

Chapter 2

THE WORLD OF HARRIET TUBMAN AND ASSOCIATED RESOURCES

This chapter describes Harriet Tubman's importance in American history and culture, and the primary sites with which she is associated. Part I sets out the context in which Tubman lived and a narrative of her life. Part II describes the primary places associated with her life and work.

PART I • HARRIET TUBMAN'S IMPORTANCE IN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

Harriet Tubman's lifelong battle against oppression and her ability to prevail over the forces of law and social convention make her story one that continues to resonate. Few people who have achieved high recognition have climbed up from more unpromising beginnings, or have overcome greater obstacles on their journeys than Tubman. Her successes as an Underground Railroad conductor, Civil War spy and nurse, suffragist, and community activist were achieved at enormous personal risk and against great adversity. Harriet Tubman continues to be the focus of groups of admirers who look to her for inspiration in 21st century America. Her life has entered the realm of legend, and as a hero of near mythic proportions, she lives on as an inspiration to present generations.

Historical Context

Enslavement in Maryland

From the first years of colonial settlement, enslaved Africans labored in fields and homes throughout the American colonies. The Chesapeake's African population dates to 1619 when a Dutch ship brought Africans to Old Point Comfort,

Virginia.¹ London slave traders took many people captive from the West African Gold Coast, in the region now part of the Republic of Ghana populated by Asante tribes. During the mid-1700s some were sold directly from the decks of slave ships in Chesapeake Bay, others at the slave market in Oxford, Maryland, eventually settling with the expanding planter families clearing and managing property in Dorchester County, birthplace of Harriet Tubman.

Enslavement of Africans in Maryland, and the laws and regulations that codified slavery's existence, evolved slowly over a hundred-year period. Until the late 17th century, white indentured servitude was common, particularly on the Eastern Shore where Harriet Tubman (1822-1913) and her family lived.² Some planters had both slaves and indentured servants; by the early to mid-1700s, however,

shipments of black captives from Africa to the Americas had increased dramatically. Numerous laws were enacted to standardize ownership of slaves, including those that specified any children born to an enslaved woman would carry the status of the mother, with ownership remaining with the slave woman's owner, even if the father was a free black or a white man.³

Denied their liberty, these enslaved people held no legal rights as human beings. Their lives were circumscribed by the needs and desires of their enslavers,



Figure 2-1. 1823 map of Choptank River area of the Eastern Shore. Tubman was born in Dorchester County.

¹ Records of the Virginia Company, 1606-26, Volume III. Thomas Jefferson Papers Series 8. Virginia Record Manuscripts 1606-1737, ed. S.M. Kingsbury, "The First Africans to Virginia—1619."

² The primary source for biography and historical background is Kate Clifford Larson, whose biography published in 2004 broke new ground with extensive original source documentation. *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004).

³ See Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*, (New York: The New Press, 1874); Jeffrey R. Brackett, *The Negro in Maryland. A Study of the Institution of Slavery*, 1889. Reprint, 1969 (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969); Robert J. Brugger, *Maryland, a Middle Temperament, 1634-1980*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

who were allowed to buy and sell them without regard for the person's family and social relationships. Food, clothing, and shelter were often inadequate, leading to higher death rates for enslaved people in comparison to free blacks and whites.

With the end of the legal importation of slaves to the United States in 1808, as mandated by Congress, traders turned to internal markets to meet the voracious demand for new labor to clear vast territories in the expanding southwest. On the Eastern Shore of Maryland, the late 18th century transition from a predominantly tobacco economy to one based on grain agriculture and timber harvesting for the Baltimore shipyards diminished the need for a large slave labor force.

Tobacco production required a year-round labor force, but grain agriculture did not. Timber production was a year-round effort requiring continuous acquisition of land and demanding a steady, predominantly male, labor force. These factors, among others, altered the nature of black slavery and freedom on the Eastern Shore by 1800; on one hand, labor by free blacks became, to some extent, a more attractive economic alternative to owning slaves, while on the other hand some white slaveholders found a lucrative market in selling off their excess slaves for financial gain.⁴



Figure 2-2. The Eastern Shore economy went from primarily tobacco farming to grain and timber harvesting in the early 19th century.

⁴ For more information regarding the transformation of Maryland's agricultural practices and its attendant affects of slavery, see Brugger, *Maryland*; Barbara J. Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); T. Stephen Whitman, *The Price of Freedom. Slavery and Manumission in Baltimore and Early National Maryland* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997).

Throughout the 1810s, the Eastern Shore experienced economic uncertainty. While demand for export products such as grain and timber reached all time highs during the War of 1812, peace brought European products flooding back into American markets. Grain and timber prices dropped dramatically, severely affecting Eastern Shore farmers and manufacturers. The whole of Chesapeake trading faced increasing competition and barriers to freer trade with escalating tariffs and taxes imposed on both sides of the Atlantic.⁵ As the economy turned and agricultural practices shifted, many slave owners started reducing their slave holdings to accommodate the change from year-round labor-intensive tobacco growing to cyclical crops. Rather than manumit (free) their slaves, many planter families began to sell them to traders plying the Chesapeake communities, looking for fresh sources of labor to satisfy the rapidly expanding southern sugar and cotton economies of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, and Texas. By this time many black families consisted of both free and enslaved members, and for them, the persistent possibility of separation through sale of enslaved loved ones emerged in the nineteenth century as one of the greatest threats to their well-being.

On the Eastern Shore of Maryland, most black people, enslaved and free alike, moved around according to the land ownership patterns, occupational choices, and living arrangements of the region's white families. Out of necessity, many black families maintained familial and community ties throughout a wide geographic area. Family separations were not always precipitated by sale. Some whites owned or rented land and farms across great distances, requiring a shifting of their enslaved and hired black labor force at varying times throughout the year, or over a period of years when new land was acquired. This pattern of intra-

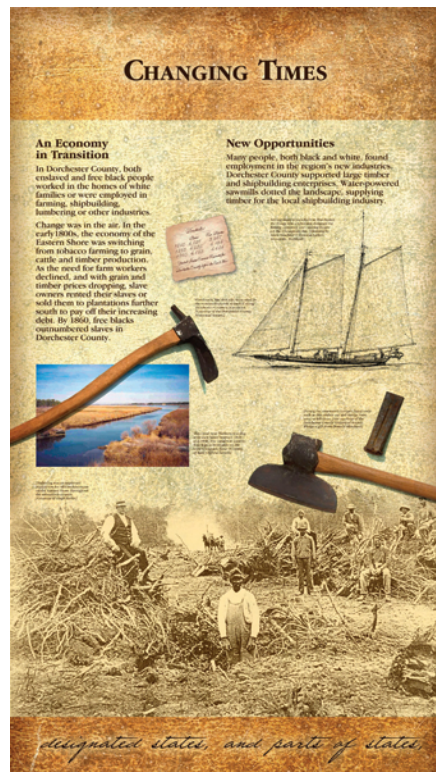


Figure 2-3. Exhibit on Tubman displayed at Harriet Tubman Organization and Museum, Cambridge, describes conditions in early 19th century.

⁵ Brugger, *Maryland*, pp. 196-199.

regional movement enabled families and friends (both black and white) to create communication and travel networks that allowed them to maintain ties to family and community. That changed, however, when sales of enslaved people to Deep South and southwest plantations escalated rapidly. One result was to fracture the black families forever.

