

Harriet Tubman

(In lieu of no public domain book found for the life of Harriet Tubman, the following biographical summary from the on-line encyclopedia *Wikipedia* is offered for student reading. The content reflects the on-line date of December 10, 2009. For updates and footnoted references, access the [Wikipedia site](#).)

Harriet Tubman (born **Araminta Ross**; c. 1822 – March 10, 1913) was an African-American abolitionist, humanitarian, and Union spy during the American Civil War. After escaping from slavery, into which she was born, she made thirteen missions to rescue over seventy slaves using the network of antislavery activists and safe houses known as the Underground Railroad. She later helped John Brown recruit men for his raid on Harpers Ferry, and in the post-war era struggled for women's suffrage.

As a child in Dorchester County, Maryland, Tubman was beaten and whipped by her various masters to whom she had been hired out. Early in her life, she suffered a traumatic head wound when she was hit by a heavy metal weight thrown by an irate overseer, intending to hit another slave. The injury caused disabling seizures, headaches, powerful visionary and dream activity, and spells of “hypersomnia” which occurred throughout her entire life. A devout Christian, she ascribed her visions and vivid dreams to premonitions from God.

In 1849, Tubman escaped to Philadelphia, then immediately returned to Maryland to rescue her family. Slowly, one group at a time, she brought relatives with her out of the state, and eventually guided dozens of other slaves to freedom. Traveling by night and in extreme secrecy, Tubman (or "Moses", as she was called) "never lost a passenger," as she later put it at women's suffrage meetings. Large rewards were offered for the capture and return of many of the people she helped escape, but no one ever knew it was Harriet Tubman who was helping them. When the far-reaching United States Fugitive Slave Law was passed in 1850, she helped guide fugitives farther north into Canada, and helped newly freed slaves find work.

When the American Civil War began, Tubman worked for the Union Army, first as a cook and nurse, and then as an armed scout and spy. The first woman to lead an armed expedition in the war, she guided the raid on the Combahee River, which liberated more than seven hundred slaves. After the war, she retired to the family home in Auburn, New York, where she cared for her aging parents. She was active in the women's suffrage movement until illness overtook her and she had to be admitted to a home for elderly African-Americans she had helped open years earlier.

Family and birth

Harriet Tubman was born Araminta "Minty" Ross to slave parents, Harriet ("Rit") Green and Ben Ross. Rit was owned by Mary Pattison Brodess (and later her son Edward), while Ben was legally owned by Mary's second husband, Anthony Thompson, who ran a large plantation near Blackwater River in Madison, Maryland. As with many slaves in the

United States, neither the exact year nor place of her birth was recorded, and historians differ as to the best estimate. Kate Larson records the year 1822, based on a midwife payment and several other historical documents while Jean Humez says "the best current evidence suggests that Tubman was born in 1820, but it might have been a year or two later." Catherine Clinton notes that Tubman herself reported the year of her birth as 1825, while her death certificate lists 1815 and her gravestone lists 1820. In her Civil War widow's pension record, Tubman claimed she was born in 1820, 1822, and 1825, an indication, perhaps, that she had only a general idea of when she was born.



A map showing key locations in Tubman's life

Modesty, Tubman's maternal grandmother, arrived in the US on a slave ship from Africa; no information is available about her other ancestors. As a child, Tubman was told that she was of Ashanti lineage (from what is now Ghana), though no evidence exists to confirm or deny this assertion. Her mother Rit (who may have been the child of a white man) was a cook for the Brodess family. Her father Ben was a skilled woodsman who managed the timber work on the plantation. They married around 1808, and according to court records, they had nine children together: Linah, born in 1808, Mariah Ritty in 1811, Soph in 1813, Robert in 1816, Minty (Harriet) in 1822, Ben in 1823, Rachel in 1825, Henry in 1830, and Moses in 1832.

Rit struggled to keep their family together as slavery tried to tear it apart. Edward Brodess sold three of her daughters (Linah, Mariah Ritty, and Soph), separating them from the family forever. When a trader from Georgia approached Brodess about buying Rit's youngest son Moses, she hid him for a month, aided by other slaves and free blacks in the community. At one point she even confronted her owner about the sale.^[12] Finally, Brodess and "the Georgia man" came toward the slave quarters to seize the child, where Rit told them: "You are after my son; but the first man that comes into my house, I will split his head open." Brodess backed away and abandoned the sale. Tubman's biographers agree that tales of this event in the family's history influenced her belief in the possibilities of resistance.

Childhood

Because Tubman's mother was assigned to "the big house" and had scarce time for her own family, as a child Tubman took care of a younger brother and a baby. At the age of five or six, she was hired out to a woman named "Miss Susan" as a nursemaid. Tubman

was ordered to keep watch on the baby as it slept; when it woke and cried, Tubman was whipped. She told of a particular day when she was lashed five times before breakfast. She carried these scars for the rest of her life. Threatened later for stealing a lump of sugar, Tubman hid in a neighbor's pig sty for five days, where she fought with the animals for scraps of food. Starving, she returned to Miss Susan's house and received a heavy beating. Later, to protect herself from such abuse, she wrapped herself in layers of clothing, but cried out as she might if less protected. Another time, she bit a white man's knee while receiving a punishment; afterwards, he kept his distance from her.

