

## Harriet Tubman: Life of an Escaped Slave

Harriet Tubman was born Araminta "Minty" Ross in 1820 in Dorchester County, Maryland. Harriet was born into slavery and spent her childhood working without payment for the benefit of her owners. As a young girl, Harriet preferred to work in the field where she learned to follow geographical directions and herbs from her family.

In 1834, Harriet witnessed a young man attempting to escape enslavement. Unfortunately, young Harriet was struck in the head by a heavy weight that had been thrown at the escaping man by his owner. Harriet suffered a serious head injury which caused her to suffer from seizures, hallucinations and sleep attacks for the rest of her life.

In 1844, Harriet married John Tubman. He was a free Black man, which meant he was not a slave. Harriet and John's marriage was not recognized by law and she continued to live her life as a slave. Harriet tried to convince John to escape north with her, where they could both live in freedom however, John refused to leave. In the northern United States and Canada, slavery was slowly becoming abolished making the act to own a slave illegal.

In 1849, Harriet's owner died and feared she would be sold to another owner. Harriet made the decision to escape using the Underground Railroad, a secret network of routes used to help African American slaves escape from enslavement in the southern United States to Northern United States that were known as free states or to Canada.

Harriet used the skills she had learned while working in the fields, observing the stars and natural environment to help her escape. Once she escaped, Harriet wanted to return to the southern United States and help others make the journey to freedom. Harriet worked in Philadelphia in the state of Pennsylvania to raise money to fund her first rescue mission. Using the Underground Railroad, Harriet made the journey to Maryland to help other slaves escape to freedom.

In 1850, the United States passed the Fugitive Slave Act, which meant any escaped slaves in the free northern United States could be captured and returned to their owners. This led Harriet to change her escape route on the Underground Railroad making the journey into Upper Canada which is now known as the province of Ontario.

The city of St. Catharines was one of the Canadian terminuses, a final stop of the Underground Railroad. In 1851, Harriet found a job and rented a house on North Street. At this time, St. Catharines already had a small Black community living in the city which was growing rapidly due to the arrival of freedom seekers. Harriet lived in her North Street home with members of her family as she continued out her efforts of being one of the most famous conductors on the Underground Railroad. Harriet opened her doors to newly arrived freedom seekers, offering food and clothing to those in need.

Harriet's rescue missions were very organized as she created her own routes through swamps and forests of various states using the North Star to guide her on her journey. Harriet only travelled at night and hid the freedom seekers, also known as passengers during the day. Harriet is known to have rescued over 300 freedom seekers who all made the safe journey into free states and Canada.

In 1859 Harriet moved to Auburn, New York however made trips back to the Niagara region when needed. Harriet continued her humanitarian efforts, raising awareness on the abolition movement and women's rights. On March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1913 Harriet passed away in Auburn. Today, Harriet remains an icon of freedom and inspiration to many for her humanitarian work and community organization.

## Reading Tips

### Language

Enslaved vs. Slave: Today, most historians use the term enslaved people instead of slaves. This language separates a person's identity from their circumstance.

Enslaver vs. Owner: The term owner empowers them as an individual and dehumanizes the enslaved, treating them like an object rather than a person who has had slavery forced upon them.

For historic purposes, using the term "slave" instead of "enslaved" may be used to describe a time in history that took place.

Free state: A state in the United States where slavery was not legal, particularly the northern United States.

Abolition: The societal and political effort to end slavery.

The Underground Railroad: a network of people that helped slaves used to escape to freedom using routes from the southern United States into the northern United States and Canada.

Passenger: Enslaved African Americans using the Underground Railroad to escape enslavement.

Freedom seeker: escaped enslaved African Americans using the Underground Railroad to journey to freedom.

Terminus: a final stop on the Underground Railroad

### Short Story Questions

What do you think Harriet was feeling when she first escaped enslavement to freedom?

How do you think enslaved people felt on their journey on the Underground Railroad and why? (i.e. happy, scared, sad)

If you were a conductor on the Underground Railroad, what would you do to help freedom seekers?

How would Harriet's life be different if she never left her enslavement?