Statewide, Maryland's free black population grew from approximately 1,800 in 1755 to more than 8,000 in 1790, and almost 34,000 by 1810.⁶ In Dorchester County in 1790, there were 5,337 enslaved and 528 free blacks; by 1800, the free black population had increased dramatically to 2,365, while the enslaved population fell to 4,566.⁷ Over the same period, Dorchester County's white population was largely stable at around 10,000. Younger white residents tended to migrate to North Carolina, Georgia, and farther west and south in search of better opportunities.⁸

During this time, a complex movement, both religious and secular, was emerging, which spurred a marked increase in manumissions during the 1790s. An increasingly important religious awakening – founded upon Quakerism and Methodism

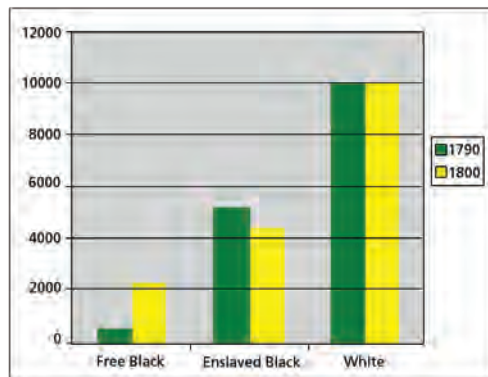


Figure 2-4. Dorchester County Population, 1790 (green) and 1800 (yellow)

⁶ Berlin, *Slaves without Masters*, pp. 45-48.

⁷ See Kay Najjyyah McElvey, "Early Black Dorchester, 1776-1870: A History of the Struggle of African Americans in Dorchester County, Maryland, to Be Free to Make Their Own Choices." (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Maryland, 1991). See also, U.S. Census Data, 1790, 1800, 1810; and, Fields, *Slavery*, pp. 8-13.

⁸ See Debra Moxie, "Thompson Land Records," *Dorchester County Genealogical Magazine*, Dorchester Co., MD; and D.F. Thompson, "The Thompson Family in Dorchester County and Maryland," *Democrat and News*, Cambridge, MD, Jan. 7, 1910. D.F. Thompson, "The Thompsons in Dorchester," *Democrat and News*, Cambridge, MD, Jan. 28, 1910. McElvey, "Early Black". From 1790 to 1800, the county witnessed an out-migration of residents, from 10,015 to 9,415, though by 1810 it had rebounded to 10,415, where it would remain for the next forty years.

– and an ideological legacy of freedom from the American Revolution, both sparked intense debate about the moral, political, and economic validity of slavery.

Quakers were among the earliest and most important voices of the dissent against slavery. Though some Quakers denounced the owning of slaves from the earliest colonial times, it was not until Quaker John Woolman of New Jersey, making a tour of Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina in the mid 1700s, called attention to American slavery. His sharp criticism of the enslavement of people found many converts, and manumissions escalated throughout the 18th century. By the turn of the century, Methodists and Baptists were also manumitting their enslaved labor, and joining the small but growing ranks of American abolitionists.

While the marked rise in manumissions and petitions for freedom immediately following the American Revolution was, in part, a function of the Revolution's rhetoric of liberty, it was also a function of fluctuating economic conditions, less labor-intensive agricultural work, and a self-sustaining and economically viable free African-American population. Increasingly vocal anti-slavery sentiment in England also sparked intense debate in America. In Maryland, citizens from the Eastern Shore, including those from Talbot, Dorchester, and Caroline counties, petitioned the House of Delegates in 1785 for the abolition of slavery, and abolitionist voices throughout Maryland became quite influential. However, outraged slaveholders forced the House and Senate to impose sanctions against the Maryland Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, effectively dismantling it by the mid 1790s.⁹

On the Eastern Shore, Quakers manumitted hundreds of slaves by deed and by will in the 1780s. Methodism, which evolved slowly in Maryland, spread rapidly in Dorchester and surrounding counties during the 1790s, and it played an important role in the increasing number of manumissions. Most of the elite families of the Eastern Shore, however, initially remained loyal to the Anglican Church.

While immediate emancipation remained a choice for some slaveholders, it appears that the majority who chose manumission did so by delaying deeds of manumission until some future date. In this way, the slaveholder ensured that he remained the beneficiary of a slave's most productive years. Slave owners also benefited from the labor of any enslaved children born to enslaved women who were set to be free at a later date. The slave owners would, under a staggered manumission schedule, have a steady supply of labor from children born to these enslaved but-soon-to-be-free women. This also would keep the women close to the plantation, and laboring

⁹ Brackett, *Negro in Maryland*, pp. 55-57.

for the plantation owner, if their children remained enslaved there. Others sold their enslaved people for a limited term of years, putting cash in their own pockets while assuaging their consciences by providing for eventual manumission, which in all cases of delayed manumission, “afforded the greatest amount of protection for the master’s purse while still appeasing the troubled conscience.”¹⁰

Limiting a slave’s term of service was one method of ensuring loyalty from enslaved people. Term limits also allowed slaveholders to ease their conscience within the context of the newly formed ideas of democracy and Christianity in the Early Republic.¹¹ This attitude was compatible with a belief that the institution of slavery could remain intact. Nonetheless, term slavery was the road to autonomy for many slaves; eventually they would join the already growing free and freeborn black population.

Hiring out provided both a valuable income to slaveholders, who could not profitably use all of their slaves, and a ready labor force for others who could not, or did not want, to own more slaves. For the enslaved people themselves, it meant the constant possibility of painful separations. It was particularly difficult for children, who often became terribly homesick and despondent.¹² While most rental contracts stipulated that slaves be clothed, fed, and sheltered properly, this was not always the case.¹³ William Still, the famous Philadelphia Underground Railroad operator, interviewed many runaway slaves who described mistreatment from temporary masters, lack of food, and frequent beatings.¹⁴ In the case of Harriet Tubman, cruel treatment, whippings, and beatings inflicted during this time period left scars “still plainly visible where the whip cut into the flesh,” forty years later.¹⁵

Resistance

Slaves had been running away from their masters since Africans were forcibly brought to the colonies in the early 1600s. The threat of sale, harsh treatment, and the intense desire for freedom motivated thousands to escape. It was illegal

¹⁰ Christopher Phillips, *Freedom’s Port. The African American Community of Baltimore, 1790-1860*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997) pp. 38-42; Whitman, *Price*, pp. 66-68; Brugger, *Maryland*, pp. 168-170; Wennersten, *Eastern*, pp. 120-121.

¹¹ Whitman, *Price*, p. 67

¹² Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) p. 158

¹³ Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 184

¹⁴ William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (1871; Reprint, Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1970).

¹⁵ Bradford, *Scenes*, p. 13.

for enslaved people to flee their masters, and those who did became known as “fugitives” from the law. While thousands of runaways were successful, they faced enormous obstacles. Armed slave catchers hunted “fugitives” with vicious attack dogs. Descriptive newspaper ads and wanted posters promised varying rewards for their capture, tempting others to inform on “runaways.” (In contemporary usage the terms freedom seeker and self-liberator are more often used than runaway.) By the end of the 18th century, however, a more organized escape system had started to take shape, one that provided some measure of support to freedom seekers finding their way to freedom. While some found protection and support in maroon¹⁶ and Native American communities in territories and states such as Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Mexico, and the Caribbean, most found refuge in black communities in the North where states had ended slavery in the early years after the Revolution. Meanwhile, the abolition of slavery in the British Empire strengthened the view that slavery was on the way to extinction, and that increased international pressure on the American institution.



