
Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad

by Tom Morton

Harriet Tubman earned the name “Black Moses” because like the Moses in the Bible who led Jews out of slavery in Egypt, she led many of her fellow Blacks out of slavery in the southern United States to freedom in Canada.

Harriet Tubman was born a slave in Maryland in 1820. Her ancestors had been captured in Africa and sold as slaves in America. Unlike slaves in earlier times, the Africans were regarded as less than human. They were chattel or property in the same sense as farm animals and were often treated the same: fed scraps, housed in shacks, and worked under the whip.

In 1793, the demand for slave labour had increased with the invention of the cotton gin, a machine that made it easier to produce cotton. The price for cotton fell so demand for it rose. Demand for slave labour to pick it also rose. The number of slaves tripled from half a million in 1775 to 1.5 million in 1820.

Most of this cotton was grown in the warm climate of the American South. It was there in the 1800s that slavery became an even greater part of the economy than ever before. When Harriet Tubman was a child, her two sisters were taken away and sold to the owner of a cotton plantation in one of the Southern states.

In 1849 Harriet Tubman decided to escape this fate by riding the “Underground Railroad” north to freedom. This escape route was not literally underground nor was it a railroad. It was underground in the sense that it was a secret operation run by courageous people, both Black and White, who were opposed to slavery. It was a railroad in the sense that it used railroad code words like “passengers” for the fugitives and “stations” for the safe houses where the fugitives hid from slave owners who hunted them. “Conductors” were those who led the slaves from one station to another like the Canadian doctor Alexander Milton Ross. He used his bird-watching hobby as a cover while visiting the plantations to tell slaves how best to travel to Canada. From 1793 until 1861, thousands of Blacks or African-Americans made it to freedom in the northern American free states and to Canada through this underground network.

Before the 19th century, Canada too had slaves, but not many. Its economy did not need them, unlike the American South. In addition, more and more Canadians were campaigning to abolish slavery. The first legal step towards its abolition was in 1793 when Upper Canada passed a law to ban the importation of slaves. In 1803 Lower Canada set free its 300 slaves but it too did not exactly abolish slavery. But in 1834, after extensive campaigning by anti-slavery societies in Britain, the British government passed the Abolition Act and ended slavery throughout the British Empire. Despite this, there was always some risk that after a slave escaped to Canada, slave hunters might kidnap their “property” and smuggle the runaway back to his or her American “owner.”

When Harriet Tubman escaped on the Underground Railroad, she travelled by night for a week before reaching the northern state of Pennsylvania, and freedom. A year later she became a conductor herself and made 19 trips before 1850, risking capture and losing that freedom. She would use the North Star to guide her on clear nights; on cloudy nights she would feel for the moss growing on the north side of trees. Sometimes she and the runaway slaves would hide in a station—in their chimneys, barns, haystacks and root cellars. They also used disguises when travelling in the South and fake passes in the Northern states.

To protect her passengers, the Black Moses could be ruthless. She thought that if a slave gave up the journey, he should be shot. An interviewer asked if she would really do that. “Yes,” she replied, “if he was weak enough to give out, he’d be weak enough to betray us all, and all who helped us; and do you think I’d let so many die just for one coward man?”

“Did you ever have to shoot anyone?” the interviewer asked. “One time,” she said, “a man gave out the second night; his feet were sore and swollen, he couldn’t go any further; he’d rather go back and die, if he must.” They tried everything to help and encourage him, but nothing worked. “Then,” she said, “I told the boys to get their guns ready and shoot him. They’d have done it in a minute, but when he heard that he jumped right up and went on as well as anybody.”

It was the voice of God who told Harriet Tubman to escape slavery and God who prompted her to return to free others. He spoke with her often. According to the station master Thomas Garrett, Tubman was once leading a band of slaves, all men, when she said that God had told her to stop. She did and asked Him what she should do. He told her to leave the road and turn to the left. She obeyed. Soon they came to a stream. She asked again of God what to do and He said to cross it. It was a cold March night, but Tubman waded across the water up to her chin with her fugitives reluctantly following. Eventually after crossing still another stream they found a cabin belonging to a Black family who took all of them in and cared for them. Garrett said he had never met anyone who had such confidence in the voice of God.

In 1850, the United States passed a new law, the Fugitive Slaves Act, which let slave owners capture their escaped slaves anywhere in the United States including the northern free states and return them to the South. Those who were not escaped slaves but helped a fugitive to hide could be fined \$1,000 or sent to jail for six months. The runaway slave who was returned to his or her master could have an ear chopped off, part of a foot removed, or be severely whipped. But the longing to be free was strong and the best hope for freedom was Canada. As many as three thousand Blacks crossed the border in the first few months after the Fugitive Slaves Act was passed.

Despite the greater risks, Tubman continued to help others escape. She made 11 more trips south, leading some 300 people into Canada, including her elderly parents and three brothers. At one point, slave owners offered \$40,000 for her capture, dead or alive.

The final stops on the Underground Railroad were small towns across the border like St. Catharines, Ontario, where Tubman and some of her family lived for many years before the American Civil War started in 1861. The winters were hard for many of the refugees who

arrived with no possessions, and poor clothing. They also found that, though they were free in Canada, they were not always equal. There was prejudice against them. However, there were also many Canadians willing to help and there was Harriet who would work for them, encourage them, and carry them through.

During the Civil War, on January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln declared slavery abolished. The Union Army of the North soon profited from hundreds of thousands of Blacks who fought as soldiers or laboured however they could.

Harriet Tubman had left Canada and joined the Union Army to serve as a nurse, scout and spy. By 1863 she had organized her own band of spies chosen from former slaves who knew the countryside and could guide the Union forces. In a raid at the Combahee River in South Carolina, these spies told the Union soldiers how to avoid mine traps set in the river. Led by Tubman, former slaves also piloted gunboats down the river and burned crops and buildings. They freed more than 750 slaves. Harriet Tubman was given credit for planning the raid, becoming the first and only woman in American history to lead a military attack.

The North won the war in 1865 and Tubman stayed to live in the United States as a free woman. However, many other Blacks stayed in Canada to contribute to their new homeland. Tubman retired in New York State and founded a home for the aged. She died in 1913.