Harriet Tubman

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From U.S. History in Context

Born: c. 1820 in Dorchester, Maryland, United States
Died: March 10, 1913 in Auburn, New York, United States
Other Names: Ross, Araminta; Tubman, Harriet Ross; Ross, Minty
Nationality: American
Occupation: Abolitionist

"I had crossed the line of which I had so long been dreaming. I was free; but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom," Harriet Tubman spoke of her accomplishment and the intense loneliness that led to her resolve to free her family and other slaves (Bradford, 31). Although she escaped from slavery, her heart was "down in the old cabin quarters, with the old folks and my brothers and sisters" (Bradford, 32). With this resolve she began her work as a conductor on the Underground Railway, a venture that would last for ten years and make her famous. Tubman made at least fifteen trips from the North into southern slave states, leading over two hundred slaves into free northern states. On her first trip into slave territory, she led her sister, Mary Ann Bowley, and two children to freedom in the North, eventually freeing all her brothers and sisters as well as her parents. Although Harriet Tubman achieved historical importance primarily in this role, she was also a spy, nurse, feminist, and social reformer, if indeed these terms can adequately describe her various activities during a period of profound racial, social, and economic upheaval in the United States in the nineteenth century.

The term conductor was, of course, a euphemism for guide or leader, as the Underground Railroad was for illegal transportation. These terms have a romantic ring today, but Tubman's work was far from romantic; it was extremely dangerous and demanded great strength and endurance, both physically and mentally. Tubman's physical appearance was decidedly not that of a leader, as she was not an imposing figure like Sojourner Truth, a slave who became a famous orator and feminist. She was of slight build and only five feet tall. Even more curious for a person whose leadership depended upon physical action, Tubman suffered from seizures of sudden and deep sleep because of a head injury received as a young girl. Nevertheless, Tubman possessed leadership qualities that were quickly recognized by the slaves she led to freedom and the abolitionists with whom she worked. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the author and reformer, called her "the greatest heroine of the age," in an 1859 letter to his mother. "Her tales of adventure are beyond anything in fiction and her ingenuity and generalship are extraordinary. I have known her for some time--the slaves call her Moses" (Conrad, 107).

Tubman made up for her small size through the expedient of carrying a long rifle--a weapon she would use to encourage any slaves who became fainthearted during their journey north as well as to discourage pro-slavers--and her innate leadership abilities. She was not taught to read or write but relied upon her memory, knowledge of nature--the only resource she had at times when guiding slaves under cover of darkness--and natural shrewdness. When some whites expressed unusual curiosity while observing Tubman and some slaves in a small southern town, she bought railway tickets for a train going south. What slave attempting to escape from a southern state would travel south? The ploy

was one of a number Tubman would use to elude escape from authorities. Tubman was well versed in the Bible, music, and folklore of her time and place in the South, and her repertoire of biblical verse and song was important in communicating. Harriet Tubman used her strong singing voice to communicate her presence to slaves in the South and to communicate danger or safety to slaves that were hidden while she was scouting their surroundings.

Tubman's unwavering resolve and courage, like that of other great leaders, is more difficult to account for. Scholars and historians can only examine the particular environment and events that produce leaders in particular places at particular times and speculate at the synergy of people, environment, and events. Of her environment, Tubman said, "I grew up like a neglected weed--ignorant of liberty, having no experience of it," when she was interviewed by Benjamin Drew, an educator and part-time journalist, in St. Catherines, Ontario, in the summer of 1855 (Conrad, 73). Although she was ignorant of liberty as a slave, Tubman was nurtured and cared for in a large family. Born in 1820 in Dorchester County near Cambridge, Maryland, one of eleven children of Benjamin and Harriet (Green) Ross, Tubman was called Araminta as a child but later adopted the name of her mother. Tubman had stability of place while growing up, unlike some slaves who were sold to landowners in the deep South, although that stability was constantly under threat. Tubman was hired out for housework for families living near her owner at various times as a young child but was always returned to her family between jobs. While she and her family were subject to the orders of their owner and hired out to neighboring farmers, they were a family unit in which care and support was given and received and in which religion and folklore were shared.

Tubman Examines the Institution of Slavery

Tubman was returned to the care of her family after a severe head injury, an injury that caused recurring seizures of sleep for the rest of her life. The injury had a profound influence on her emotionally as well as physically. When she was about thirteen years of age and working in the field one autumn, one of her fellow slaves left his field work early and went to the general store. The overseer caught up with the man in the store and attempted to bind him for a whipping. As the slave ran out the door, Tubman attempted to shield the man and was knocked unconscious by a two-pound weight the angry overseer had thrown at the running slave. She recovered from the blow, but her convalescence was slow because the injury to her head was serious. While her body was healing, Tubman, raised in a deeply religious family, began praying. While seeking a solution to her condition as a slave, she began to examine that condition and, as well, the institution of slavery in general from a philosophical and practical perspective.

