Harriet Tubman

Born 1820 or 1821
Dorchester County, Maryland
Died March 10, 1913
Auburn, New York

Escaped slave who became a leader of the Underground Railroad

Risked her life in order to guide hundreds of slaves to freedom in the North

Harriet Tubman was a fugitive slave who helped other slaves gain their freedom through the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was not actually a railroad. It was a secret network of abolitionists (people who fought to end slavery) who helped slaves escape from their masters and settle in the Northern United States and Canada, where slavery was not allowed. The Underground Railroad system consisted of a chain of homes and barns known as "safe houses" or "depots." The people who guided the runaway slaves from one safe house to the next were known as "conductors." As one of the most successful conductors, Tubman made nineteen dangerous trips into slave territory and helped more than three hundred slaves gain their freedom.

"There was one of two things I had a *right* to, liberty, or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive."

Born into slavery

Harriet Tubman was born on a plantation (a large farming estate) in Dorchester County, Maryland, in either 1820 or 1821. She never knew the exact date of her birth because she was born a slave. Black people were taken from Africa and

Harriet Tubman. *(Reproduced with permission of Archive Photos, Inc.)*

brought to North America to serve as slaves for white people beginning in the 1600s. The basic belief behind slavery was that black people were inferior to whites. Under slavery, white slaveholders treated black people as property, forced them to perform hard labor, and controlled every aspect of their lives. States in the Northern half of the United States began outlawing slavery in the late 1700s. But slavery continued to exist in the Southern half of the country because it played an important role in the South's economy and culture.

Most slave owners tried to prevent their slaves from learning much about themselves or the world around them. They believed that educated slaves would be more likely to become dissatisfied with their lives. For this reason, Tubman never knew the details of her birth. However, she did know that she was one of eleven children born to Harriet Greene and Benjamin Ross. Her whole family was the property of Edward Brodas, the white man who owned the plantation where they lived. The name she received when she was born was Araminta. She adopted the name Harriet in 1831.

When Tubman was seven years old, her master hired her out to an impatient and cruel woman named Miss Susan. Many slaveowners loaned their extra slaves to other people in exchange for a fee. Tubman took care of Miss Susan's baby and performed household chores. Miss Susan beat her whenever the house was not clean enough or the baby cried at night. The beatings left scars on her back and neck that would remain visible the rest of her life. Eventually Miss Susan returned Tubman to the Brodas plantation.

From that time on, Tubman worked in the fields and became very strong. She constantly thought about running away from the plantation, but did not know where to go and could not read a map. One day, Tubman noticed a young male slave sneaking away from the fields where they worked. She decided to follow him. Unfortunately, the overseer (a person who watches over field hands and directs their work) chased and caught them. When Tubman refused to help the overseer tie up the male slave, the overseer threw a heavy weight that hit her in the middle of the forehead. She slipped into a coma for several weeks before slowly recovering. This head injury caused her to suffer from blackouts and terrible nightmares for the rest of her life.

Tubman Should Never Have Been a Slave

In 1844, Tubman used some of the money she had earned to hire a lawyer. She wanted someone to research her family's history in order to find out if they were held in slavery legally. Tubman took this unusual step after learning how her new husband had become free. John Tubman had been freed because his former master, who had no children, died without leaving a will.

Then Tubman remembered a story her mother had told about her past. Harriet Greene had once belonged to a woman named Mary Patterson. Patterson died young, had no heirs, and left no will. As a result, Tubman's mother legally should have been freed. But Harriet Greene did not know the law, and no one bothered to tell her. Instead, she remained a slave, and all her children became slaves as well.

After learning that she was being held in slavery illegally, Tubman asked the lawyer what she could do to secure her rights. But the lawyer said that no judge would ever consider the case because too much time had passed, and the women had always lived as slaves. Instead of gaining her freedom on legal grounds, Tubman was forced to escape from slavery on the Underground Railroad.

Harriet Tubman. *(Reproduced with permission of Corbis-Bettmann.)*

Escapes to the North

Edward Brodas died in 1835, and ownership of Tubman and her family passed to his son. Tubman convinced her new master to let her "hire her time," or find her own jobs outside of the plantation. She still had to pay her master a large chunk of her earnings, but she also got to keep some money for herself. In 1844, she married a free black man named John Tubman and went to live in his cabin. Before long, it became clear that Tubman and her husband had different priorities. She dreamed of escaping from slavery and

traveling to the North, but he worried that his freedom would be put in jeopardy if he left Maryland. He threatened to report his wife to her master if she attempted to escape.

In 1849, Brodas's son died. At this point, one of Tubman's worst fears became a reality. She learned that she and her family would be sold in order to pay the plantation's debts. There was little market for slaves in Maryland, so they would likely be taken to the Deep South to pick cotton. Tubman decided that the time had come for her to run away. "I had reasoned this out in my mind," she noted. "There was one of two things I had a *right* to, liberty, or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive."