Tubman also worked as a child at the home of a planter named James Cook, where she was ordered into nearby marshes to check the muskrat traps. Even after contracting the measles, she was sent into waist-high cold water. She became very ill and was sent back home. Her mother nursed her back to health, whereupon she was immediately hired out again to various farms. Tubman spoke later of her acute childhood homesickness, once comparing herself to "the boy on the Swanee River", an allusion to Stephen Foster's song "Old Folks at Home". As she grew older and stronger, she was assigned to grueling field and forest work: driving oxen, plowing, and hauling logs.

Head injury

One day, when she was an adolescent, Tubman was sent to a dry-goods store for some supplies. There, she encountered a slave owned by a different family, who had left the fields without permission. His overseer, furious, demanded that Tubman help restrain the young man. She refused, and as the slave ran away, the overseer threw a two-pound weight from the store's counter. It missed and struck Tubman instead, which she said "broke my skull". She later explained her belief that her hair – which "had never been combed and ... stood out like a bushel basket" – might have saved her life. Bleeding and unconscious, Tubman was returned to her owner's house and laid on the seat of a loom, where she remained without medical care for two days. She was immediately sent back into the fields, "with blood and sweat rolling down my face until I couldn't see." Her boss said she was "not worth a sixpence" and returned her to Brodess, who tried unsuccessfully to sell her. She began having seizures and would seemingly fall unconscious, although she claimed to be aware of her surroundings even though she appeared to be asleep. These episodes were alarming to her family who were unable to wake her when she fell asleep suddenly and without warning. This condition remained with Tubman for the rest of her life; Larson suggests she may have suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy as a result of the injury.

This severe head wound occurred at a time in her life when Tubman was becoming deeply religious. As an illiterate child, she had been told Bible stories by her mother. The particular variety of her early Christian belief remains unclear, but Tubman acquired a passionate faith in God. She rejected white interpretations of scripture urging slaves to be obedient, finding guidance in the Old Testament tales of deliverance. After her brain trauma, Tubman began experiencing visions and potent dreams, which she considered signs from the divine. This religious perspective instructed her throughout her life.

Family and marriage

By 1840, Tubman's father Ben was manumitted – released from slavery at the age of forty-five, as stipulated in a former owner's will, though his real age was closer to fifty-five. He continued working as a timber estimator and foreman for the Thompson family, who had owned him as a slave. Several years later, Tubman contacted a white attorney and paid him five dollars to investigate her mother's legal status. The lawyer discovered that a former owner had issued instructions that Rit, like her husband, would be manumitted at the age of forty-five. The record showed that a similar provision would apply to Rit's children, and that any children born after she reached forty-five years of age were legally free. However, the Pattison and Brodess families had ignored this stipulation when inheriting the slaves, and seeing it enacted was an impossible task for Tubman.

In or around 1844, she married a free black man named John Tubman. Although little is known about him or their time together, the union was complicated due to her slave status. Since the mother's status dictated that of children, any children born to Harriet and John would be enslaved. Such blended marriages – free people marrying enslaved people – were not uncommon on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, where half the black population was free. Most African American families had both free and enslaved members. Larson suggests that they might have planned to buy Tubman's freedom.

Tubman changed her name from Araminta to Harriet soon after her marriage, though the exact timing is unclear. Larson suggests this happened right after the wedding, and Clinton suggests that it coincided with Tubman's plans to escape from slavery. She adopted her mother's name, possibly as part of a religious conversion, or possibly to honor another relative.

Escape from slavery

In 1849, Tubman became ill again, and her value as a slave was diminished as a result. Edward Brodess tried to sell her, but could not find a buyer.^[31] Angry at this effort (and the unjust hold he kept on her relatives), Tubman began to pray for her owner, asking God to make him change his ways. "I prayed all night long for my master," she said later, "till the first of March; and all the time he was bringing people to look at me, and trying to sell me." When it appeared as though the sale was being finalized, she switched tactics. "I changed my prayer," she said. "First of March I began to pray, 'Oh Lord, if you ain't never going to change that man's heart, kill him, Lord, and take him out of the way.'" A week later, Brodess died, and Tubman expressed regret for her earlier sentiments. Ironically, Brodess's death increased the likelihood that Tubman would be sold and the family would be broken apart. His widow Eliza began working to sell the family's slaves. Tubman refused to wait for the Brodess family to decide her fate, despite her husband's efforts to dissuade her. "[T]here was one of two things I had a right to," she explained later, "liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other."

**THREE HUNDRED DOLLARS
REWARD.**

RUNAWAY from the subscriber on Monday the 17th ult., three negroes, named as follows: HARRY, aged about 19 years, has on one side of his neck a wen, just under the ear, he is of a dark chestnut color, about 5 feet 8 or 9 inches high; BEN, aged about 35 years, is very quick to speak when spoken to, he is of a chestnut color, about six feet high; MINTY, aged about 27 years, is of a chestnut color, fine looking, and about 5 feet high. One hundred dollars reward will be given for each of the above named negroes, if taken out of the State, and \$50 each if taken in the State. They must be lodged in Baltimore, Easton or Cambridge Jail, in Maryland.