Figure 2-5. Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Gerrit Smith, depicted on NPS website.



Figure 2-6. William Still, Underground Railroad operator

¹⁶ Derived from a Spanish term, maroon refers to “runaways” who formed self-governing communities often located in remote places such as forests, swamps, and mountains.

Many abolitionists worked in cooperation with countless black and white supporters, unknown today, who preferred to practice their anti-slavery in private, but who were part of a loose network of individuals who could be tapped to help freedom seekers find their way north and provide support and shelter once they arrived. The Underground Railroad, as this secret network of places and people was known, functioned on the Eastern Shore in the mid-19th century. People who participated in these clandestine operations were known as “agents,” “conductors,” “engineers,” and “station masters,” terms that mirrored positions on actual railroads. As historians now understand it, the Underground Railroad “refers to the effort – sometimes spontaneous, sometimes highly organized – to assist persons held in bondage in North America to escape from slavery.”¹⁷

The Underground Railroad existed as early as the 1780s and lasted until the end of the Civil War in 1865, with the years of greatest activity starting in 1830, and especially heightened after the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. More than specific routes and means of escape, it entailed the larger action of flight from bondage by various means; and it made its appearance throughout North America. Central to its existence were uncounted numbers of whites and free and enslaved blacks who assisted escapees. Although not emphasized historically, it is now known that

“...the majority of assistance to runaways came from slaves and free blacks, and the greatest responsibility for providing shelter, financial support and direction to successful runaways came from the organized efforts of northern free blacks.”¹⁸



Figure 2-7. Frederick Douglass.

Harriet Tubman used a variety of paths to freedom, including a heavily traveled route supported by Frederick Douglass, another famous freedom seeker from Maryland. The route on which Douglass operated included stations in Baltimore, Wilmington, Philadelphia, New York City, Albany, Syracuse, and Rochester, and Ontario, Canada. The stations were manned by abolitionists and some are known and honored today: Thomas Garrett, of Wilmington, Delaware; J. Miller McKim,

¹⁷ *Underground Railroad Theme Study*, “E. Statement of Historic Context, Introduction.” <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/underground/themef.htm>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4 of 45.

William Still, Robert Purvis, Edward M. Davis, Lucretia and James Mott, and many others in Philadelphia; David Ruggles, Isaac T. Hopper, among others, in New York City; the Mott sisters, Stephen Myers, John H. Hooper, and others in Albany; and the Reverends Samuel J. May and J. W. Loguen of Syracuse. From Rochester, J. P. Morris, Frederick Douglass, Amy and Isaac Post and others, secretly sent freedom seekers along to Buffalo and Canada.¹⁹ But these individuals all remained safely in the North.

The enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, a strict law requiring northern officials and citizens to return freedom seekers against their will to their former enslavers, made even free blacks vulnerable to kidnapping. It forced many self liberators living and working in the North to seek safety in Canada where laws protected them from re-enslavement. Liberty in Canada did not guarantee food, clothing, and shelter, and the daily work of survival continued unabated. Weary African Americans struggled to start new lives over again. In Canada, however, blacks enjoyed political liberties not shared by African Americans in the U.S. Though racism and discrimination often tempered the enjoyment of those rights, most freedom seekers eventually found work and stability once they arrived in Canada.

Civil War

Sectional controversy, rooted in the issue of slavery, had divided the nation from its start and became acute after John Brown's failed attack on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in October 1859. Brown, a zealous, white anti-slavery activist, had hoped to overthrow the hated institution by provoking a widespread slave insurrection. His trial, conviction, and execution polarized feelings in North and South. The election of Abraham Lincoln as a minority president in 1860 precipitated the secession of several southern states and their organization into the Confederate States of America. When Confederate forces fired on federal Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, in Charleston harbor, the Civil War began.²⁰

Once Union forces began to operate in the South, thousands of enslaved people fled their homes to place themselves under federal protection. Declared "contrabands of war," these fleeing enslaved people who were flooding Union encampments became an immediate concern to federal officials. Hundreds of northern abolitionists volunteered to help educate and train the former slaves, whose legal status remained unclear. Harriet Tubman was recruited by the federal government to work on behalf of Union troops in the South. Her assignments were to nurse the troops and to spy on and scout out confederate positions.

¹⁹ Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, p. 330.

²⁰ McPherson, *Battle Cry*, pp. 264-275.

President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, effective January 1, 1863, provided for slaves in states still in rebellion against the United States to be freed, and also authorized calling into service able-bodied African Americans who could be of assistance to the Union forces in the South. This action opened the window for the establishment of African American regiments. Military pay for black soldiers immediately became an issue: African Americans were paid \$10 per month, less \$3 for clothing, while their white counterparts were paid \$13 per month with an additional allowance for clothing. Many black troops refused to accept the lesser pay, demanding equal payment for equal service. They waited until September 1864 to see equal pay.²¹ African American soldiers also received unequal medical care in army hospitals, which contributed to a higher death rate among them.

The plight and struggles of the freedmen in the South for economic, educational, and political advancement occupied black and white humanitarian efforts during and after the Civil War. Through the Freedmen's Bureau, large sums of money and hundreds of relief workers fanned out across the South to help provide for the basic needs of millions of newly liberated men, women, and children.

Civil Rights

During the latter half of the 19th century, suffrage and civil rights for African Americans dominated political discourse. In January 1865, Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery, but this amendment did not guarantee African Americans equality, citizenship, or the right to vote. The Dred Scott Supreme Court decision in 1857 had virtually stripped free blacks of their citizenship rights, and a new amendment was needed to guarantee the full protection of citizenship. For African Americans, in both the North and the South, bigotry and injustice persisted. Discrimination against African Americans, particularly in the South, was rampant, and African Americans could not depend upon equal protection under the existing provisions of the Constitution. In fact, in the South, many states began enacting "Black Codes," specifically targeting blacks, denying them the right to vote, and in many cases restricting rights to own guns or land, to move freely, or to work for themselves. They also included harsh penalties for any breach of these codes, including enforced labor and apprenticeships, prison terms, and punitive levies and taxes.

Liberal and moderate Republicans in Congress, therefore, sought to guarantee the citizenship rights of freedmen by passing a Civil Rights bill in March 1866. Vetoed by President Andrew Johnson, the bill failed to become law, but only temporarily.

²¹ White soldiers also received bounties for re-enlisting, whereas black soldiers did not.

Its key provisions were incorporated into the first clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (1868), which guaranteed citizenship for anyone born in the United States, and forbade states to “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law,” or to “...deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” The right to vote was achieved for African-American men two years later by the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

To the disappointment of activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the Reconstruction Amendments rights applied specifically to men. This left both black and white women without a political voice. The women’s suffrage movement, officially established at the first women’s rights convention held at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 with Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Martha Wright, Frederick Douglass, and others, gained momentum after the Civil War. Utilizing skills sharpened during the abolition campaigns of the 1840s and 1850s, these activists fought to bring equal rights to women.

In the postwar period, a new generation of activist women began moving into positions of leadership in the suffrage movement. In this “changing of the guard,” respected figures such as Tubman were not only important to bring to life the abolitionists’ glorious pasts, but they also demonstrated an obligation to give black women the right to vote. During this period, Harriet Tubman dedicated her efforts to philanthropy among poor and elderly black people and to the cause of women’s rights.

