

Tubman, Harriet

(c.1822–10 Mar. 1913),

Rosetta E. Ross

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Underground Railroad conductor, abolitionist, spy and scout, and social reformer, was born Araminta Ross in Dorchester County on Maryland's Eastern Shore, one of nine children, to slave parents Harriet Green and Ben Ross. She took her mother's name, Harriet, around 1844. This was also about the time she married John Tubman, a free black of about thirty-two years in age. The couple had no children.

The black community in which Harriet grew up comprised a mix of free and slave, skilled and unskilled people who married one another and formed interconnected, extended families. Freedmen and slaves worked together in the fields, swamps, forests, and canals. Harriet's father worked as a skilled slave, cutting and hauling timber for his master, Anthony Thompson, a lumber supplier for the area's shipbuilding industry. A favorite of Thompson's, Ross eventually won his freedom in 1840 by a provision in Thompson's will that stipulated staggered emancipation dates for all his slaves. The other family members did not fare as well. The death of Thompson's wife in 1824 effected the first family separation, when Thompson's stepson Edward Brodess inherited Harriet Ross and her children.



Harriet Tubman in 1911, probably at her home in Auburn, New York. During her long life, she was internationally acclaimed as an Underground Railroad operator, abolitionist, Civil War spy and nurse, suffragist, and humanitarian.

(Library of Congress.)

Under the new master the family fell upon particularly hard times. The distance between the two plantations dictated only infrequent family gatherings, while Brodess's practice of hiring out his slaves, even the younger ones, separated the children from one another and from their mother for long periods of time. Brodess, like other slaveholders with small landholdings, commonly hired out his excess slaves or sold them in the slave market to meet expenditures. Several of Harriet Tubman's siblings were sold outside the state, though her mother was successful in saving her youngest son. With threats and cunning she hid him in the woods for a month, thus thwarting his sale into Georgia.

As a child Harriet Tubman was hired out to several masters, serving them in a variety of capacities. She worked as a house servant, cleaning house and tending children. She often encountered cruelty and beatings from her white mistresses. She was sent at a young age to trap muskrats in the marshland of Dorchester County, where she became ill from the cold and wet surroundings. In her teens she was hired out most often as a field hand. She drove oxen, carted wood, plowed, crushed flax, worked in timber gangs, and labored as hard as a man. One master to whom she was hired enjoyed displaying her physical strength to his neighbors.

From an early age Harriet made clear her unwillingness to comply with the slave system. At seven years old she hid from a slave mistress for five days after being threatened with a beating for taking a lump of sugar. An episode during her teen years shows her tenacity and foreshadows the work for which she became most well known. When a fellow slave was threatened with a beating for going to a village store without permission, Tubman was ordered to help tie him down. She refused to help, so the overseer grabbed a two-pound weight and hurled it at her. The object struck her in the head, leaving an injury that caused narcoleptic seizures throughout her life.

Before her own escape to freedom, Harriet and her siblings worried constantly about being sold into deep southern slavery. Three sisters had suffered this fate, and when her master's death in 1849 portended the same, she determined to run away. The sale of Tubman's niece, also named Harriet, and her niece's two-year-old daughter, Mary Ann, proved the signal event that pushed her and her brothers to set out for freedom. Tubman's husband, John, refused to join them. Her brothers became fearful not long into the journey and returned, bringing Harriet back as well. Two days later she set out alone. She was probably emboldened by stories of other fugitives. Indeed, Maryland led the southern states in the number of escaped slaves. Nor was the route of escape completely unfamiliar to her. While working on timber gangs, she had learned of a world beyond slavery. In this largely male workforce she heard about and made the acquaintance of free black stevedores and seamen along the eastern seaboard. As the story of Moses Roper has indicated, black seamen historically constituted an important source of information linking together southern and northern black communities.

Tubman fled Maryland on foot, walking through Delaware and into Pennsylvania, traveling at night and hiding or sleeping by day. In Philadelphia and Cape May, New Jersey, she worked as a cook, maid, and laundress. However, feeling alone in her freedom, Tubman determined to have the community of her family and friends around her and saved her earnings in order to return south and rescue others. Her reputation as a liberator began in 1850 when she saved her niece Kessiah and her two children from sale in Baltimore; a few months later she returned to free her youngest brother. During that same year, enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law necessitated extra precaution and made it more difficult to take escapees to Canada. In 1851 Tubman stole back into Maryland for her husband, only to discover that he had remarried. Despite her great disappointment, she continued her rescue work undaunted—determined “to do without him.”

Around 1855 Tubman took up residence in St. Catherine's, Ontario, Canada, an area to which she delivered many others to freedom. While she resided there, the abolitionist John Brown, who called her "General," sought her out to recruit soldiers for and lead his planned slave insurrection, which collapsed with the failure of the famed attack on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. Tubman apparently supported Brown's plan and spoke admirably of him throughout her life, though illness and a change in date prevented her participation in the raid. In 1857 Tubman accomplished the difficult feat of delivering her own elderly parents to Auburn, New York. Since they were too feeble to walk, Tubman managed her parents' travel to freedom by wagon. She settled them in a modest home on property she bought in Auburn with assistance from New York (and, later, U.S.) secretary of state William Seward. Tubman took up residence there in 1865.