ELIZA ANN BRODESS.
Near Bucktown, Dorchester county, Md.
Oct. 3d, 1849.

☞ The Delaware Gazette will please copy the above three weeks, and charge this office.



Notice published in the *Cambridge Democrat*, offering a three hundred dollar reward for Araminta (Minty) and her brothers Harry and Ben

Tubman and her brothers Ben and Henry escaped from slavery on September 17, 1849. Tubman had been hired out to Dr. Anthony Thompson, who owned a very large plantation called Poplar Neck in neighboring Caroline County, and it is likely her brothers labored for Thompson there as well. Because the slaves were hired out to another household, Eliza Brodess probably did not recognize their absence as an escape attempt for some time. Two weeks later, however, she posted a runaway notice in the *Cambridge Democrat*, offering a reward of up to one hundred dollars for each slave returned. Once they had left, however, Tubman's brothers succumbed to second thoughts. Ben had just become a father, and the two men – fearful of the dangers ahead – went back, forcing Tubman to return with them.

Soon afterwards, Tubman escaped again, this time without her brothers. The night before she left, Tubman tried to send word to her mother of her departure. She located Mary, a trusted fellow slave, and sang a coded song of farewell: "I'll meet you in the morning," she intoned, "I'm bound for the promised land". While her exact route is unknown, Tubman made use of the extensive network known as the Underground Railroad. This informal but well-organized system was composed of free and enslaved blacks, white abolitionists, and other activists. Most prominent among the latter in Maryland at the time were members of the Religious Society of Friends, often called Quakers. The Preston area near Poplar Neck in Caroline County, Maryland contained a significant Quaker community, and was probably an important first stop during Tubman's escape, if not the starting point. From there, she probably took a common route for fleeing slaves: northeast along the Choptank River, through Delaware and then north into Pennsylvania. A journey of nearly ninety miles (145 kilometers), traveling by foot would take between five days and three weeks.

Her dangerous journey required Tubman to travel by night (guided by the North Star), avoiding the careful eyes of "slave-catchers", eager to collect rewards for fugitive slaves.^[46] The "conductors" in the Underground Railroad used a variety of deceptions to

hide and protect her. At one of the earliest stops, the lady of the house ordered Tubman to sweep the yard to make it appear as though she worked for the family. When night fell, the family hid her in a cart and took her to the next friendly house. Given her familiarity with the woods and marshes of the region, it is likely that Tubman hid in these locales during the day. Because the routes she followed were used by other fugitive slaves, Tubman did not speak about them until later in her life.

Particulars of her first journey remain shrouded in secrecy. She crossed into Pennsylvania with a feeling of relief and awe, and recalled the experience years later: "When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. 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."

"Moses"

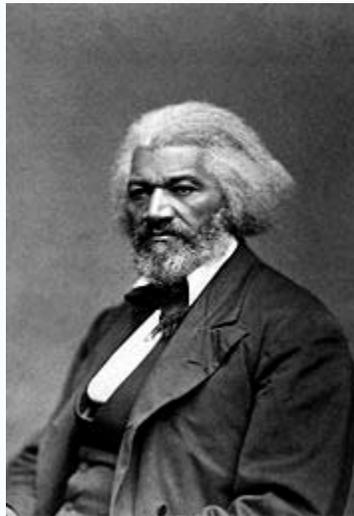
Immediately after reaching the city of Philadelphia, Tubman began thinking of her family. "I was a stranger in a strange land," she said later. "[M]y father, my mother, my brothers, and sisters, and friends were [in Maryland]. But I was free, and *they* should be free." She began to work odd jobs and save money. At the same time, the U.S. Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which forced law enforcement officials (even in states which had outlawed slavery) to aid in the capture of fugitive slaves, and imposed heavy punishments on those who abetted escape. The law increased risks for escaped slaves, many of whom headed north to Canada. Meanwhile, racial tension was increasing in Philadelphia itself, as the city expanded.

In December 1850, Tubman received a warning that her niece Kessiah was going to be sold (along with her two children, six-year-old James Alfred, and baby Araminta) in Cambridge, Maryland. Horrified at the prospect of having her family broken further apart, Tubman did something very few slaves ever did: she voluntarily returned to the land of her enslavement. She went to Baltimore, where her brother-in-law Tom Tubman hid her until the time of the sale. Kessiah's husband, a free black man named John Bowley, made the winning bid for his wife. Then, while he pretended to make arrangements to pay, Kessiah and her children absconded to a nearby safe house. When night fell, Bowley ferried the family on a log canoe sixty miles (one hundred kilometers) to Baltimore. They met up with Tubman, who brought the family safely to Philadelphia.

