

HARRIETT TUBMAN



Born: About 1822 in Dorchester County, MD

Died: Mar. 10, 1913 in Auburn, NY

Appointment(s):

Appointed by Gov. Andrews of MA
Hilton Head Island
Jan. 1862

New England Freedmen's Aid Society
South Carolina
Jan. 1865

Teacher – Hilton Head, SC
Apr. – Nov., 1865

1822-1913

Harriett Tubman is an American icon of courage and freedom. Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison nicknamed her the “Moses of Her People” for leading at least 13 missions to take more than 70 slaves to freedom via the Underground Railroad.¹ Slave owners posted \$40,000 for her capture, but she was never caught.² Harriett was born as Araminta aka ‘Minty’ Ross about 1822 in Dorchester County, Maryland, the fifth of nine children, to slave parents, Benjamin Ross and Harriet Green. Her maternal grandmother, Modesty, was an African Ashanti who came to America on a slave ship from either the Ivory Coast or Ghana.³ ‘Minty’ had four brothers and four sisters. Growing up, she was very capable at a young age. Her slave master hired her out at the age of 5 as a nanny for an infant and a domestic servant, where she learned valuable skills of childcare, cooking, doing laundry and sewing, but she was also whipped about the neck and head whenever the baby cried at night.⁴ She was sent home because she was too weak to work. At seven years old, she was hired out to

¹ Harriet Tubman Historical Society. University of Massachusetts History Club. <http://www.harriet-tubman.org>. [hereafter cited as HTHS]

² Bradford, Sarah Hopkins. “Scenes in The Life of Harriet Tubman”. NY: W.J. Moses 1869, p 23. . <http://accessible-archives.com/collections/scenes-in-the-life-of-harriet-tubman/> [hereafter cited as Bradford, “Scenes”].

³ HTHS, Ibid.

⁴ Michals, Debra. “Harriet Tubman”. National Women’s History Museum, 2015. accessed 9/1/2019. <http://womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/harriet-tubman> - [Bradford, Scenes, p 11-12.](#)

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collect muskrats from traps, but contracted measles and was sent home again to recover. But at the age of 12, she was sent by her master to work in the fields. Harriet interfered to stop her master from beating an old slave, so he beat Harriet with a two-pound weight that left her with severe headaches for life.⁵ “The weight broke my skull and cut a piece of that awl clean off and drove it into my head. They carried me to the house all bleeding and fainting. I had no bed, no place to lie down at all, and they laid me on the seat of the loom and I stayed there all day and the next.”⁶ She never fully recovered and had narcolepsy all her life, even having surgery later to alleviate the symptoms of severe headaches, sleeping fits and hallucinations.

Harriet had a slave marriage with a free man of color, John Tubman in 1844.⁷ Harriet’s father had been manumitted in 1840 by his slave master but continued working for his master.⁸ Her mother was supposed to be manumitted at age 45 along with all of her children, but the grandson of her master would not honor the terms of his grandfather’s will and so they remained slaves. Now their future was very uncertain, so Harriet plotted her escape. She changed her name from Araminta to Harriet (after her mother) and took on her first husband’s surname of Tubman.⁹ On Monday, September 17, 1849 she and two of her brothers escaped Poplar Neck Plantation, but without her ‘husband’ who thought she was being foolish.¹⁰ John Tubman then legally married a free black woman in 1851. Harriet’s brothers returned to the plantation, but Harriet travelled ninety miles north to Pennsylvania with the help of Quakers and the Underground Railroad where she settled among free blacks in Philadelphia.¹¹ The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made it more difficult for Harriet to rescue slaves, since they now needed to get to Canada to be safe. But in 1857, her father Benjamin was in trouble for harboring a fugitive slave, so she rushed south to rescue her parents and lead them to Ontario, Canada.¹² It was too cold for her mother in Canada, so they relocated to Auburn, NY where Harriet bought seven acres for \$1,200 from her friend, William Seward (later President Lincoln’s Secretary of State).¹³ Harriet made her last rescue trip in December 1860 to bring her sister Rachel and her children to safety, but Rachel had already died and Harriet could not find her children.

⁵ Bradford, Sarah Hopkins. *Harriet Tubman, The Moses of Her People*, 1886. p 15.
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/harriet/harriet.html>. [hereafter cited as Bradford, *Moses*]

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 111.

- Horton, Lois E. *Harriet Tubman and the Fight For Freedom: A Brief History with Documents*.
Boston: Bedford/St Martin’s, 2013, p 29..

⁸ HTHS.

⁹ HTHS

¹⁰ Horton, Lois E. p 24..

- Bradford, “Scenes”, pp 17-18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 25.

¹² Bradford, “Scenes”, pp 48-49.

- HTHS.

Bradford, *Moses*, pp 115-116.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p 5.

