

Women's Rights

National Historical Park
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Harriet Tubman

"There are two things I've got a right to, and these are death or liberty. One or the other I mean to have."

Harriet Tubman



Coming Of Age Under Slavery

Harriet Tubman was born in 1820 or 1821 on a small Maryland plantation. Her childhood as a slave was fairly typical: she received



no education and was put to work at an early age as a maid for her master's family.

Later she was apprenticed to a weaver, but soon returned home and spent most of her adolescence working in the fields. When Harriet was about 13, an overseer threw a 2 lb. weight at her head, fracturing her skull. Her recovery was slow, and she suffered from blackouts the rest of her life. To cope with the brutality and oppression in her life, Harriet turned to religion. Always deeply spiritual, she began to have visions and later claimed that her struggles against human slavery had been commanded by God.

In 1844 Harriet married John Tubman, a free Black man. Little is known about their marriage, and they had no children. In 1849 Harriet's master died, and a rumor spread among the slaves that they were to be sold into the Deep South. Harriet realized that this would make her escape more difficult and immediately made her successful break for freedom. Living and working in the North, Harriet gloried in her own freedom, but she also worried about those she had left behind. She vowed that the rest of her family and her people must be free, regardless of the risk to her own safety and freedom.

The Underground Railroad

In late 1850 Harriet made her first trip back into slave territory to rescue her sister and 2 children. She made 2 more missions in 1851, and by 1857, when she rescued her aged parents, almost the entire family had been reunited in the North. On one of these trips, Harriet tried to convince her husband to join her, but he had remarried and refused.

After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, even the "free states" of the North were unsafe for runaway slaves, and Harriet had to lead her charges over 500 miles through 5 states to Canada.

In all, Harriet is believed to have made 19 rescue

missions and to have led over 300 slaves to freedom. Called the "Moses of her people", she was one of the best known conductors on the Underground Railroad. Even with the help of this important escape network, however, these journeys were very dangerous, and at one point the reward for Harriet's capture totalled \$40,000.

During this time, Harriet met and worked with many abolition leaders, including Frederick Douglass, Lydia Maria Child, William Lloyd Garrison, and Gerrit Smith. Around 1858 Senator William Seward sold Harriet a small farm in Auburn, NY. A hotbed of radical reform and abolition activity, upstate

AN AMERICAN WOMAN.



NY was an ideal home base for Harriet, who also spent much time travelling throughout the North to address antislavery meetings.

The Civil War

By the end of the 1850s Harriet believed that armed insurrection was needed to end the evil of slavery. In April 1858, she helped John Brown plan the raid on the Federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, WV, to incite a slave revolt. Brown was so impressed with Harriet's understanding of guerrilla warfare that he called her "General Tubman". Only a sudden illness prevented Harriet from taking part in the ill-fated raid in 1859.

Harriet had foreseen the outbreak of the Civil War in a vision, and in 1862 she joined the Union army in South Carolina, serving as a scout and spy with 8 Black men under her command. In June 1863 she guided Colonel James Montgomery and 300 Black troops on a raid up the Combahee river. This raid, which freed over 750 slaves and cost the Confederacy millions of

dollars in destroyed crops and property, is one of the only military actions in U.S. history planned and led by a woman. During the war, Harriet also served as a nurse in a freedman's hospital in Virginia. After the war, she applied for veteran's benefits in compensation for her unpaid wartime services. Her petition was not granted until 1897, when the Senate voted to give her \$20 a month for the rest of her life.



HARRIET TUBMAN.

The Fight For Full Equality

Returning to Auburn in 1866, Harriet settled down to care for her parents and to create a Home for Indigent and Aged Negroes on her own property. Three years later she married Nelson Davis, one of her patients. They lived together until his death in 1888 of tuberculosis.

Harriet remained politically active as well, promoting the growth of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in upstate New York

and attending local suffrage meetings. She strongly believed that women needed the right to vote, saying "I've suffered enough to believe it." As a member of the National Woman Suffrage Association, Harriet knew and worked with both Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. In the 1880s she spoke at a woman suffrage convention in Rochester and a decade later attended a party given in her honor by the New England Woman Suffrage Association.

Harriet also supported Black women's efforts to create their own political organizations to address issues of education, work, and the equality of Blacks. In 1896 she spoke at the founding meeting of the National Association of Colored Women and was honored as the oldest member of the National Federation of Afro-American Women.

Harriet remained active until the end of her life, joining a suffrage club in Geneva, NY just 2 years before her death in 1913 of pneumonia. This daring and courageous woman is an important symbol of the strength and perseverance of Black womanhood, and her life and work continue to provide inspiration in the struggle against human oppression.



Harriet Tubman (standing, left), her husband, Nelson Davis (seated, with cane) and some of her protégés. (Boston Public Library)

Her home on South St. in Auburn is currently owned by the AME church and is open to the public. For further information, call (315) 253-2621.