As the 1890s wore on however, many middle class white women suffragists shied away from supporting the idea of racial equality, and the new younger leadership unabashedly found usefulness in white supremacy. By the turn of the century, the southern-based Woman Suffrage Conference had successfully organized to support white woman suffrage only and remained a powerful force within the movement, disabling any hopes of a biracial effort to win the vote.

Biographical Summary

A Daughter of the Eastern Shore: 1822–1849

Situated south of the Mason-Dixon Line, Maryland was located in the northern tier of slave states. The Eastern Shore of Maryland, lying between Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, always somewhat isolated, developed a distinctive economy and lifestyle. In this flat and bountiful land, deeply incised by tidal inlets, the horizon between land and water was blurred and the inhabitants drew on both for their livelihood and their cultural traditions. The flat terrain provided abundant

tillable land for tobacco at first, then wheat, corn, fruit, and other agricultural products that could be carried to distant markets on the numerous waterways.

Harriet Tubman was born enslaved on the Eastern Shore in early 1822.²² Her parents, Harriet “Rit” Green and Benjamin Ross, named her Araminta and called her “Minty.” They were the property of white plantation owners.²³ Through the marriage of Mary Pattison Brodess and Anthony Thompson, Tubman’s parents had become members of the same household and started their own family around 1808. Anthony Thompson’s plantation was at Peter’s Neck, ten miles southwest of Cambridge, Dorchester County. The lives of enslaved persons are not well documented, and many details about Harriet Tubman’s early life remain unknown.

Harriet Tubman, her parents, and her siblings experienced relative stability as a family while under the control of Anthony Thompson. The owner of dozens of enslaved persons, Thompson kept the majority of his bondspeople working on his own plantation. He probably also required the labor of free blacks to log and cultivate his vast acreage. This community of free and enslaved black people formed the nucleus of Tubman’s social and familial world.

When Mary Thompson died around 1810, Anthony Thompson became the guardian to her son, his stepson, Edward Brodess, maintaining control of Brodess’s inherited property in enslaved people and land until Brodess turned 21 in 1822.

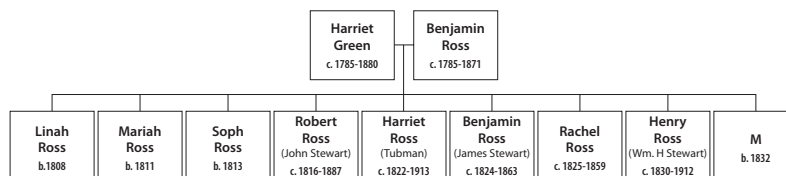


Figure 2-8. Chart of Harriet Tubman’s Parents and Siblings

In late 1823 or early 1824, Brodess moved several miles southeast of Peter’s Neck to the hamlet of Bucktown to establish a farm on his inherited property. Brodess brought Rit and her then five children, including young Minty, with him to live and work on his farm. This move separated Tubman and her siblings from their father, Ben, and the community of friends and relatives they had known at Peter’s Neck.

Tubman’s family was threatened by the rapidly changing economic landscape of the Eastern Shore. Brodess’s relatively small farm did not require the labor of all

²² Larson, *Bound*, p. 16.

²³ *Ibid.* 8; 18.

the enslaved persons he owned. Beginning in 1825 Brodess began to sell some of these people, including three of Tubman's sisters. Rit and Ben were powerless to halt this fracturing of the vulnerable family. Tubman later recalled to biographer Sarah Bradford, the "agonized expression" on the faces of her sisters as they were taken away, and the "hopeless grief" of her parents after they were gone.²⁴

Brodess also hired out some of his enslaved persons to local farmers in need of additional labor. Harriet herself was hired out to a variety of masters and mistresses, some cruel and negligent. One such master was James Cook, a small-scale farmer living near the Little Blackwater River. At the age of only six or seven, Harriet not only labored in his house but was also responsible for setting and checking muskrat traps, which during the cold harsh winter, made her ill and weak.

During the 1830s, Tubman was hired out as a field hand to another local plantation owner. While visiting a dry goods store, at the Bucktown crossroads, she became involved in an event that permanently altered her life. An angry overseer threw an iron weight at a fleeing young man. Tubman, hoping to stop the overseer, had stepped in front of the door, and the weight hit her in the head instead of the targeted young man. The blow debilitated her for months and left her suffering from headaches and an epileptic condition. It marked the beginning of a lifetime of seizures that were often accompanied by potent dreams and visions, which fed into Tubman's already strong religious beliefs.

Harriet Tubman's faith was deep, and founded upon strong religious teachings, including Methodist, Catholic, Episcopal, and Baptist beliefs, which blended with cultural and religious traditions that survived the middle passage from Africa. First generation Africans, like her maternal grandmother (Modesty Green), embodied a living African connection and memory for Tubman and her family, revealing a multitude of sources for Tubman's spiritual strength and endurance. Thomas Garrett said that he "never met with any person, of any color, who had more confidence in the voice of God, as spoken direct to her soul... and her faith in a Supreme Power truly was great."²⁵

When Tubman matured into a productive worker, she was allowed to hire out to a master of her own choosing, after paying Brodess a set wage. During the late 1830s and early 1840s, she worked for John T. Stewart of Madison, doing "all the

²⁴ Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet. The Moses of Her People.*, 1st ed. (New York: Geo. R. Lockwood & Sons, 1886) p. 15.

²⁵ Garrett letter quoted in Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 1st ed. (Auburn, New York: W.J. Moses, 1869) p. 49.

work of a man.”²⁶ This experience working on the docks and in the forest brought Tubman into an enslaved black man’s world, where males had contact with the black mariners whose ships carried timber and produce to Baltimore shipyards, and beyond. These maritime lines of communication and travel would prove vitally important to Tubman in her future missions of liberation.

Around 1844, Harriet met and married John Tubman, a local free black man. From 1847 to 1849 she worked for Dr. Anthony C. Thompson, Anthony Thompson’s son. Dr. Thompson had acquired more than 2,000 acres of farm and dense woodland north in Caroline County, in an area called Poplar Neck. It is not certain whether she labored at Poplar Neck or at Bellefield, Thompson’s small farm in Cambridge. But it is known that by 1848, Ben Ross had moved from his home in Dorchester County to Poplar Neck to work for Dr. Thompson.

