearby. She was caught between the slave and his master when the two confronted each other. The master slung a lead weight at the escapee, but hit Tubman in the head. The force of the blow "broke her skull and drove a piece of her bandana" into her head. The head injury would cause her to have headaches, fainting spells, and visions for the rest of her life.

In 1844, she married a free black man named John Tubman. Around this time, she hired a lawyer to investigate her family's slave contracts. The lawyer found her mother should have been freed at the age of 45, meaning that some of her siblings should have been born free.

Escape North

The revelation about her mother angered and saddened Tubman, so she decided to do what she had thought about for years: flee to the North. In September 1849, she made off. She was one of about 280 slaves who escaped Maryland from June 1849 to June 1850.

Tubman became so closely linked to the Underground Railroad that many assume she founded it, but by the 1840s a system of clandestine routes already existed. Women rarely made the dangerous journey alone, but Tubman, with her husband's blessing, set out by herself.

Throughout her life, Tubman treated the details of her escape as a secret. Freed slaves were intentionally secretive about how they escaped, so as not to reveal precious escape routes. Historians suspect Tubman took the

most common “liberty line” of the Underground Railroad, which cut inland through Delaware along the Choptank River.

Fugitives, or runaways, on the Choptank liberty line traveled by foot at night and rested during the day, generally doing about 10 miles a night on the roughly 90-mile journey to the Pennsylvania state line. The trip usually took between 10 to 20 days.

Since it was called a “railroad,” many of its elements were known by common railroad terms. People who gave shelter to fugitives were called “stationmasters,” and their homes were known as “stations” or “depots.” The volunteers who guided fugitives between stations were “conductors,” and the fugitives themselves were called “cargo.”

The railroad was “underground” in the sense that it was clandestine. Its routes, safe houses, and the identity of participants were closely guarded secrets. Over time, the Underground Railroad developed an elaborate system of catchphrases, code words, secret knocks, lamps lit at night, and hymns to warn of slave catchers and to identify sympathizers.

The gateway for runaway slaves heading north was Philadelphia, which had a strong Underground Railroad network. The city attracted abolitionists and upwardly mobile African Americans. Here, free blacks formed their own businesses, schools, and churches. Tubman got a job and was able to live freely. She also likely expanded her network, meeting Underground Railroad members and activists.

But life in Philadelphia was not easy. Philadelphia was the last stop for recaptured slaves being shipped back south. Slave catchers raided black communities and were prominent in Philadelphia. Fear of recapture among fugitives was constant, and racial tensions ran



When Harriet Tubman first escaped, she probably followed the route that passes near Dover and leads to Philadelphia.

high. Tubman found herself feeling lonely and frustrated by the uncertainty of freedom.

By the late 1840s, slave owners claimed they were losing \$200,000 annually to the Underground Railroad. (This would be about \$4.5 million in today’s money.) In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, which opponents dubbed the “Bloodhound Law.” The law gave federal authorities sweeping powers to seize fugitives and return them to the South. Without legal protection, even free blacks were at risk. As former slaves were plucked out of unlikely places like New York and Boston, anger grew in the anti-slavery community. The issue of slavery increasingly divided the nation.

The Abductor

Within the growing climate of fear and persecution, Tubman, most likely still in her teens, undertook her legendary career as an “abductor.” Abductors, true folk heroes of the Underground Railroad, ventured into slave states and led fugitives out. Prior to Tubman, most abductors were adventurous white men. Tubman was five feet tall, illiterate, and a fugitive, with little idea of geography and subject to frequent fainting spells.

Tubman’s first rescue mission was prompted by news that her niece Keziah would be sold into slavery in the Deep South. Keziah’s husband, John Bowley, sent word to Tubman in Philadelphia of the pending sale. In 1850, risking capture, ▶

Tubman returned to the slave state of Maryland. Bowley delivered Keziah and her children to Tubman in Baltimore, where she hid them before using her contacts to move the fugitives into Philadelphia.

She went south a second time in the spring of 1851 to rescue one of her brothers. Two of his fellow slaves joined their expedition. In the fall of 1851, Tubman returned to Dorchester County to persuade her husband to return north with her. The risk of being recognized by a former master was enormous, and the result, heartbreaking. John Tubman refused to flee with her as he had taken another wife.

