

Harriet Tubman, née Araminta "Minty" Ross, abolitionist, 'conductor' of the Underground Railroad (1820-1913)



Harriet Tubman was born into slavery as Araminta Ross (nicknamed Minty) in 1820, Maryland, and spent her childhood working for her owners as an unpaid slave. Preferring working in the fields to servitude in the home, she learned to follow directions based on geographic details as well as how to use herbs and plants found outdoors for therapeutic and medicinal purposes—skills that proved to be invaluable when she fled to secure her own freedom, and as the 'conductor' of the Underground Railroad.

It is important to note that the Underground Railroad was not an actual railroad, but was rather a term that began to be used in the 1830s (when railway technology came about) to describe a secretive network of people and safehouses across America that helped slaves reach freedom in the North, and particularly in Canada following the 1850 passage of the *Fugitive Slave Act* in the US, which allowed slave catchers to pursue escaped slaves into free Northern states. In 1793 Canada passed the *Act to Limit Slavery*, in which a provision was added that any enslaved person who reached Upper Canada became free as soon as they arrived.

When Tubman was 14 she witnessed a young black man attempting to escape to freedom. As she watched she was struck in the head by a large weight that the slave owner attempted to throw at his escaping slave, suffering a serious head injury that caused her to suffer from seizures, hallucinations and sleep disturbances for the rest of her life.

In 1844, when she was 24, Harriet married a free Black man named John Tubman while she was still a slave, which meant that her marriage was not legally recognized. She tried to convince him to flee north to freedom with her, but he refused.

In 1849, when Tubman was 29, her owners died and she feared being resold into slavery to cover their debts, so she fled north alone, and made her way to Philadelphia with assistance from groups of Quakers who were involved in the Underground Railroad. Tubman stayed in Philadelphia and worked for a year, raising enough money to rescue her niece and two daughters from Maryland before they were auctioned off to another slave owner. She returned to Maryland to personally assist her family's escape, thus beginning her life as a 'conductor' of the Underground Railroad.

Following this extremely personal mission, she began to meet other prominent abolitionists who were part of the Underground Railroad and assisted her with getting freed slaves to Philadelphia by providing food, clothing, shelter, and financial assistance along the way. When the *Fugitive Slave Act* was passed in 1850, Tubman—a fugitive slave herself—moved to St. Catherines, Canada West in 1851, and altered the Underground Railroad escape route to this location.

After moving to St. Catherines in December 1851, Harriet Tubman was quickly able to find work and rent a house. She lived with her family and continually opened her doors to newly arrived freed slaves offering food and clothing to those who needed it while supporting many charitable endeavours in the town. Throughout this time she continued leading missions to free former slaves in the US, forging routes through swamps, forests, and other difficult terrain through many states, always using the North Star for guidance (she always travelled by night). In total she made at least 10 trips and transported at least 70 people to Canada using these trails. She was never caught and never lost a passenger.

Following two harsh winters, in 1959 Harriet Tubman moved with her parents and brother to Auburn, New York, in order to avoid the harsh Canadian climate. Tubman gave lectures at anti-slavery gatherings and used them to support both her family and the abolition movement, and became increasingly involved in the women's rights movement as well. In 1862, after the Civil War broke out, and at 42 years of age, Harriet Tubman enlisted in the Union Army, combatting slavery by assisting the Union as a nurse, spy, scout, laundress, and cook until 1864. She returned to Auburn after the Civil War where she remarried, adopted a young girl, and opened a nursing home for elderly African Americans to be cared for with dignity.

In recognition of Harriet Tubman's courage, devotion to humanitarian efforts, heroism and life of service, March 10 was declared Harriet Tubman Day in the US and St. Catherines, and in 2005 she was designated a "Person of National Significance" by the Government of Canada.