Edward Brodess died in March 1849, sparking upheaval in the lives of Tubman and her family. His widow petitioned to order the sale of several of the estate’s slaves to clear her many debts. Harriet was determined to run away rather than be sold. And in October 1849, she made her successful escape to Philadelphia. She later told Sarah Bradford of her arrival in Pennsylvania, “When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven.”²⁷



Figure 2-9. Blackwater area of Dorchester County where Harriet Tubman was born and grew up.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 75.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 19 “When I found I had crossed dat *line*,” she said, “I looked at my hands to see if I was de same pusson. There was such a glory ober ebery ting; de sun came like gold through the trees, and ober the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaben” *We have chosen to normalize Tubman’s words, as the plantation dialect written by Sarah Bradford may not be an accurate representation of Tubman’s speech. Bradford uses far less plantation dialect in her first biography of Tubman, published in 1868, than in the second biography written in 1886. It is unclear how much of Bradford’s own particular biases, prejudices, and expectations influenced her recording of Tubman’s words. Franklin Sanborn, another early Tubman biographer uses very little plantation dialect when quoting Tubman. See Humez, Harriet; and Larson, Bound.*

Underground Railroad Years: 1850-1860

Safe in Philadelphia, Tubman learned that freedom did not ensure happiness. Liberation from slavery had its own reward, but, Tubman told Bradford “there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land; and my home, after all, was down in Maryland; because my father, my mother, my brothers, and sisters, and friends were there. But I was free, and they should be free.”²⁸

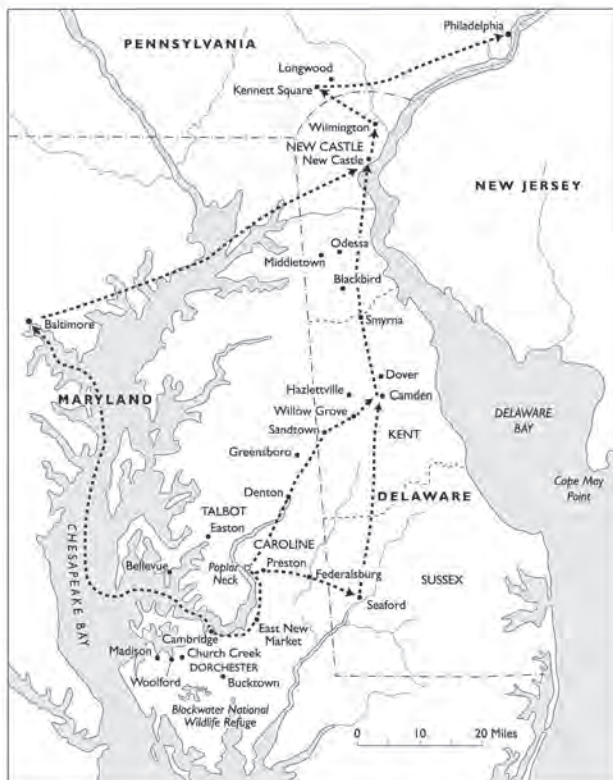


Figure 2-10. Southern routes to Canada from Maryland used by Harriet Tubman and other freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad.

Courtesy of Kate Clifford Larson, Bound for the Promised Land, xxiii, xxiv.

While throughout her life she had known of other enslaved people who had escaped and never returned, Tubman followed another pattern, which earned her the reputation as the “Moses of her People.” She returned at least a dozen times over the next decade to lead people north to free territory. Harriet Tubman never acted alone. She skillfully used an underground network to freedom that had long been in operation on the East Coast, supported by free and enslaved African Americans and sympathetic white people.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 20.

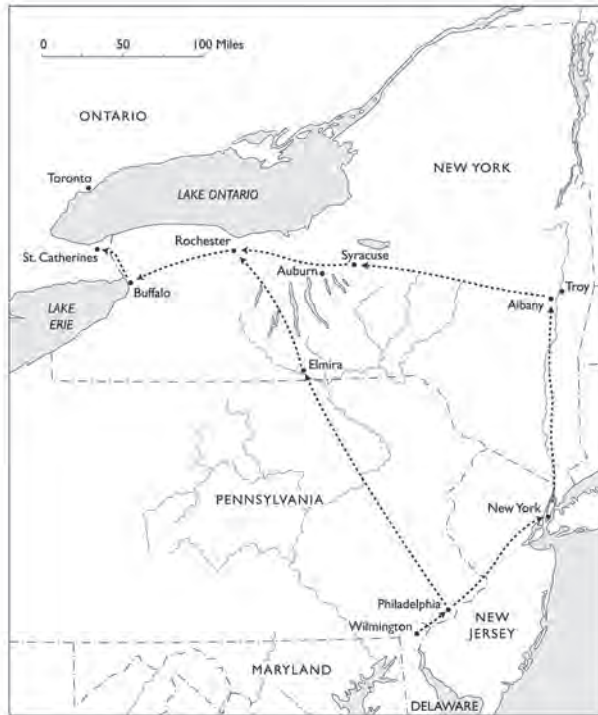


Figure 2-11. Northern routes to Canada from Maryland used by Harriet Tubman and other freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad.

Courtesy of Kate Clifford Larson, Bound for the Promised Land, xxiii, xxiv.

Planning carefully for the opportunities to bring her family north to freedom, she earned money working as a domestic and a cook in various hotels and private homes in Philadelphia; during the summer months she worked at Cape May, New Jersey. She kept in touch with events on the Eastern Shore by communicating with an extensive network of informants among the free black, fugitive black, and sympathetic white communities in Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania.

Her strategy for her rescues was to tap into the network that was called the Underground Railroad. She made valuable connections within Philadelphia's multi-racial, anti-slavery community, becoming known to a group of powerful northern abolitionists. They marveled at her devotion to freeing her family and friends, and became part of an invaluable support system that helped her with money and shelter.

Tubman first came in contact with the American Anti Slavery Society in Philadelphia in 1849 through the African American activist William Still. He was clerk of that city's branch and provided her lodging.²⁹ Still introduced her to Lucretia and James Mott and others prominent in either or both the American Anti-Slavery Society and the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee. Details of Tubman's

²⁹ Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003, p. 20

rescues come from Still who recorded his contacts with most freedom seekers who sought his refuge. Thomas Garrett, her collaborator in Wilmington, worked with the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee. Anti-slavery publications, particularly William Garrison's *Liberator* and independent papers of Frederick Douglass, boosted Tubman's public image and thus her support among abolitionists.³⁰

Philadelphia became the primary base for Tubman's rescues. Her first rescue took place in December 1850, within 15 months of her own escape, when she went to fetch her niece, Kessiah Bowley, and Kessiah's two children, who had fled Dorchester County. She met them in Baltimore and took them north. Next, she helped bring away her youngest brother, Moses, and two other men sometime during 1851. In the fall of that year, Tubman returned to Dorchester County intending to bring north with her, her husband whom she had not seen for two years. But she found that

John Tubman had taken another wife and was content to continue with his free life in Dorchester County. Despite what must have been a painful personal injury, Tubman returned that winter, 1851-52, to take a group of eleven refugees safely to St. Catharines, Ontario.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which gave slave catchers the power to force cooperation from local authorities, made living in Philadelphia or any other northern city no longer safe. Many refugees began a second journey to a more secure freedom in Canada. However, after delivering her charges to Canada, Tubman in fact returned to Philadelphia, where she worked to bring out the rest of her family from Maryland. During the summer of 1852 she worked in Cape May, and that fall she returned again to the Eastern Shore, bringing away a group of nine freedom seekers, although her parents and siblings were not among them.



Figure 2-12. BME Church, St. Catharines, Ontario, the church at which Harriet Tubman worshipped, now a Canadian national landmark for its association with Tubman.

³⁰ Ibid. pp. 20-30.

In December 1854, Tubman was finally able to retrieve her brothers, but it meant concealing her presence from her mother, whom she had not seen for six years. Only in 1857, after a particularly perilous mission, was Tubman able to bring her parents to safety. From mid 1857 to early 1859, she settled with them in St. Catharines.

