



## AMERICAN LIVES Harriet Tubman

### *Conductor to Freedom*

#### Section 1

*“Excepting John Brown . . . I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you have.”—Frederick Douglass, letter to Harriet Tubman (1868)*

Herself an escaped slave, Harriet Tubman risked her life countless times by returning to the South to free others from slavery. She became known as “the Moses of her people,” because she led so many from captivity to the promise of the North.

Harriet Tubman (c. 1820–1913) was born around 1820 on the eastern shore of Maryland. When she was six, her master hired her out to another family to work. She was uncooperative, though, and was sent back. After another failed effort to hire her out, she was made a field hand. When only 13, she blocked an overseer from pursuing an escaping slave. He hurled a two-pound weight that hit Tubman, fracturing her skull. Until the end of her life, she suffered occasional black-outs as a result of the blow.

She recovered from the incident and later joined her father in being hired out to a builder. She worked hard, performing heavy labor that normally was done by men. She preferred such work to being in the kitchen or doing cleaning. She became strong and tough. She married John Tubman during this period.

When the plantation owner died, slaves were sold because the estate was struggling. One day in 1849, Tubman was told that she and her brothers had been sold. Determined not to be sent further South, she escaped that night.

Aided by the Underground Railroad, Tubman made it to Philadelphia and began to work in hotels. Visiting the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, which helped runaways, she learned that her brother-in-law was planning to come North with his wife, her sister, and their child. Tubman returned South to lead them to freedom. The next year she brought out a brother and his family. Later she returned for her husband, but he had remarried and chose not to leave. Tubman led out 11 others instead.

Throughout the 1850s, Tubman returned to the South almost twenty times. She let slaves know that she was nearby with a simple secret message:

“Moses is here.” She brought anywhere from sixty to three hundred slaves to the North—among them her parents. She became notorious throughout the South, where the reward for her capture went as high as \$40,000.

In the North, Tubman became friends with the leading abolitionists, including Wendell Phillips and Frederick Douglass. She was visited by John Brown. He had a plan to free large numbers of slaves and hoped to take advantage of Tubman’s detailed knowledge of geography and conditions in the South. At about this time, she also began to make public appearances, describing the evils of slavery and telling the stories of her rescue voyages.

Tubman was saddened by the collapse of Brown’s plan. When the Civil War broke out, she took direct action by helping the Union army in South Carolina. She served as a spy and a scout, going behind Confederate lines to gather information from slaves. She also worked as a nurse and helped African Americans who had escaped Confederate control.

After the war’s end and her husband’s death, she remarried. She lived on a farm sold to her for a small amount by William Seward, prominent New York Republican and Abraham Lincoln’s secretary of state. She devoted herself to helping others. She started the Harriet Tubman Home for Indigent Aged Negroes to help older former slaves. She campaigned to establish schools in the South for the now-freed African Americans. For many years Tubman tried to persuade Congress to grant her a pension for her work during the war. It was finally approved in 1897.

### Questions

1. Why was the route taken by escaping slaves called the Underground Railroad?
2. Why was such a high reward placed on Tubman?
3. In the 1850s, Tubman had a home in St. Catharines, a town in Canada near Buffalo, New York. Why did she lead escaped slaves there?