Despite her grief, Tubman completely committed herself to the task of freeing slaves. She returned to Maryland in December 1851, rallying a large band of fugitives. Reports indicate there were as many as 11, among them relatives. Tubman led them north to Philadelphia, but the new border of freedom had been pushed still further north by the Fugitive Slave Law. Tubman moved into uncharted territory, guiding her group up through New York to Niagara and into the new promised land of Canada.

It was far easier to lead small groups, or for slaves to flee on their own. But Tubman became a master at organizing large groups. She sent word ahead through the Underground Railroad network of upcoming missions, and she quickly assembled groups of fugitives.

Thomas Garrett, a stationmaster in Wilmington, Delaware, sheltered many of Tubman's groups at a blacksmith shop. While many stationmasters destroyed their records of fugitive slaves to avoid prosecution, Garrett's records remain. A Quaker who believed in the equality of all people before God, Garrett sheltered some 2,500 fugitives, scores of whom had been under Tubman's care.

Starting in 1852, Tubman made one or two trips a year, shepherding fugitives through the night. She famously toted a pistol and was known to point it at fugitives who threatened to turn back and put the entire band at risk. "You'll be free or die," she would say to them.

She often worked in winter when the days were short, facing darkness and bad weather on the exhausting and perilous journey into Maryland and Virginia. The Underground Railroad's path then took her back through stations in Wilmington, Philadelphia, New York, and on to the Canadian border. During this time, Underground Railroad members and anti-slavery admirers gave her the nickname "Moses."

General Tubman

As the numbers of fugitives she rescued swelled, so did her fame. Tubman was a celebrity among the elite abolitionists of Boston and New York.

Southern authorities fumed as they failed at efforts to "end her reign." In 1856, a \$40,000 reward was offered for her recapture in the South. Once, she overheard men reading a wanted poster that mentioned her illiteracy. She cleverly pretended to read a book to avoid being recognized. She not only eluded capture, but later in life she claimed that she never lost a single slave on any of her missions.

It was far easier to lead small groups, or for slaves to flee on their own. But Tubman became a master at organizing large groups.

She had become a devout Christian in her childhood. Her strong faith and uncanny ability to avoid capture also earned her a

reputation as a mystic, or person in direct contact with God.

Tubman helped her own family gain freedom. She was able to guide five of her siblings to St. Catharines, outside present-day Toronto, Canada. In 1857, her parents were technically free, but faced penalties for sheltering slaves in their Maryland home. Knowing her parents were in danger but not physically strong, Tubman fashioned a primitive horse-carriage and carried them 80 miles to Garrett's safe house in Wilmington. Garrett supplied them with train tickets to Canada, where they joined their children and grandchildren. Tubman spent time there gathering funds for missions to the South.

In 1859, Tubman got help from Senator William Seward, a high-profile admirer of Tubman's work. Seward, who later became Lincoln's secretary of state, sold Tubman a small piece of land in Auburn, New York, for a home, and Tubman moved her parents and siblings there from Canada. But just as it looked like she might settle down, firebrand abolitionist John Brown sought her out in Canada. He called her "General Tubman." She supported his mission to wage war to end slavery.

Brown's plan involved raiding the U.S. arsenal, or weapons storage, at Harper's Ferry. He wanted to arm slaves to fight their masters. Tubman began to raise money and gather former slaves in Canada to help with the raid, but she fell sick before she could participate herself. Brown's poorly planned mission failed, and he was hanged at the gallows. Brown's execution, however, made him a martyr for the abolitionist cause.

Meanwhile, slave owners complained of a "stampede" of slaves to the North. Abolitionists feared Tubman would be executed, just like Brown, if ever recaptured.

Daring and Tenacity

In 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected president. The slaveholding South viewed him as an abolitionist, though he did not think of himself that way. He opposed slavery, but his main goal was to stop the spread of slavery into new American territories. Beginning with South Carolina on December 20, 1860, Southern states began to secede from the Union and in 1861 formed the rebellious Confederate States of America. In April, the Confederate Army's attack on Fort Sumter in South Carolina began the Civil War.

While Lincoln's primary aim was to keep the country from splitting apart, Tubman and other activists were convinced the war should put an end to slavery. "God won't let Master Lincoln beat the South," she was quoted while fundraising in Massachusetts, "till he does the right thing." The right thing was to abolish slavery.

