

Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad

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Word Count: 1,260



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Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad



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Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad

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LEVEL S	
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DRA	34

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Slaves were sold at humiliating auctions.

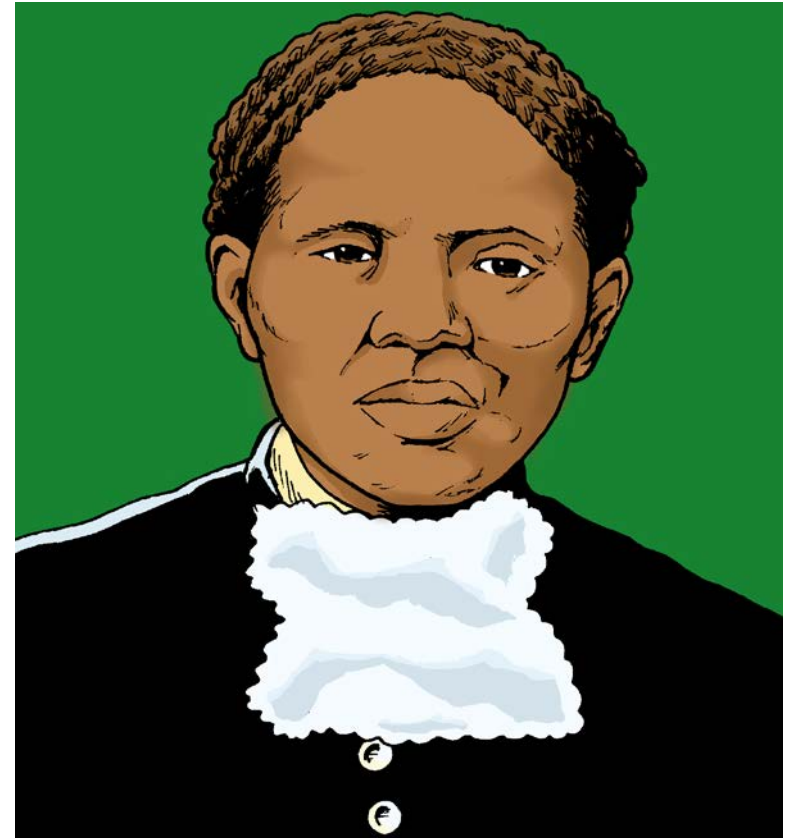
Born a Slave

Long before Harriet Tubman was born, her great-grandmother was taken from her home in Africa. The kidnapers packed Harriet's great-grandmother into a small wooden ship with hundreds of other Africans and sent her to the United States. Once she arrived, she was sold to the owner of a large farm called a **plantation**. She became a slave.

Harriet's great-grandmother was the human property of a man she called her master. All of her children and grandchildren were slaves, too. The slaves were forced to do hard labor and were punished cruelly at times. They received no pay, only **meager** food and housing that was no better than that of farm animals. Many of them were never taught to read and write. Slaves had no freedom to go where they wanted, and sometimes they were not allowed to marry or raise their own children. Members of slave families could also be sold to different masters, breaking up the family.



Harriet's entire family was forced to work without pay.



Harriet Tubman

Harriet was born as a slave around 1820. Like all slave children, she could not run and play; she worked all the time. Harriet was a hard worker, but when she did not obey her owner, she was whipped cruelly. When she saw her owner sell two of her sisters, Harriet was terrified that she would also be sold and have to leave her family.

Dreams of Escape

When she was a young girl, Harriet tried to help an escaping slave. The slave's master threw a metal weight at her, and it struck her in the head. Harriet almost died from the wound on her forehead. For the rest of her life, she had headaches and sleeping spells because of her injury.



The weight left Harriet with a large scar on her head.

Harriet's life was harsh, but she had dreams. People called **abolitionists**, who were against slavery, had begun to speak out against the injustice of owning other human beings. Some abolitionists helped slaves escape to northern states or to Canada, where slavery was illegal. Harriet dreamed of living as a free woman in the North.

Slaves went to great lengths to escape to freedom. Some shipped themselves north in boxes. One man, Henry "Box" Brown, nearly died during his escape when the box he was in was turned upside down for hours. Henry made it to Philadelphia, and freedom, after twenty-six hours in his box.