The following spring, she headed back into Maryland to help guide away other family members. On this, her second trip, she brought back her brother Moses, and two other unidentified men. It is likely that Tubman was by this time working with abolitionist Thomas Garrett, a Quaker working in Wilmington, Delaware. Word of her exploits had encouraged her family, and biographers agree that she became more confident with each trip to Maryland. As she led more and more individuals out of slavery, she became popularly known as "Moses" – an allusion to the prophet in the Book of Exodus who led the Hebrews to freedom.

During an interview with author Wilbur Siebert in 1897, Tubman revealed some of the names of helpers and places she used along the Underground Railroad. She stayed with Sam Green, a free black minister living in East New Market, Maryland; she also hid near her parents' home at Poplar Neck in Caroline County, MD. From there, she would travel northeast to Sandtown and Willow Grove, Delaware, and onto the Camden area where free black agents William and Nat Brinkley, and Abraham Gibbs guided her north past Dover, Smyrna, and Blackbird, where other agents would take her across the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal to New Castle and Wilmington. In Wilmington, Quaker Thomas Garrett would secure transportation to William Still's office or the homes of other Underground Railroad operators in the greater Philadelphia area. Still, a famous black agent, is credited with aiding hundreds of freedom seekers escape to safer places farther north in New York, New England, and Canada.^[58]

In the fall of 1851, Tubman returned to Dorchester County for the first time since her escape, this time to find her husband John. She once again saved money from various jobs, purchased a suit for him, and made her way south. John, meanwhile, had married another woman named Caroline. Tubman sent word that he should join her, but he insisted that he was happy where he was. Tubman at first prepared to storm their house and make a scene, but then decided he was not worth the trouble. Suppressing her anger, she found some slaves who wanted to escape and led them to Philadelphia.^[59] John and Caroline raised a family together, until he was killed sixteen years later in a roadside argument with a white man named Robert Vincent.



Frederick Douglass, who worked for slavery's abolition alongside Tubman and praised her in print

Because the Fugitive Slave Law had made the northern United States more dangerous for escaped slaves, many began migrating further north to Canada. In December 1851, Tubman guided an unidentified group of eleven fugitives – possibly including the Bowleys and several others she had helped rescue earlier – northward. There is evidence to suggest that Tubman and her group stopped at the home of abolitionist and former

slave Frederick Douglass. In his third autobiography, Douglass wrote: "On one occasion I had eleven fugitives at the same time under my roof, and it was necessary for them to remain with me until I could collect sufficient money to get them on to Canada. It was the largest number I ever had at any one time, and I had some difficulty in providing so many with food and shelter...." The number of travelers and the time of the visit make it likely that this was Tubman's group.

Douglass and Tubman showed a great admiration for one another as they struggled together against slavery. When an early biography of Tubman was being prepared in 1868, Douglass wrote a letter to honor her. It read in part:

You ask for what you do not need when you call upon me for a word of commendation. I need such words from you far more than you can need them from me, especially where your superior labors and devotion to the cause of the lately enslaved of our land are known as I know them. The difference between us is very marked. Most that I have done and suffered in the service of our cause has been in public, and I have received much encouragement at every step of the way. You, on the other hand, have labored in a private way. I have wrought in the day—you in the night. ... The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism. Excepting John Brown—of sacred memory—I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you have.^[63]

Journeys and methods

For eleven years Tubman returned again and again to the Eastern Shore of Maryland, rescuing some seventy slaves in thirteen expeditions, including her three other brothers, Henry, Ben, and Robert, their wives and some of their children. She also provided specific instructions for about fifty to sixty other fugitives who escaped to the north. Her dangerous work required tremendous ingenuity; she usually worked during winter months, to minimize the likelihood that the group would be seen. One admirer of Tubman said: "She always came in the winter, when the nights are long and dark, and people who have homes stay in them. Once she had made contact with escaping slaves, they left town on Saturday evenings, since newspapers would not print runaway notices until Monday morning.

Her journeys back into the land of slavery put her at tremendous risk, and she used a variety of subterfuges to avoid detection. Tubman once disguised herself with a bonnet and carried two live chickens to give the appearance of running errands. Suddenly finding herself walking toward a former owner in Dorchester County, she yanked the strings holding the birds' legs, and their agitation allowed her to avoid eye contact.^[66] Later she recognized a fellow train passenger as another former master; she snatched a nearby newspaper and pretended to read. Since Tubman was known to be illiterate, the man ignored her.^[67]

Her religious faith was another important resource as she ventured again and again into Maryland. The visions from her childhood head injury continued, and she saw them as

divine premonitions. She spoke of "consulting with God", and trusted that He would keep her safe. Thomas Garrett once said of her: "I never met with any person of any color who had more confidence in the voice of God, as spoken direct to her soul."^[69] Her faith in the divine also provided immediate assistance. She used spirituals as coded messages, warning fellow travelers of danger or to signal a clear path.