Late one night, Tubman left the plantation and went to a nearby home that was rumored to be part of the Underground Railroad. The woman who lived there provided directions to the next safe house. For the next few days, Tubman traveled at night with the assistance of strangers who opposed slavery. At one house she pretended to be a servant in order to avoid suspicion. Another time she hid in the back of a vegetable wagon. Sometimes she hiked north along the coast and through swamps and woodlands. She took careful notice of the route so that she could return later to rescue her family. Tubman finally crossed the border into Pennsylvania—where slavery was not allowed—after a one hundred-mile journey. "I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now that I was free," she recalled. "There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven."

Becomes a conductor on the Underground Railroad

Tubman was finally free, although she knew that she might be captured and returned to slavery at any time. She settled in Philadelphia and took a job washing dishes at a hotel. She saved her money in the hope of returning to Maryland to deliver her family to freedom. She met many prominent abolitionists during this time, including **John Brown** (1800–1859; see entry) and **Frederick Douglass** (1817–1895; see entry). In 1850, Tubman made her first trip to the South as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. She returned to

her old plantation in order to rescue her brothers and their families from slavery. Another time, she helped her elderly parents make the trip to the North. She once tried to bring her husband to Pennsylvania, but found that he had remarried and was not interested in leaving Maryland.

Tubman made a total of nineteen trips into slave territory over the next ten years. She guided more than three hundred slaves to freedom. Each time she made the dangerous journey, she risked being captured and returned to her owner, or even killed. As word of her daring rescues spread, white Southerners offered a large reward for her capture. But although she had some close calls, she never ran into serious trouble. "I never ran my train off the track, and I never lost a passenger," she stated. Tubman made her final trip on the Underground Railroad in December 1860. Then it became clear that the issue of slavery would be settled by war.

Serves the Union during the Civil War

The North and the South had been arguing over several issues, including slavery, for many years. Growing numbers of Northerners believed that slavery was wrong. Some people wanted to outlaw it, while others wanted to prevent it from spreading beyond the Southern states where it was already allowed. But slavery played a big role in the Southern economy and culture. As a result, many Southerners felt threatened by Northern efforts to contain slavery. They believed that each state should decide for itself whether to allow slavery. They did not want the national government to pass laws that would interfere with their traditional way of life.

By 1861, this ongoing dispute had convinced several Southern states to secede from (leave) the United States and attempt to form a new country that allowed slavery, called the Confederate States of America. But Northern political leaders were determined to keep the Southern states in the Union. The two sides soon went to war. Once the Civil War began, Tubman began looking for a way to help the Union cause. She ended up volunteering as a cook, nurse, and laundress for Union troops who had taken over Beaufort, South Carolina.

Tubman also served as a spy, conducting several successful raids and scouting missions. In June 1863, she led a

group of Union gunboats manned by black soldiers on a raid up the Combahee River in South Carolina. They removed mines from the river, destroyed Confederate supplies, and led 750 slaves to freedom. Nearly all of the male slaves who were freed in this mission later joined the Union Army.

Helps freed slaves after the war

After war ended in a Northern victory in 1865, Tubman expected the U.S. government to pay her for her wartime service. After all, the Union had offered a bounty (reward) to people who recruited new soldiers. Counting the freed slaves Tubman had convinced to sign up after the Combahee River mission, she figured the government owed her $1,800. But the government refused to pay her the money, even when Secretary of State **William Seward** (1801–1872; see entry) made a personal appeal on her behalf.

As a result, Tubman lived in relative poverty after the war. She had a home in Auburn, New York, that she shared with her parents. She earned a living by selling fruits and vegetables from her garden door-to-door. The people in town welcomed her into their homes, bought her goods, and listened to her amazing stories about the Underground Railroad. In 1867, Tubman's friend Sarah Bradford published a book called *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*. This book discussed Tubman's accomplishments before and during the war and included statements of praise from her important friends, such as Frederick Douglass. Bradford gave the money she earned from sales of the book to Tubman, who used it to build schools to educate freed slaves and facilities to nurse sick and injured blacks.

In 1869, Tubman married Nelson Davis. In the 1870s, she threw her support behind efforts to secure the right to vote for women. In 1897, Tubman received a medal from Queen Victoria (1819–1901) of England. In 1908, she donated land in Auburn to the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. The site was to be used for a home for sick and elderly black people. Tubman had several disagreements with the church about how the home should be run, but they eventually settled their differences. As she grew frail, Tubman moved into the home in 1911. She died of pneumonia on March 10,

1913, at the age of ninety-three. A group of Union Army veterans arranged for her to receive a military funeral.

"Harriet Tubman's life story is an inspiration to blacks and women in their ongoing battle for equal rights," Bree Burns wrote in *Harriet Tubman and the Fight against Slavery.* "She is remembered as a hero who was not afraid to fight for her beliefs. Tubman's dedication to justice has become a model for all Americans."

Where to Learn More

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