Henry "Box" Brown



The Crafts were one of many families that used clever disguises to escape.

One light-skinned slave woman, Ellen Craft, disguised herself as a white man accompanied by a slave. The slave was actually her husband, William Craft. The Crafts traveled by train and steamship, and reached Philadelphia on December 25, 1848.

When Harriet started planning her own escape, she wanted her husband, a free slave, to join her. He refused, **mocking** her for wanting to leave, and threatened to report her to her master. But Harriet was determined to become a free woman.

One day, Harriet's owner died. Harriet knew the slaves would be sold; it was time to go. Harriet and two of her brothers ran away, but soon after they left, the brothers gave up, forcing Harriet to return with them.



If Harriet had continued, her brothers may have been tortured into revealing where she was going.



Abolitionists' help allowed Harriet to escape north.

Two nights later, Harriet escaped alone. She went to the home of an abolitionist woman who had offered help. The woman fed Harriet and let her sleep, and then she directed Harriet to the next safe place. When Harriet reached that house, the people there directed Harriet to her next stop. This secret network of safe homes was called the **Underground Railroad**.

To escape, Harriet walked 100 miles (160 km), alone, through unknown land. She traveled at night and hid during the day. Finally, she arrived at the border of Pennsylvania, a state where slavery was illegal. Harriet was free!



Even in the north, African-Americans were paid little.

Leading Others to Freedom

When Harriet reached freedom, she was overjoyed. “There was such a glory over everything,” she said when she remembered that day. “The sun come like gold through the trees.”

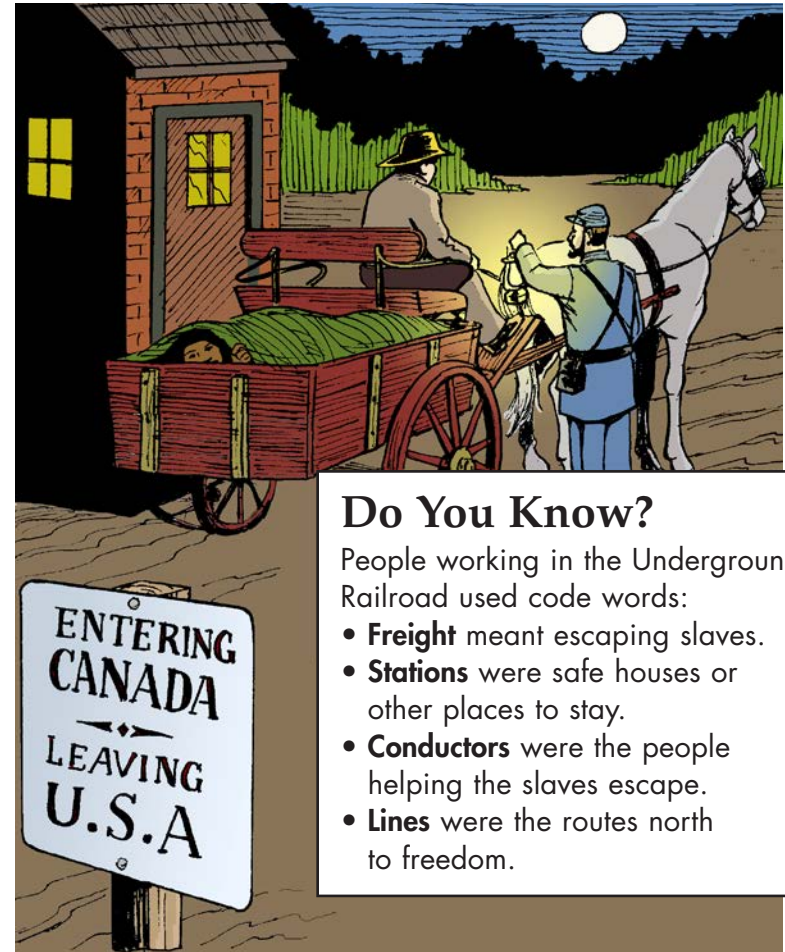
Harriet went to work. She cooked, washed dishes, and cleaned people’s houses. Now that she was free, people actually paid her to work for them. But Harriet was not content to sit back and enjoy her freedom—she saved the money she earned so that she could help free others.