Speaking of this recovery period in her youth to her friend and biographer, Sarah Elizabeth Bradford, Tubman said "And so, as I lay so sick on my bed, from Christmas till March, I was always praying for poor old master. Oh, dear Lord, change that man's heart, and make him a Christian" (Bradford, 23-24). Tubman's prayers changed when she heard that she and her brothers were to be sent in a chain gang to the far South. She prayed, "Lord, if you ain't never going to change that man's heart, kill him, Lord, and take him out of the way, so he won't do no more mischief" (Bradford, 24). When her owner died shortly afterwards, Tubman again changed her prayers. She began praying in different ways and at different times for the Lord to "cleanse her heart of sin," beginning the process of taking control, so much as she could, of her life rather than passively accepting things as they were.

During this period of illness, prayer, and rumors of slave-selling, Tubman began to formulate a

personal philosophy that transcended the laws of men. She trusted herself, God, and Divine Providence, in that order. Although she did not formulate this philosophy in a stroke of flashing illumination, it is probable that Tubman's character and intelligence, combined with the experience of her illness, prayer, and changing circumstances, produced an individual who, paradoxically, through both desire and necessity, developed self-reliant courage and strength of purpose. It was Tubman's courage and purpose that led her to become an important figure to both blacks and whites.

Tubman had a calm respite after she slowly healed from her injury. It was during this period that two events took place that are important: she married a free black man, and she discovered that her mother legally should have been freed years earlier upon the death of her former owner. Shortly after her recovery, her father became a valuable laborer for a neighboring timber operator, and Tubman began working for the man, slowly regaining her strength and becoming a valuable laborer also. In 1844, she married John Tubman, a free black in the Cambridge area. Little is known about Tubman's relationship with her husband; there are reports that he was not an ambitious man, and that he thought his wife worried too much about her condition as a slave. While Tubman was reticent about her relationship with John Tubman, she apparently cared for him. About a year after marrying, while she was still a slave, Tubman's curiosity about legal matters affecting the status of blacks led her to pay a lawyer to search for legal documents relating to her mother's owners to trace her mother's history in slavery. She discovered that her mother, Harriet Green Ross, had been legally free at one time because of the untimely death of one of her owners, a young woman named Mary Patterson who died young and unmarried, leaving no provisions for Harriet Green Ross. It was the lawyer's opinion that Tubman's mother was emancipated at that time. No one informed Harriet Ross of her rights, and she remained a slave. Although Tubman was illiterate, she examined the workings of literacy in a social order in which she had not power. Tubman realized that literacy had been denied her, but she began to understand the social order enslaved her. In 1849 Tubman escaped to freedom in Pennsylvania alone and unaided.

The self-reliance of Tubman was twofold: she began supporting herself economically, and within a year of her escape, she began the task of freeing her relatives. Tubman's first stop was Baltimore, Maryland, for her sister and two children. Tubman embarked on her career as a conductor alone and unaided by the simple expedient of working as a cook and domestic in Philadelphia until she had saved enough money to provide for her needs. She provided for herself in between her trips to the South before the Civil War and also between her political interventions after the war.

By 1857 she had freed her entire family, including her aging parents. John Bell Robinson, a pro-slavery advocate, criticized Tubman's work in his book *Pictures of Slavery and Freedom*, stating, "The most noted point in this act of horror was the bringing away from ease and comfortable homes two old slaves over seventy years of age" (Conrad, 99). Proslavery writing criticizing Tubman was indicative not only of the economic damage she was responsible for in the South but also intended as a corrective to the increasing agitation in the North to abolish slavery. Tubman did not remember a life of ease and comfort as a slave. While Tubman began the work of leading her family and others from slavery to freedom in the North single-handedly after her own escape, she soon worked in concert with other abolitionists in the North, both black and white. The end of slavery was a personal issue for Harriet Tubman.

Tubman's self-appointed purpose led her to be closely involved with progressive social leaders in the

North, first abolitionists, then feminists, and political and military leaders as she became well known as an abolitionist and a black leader. Her primary goal was to work for the freedom of slaves. Tubman's career led her to associate with people who shared her goal of the emancipation of blacks, regardless of the boundaries of gender, color, and socioeconomic status. She became closely associated with John Brown before his raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry and admired him enormously all of her life. Other white leaders she personally knew were Thomas Garrett and William H. Seward, as well as Susan B. Anthony, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the Alcotts. The settlement and growth of the western states led to increased agitation over the institution of slavery, and white progressive leaders supported Tubman's work financially and welcomed her into their homes when she needed shelter, generally in conjunction with her trips to the South or when she was attending an antislavery feminist meeting. As the controversy over slavery intensified, Tubman became an effective and acknowledged leader in the abolitionist movement, which had a strong and effective organization in Philadelphia.