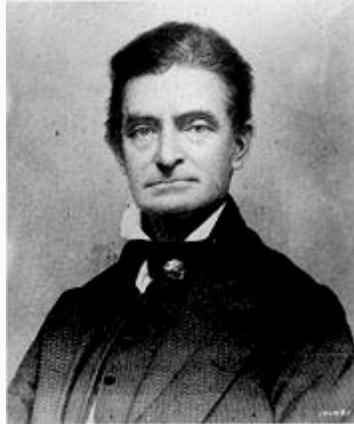
She also carried a revolver, and was not afraid to use it. Once a slave agreed to join her expedition, there was no turning back – and she threatened to shoot anyone who tried to return. Tubman told the tale of one voyage with a group of fugitive slaves, when morale sank and one man insisted he was going to go back to the plantation. She pointed the gun at his head and said: "You go on or die." Several days later, he was with the group as they entered Canada. It is more than likely that Tubman carried the handgun as protection from ever-present slave catchers and their vicious dogs.

Slaveholders in the region, meanwhile, never knew that "Minty", the petite, five-foot-tall, disabled slave who had run away years before and never come back, was behind so many slave escapes in their community. In fact, by the late 1850s they began to suspect a northern white abolitionist was secretly enticing their slaves away. They even entertained the possibility that John Brown himself had come to the Eastern Shore to lure slaves away before his ill-fated raid on Harper's Ferry in October 1859. While a popular legend persists about a reward of US\$40,000 for Tubman's capture, this is a manufactured figure. In 1868, in an effort to drum up support for Tubman's claim for a Civil War military pension, a former abolitionist named Salley Holley wrote an article claiming US\$40,000 "was not too great a reward for Maryland slaveholders to offer for her."^[73] Such a high reward would have garnered national attention, especially at a time when a small farm could be purchased for a mere US\$400. No such reward has been found in period newspapers. (The federal government offered \$25,000 for the capture of each of John Wilkes Booth's co-conspirators in Lincoln's assassination.) A reward offering of US\$12,000 has also been claimed, though no documentation exists for that figure either. Catherine Clinton suggests that the US\$40,000 figure may have been a combined total of the various bounties offered around the region. Despite the best efforts of the slaveholders, Tubman was never captured – and neither were the fugitives she guided. Years later, she told an audience: "I was conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can't say – I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger."

One of her last missions into Maryland was to retrieve her aging parents. Her father, Ben, had purchased Rit, her mother, in 1855 from Eliza Brodess for twenty dollars.^[76] But even when they were both free, the area became hostile to their presence. Two years later, Tubman received word that her father had harbored a group of eight escaped slaves, and was at risk of arrest. She traveled to the Eastern Shore and led them north into the Canadian city of St. Catharines, Ontario, where a community of former slaves (including Tubman's brothers, other relatives, and many friends) had gathered.^[77]

John Brown and Harpers Ferry

In April 1858, Tubman was introduced to the abolitionist John Brown, an insurgent who advocated the use of violence to destroy slavery in the United States. Although she never advocated violence against whites, she agreed with his course of direct action and supported his goals. Like Tubman, he spoke of being called by God, and trusted the divine to protect him from the wrath of slaveholders. She, meanwhile, claimed to have had a prophetic vision of meeting Brown before their encounter.^[79]



Tubman helped John Brown plan and recruit for his raid at Harpers Ferry.

Thus, as he began recruiting supporters for an attack on slaveholders, Brown was joined by "General Tubman", as he called her. Her knowledge of support networks and resources in the border states of Pennsylvania, Maryland and Delaware was invaluable to Brown and his planners. Although other abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison did not endorse his tactics, Brown dreamed of fighting to create a new state for freed slaves, and made preparations for military action. After he began the first battle, he believed, slaves would rise up and carry out a rebellion across the south.^[80] He asked Tubman to gather former slaves then living in Canada who might be willing to join his fighting force, which she did.

On May 8, 1858, Brown held a meeting in Chatham-Kent, Ontario, where he unveiled his plan for a raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia. When word of the plan was leaked to the government, Brown put the scheme on hold and began raising funds for its eventual resumption. Tubman aided him in this effort, and with more detailed plans for the assault.^[83]

Tubman was busy during this time, giving talks to abolitionist audiences and tending to her relatives. In the autumn of 1859, as Brown and his men prepared to launch the attack, Tubman could not be contacted. When the raid on Harpers Ferry took place on October 16, Tubman was not present. Some historians believe she was in New York at the time, ill with fever related to her childhood head injury. Others propose she may have been recruiting more escaped slaves in Canada, and Kate Clifford Larson suggests she may have been in Maryland, recruiting for Brown's raid or attempting to rescue more family members. Larson also notes that Tubman may have begun sharing Frederick Douglass' doubts about the viability of the plan.

The raid failed; Brown was convicted of treason and hanged in December. His actions were seen by abolitionists as a symbol of proud resistance, carried out by a noble martyr. Tubman herself was effusive with praise. She later told a friend: "[H]e done more in dying, than 100 men would in living."

Auburn and Margaret

In early 1859, abolitionist US Senator William H. Seward sold Tubman a small piece of land on the outskirts of Auburn, New York for US\$1,200. The city was a hotbed of antislavery activism, and Tubman seized the opportunity to deliver her parents from the harsh Canadian winters.^[90] Returning to the US meant that escaped slaves were at risk of being returned to the south under the Fugitive Slave Law, and Tubman's siblings expressed reservations. Catherine Clinton suggests that anger over the 1857 Dred Scott decision may have prompted Tubman to return to the US. Her land in Auburn became a haven for Tubman's family and friends. For years, she took in relatives and boarders, offering a safe place for black Americans seeking a better life in the north.

