

## Harriet Tubman

— Born into enslavement around 1820, fifth of 9 children. Father Ben Ross was an enslaved African who managed timber, mother Rit worked indoors. Harriet's name was Minty Ross, but she changed her name when she escaped to freedom.

— Hired out as a little girl. One mistress whipped her every day, so that she had scars she showed in old age. She coped by wearing extra layers of clothes and fighting back. She was hired out to several different families. The separations from her family when she was hired out caused her intense loneliness and fear. During Harriet's childhood, mother Rit was sold 10 miles away from her father. It was known that the original owner had stipulated in his will that father Ben Ross and mother Rit were to become free at age 45, and so too their children when they turned 45, but this was ignored. At one point, a buyer determined to have Harriet's youngest brother Moses while still a little boy, but Harriet's mother hid the boy, and passed him from family to family so that he couldn't be found. Three of Harriet's sisters were sold away to the South, without their children. What would be a reparation for that?

— Sometime between 1834 and 1836, she suffered a head injury. An overseer threw a heavy metal object at another enslaved African, and it struck Harriet, causing a skull fracture. She later said that she went back to work in the field, "with blood and sweat rolling down my face til I couldn't see" She lost consciousness for 2 days. Afterward, and for the rest of her life, she suffered headaches, epilepsy, visions, and periods of unconsciousness.

— Perhaps related to this injury, she began to experience vivid dreams, and had a spiritual experience, such that she began to feel God was guiding her and letting her see the future. Thomas Garrett, an underground RR agent, said he had, "never met with any person who had more confidence in the voice of God, as spoken direct to her soul, and her faith in a Supreme Power truly was great."

— She was hired out to work for John Stewart, near her father Ben Ross, who was a timber man. He knew the mariners who carried the timber, and learned the secret networks of communication among black mariners whose ships carried the timber and other goods to Baltimore. They had knowledge of safe places up and down the coast. At that time, Harriet was said to have learned to use skills of disguise and deception. For instance, she would disguise herself with a large bonnet, and carry 2 chickens to give the idea she was running errands. If she saw someone she knew, she would suddenly yank the string around the chickens' feet, and with the resulting commotion, no one would look at her face. She married

John Tubman at around that time.

— After their 3 sisters were sold, she and 2 of her brothers decided to escape. But her brothers were fearful and turned back, and her husband did not want to go. She changed her name to Harriet Tubman, and traveled 90 miles to Philadelphia. When she crossed into the free state of Pennsylvania, she recalled that “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.”

— In Philadelphia she worked for a hotel, and sold root beer and pies to make money, because she wanted to go back and bring her family to freedom. She made at least 13 trips, under the name Moses, probably bringing about 300 people. Many of their names are known. She said of this time, “I was a conductor of the Underground Railroad for 8 years, and I can say what most conductors can’t say, that I never ran the train off the track, and I never lost a passenger.” She used spirituals as coded messages, warning fellow travelers of danger. When she started another trip down, she sent word, and the enslaved people around her old home would begin singing “Steal Away”, “Go down Moses”, “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” and “I Looked over Jordan,” and this was a signal to meet at a secret spot at the new moon. She took people to Canada for some of these trips, because of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which allowed gangs of robbers to capture people of African descent, whether slave or free, and take them south.

— She met John Brown in 1858, and helped recruit for him. He called her General Tubman.

— The Civil War. She worked as a cook and a nurse, using her knowledge of roots and herbs, then as an armed scout. One of the actions was on the Combahee River, under Col. Montgomery. She and a few other scouts visited a line of plantations along that river, and then were able to guide 3 steam boats past the Confederate mines. And all the slaves knew that when the whistle blew on the boats, it meant to run for freedom while the Union soldiers battled the plantation owners and set fire to buildings. The enslaved Africans ran to the boats holding whatever was in their hands, and about 700 people were freed.

—After the Civil War she purchased a house in Auburn NY, where many abolitionists and suffragists lived. She and her second husband Nelson Davis, a Civil War veteran, lived there and adopted a young child, and she cared for her parents there. She founded a home for elderly African Americans, and finally lived there herself until her death in 1913, in her nineties.