Tubman and William Still Join Forces

As Boston was the center of progressive thought in New England, so Philadelphia was the center of progressive social thought and action further south on the Atlantic seaboard. It was in Philadelphia that Tubman became acquainted with William Still and other well-known and well-organized abolitionists. The first organized society against slavery was established in Philadelphia in 1775, the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the African Race, indicating the long-held sympathetic views of the inhabitants. Tubman became closely associated with William Still, the energetic and active executive director of the General Vigilance Committee. Still was the most important black man that Tubman was closely associated with. The Underground Railroad was effectively organized into networks for the safe transport of slaves, and communication between leaders and workers in the system was necessary for safety and efficiency. On the other hand, written records were dangerous to keep, as abolitionists became aware after John Brown's papers were seized after the Harper's Ferry raid. Although many written records and letters were destroyed, Still kept a chronicle that has survived. Of Harriet Tubman he later wrote, "She was a woman of no pretensions; indeed, a more ordinary specimen of humanity could hardly be found among the most unfortunate-looking farm hands of the South. Yet in point of courage, shrewdness, and disinterested exertions to rescue her fellowman, she was without equal" (Conrad, 54).

William Still and the other members of the General Vigilance Committee worked closely with Harriet Tubman; through their organization she met Thomas Garrett, a prominent white Quaker abolitionist in Wilmington, Delaware. Thomas Garrett thought highly of Tubman and her work and provided her with shelter, money, or whatever else she needed for her trips on the Underground Railway, especially when Tubman was leading groups of slaves into Canada. He corresponded with friends united in the abolitionist movement as far away as Scotland, describing the activities of antislavers in the United States as well as Tubman's activities and raising money for her needs. His help was especially important as she freed members of her family from Delaware and began taking slaves to St. Catherines in western Canada for complete safety "under the lion's paw" of England. Passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 made freedom precarious for blacks in the North.

After living intermittently in St. Catherines, Ontario, from 1851 until 1857, Tubman moved to Auburn, New York, eventually settling there with her parents after the Civil War. Auburn was the center of progressive thought in New York. Abolition and women's suffrage thrived in Auburn. As well, it was the

home of one of Harriet Tubman's strongest supporters, William H. Seward, governor of New York, and a publishing center for abolitionist literature. William H. Seward sold Tubman a home in Auburn on generous terms, for which she paid through unsolicited donations from white supporters. At the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1859, the president, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, asked for a collection to assist her in buying the house so "her father and mother could support themselves, and enable her to resume the practice of her profession!" There was much "laughter and applause" after Higginson's announcement (Conrad, 109).

Tubman's profession changed but little during the Civil War. She was sent to Beaufort after the fall of Port Royal, South Carolina, in 1862 for Reconstruction work by Governor Andrew of Massachusetts. Her position with the War Department was one of irregular attachment yet solicited by officials. Tubman nursed the sick and wounded soldiers and taught newly-freed blacks strategies for self-sufficiency. She was sent to Florida for a time to nurse soldiers who were ill with fever. After her return to South Carolina, she resumed her nursing duties there. When the young school-teacher, Charlotte L. Forten, visited Beaufort, she enthusiastically wrote the following entry in her diary on 31 January 1863: "We spent all our time at Harriet Tubman's. She is a wonderful woman--a real heroine" (Quarles, 49). Harriet Tubman also organized a group of eight black men to scout the inland waterway area of South Carolina for Union raids under the direction of Colonel James Montgomery. She personally assisted Colonel Montgomery when he led a raid in the Combahee area, coming under fire herself from Confederate troops in the battle.

Returning to Auburn after the Civil War, Tubman devoted herself to caring for her parents, raising funds for schools for former slaves, collecting clothes for destitute children, and helping the poor and disabled. Tubman worked closely with black churches that had provided overnight shelter for runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad and raised money for Tubman's work as a conductor. She was active in the growth of the AME Zion church in central and western New York and raised funds for the Thompson Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Auburn. Always concerned with the most vulnerable--children and the elderly--Tubman was the agent of her church in collecting clothes for destitute children and was concerned with homes for the elderly. With her characteristic penchant for action, Tubman purchased twenty-five acres of land adjoining her house in 1896. The land was to be sold at auction, and Tubman hid in a corner of the crowd, bidding on the property until all others dropped out. It was not until she won the bidding that she identified herself as the buyer: The astonished crowd wondered where she would obtain the money for her purchase, but Harriet Tubman went to the bank and secured funds by mortgage. The Harriet Tubman Home for Aged and Indigent Colored People was incorporated in 1903 with the assistance of the AMEZ church, and formally opened in 1908.