Shortly after acquiring the Auburn property, Tubman went back to Maryland and returned with her "niece", an eight-year-old light-skinned black girl named Margaret. The circumstances of this expedition remain clouded in mystery. There is great confusion about the identity of Margaret's parents, although Tubman indicated they were free blacks. The girl had left behind a twin brother and a loving home in Maryland. Years later, Margaret's daughter Alice called Tubman's actions selfish, saying: "she had taken the child from a sheltered good home to a place where there was nobody to care for her." Indeed, Alice described it as a "kidnapping".

However, both Clinton and Larson present the possibility that Margaret was in fact Tubman's daughter. Larson points out that the two shared an unusually strong bond, and argues that Tubman – knowing the pain of a child separated from her mother – would never have intentionally caused a free family to be split apart. Clinton presents evidence of strong physical similarities, which Alice herself acknowledged. Both historians agree that no concrete evidence exists for such a possibility, and the mystery of Tubman's relationship with young Margaret remains to this day.

In November 1860, Tubman conducted her last rescue mission. Throughout the 1850s, Tubman had been unable to effect the escape of her sister Rachel, and Rachel's two children (Ben and Angerine). Upon returning to Dorchester County, Tubman discovered that Rachel had died, and the children could only be rescued if she could pay a US\$30 bribe. She had no money, so the children remained enslaved (and their fates remain unknown). Never one to waste a trip, Tubman gathered another group, including the Ennals family, ready and willing to take the risks of the journey north. It took them weeks to safely get away because of slave catchers, forcing them to hide-out longer than expected. The weather was unseasonably cold and they had little food. The children were drugged with paregoric to keep them quiet while slave patrols rode by. They safely reached the home of David and Martha Wright in Auburn, New York on December 28, 1860.

Civil War



Union General David Hunter worked with Tubman during the Civil War and shared her abolitionist views.

When the American Civil War broke out in 1861, Tubman saw a Union victory as a key step toward the abolition of slavery. General Benjamin Butler, for instance, aided escaped slaves flooding into Fort Monroe. Butler had declared these fugitives to be "contraband" – property seized by northern forces – and put them to work without pay in the fort. Tubman hoped to offer her own expertise and skills to the Union cause, too, and soon she joined a group of Boston and Philadelphia abolitionists heading to the Hilton Head District in South Carolina. She became a fixture in the camps, particularly in Port Royal, South Carolina, assisting fugitives.

Tubman soon met with General David Hunter, a strong supporter of abolition. He declared all of the "contrabands" in the Port Royal district free, and began gathering former slaves for a regiment of black soldiers. US President Abraham Lincoln, however, was not prepared to enforce emancipation on the southern states, and reprimanded Hunter for his actions. Tubman condemned Lincoln's response (and his general unwillingness to consider ending slavery in the US), for both moral and practical reasons. "God won't let master Lincoln beat the South till he does *the right thing*," she said.

Master Lincoln, he's a great man, and I am a poor negro; but the negro can tell master Lincoln how to save the money and the young men. He can do it by setting the negro free. Suppose that was an awful big snake down there, on the floor. He bite you. Folks all scared, because you die. You send for a doctor to cut the bite; but the snake, he rolled up there, and while the doctor doing it, he bite you *again*. The doctor dug out *that* bite; but while the doctor doing it, the snake, he spring up and bite you again; so he *keep* doing it, till you kill *him*. That's what master Lincoln ought to know.

Tubman served as a nurse in Port Royal, preparing remedies from local plants and aiding soldiers suffering from dysentery. She rendered assistance to men with smallpox; that she

did not contract the disease herself started more rumors that she was blessed by God.^[103] At first, she received government rations for her work, but newly freed blacks thought she was getting special treatment. To ease the tension, she gave up her right to these supplies and made money selling pies and root beer, which she made in the evenings.^[104]

Scouting and the Combahee River Raid

When Lincoln finally put the Emancipation Proclamation into effect in January 1863, Tubman considered it an important step toward the goal of liberating all black men, women, and children from slavery. She renewed her support for a defeat of the Confederacy, and before long she was leading a band of scouts through the land around Port Royal. The marshes and rivers in South Carolina were similar to those of the Eastern Shore of Maryland; thus her knowledge of covert travel and subterfuge among potential enemies were put to good use. Her group, working under the orders of Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, mapped the unfamiliar terrain and reconnoitered its inhabitants.^[107] She later worked alongside Colonel James Montgomery, and provided him with key intelligence which aided the capture of Jacksonville, Florida.^[107]



A woodcut of Tubman in her Civil War clothing

Later that year, Tubman became the first woman to lead an armed assault during the Civil War. When Montgomery and his troops conducted an assault on a collection of plantations along the Combahee River, Tubman served as a key adviser and accompanied the raid. On the morning of June 2, 1863, Tubman guided three steamboats around Confederate mines in the waters leading to the shore. Once ashore, the Union troops set fire to the plantations, destroying infrastructure and seizing thousands of dollars worth of food and supplies. When the steamboats sounded their whistles, slaves throughout the area understood that it was being liberated. Tubman watched as slaves stampeded toward the boats. "I never saw such a sight," she said later, describing a scene of chaos with women carrying still-steaming pots of rice, pigs squealing in bags slung over shoulders,

and babies hanging around their parents' necks. Although their owners, armed with handguns and whips, tried to stop the mass escape, their efforts were nearly useless in the tumult. As Confederate troops raced to the scene, steamboats packed full of slaves took off toward Beaufort.