While on the Eastern Shore, she traveled mostly at night, following the North Star, using survival skills learned from years of working in the woods and waterways, and stopping at each new house she was directed to by black and white collaborators. For example, when the North Star was not visible Tubman is thought to have navigated using tree moss and by observing currents in rivers and streams, skills she learned from her father. Her success with rescues speaks to her broad and deep knowledge of the physical and cultural landscape, including the people on both sides of slavery who inhabited it.

Ultimately, Tubman's family remained fractured. Her sister Rachel had died before she could be rescued, and the fate of Rachel's children remains unknown. Tubman's family story is representative of many enslaved persons who successfully fled to the North; while they attained liberty, they were often forced to leave loved ones behind.

Tubman took risks on behalf of not only her family and friends from the Eastern Shore, but at times for strangers. A notable example is documented in an incident in 1860 at Troy, New York. She confronted federal marshals, who were holding fugitive freedom seeker Charles Nalle, diverted them, and facilitated Nalle's escape.³¹

By 1858, discouraged by her inability to return safely to the Eastern Shore, due to the increased vigilance of enslavers, and financially and physically burdened with supporting her aged parents, Tubman channeled her frustrations into a more public and activist role in northern abolitionist circles. Her appearances at anti-slavery, suffrage, and other public events in the North brought increased notoriety and fame. The retelling of her heroic feats on the Underground Railroad captured her audiences' imaginations in a way that resonated particularly for women, both white and black. Tubman's growing reputation attracted the attention of fiery abolitionist John Brown. In May 1858 Brown traveled to St. Catharines to meet Tubman and other refugees who might be interested in his plans for an attack in slave territory to foment an uprising. He entrusted her with organizing a band of formerly enslaved persons willing to fight along with him, hoping that she, too, would be at his side when the attack came. Not surprisingly, some of the enslaved

³¹ Larson, *Bound*, p 179

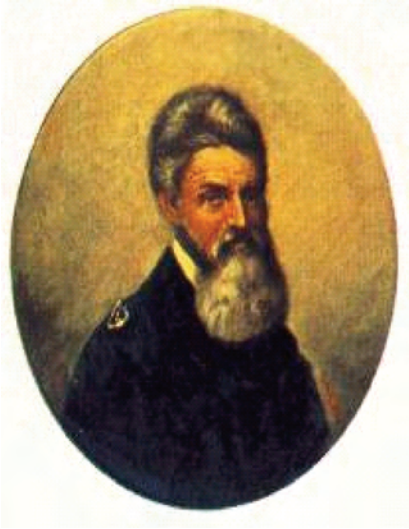


Figure 2-13.
John Brown, abolitionist

persons Tubman helped liberate in the mid-1850s were among the first black recruits to Brown's cause. Although she did not accompany Brown when his attack on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, failed in 1859, Tubman was hurried off to Canada to avoid being taken to Virginia for trial.

Sometime during May 1859, William H. Seward, a United States Senator from New York and the future Secretary of State under President Lincoln, sold Tubman a small parcel of property on the outskirts of Auburn, New York. Tubman was eager to provide a permanent home and security for her parents, and Auburn was a good choice because of its

active abolitionist community and settlement of African Americans. It also provided easy access to St. Catharines, where other family members and friends remained.

The Legendary Moses

Harriet Tubman was an exceptional American figure – a woman carrying out exploits few men did – and her daring came to the attention of prominent people. She risked her hard-earned liberty by returning repeatedly to slave territory and managed to evade capture for ten years. She quickly came to the notice of prominent abolitionists. Frederick Douglass spoke about her and the Underground Railroad, and William Lloyd Garrison wrote about her in *The Liberator*.

Her personal characteristics are often noted in stories of her success. She is called dogged, brave, and smart as she cagily traversed the region's forests and waterways. She held a single-minded vision. And by all accounts, she believed she was guided by divine faith.³²

At the Right Hand of Soldiers: Civil War, 1861-1865

When decades of sectional controversy culminated in the disintegration of the union, Harriet Tubman's reputation earned her a prominent role in war and rebuilding. Early in the war, Union forces captured Port Royal, South Carolina, as part of the strategy of choking off southern commerce. Boston abolitionists

³² For a discussion of Tubman's spirituality, see Sernett, chapter 5.

supported the “Port Royal Experiment,” a “proving ground for the freedmen,” which would, they hoped, demonstrate that former enslaved persons could be taught to function in a free, capitalist economy.³³

Massachusetts’s abolitionist governor John Andrew, believing Tubman would be useful in the Union war effort, made arrangements for her to travel to South Carolina. Tubman was sent to Port Royal, then the headquarters for the Department of the South, to begin humanitarian and military work there. Her leadership skills, honed on the escape missions she successfully conducted from the Eastern Shore, prepared her for her work with the military. In a time when women did not work outside the home, Harriet Tubman worked with newly freed women to prepare them to join the larger American wage-based economy for the first time. As part of the Port Royal experiment, Tubman established a “wash house” with \$200 she received from the government; here she taught these newly freed women to put their skills of washing, sewing, and baking to use for the Union soldiers, so they could support themselves with wages instead of depending upon government support.³⁴

There had been a military quality in much of Tubman’s Underground Railroad operations. Her ability to employ networks of informants and to take tactical advantage of intricacies of terrain made her valuable to Union officers and brought about the astonishing scene of an illiterate black woman advising federal generals. Tubman led Colonel James Montgomery on a successful raid from Port Royal up the Combahee River in June 1863. Her contacts in the black community and her familiarity with a marshy coastal landscape made her a valuable source of information: she was a spy and a scout.³⁵ Records indicate that Tubman also accompanied this regiment to the Battle of Olustee, Florida, in February 1864, nursing the wounded in Jacksonville and Fernandina after the Union retreat.³⁶

Harriet Tubman witnessed the full range of wartime horror. She was present at the disastrous assault on Fort Wagner, where the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, composed of African American soldiers under white officers, suffered catastrophic losses.³⁷ She nursed battlefield casualties, as well as victims of camp epidemics, and buried the dead.

³³ Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment*, rpt. 1964 ed. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1999). p.xiv

³⁴ Charles P. Wood, “Manuscript History Concerning the Pension Claim of Harriet Tubman,” in *HR 55A-D1 Papers Accompanying the Claim of Harriet Tubman* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives, 1868).

³⁵ Larson, *Bound*, 212.

³⁶ Further research will be needed to determine her role in Montgomery’s mission.

³⁷ Larson, *Bound*, p. 220.

Tubman was paid nothing for her nursing and domestic services, and was paid very little for her role as a spy and a scout for the Union Army during the war. When the war was over, Tubman was given a special commission to work under the Freedman's Bureau in South Carolina but instead took an assignment to nurse sick and wounded black soldiers at Fort Monroe, Virginia. The ill treatment that black soldiers endured at the hospital prompted her to complain to the surgeon general, which eventually helped improve conditions.³⁸ She stayed at Fort Monroe for only a few months.

At Home in the Promised Land: Auburn, 1865-1913

Back in Auburn, Tubman formed a vital part of an already well-established black community dating to the turn of the 19th century, a section called New Guinea. Many former enslaved persons chose to rebuild their lives in close proximity to Tubman and her family, recreating the sense of community they had known in Maryland and in Canada. This closely knit black and white community of relatives and friends was part of a healthy and supportive environment within which Tubman could express her commitment to freedom, suffrage for women, and the care of sick, elderly, and disabled people.