Tubman resumed her affiliation with women's groups because she viewed racial liberation and women's liberation as being strongly linked. Tubman had a long-lasting and cordial relationship with the suffragist pioneer and leader, Susan B. Anthony, both being active in the New England Anti-Slavery Society. Tubman strongly believed in racial equality and thought that the greatest benefit could be reaped when blacks and whites worked together. She was also a delegate to the first annual convention of the National Federation of Afro-American Women in 1896 and when she was asked to give a talk at this first meeting, her theme was "More Homes for Our Aged." Victoria Earle Matthews, chairperson of the evening session, introduced Mother Harriet, as she was called, and commented on the great services that she had rendered to the race. Tubman's initial appearance before the delegates

as speaker was a momentous occasion:

> Mrs. Tubman stood alone on the front of the rostrum, the audience, which not only filled every seat, but also much of the standing room in the aisles, rose as one person and greeted her with the waving of handerchiefs and clapping of hands. This was kept up for at least one minute, and Mrs. Tubman was much affected by the hearty reception given her (*A History of The Club Movement*, 41).

The National Association of Colored Women would later pay for Tubman's funeral and for the marble headstone over her grave. In April 1897 the New England Women's Suffrage Association held a reception in her honor. When asked later in life whether she believed that women should have the right to vote, Tubman replied, "I have suffered enough to believe it" (Conrad, 217).

While Tubman was active in Reconstruction work, women's rights organizations, and in caring for her parents in her home, she also remarried. Her first husband, John Tubman, did not join her after her dash for freedom, and he died in 1867. In 1869 Tubman married a Union soldier, Nelson Davis, a black man twenty-two years younger than she. Little is known of Davis except that he was a former slave who served in the Union Army. The facts that have survived him are a result of documentation of his war service, documentation that enabled Harriet Tubman to draw a pension after his death as the widow of a Civil War veteran. For two decades white supporters attempted unsuccessfully to secure a government pension for Tubman based upon her three years of service during the Civil War. The only other facts about the marriage of Tubman to Nelson Davis come from a description of the wedding ceremony that appeared in an unidentified Auburn newspaper. Earl Conrad, in his book, *Harriet Tubman*, states, "It has been said that her husband, Nelson Davis, in spite of being a large man was not a healthy man, that he suffered with tuberculosis, and she married him to take care of him" (145). This information was based upon an oral statement of a friend. The fact that Nelson Davis lived for twenty years after his marriage to Tubman appears to invalidate this claim and to reflect Victorian patriarchal sentiments. Other writers assert that Tubman cared deeply for her first husband because she kept his name. Tubman probably did care for her first husband, but again, retaining the Tubman surname was probably a practical matter for Tubman because of her age and fame, rather than a mythic and romantic matter. Tubman's second marriage, a marriage to a much younger man, has consistently been marginalized even by scholars and writers today. Readers of biographies and articles on Tubman's life are required to pay close attention to dates of births and deaths to discover that Harriet Tubman was a vital woman in middle age--not just a very good nurse.

Tubman died of pneumonia on March 10, 1913, after a two-year residence in the Harriet Tubman Home for Aged and Indigent Colored People. A memorial service was held a year later by the citizens of Auburn, at which time a tablet erected in her honor was unveiled. Booker T. Washington was the featured speaker at the evening service. Although biographies of Tubman contain elements of myth as well as fact, her fame has endured, most recently because of new interest in the role of women in history and in literature. A liberty ship was christened the *Harriet Tubman* during World War II, and in 1978 the United States Postal Service issued a Harriet Tubman commemorative stamp, the first in a Black Heritage USA Series. Poets, artists, and musicians have written, portrayed, and sung their admiration of this nineteenth-century black woman. Harriet Tubman personified strength and the quest for freedom, and her fame is enduring.

Further Readings

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- Conrad, Carl. *Harriet Tubman*. New York: Erickson, 1943.
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- *A History of the Club Movement among the Colored Women of the United States of America as Contained in the Minutes of the Conventions, Held in Boston, July 29, 30, 31, 1895, and of the National Federation of Afro-American Women, Held in Washington, D.C., July 209, 21, 22, 1896*. Washington, 1902.
- McPherson, James M., et. al. *Blacks in America: Bibliographic Essays*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971.
- Quarles, Benjamin. "Harriet Tubman's Unlikely Leadership." *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*. Edited by Leon Litwack and August Meier. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Williams, Lorraine A. "Harriet Tubman." *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*. Edited by Rayford W. Logan and Michael R. Winston. New York: Norton, 1982.

Collections

- A famous portrait of Harriet Tubman appears opposite the title page of the first edition of Sarah Bradford's *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*. A well-known picture of Harriet Tubman formally posed standing by a chair is often reproduced; *Ebony* magazine's archives apparently has this picture.