More than seven hundred slaves were rescued in the Combahee River Raid.^{[113][114]} Newspapers heralded Tubman's "patriotism, sagacity, energy, [and] ability",^[115] and she was praised for her recruiting efforts: most of the newly liberated men went on to join the Union army.^[116] Tubman later worked with Colonel Robert Gould Shaw at the assault on Fort Wagner, reportedly serving him his last meal. She described the battle by saying: "And then we saw the lightning, and that was the guns; and then we heard the thunder, and that was the big guns; and then we heard the rain falling, and that was the drops of blood falling; and when we came to get the crops, it was dead men that we reaped."^[118]

For two more years, Tubman worked for the Union forces, tending to newly liberated slaves, scouting into Confederate territory, and eventually nursing wounded soldiers in Virginia. She also made periodic visits back to Auburn, to visit her family and care for her parents. The Confederacy surrendered in April 1865; after donating several more months of service, Tubman headed home.

Despite her years of service, she had never received a regular salary and was for years denied compensation. Her unofficial status and the unequal payments offered to black soldiers caused great difficulty in documenting her service, and the US government was slow in recognizing its debt to her. Tubman did not receive a pension for her service in the Civil War until 1899. Her constant humanitarian work for her family and former slaves, meanwhile, kept her in a state of constant poverty, and her difficulties in obtaining a government pension were especially taxing for her.^[126]

Tubman returned to Auburn at the end of the war. During a train ride to New York, the conductor told her to move into the smoking car. She refused, explaining her government service. He cursed at her and grabbed her, but she resisted and he summoned two other passengers for help. While she clutched at the railing, they muscled her away, breaking her arm in the process. They threw her into the smoking car, causing more injuries. As these events transpired, other white passengers cursed Tubman and shouted for the conductor to kick her off the train.

Later life



Tubman (far left), with Davis (seated, with cane), their adopted daughter Gertie (beside Tubman), Lee Cheney, John "Pop" Alexander, Walter Green, Blind "Aunty" Sarah Parker, and great-niece, Dora Stewart at Tubman's home in Auburn, New York circa 1887

Tubman spent her remaining years in Auburn, tending to her family and other people in need. She worked various jobs to support her elderly parents, and took in boarders to help pay the bills. One of the people Tubman took in was a Civil War veteran named Nelson Davis. He began working in Auburn as a bricklayer, and they soon fell in love. Though he was twenty-two years younger than she was, on March 18, 1869, they were married at the Central Presbyterian Church. They spent the next twenty years together, and in 1874 they adopted a baby girl named Gertie.

Tubman's friends and supporters from the days of abolition, meanwhile, raised funds to support her. One admirer, Sarah H. Bradford, wrote an authorized biography entitled *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*. The 132-page volume was published in 1869, and brought Tubman some US\$1,200 in revenue. Criticized by modern biographers for its artistic license and highly subjective point of view,^[131] the book nevertheless remains an important source of information and perspective on Tubman's life. Bradford released another volume in 1886 called *Harriet, the Moses of her People*, which presented a less caustic view of slavery and the South. It too was published as a way to help alleviate Tubman's poverty.^[132]

Because of the debt she had accumulated (including delayed payment for her property in Auburn), Tubman fell prey in 1873 to a swindle involving gold transfer. Two men, one named Stevenson and the other John Thomas, claimed to have in their possession a cache of gold smuggled out of South Carolina. They offered this treasure – worth about US\$5,000, they claimed – for US\$2,000 in cash. They insisted that they knew a relative of Tubman's, and she took them into her home, where they stayed for several days.^[135] She knew that white people in the South had buried valuables when Union forces threatened the region, and also that black men were frequently assigned to digging duties. Thus the situation seemed plausible, and a combination of her financial woes and her good nature led her to go along with the plan. She borrowed the money from a wealthy friend named Anthony Shimer, and arranged to receive the gold late one night. Once the

men had lured her into the woods, however, they attacked her and knocked her out with chloroform, then stole her purse and bound and gagged her. When she was found by her family, she was dazed and injured, and the money was gone.^{[133][136]} New York responded with outrage to the incident, and while some criticized Tubman for her naïveté, most sympathized with her economic hardship and lambasted the con men.^[137] The incident refreshed the public's memory of her past service and her economic woes. Wisconsin Representative Gerry W. Hazelton introduced a bill (H.R. 3786) providing that Tubman be paid "the sum of \$2,000 for services rendered by her to the Union Army as scout, nurse, and spy...."^[138] It was defeated.