- HTHS

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The next year, the Civil War began. Harriet was first recruited by Gen. Benjamin Butler of the Massachusetts Regiment stationed at Fort Monroe, Virginia as a nurse, cook and laundress with the freedmen's families.¹⁴ Governor Andrews of Massachusetts thought so highly of her skills and reputation, that he recruited her in January 1862 to join the war effort on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina where she worked for four years without pay.¹⁵ Harriett helped the US Army gain the trust of the freedmen so that General David Hunter could recruit the first black Union army brigade known as the 1st SC Volunteers and served as a nurse to those soldiers. She then joined Dr. Henry K. Durrant, Director of the Hospital at Port Royal (Hilton Head) in May 1862 as a nurse where her healing powers became legendary among the soldiers.¹⁶ Her knowledge of local medicinal roots and herbs allowed her to help treat soldiers and freedmen for typhoid, malaria, yellow fever, chicken pox, and dysentery. On June 2, 1863, Harriett used the intelligence she had gained from mingling among the troops and earlier trips along the Underground Railroad to guide 150 black soldiers of the 2nd SCCT on a raid up the Combahee River to free 730 slaves and confiscate abandoned property for the Union Army.¹⁷ She was the first known African-American woman to serve in the US military as a scout, guerilla soldier, spy and nurse during the Civil War.¹⁸

Harriet was appointed by the New England Freedmen's Aid Society (NEFAS) in January 1865 as a teacher to the freedmen in South Carolina although she was illiterate and would remain so all of her life.¹⁹ On March 20, 1865, the Secretary of War appointed Harriet to Hilton Head where she remained from April to November 1865 to 'teach' the freedmen and troops on Hilton Head Island.²⁰ She also taught the freedwomen skills such as cooking, sewing, and doing laundry so that they could earn money working for the Union troops on Hilton Head.

After the Civil War, she returned home to Auburn, New York to care for family members and that is where she became involved in the women's suffrage movement. She worked with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony giving speeches advocating for women's right to vote.²¹ She continued to raise funds for the education of freedmen. On July 10, 1863, journalist Franklin B. Sanford published a story about Harriet Tubman's heroic accomplishments which made her well-known in America.²²

¹⁴ HTHS.

¹⁵ Bradford, Moses, pp 6, 93-94.

¹⁶ HTHS.

¹⁷ Bradford, Moses, p 99.

- HTHS.

¹⁸ Michals, *Opcit.*

¹⁹ Bradford, Moses, p 99.

- New England Freedmen's Aid Society. *Freedmen's Record*. Vol 1, # 1, 4-8 and 11, Jan, Apr-Aug & Nov 1865.

²⁰ Bradford, "Scenes", p 70.

²¹ HTHS.

²² *Ibid.*

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She sought out friend and writer Sarah Bradford to help her write a short autobiography entitled "Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman" in 1869– the sale of which raised \$1,200 to pay her mortgage and care for her parents.²³ In 1886, Bradford wrote a full biography of Tubman called Harriet, the Moses of Her People, the money raised going towards aid for struggling freedmen in Auburn as well as the education of freedmen in the South.

After John Tubman's death in 1867, Harriet married Nelson Davis, who was twenty years her junior on March 18, 1869 in the Presbyterian Church in Auburn, NY.²⁴ He had come to Harriet's door as an escaped slave from North Carolina earlier and had served in the Union Army. The couple adopted a daughter in 1874. Harriet was approved for a widow's pension from her husband's military service in 1895 of \$8 per month and finally received a pension from the US government for her own service in 1899 of \$20 per month.²⁵ She had the winning bid of \$1450 at auction for 25 acres adjacent to her own home in 1896 and later had a Home for the Elderly and Disabled black folk built there in Auburn. She donated the property in 1903 to the AME Zion Church in Auburn and the church raised the funds to equip and staff it.²⁶ Harriet was the guest of honor at its grand opening on June 2, 1908. After a hospitalization in 1911, she went to live there herself.²⁷ Harriet testified in 1890 on a pension application that she was born in 1825 and her death certificate says that she was born in 1815 while her tombstone shows her birthdate as Jan. 29, 1820. So it is unclear how old she was when she died from pneumonia on March 10, 1913 in Auburn, New York.²⁸ Harriet Tubman was buried with military honors at Fort Hill Cemetery in Auburn, New York.²⁹



To the Memory of Harriet Tubman Davis

Heroine of the Underground Railroad

Nurse and Scout in the Civil War

"Servant of God, Well Done"

Erected by the

Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs

July 5, 1937

²³ HTHS.

²⁴ Michals.

²⁵ Bradford, Moses, p 6.

²⁶ HTHS

²⁷ Syracuse Herald. June 4, 1911. <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

²⁸ Michals.

- New York Times. March 14, 1913. Obituary. <https://www.newspapers.com/>

²⁹ Findagrave.com Memorial ID 1247 created 30 Dec 2000. Tombstone photo added 21 May 2008 by Paul G. Healey.

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Source: Findagrave.com/memorial/1247/harriet-tubman



Source: Bradford, Sarah H. "Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman", frontispiece. NY: W.J. Moses, 1869.

<http://accessible-archives.com/collections/scenes-in-the-life-of-harriet-tubman/>