Tubman used her detailed knowledge of routes through swamps, rivers, and wetlands to help Union troops in Maryland. Later, she sailed to South Carolina, extending her liberty lines into the Deep South as the war raged. She spent much of her time caring for fugitives and guiding them back north.

Tubman wanted to join the military. Through influential abolitionist friends, Tubman met the abolitionist governor of Massachusetts, John Albion Andrew. In response to a Union general's request for volunteers, Andrew said that Tubman would be "a valuable person to operate within enemy lines in procuring information and scouts." At first, however, Tubman worked as a cook and a nurse in Union camps. She also taught slaves freed by the Army.

Early on, Lincoln opposed arming freed slaves, but Tubman enthusiastically supported bringing

them into the U.S. Army. With the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the first black troops of the Army appeared ready for battle. Tubman then joined, too. She became the leader of a team of spies, sending valuable information to commanders and recruiting restless slaves in the South to join Union forces.

On June 1, 1863, Tubman aided a mission of black soldiers up the Combahee River in South Carolina to take supplies and free slaves from plantations controlled by rebels. Serving as navigator on the

lead gunboat, Tubman took charge. The raid on the plantations freed at least 750 slaves. Tubman was the only woman in the Civil War to plan and lead an armed assault.

The *Wisconsin State Journal* soon published an article about her titled "A Black She 'Moses' — Her Wonderful Daring and Tenacity." But the article did not use her name. The Boston *Commonwealth* newspaper reprinted the article. The editor let his readers know that the "black heroine" of the story was Harriet Tubman.



Wikimedia Commons

In the Civil War, Tubman worked tirelessly, leading a team of spies and even raiding plantations.



Tubman (far left) poses for a photograph with her family and neighbors in Auburn, N.Y.

Continued Struggle

When the war ended in 1865, Tubman returned to Auburn to live with her parents and siblings. Although she struggled financially, Tubman opened her home to people in need. Her former husband, John Tubman, was gunned down in 1867 by a white man in Maryland. She then married Nelson Davis, a veteran of Civil War from the U.S. Colored Troops, the black soldiers of the U.S. Army.

Tubman, who had survived slavery, illness, heartbreak, and even battle, experienced hardship in her later life. Even with the help of powerful friends like William Seward, it took 30 years for Tubman to receive payment for her wartime services from the U.S. Army. She also struggled to receive widow's benefits when Nelson Davis died.

In 1896, Tubman bought the land where she and Nelson had lived to create a home for aging, poor African Americans. With only a \$20 per month pension, she could not afford upkeep of the property. She donated the land to the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. The Harriet Tubman Home officially opened in 1908.

In the meantime, Tubman became active in the women's suffrage, or voting rights, movement alongside

Susan B. Anthony and others. As a war hero, Tubman stood as an example of equality between women and men. She spoke at suffrage meetings throughout the Eastern states and also used her respected status to continue speaking out for equality for African Americans.

Former slave and influential abolitionist Frederick Douglass admired her greatly and wrote about her. After lengthy bouts with illness, Tubman died in 1913. Prominent African American reformer

Booker T. Washington gave the eulogy at her funeral.

During her lifetime, she had become widely known. In 1869, a biography of her sold well. Though criticized for inaccuracies, the book spread her fame, and she was invited many places to speak about her experiences with the Underground Railroad and the war. Many biographies have been written since. Although for a period after her death, her story lapsed into obscurity, it has since risen into the stuff of legend.

DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Why do you think it was called the Underground Railroad?
2. What was the Fugitive Slave Law? What effects did it have on the Underground Railroad?
3. What made Harriet Tubman an unlikely person to be a leader? What do you think motivated her? Explain.
4. Tubman made many decisions in her life. Which do you think was the bravest? Which do you think was the most questionable? Explain your answers.

ACTIVITY

The Traits of Leadership

Harriet Tubman was a great leader. In this activity, students discuss what makes a great leader and evaluate Tubman's leadership qualities.

1. Form small groups.
2. Each group should:
 - a. Discuss traits that leaders should have.
 - b. Choose the **five** most essential traits of a leader.
 - c. Evaluate Harriet Tubman's leadership based on these five traits.
 - d. Discuss what other leadership traits Tubman possessed.
 - e. Be prepared to report your conclusions and reasons for them to the class.
3. Call on groups to report their conclusions and hold a class discussion on the traits of leadership.



[facebook.com/ConstitutionalRightsFoundation](https://www.facebook.com/ConstitutionalRightsFoundation)