Susan B. Anthony worked with Tubman for women's suffrage.

Suffragist activism

Tubman worked in her later years to promote the cause of women's suffrage. A white woman once asked Tubman whether she believed women ought to have the vote, and received the reply: "I suffered enough to believe it."^[139] Tubman began attending meetings of suffragist organizations, and was soon working alongside women such as Susan B. Anthony and Emily Howland.

Tubman traveled to New York, Boston, and Washington DC to speak out in favor of women's voting rights. She described her actions during and after the Civil War, and used the sacrifices of countless women throughout modern history as evidence of women's equality to men. When the National Federation of Afro-American Women was founded in 1896, Tubman was the keynote speaker at its first meeting.^[143]

This wave of activism kindled a new wave of admiration for Tubman among the press in the United States. A publication called *The Woman's Era* launched a series of articles on "Eminent Women" with a profile of Tubman. An 1897 suffragist newspaper reported a series of receptions in Boston honoring Tubman and her lifetime of service to the nation. However, her endless contributions to others had left her in poverty, and she had to sell a cow to buy a train ticket to these celebrations.

AME Zion Church, illness, and death



Harriet Tubman, 1911

At the turn of the century, Tubman became heavily involved with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Auburn. In 1903, she donated a parcel of real estate she owned to the church, under the instruction that it be made into a home for "aged and indigent colored people". The home did not open for another five years, and Tubman was dismayed when the church ordered residents to pay a one-hundred-dollar entrance fee. She said: "[T]hey make a rule that nobody should come in without they have a hundred dollars. Now I wanted to make a rule that nobody should come in unless they didn't have no money at all." She was frustrated by the new rule, but was the guest of honor nonetheless when the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged celebrated its opening on June 23, 1908.

As Tubman aged, the sleeping spells and suffering from her childhood head trauma continued to plague her. At some point in the late 1890s, she underwent brain surgery at Boston's Massachusetts General Hospital. Unable to sleep because of pains and "buzzing" in her head, she asked a doctor if he could operate. He agreed, and in her words, "sawed open my skull, and raised it up, and now it feels more comfortable." She had received no anesthesia for the procedure, and reportedly chose instead to bite down on a bullet, as she had seen Civil War soldiers do when their limbs were amputated.

By 1911, her body was so frail that she had to be admitted into the rest home named in her honor. A New York newspaper described her as "ill and penniless", prompting supporters to offer a new round of donations. Surrounded by friends and family members, Harriet Tubman died of pneumonia on March 10, 1913. Just before she died, she told those in the room: "I go to prepare a place for you."

Legacy

Harriet Tubman, widely known and well-respected while she was alive, became an American icon in the years after she died. A survey at the end of the twentieth century named her as one of the most famous civilians in American history before the Civil War, third only to Betsy Ross and Paul Revere. She inspired generations of African Americans struggling for equality and civil rights; she was praised by leaders across the political spectrum.

When she died, Tubman was buried with military honors at Fort Hill Cemetery in Auburn. The city commemorated her life with a plaque on the courthouse. Although it showed pride for her many achievements, its use of dialect ("I nebber run my train off de track") – apparently chosen for its authenticity – has been criticized for undermining her stature as an American patriot and dedicated humanitarian. Still, the dedication ceremony was a powerful tribute to her memory, and Booker T. Washington delivered the keynote address.^[155] The Harriet Tubman home was abandoned after 1920, but was later renovated by the AME Zion Church. Today, it welcomes visitors as a museum and education center.

Bradford's biographies were followed by Earl Conrad's *Harriet Tubman: Negro Soldier and Abolitionist*. Conrad had experienced a great difficulty in finding a publisher – the search took four years – and endured disdain and contempt for his efforts to construct a more objective, detailed account of Tubman's life for adults. Several highly dramatized versions of Tubman's life had been written for children – and many more came later – but Conrad wrote in an academic style to document the historical importance of her work for scholars and the nation's memory. The book was finally published by Carter G. Woodson's Associated Publishers in 1942. Despite her popularity and significance, another Tubman biography for adults did not appear for sixty years, until Jean Humez published a close reading of Tubman's life stories in 2003, and Larson and Clinton both published their biographies in 2004.

Tubman was celebrated in many other ways throughout the nation in the twentieth century. Dozens of schools were named in her honor, and both the Harriet Tubman Home in Auburn and the Harriet Tubman Museum in Cambridge serve as monuments to her life.^[159] In 1937 the gravestone for Harriet Tubman Davis was erected by the Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs; it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1999. In 1944, the United States Maritime Commission launched the *SS Harriet Tubman*, its first Liberty ship ever named for a black woman. In 1978, the United States Postal Service issued a stamp in honor of Tubman as the first in a series honoring African Americans. She is commemorated together with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, and Sojourner Truth in the calendar of saints of the Episcopal Church on July 20.

In 2002, scholar Molefi Kete Asante included Harriet Tubman on his list of the 100 Greatest African Americans. In 2008, Towson University named Tubman House, a new residence hall in the campus' West Village development, after Tubman.