Harriet made nineteen **perilous** trips back to the South, ignoring her own danger in order to become a conductor of the Underground Railroad. She guided escaping slaves from one safe resting place to another. A “station” on the Underground Railroad was usually an abolitionist’s home, or sometimes it was a church or another safe resting place. Some of the “stations” had secret rooms to hide the escaping slaves. Sometimes the slaves rode from place to place hidden under false bottoms in conductor’s carts.



Harriet guided escaping slaves to safe houses.

In 1850, the United States passed the Fugitive Slave Act, which made it a law that the Northern states had to return any escaped slaves to their owners. Now Harriet had to conduct her passengers all the way to Canada to find freedom.



Do You Know?

People working in the Underground Railroad used code words:

- **Freight** meant escaping slaves.
- **Stations** were safe houses or other places to stay.
- **Conductors** were the people helping the slaves escape.
- **Lines** were the routes north to freedom.

After the Fugitive Slave Act, Canada was the closest free place.



Harriet often disguised herself as a man.

How She Did It

Many called Harriet a “master of disguise.” Sometimes she dressed as an old woman, and sometimes she disguised herself as a man. It is said that one day, she met one of her former owners, and he didn’t recognize her!

Harriet was clever in other ways. She hired men to rip down wanted posters that described runaway slaves. Runaway notices, which were printed in the newspaper, weren’t put in newspapers on weekends—they had to wait until Monday morning. Harriet began escapes on Saturday nights in order to have a head start.

If Harriet saw people she thought were slave hunters, she’d turn and go south, to make it look as though she was not trying to escape. She gave crying babies a drug that helped them sleep quietly. If the escaping slaves wanted to turn back, she forced them to keep moving north to freedom. She boasted that she never lost a passenger.

Slave owners were furious, and they offered a reward for Harriet’s capture, dead or alive. The reward was \$40,000—an enormous amount of money for those days. One day, Harriet overheard a man reading her own wanted poster, which described Harriet as not being able to read. She immediately pulled out a book and pretended to read it, and the man left without giving her a second look.



Even with the reward, no one turned Harriet in.



This is one of many memorials honoring Harriet Tubman.

Harriet helped many of her own relatives out of the South. Thanks to Harriet, six of her ten brothers and sisters escaped. On one difficult journey, she brought her elderly parents north to Canada.

Harriet led about three hundred slaves north to freedom. Nothing was more important to her than helping others become free. One famous abolitionist, John Brown, called Harriet Tubman “one of the bravest persons on this continent.” People called Harriet the “Moses of her people,” because like Moses of the Bible, she led her people to freedom.

The End of Slavery

On April 12, 1861, the Civil War began. The North and South fought each other over the right to own slaves. During the war, Harriet worked as a nurse for the North’s Union Army. She was also a spy, scouting out the Southern army’s weapon warehouses, and she continued to travel into the South to lead slaves north.



Harriet led Union soldiers to arms and ammunition stores.

Do You Know?

How many slaves escaped to freedom via the Underground Railroad? No one knows.

While it’s true that many reached the North and became free, some did not. Many escaping slaves were discovered, captured, and returned to their masters. Others died while trying to flee. The exact number of Underground Railroad successes is unknown because secrecy was so terribly important.

When the Civil War ended in 1865, slavery became illegal in the United States. Harriet remarried and lived in Auburn, New York. She sold vegetables door-to-door. Harriet was very poor, yet she turned her own house into a home for needy freed people. She worked for aid and education for freed slaves. Harriet also fought for the right of women to vote.

Harriet Tubman died March 10, 1913. She devoted her long life to freedom. She will always be remembered as a true hero.



The Harriet Tubman Home housed elderly freed slaves.

Glossary

abolitionists (<i>n.</i>)	people who fought to make slavery illegal (p. 8)
meager (<i>adj.</i>)	very little (p. 5)
mocking (<i>v.</i>)	making fun of by imitating (p. 10)
perilous (<i>adj.</i>)	filled with danger (p. 13)
plantation (<i>n.</i>)	a large farm owned by a wealthy person or family where the work is done by others (p. 4)
Underground Railroad (<i>n.</i>)	the system of houses and other safe places that provided a way for slaves to escape north to freedom (p. 11)

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