The plight and struggles of the freedmen in the South for economic, educational, and political advancement occupied Tubman's thoughts in the years immediately following the Civil War. Tubman organized fairs, modeled on the pre-war Anti-Slavery Fairs, to raise money to benefit the southern freedmen. Tubman's persistent efforts to alleviate the sufferings of her family and the struggling freedmen represented a continuum of humanitarian work that defined the remainder of her life.

Although John Tubman had married another woman after Harriet fled slavery, Harriet did not remarry until after John died in 1867. In 1869 she married Nelson (Charles) Davis, twenty years her junior, who had been a volunteer with the 8th United States Colored Regiment. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, Tubman and her husband ran a seven-acre farm, and Davis may have worked in nearby brick-making operations. Tubman also hired herself out as a domestic to Auburn's wealthier families.

Despite these efforts, she remained perpetually on the verge of poverty. Her ongoing health problems limited her ability to earn money, and her support of a large household of dependents, including not only family, but orphaned children,

³⁸ Ill treatment of blacks was not limited to soldiers. Hostile incidents on conveyances were not uncommon: Tubman, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, among others, were thrown from trains in post-war years. Tubman suffered serious injuries after being ejected from a train while traveling through New Jersey in the fall of 1865.

sick, disabled, and homeless people, contributed to her poverty. In essence she gave away money, leaving herself sometimes dependent upon white and black benefactors to help keep her household fed and clothed.

Persistent financial difficulties hindered Tubman's efforts to carry out social programs she felt were important to the betterment of humankind. Nevertheless, she pursued a long-standing desire to establish a hospital and rest home for aged African Americans, and purchased 25 acres adjoining her property in 1896. The property contained additional buildings, which were used to establish the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged. Soon, however, the financial burden became too great, and in 1903, Tubman deeded the property to the AME Zion Church, which paid off the mortgage of \$1575.

Always sympathetic to those who were being denied their rights, Tubman was a natural ally of the women's suffrage movement. She was a frequent attendee at suffrage meetings, where the awe and respect she commanded gave her mere presence at these events great weight. During a convention in Rochester, New York, in the mid-1890s, Susan B. Anthony introduced her to the audience as the legendary conductor on the Underground Railroad. It was here that Tubman spoke the famous words: "I was the conductor on the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can't say – I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger." Earl Conrad noted in his 1943 biography of Tubman that "[i]t was as an Underground Railroad operator and Union fighter that Harriet spoke, but it was as a suffragist that she came to the Rochester meeting."³⁹



Figure 2-14. 1930s view of Tubman property on South Street, Auburn, New York

³⁹ Earl Conrad, *General Harriet Tubman* (Washington, DC: The Associated Publishers, Inc.), p. 214.

During the 1880s, a new generation of activist women began moving into positions of leadership in the suffrage movement. In response to a splitting off by white women suffragists in the 1890s, the National Federation of Afro-American Women was founded, holding its first convention in July of 1896. Tubman was a featured speaker. A resilient and determined Tubman remained a fixture at local and New York State suffrage meetings conducted and attended by old friends such as Susan B. Anthony and Eliza Wright Osborn.

Tubman's humanitarian efforts continued unabated, reflecting an on-going movement in the African American community to build and strengthen community-based educational and social services to provide for the needs of African Americans who were increasingly barred from white establishments and services. The Tubman Home for the Aged was incorporated in 1895 but opened officially in 1908, capping a lifelong commitment of caring and serving.

When Tubman died in 1913, newspapers across the country reported on her funeral. Her casket was draped with an American flag and she was adorned with the medal given her by Queen Victoria for her work in emancipation. The Thompson Memorial AME Zion Church was filled and mourners were even turned away. She was named by the New York Times as one of the 250 most important figures in the world who died that year.

Historian Milton Sernett, who has examined the Tubman legend, assesses her this way: "Americans are now as likely to think of Tubman as 'Moses' as they are to believe Abraham Lincoln to be 'The Great Emancipator' or to celebrate George Washington as the 'Father of His Country.'"⁴⁰

After 150 years Harriet Tubman remains an icon.

The power of Tubman as an icon today derives essentially from the public's perception of her as an American hero. In spite of the difficulties of constructing an accurate history of her life, our individual and collective memories of her resonate so strongly because Harriet Tubman's life story causes us to reflect on both the good and the bad in the larger American story. Her struggles to be free and then her self-sacrificial efforts to help others underscore values that we as Americans treasure in custom and law, beginning with the founding of the Republic of the United States. Americans, at their best, aspire to be champions of freedom and great humanitarians. Our democracy's failures are mirrored, too, in Tubman's life. She knew the sting of racism, the pain of poverty, and the challenges

⁴⁰ Sernett p. 42.

of adversity. As long as some Americans believe that they suffer injustice, however defined, they will find Tubman a useful symbol of their struggle to achieve parity with those enjoying the full benefits of economic and political citizenship.⁴¹

In all, Tubman made approximately 13 rescue trips, bringing out some 60 to 70 enslaved friends and family members.⁴² Beyond that, she passed on instructions and inspired scores of others to find their way to freedom. Probably no other conductor on the Underground Railroad made as many successful trips into the South, but by its nature, the Underground Railroad did not allow any one individual to have an overwhelming statistical impact. In other areas, her influence was exerted behind the scenes or by reputation. She is a revered figure today largely because of what she represents: an extraordinary example of human courage in rising above socially imposed limitations of race, sex, servitude, disability, poverty, and rural isolation, any one of which would have halted a less determined individual. Her lifelong commitment to the struggle for liberty, equality, and justice for herself, her family, and community makes her a role model of enduring value.

PART II • PRIMARY RESOURCES ASSOCIATED WITH HARRIET TUBMAN

Of all the places associated with Harriet Tubman, two stand out above others, the Choptank River Region of Maryland and Auburn, New York. Tubman was born and raised in Maryland; in 1849, she emancipated herself and fled north. Within ten years, she had acquired property in Auburn, New York, where she put down roots for the rest of her life. The resources in these two locales were analyzed to determine if they met the criteria for designation as a new NPS area.

Choptank River Region, Maryland

Harriet Tubman was born in 1822 in the Eastern Shore county of Dorchester where she lived for more than 25 years. The last two years before she fled north

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 317.

⁴² Harriet Tubman recalled to friends and in public speeches in 1859 that she had rescued about 50 to 60 people in 8 or 9 trips. Based on extensive research, it has been found that by 1860, Tubman had brought away about seventy people in roughly thirteen trips. Sarah Bradford credited Tubman with rescuing 300 people in 19 trips, but it is now known through additional research that Sarah Bradford made up those numbers to dramatize Tubman's work. Tubman's friends were concerned that Bradford did not tell Tubman's story accurately. Bradford's words became part of the historical record and have been repeated in nearly every publication about Tubman since that time. Regardless of the numbers, the main point is the Tubman risked her life time and again to return to lead others from enslavement. See Larson, Bound. p. xvii, 305n6, and chapters 5-9; and James McGowan, "Harriet Tubman: According to Sarah Bradford," *Harriet Tubman Journal* 2, No. 1 (1994).

may have been spent in Caroline County, where her parents had moved to work on a farm owned by Dr. Anthony Thompson, the son of her father's former owner. The Choptank River was thus the region in which she spent her young life. The river, which drains into Chesapeake Bay, had embarkation points for boat travel to Baltimore. Tubman is known to have used Baltimore as a base during some of her rescues. Through her father's work and her own work assignments she became acquainted at a young age with the Choptank River, the wharves, and the black merchant mariners who hauled cargo to Baltimore and beyond.