Tubman made fourteen trips back to the Eastern Shore between 1849 and 1860. Recent scholarship reveals that she directly rescued seventy to eighty slaves, some of whom were family members, and indirectly freed about fifty others through instructions she provided. She preferred traveling in the winter months when the daylight was shorter, and she solicited free blacks in Maryland to remove postings of slave runaway advertisements. She wore a variety of disguises and carried a gun to avert trouble and to prevent being betrayed by those who became weary or fearful. Tubman would give them a choice: either go forward to freedom or die. She carried paregoric to sedate babies so their crying would not give them away. Her ability to travel undetected rested upon an elaborate communication system, along with numerous strategies and routes. Her intimate knowledge of various routes and trade networks, wooded areas and waterways, enhanced her surreptitious and daring escapes, but she was also aided by an array of underground operatives—slave and free, rich and poor, white and black—who provided "safe houses" along the way.

Black churches and abolitionist friends like Thomas Garrett, William Still, and Lucretia Mott provided the fugitives with housing, clothing, transportation, and other resources. Tubman herself gave the greatest credit for her success to divine guidance. As a woman of deep religious faith she found inspiration, like many other enslaved African Americans, in a mixture of evangelical Protestantism and African American folk beliefs. Thus she spoke of charms, experienced spiritual visions, and attributed her ingenuity and daring success to divine handiwork. From her perspective, God's power made it possible for her to boast of never having lost a "passenger." Tubman's success in delivering people from bondage resulted in her being given the moniker "Moses" in her lifetime.

With the onset of the Civil War, Tubman threw herself into the war effort. She traveled to coastal South Carolina in May 1862 and set about nursing wounded soldiers, bondmen, and bondwomen. She also sought to help newly freed women become self-supporting by washing and cooking for the soldiers. Continuing to display ingenuity and sensitivity, Tubman relinquished the privilege of receiving army rations like whites when local blacks expressed suspicion of this. Instead, she supported herself by selling pies, cakes, and root beer she prepared in the evenings.

Tubman's nursing skills and herbal remedies became known and sought after; on one occasion an officer requested that she travel to Florida to attend to troops suffering from severe dysentery. Receiving notes and passes from army officials, she passed freely among Union forces by foot and federal transport. Tubman's plain appearance allowed her to move effortlessly among the slaves, thus making her a valuable scout and spy in Confederate territory. She obtained information about cotton storage, ammunition deposits, and the location of black communities useful to the success of Union campaigns. She particularly admired Colonel James Montgomery, who had fought side by side with

John Brown in "Bleeding Kansas," and she worked closely with him in the recruitment of black soldiers at Port Royal, South Carolina. With Montgomery's permission, she led a spying expedition up the Combahee River. The mission resulted in the capture by Montgomery's troops of large caches of material resources and the freeing of 756 slaves.

An independent and practical thinker in regard to-gender conventions, Tubman sought appropriate attire for her army work. In a letter to northern friends she commented on her preference for pants or bloomers, given the difficulty of wearing a dress on scouting expeditions, especially when running. After the war she took pride in having worn "pants" and having carried a musket and other military accoutrements, which she saved as souvenirs. During 1865 Tubman served as a nurse, treating black patients at the James River contraband hospital in Virginia; near the end of the war she became matron of the Colored Hospital at Fortress Monroe.

In 1869 the unconventional Tubman married Nelson Davis, a former Union soldier twenty years her junior, though she kept her first husband's name. Like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, Tubman raised funds for herself and her causes by selling copies of her biography, which was written by Sara Bradford. For twenty-five years Tubman wrote to the federal government in pursuit of her right to a military pension. Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson and General Rufus Saxton were among those who intervened unsuccessfully to obtain a government pension for her service. Ironically, two years after her husband's death in 1888 she was finally awarded a pension, receiving compensation not for her own service in the war but for her status as the widow of a black veteran.

Tubman's postbellum work focused on racial uplift efforts for elderly and destitute blacks. Seeing the connection of racial and gender oppression, she worked primarily with black women's groups and black churches, although she did accept monetary gifts from white supporters. She was a delegate at the July 1896 meeting of the Federation of Afro-American Women in Washington, D.C. When asked to address the group, she called for assistance in providing homes for the aged. She worked primarily through her local congregation, Thompson Memorial African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church, and through the larger AME Zion denomination. In 1896 she was successful in purchasing twenty-five acres of land adjoining her home, on which she sought to build facilities for the indigent. Her meager resources delayed completion of the facility until 1903. In that year she deeded the property to AME Zion trustees. In 1911 Tubman herself entered the Harriet Tubman Home for Aged and Indigent Colored People. She died two years later.

Tubman was a well-known and much respected figure among abolitionists and women's rights advocates of her time. Frederick Douglass lauded her willingness to work without public praise. The suffragist pioneer and leader Susan B. Anthony expressed high regard for "this wonderful woman." The abolitionist William Still said she was unequaled in courage, shrewdness, and altruistic efforts to deliver others. The historian Benjamin Quarles noted that "esteem for her was practically universal among blacks of her day, including high and low, young and old, male and female, and cutting across sectional lines." Later generations would continue to honor her. Formal federal recognition of Harriet Tubman as an enduring model of heroism and patriotism has included naming a ship after her in World War II, designating her home in Auburn a national historic landmark in 1974, and issuing a postage stamp bearing her image in 1978.

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