Tubman's early life and Underground Railroad exploits took place in the context of the landscapes of Maryland's Eastern Shore in Dorchester and Caroline counties. It remains a rural region, relatively unchanged from the one that Tubman knew. In this landscape mosaic, the basic estuarine environment of the Blackwater River, Transquaking River, Choptank River and other waterways remains unchanged. Greenbriar Swamp and the tidal marshes characteristic of Maryland's coastal plain exhibit more open water than they did 150 years ago, but their character is unchanged. The road system retains its 19th century structure as well. While the mixed pine and oak forests have been in a state of constant harvest and regrowth since the earliest European settlement of the land, the current woodland communities represent the native vegetation that sustained the economy of the region, and particularly that of the Thompson family with whom Harriet Tubman and her parents were so closely affiliated.

Whereas today's farms grow corn rather than tobacco and are mechanized rather than operated by hand labor, the farm fields have remained in agricultural use, and their spatial organization – much influenced by topography and water resources – reflects the field patterns of the 19th century. The basic road and field-forest patterns remain.⁴³ They contrast dramatically with residential subdivisions which have grown up on the outskirts of Cambridge.

While topography and geography and its rural character contribute to the area's cohesiveness, it is Tubman's association with this area that makes it a landscape of special recognition. Its period of significance begins in 1822, the year of Tubman's birth, and ends in 1860, when she returned from the North for the last time to rescue family members.

These landscapes appear to be of the 19th century, making it possible to visualize the life of enslaved people and their owners, and of the escape routes used by

⁴³ John Milner Associates, Inc. *Cultural Landscape Assessment for the Harriet Tubman Special Resources Study, Dorchester and Caroline Counties, Maryland*. Prepared for the National Park Service. Charlottesville, VA: John Milner Associates, Inc., 2005. p. 1-6.

Map 1. Tubman in Maryland: Regional Setting



Figure 2-15. Today's Eastern Shore is characterized by wetlands, open water, forests, and fields, much like Tubman's time.

Tubman and other freedom seekers. The region retains the ability to convey its significance, and Tubman herself would recognize this mosaic of the natural environment and agricultural use today.

BLACKWATER, DORCHESTER COUNTY

The Blackwater component of the area consists of a broad corridor of farms, forests, and wetlands that once constituted Tubman's familiar home territory. It is a swath of land from Stewart's Canal in the west to Bucktown in the east, much of it contained within the boundaries of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. It consists of roads, trails, and other features familiar to Tubman during her period of enslavement and subsequent rescue work with the Underground Railroad. Within this section are four sites that not only typify the landscape but highlight Tubman's strong association with the place: Stewart's Canal, Peters Neck, Brodess Farm, and Bucktown Crossroads.

Stewart's Canal

At the western edge of the area is a ten-mile long Stewart's Canal waterway, completed in the 1830s after some 20 years of labor on its construction by free and enslaved persons. It connected Parsons Creek and Blackwater River with Tobacco Stick (today's Madison) Bay and it opened up some of Dorchester's more remote territory for timber and agricultural products to be shipped to Baltimore

markets. Tubman lived in the vicinity while working for John T. Stewart, and she also may have worked there with her father in timbering. Ben Ross, who gained his freedom in 1840, continued to work in the area where his skills were in demand. The vicinity of Stewart's Canal was the center of a free black community which intermingled with the community of enslaved people.

Known today as Coursey's Creek, Stewart's Canal forms an evocative image mirroring that of the Tubman period, a straight-line waterway viewed from State Route 16 extending east from the main road, surrounded by low grassland and a background edge of forest.

In the vicinity are the Jacob Jackson and John Stewart homesites. Research to date has approximated the locations of these sites near Stewart's Canal. Jacob Jackson was a free black man to whom Tubman appealed for assistance in 1854 in attempting to retrieve her brothers and who, because he was literate, was likely an important link in the local communication network. The John Stewart home site is noteworthy because Harriet was hired out to Stewart for a period of five or six years sometime after recovering from her injury sustained at the Bucktown store (c. 1836). It is located in Madison.

Peters Neck

The historic 700-acre Anthony Thompson farm at the end of Harrisville Road is Harriet Tubman's probable birth place.⁴⁴ Tubman's father, Ben Ross, was enslaved by Thompson and lived there with his wife at the time of Harriet's birth in 1822. Today, the property is owned by a private sportsmen's club, not accessible to the public, and adjacent to Blackwater Wildlife Refuge. No buildings remain from Tubman's era and no archeological investigation has been undertaken. In its remoteness it presents a landscape that has not changed dramatically from Tubman's time.

The approach on Harrisville Road is along a narrow corridor with views channeled by dense forests opening to cultivated fields beyond an entrance gate. Thompson's was one of the largest farms in the vicinity. Property records show an area west of the Thompson site as "old Ben's," thought by historians to be Ben Ross's home.

Lying approximately ten miles southwest of Cambridge, this general area was home to a large free and enslaved black community which formed the nucleus of Harriet Tubman's familial and social world throughout the antebellum period. It encompasses Harrisville, Whitemarsh, and Tobacco Stick (now Madison). This is where she met her husband, a freeman, John Tubman.

⁴⁴ Larson, p. 16.

The Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge comprises a large portion of Peter's Neck, its 27,000 acres set aside and managed primarily for migratory birds and endangered species. The landscape contains mainly rich tidal marsh with fluctuating water levels. Other habitat types include freshwater ponds, mixed evergreen and deciduous forests, and small areas of cropland. The view from public roads near the refuge reveals a pattern of small commercial agricultural fields in the foreground edged by forests in the background.

Eastward, between Peters Neck and the Brodess Farm, is a notable site near the Little Blackwater bridge on today's Key Wallace Drive. The James Cook home site is the location where Tubman was hired out as a child. At the age of six or seven she was sent to learn the trade of weaving. She remembered the harsh treatment she received long afterward and described it later to her early biographer Sarah Bradford. Tubman recalled that even when ill, she was expected to wade into swamps throughout the cold winter to haul muskrat traps.

Brodess Farm

Brodess Farm, approximately ten miles southeast of Cambridge, belonged to Edward Brodess, enslaver of Tubman's mother and her children. As a minor, he had inherited the farm and a number of enslaved people and took up residence there in late 1823 or 1824.

The farm was cited years ago as her birthplace, however Brodess Farm is more likely the place of Tubman's youth, not her birth. A highway marker and interpretive wayside note this as a Tubman site. It is adjacent to Blackwater Refuge and in private ownership. The farm consists of 168 acres of upland with approximately 70 acres under cultivation of corn and soybeans.

Promotion of the site's history and the presence of the highway marker and interpretive wayside have made the site noteworthy for visitors. Dorchester County's Department of Tourism has developed a vehicle pull off through agreement with the private property owner for greater safety when drivers stop to view the site.

The only building visible from the road was moved there from another part of the county in the 20th century to the center of the agricultural fields, and that, mistakenly, is what tourists often take to be Tubman's birthplace. It is now used as a hunting lodge. The farm complex that existed during the Tubman period likely consisted of the main house and several outbuildings (probably including slave cabins). None of the original buildings has survived, although archeology is likely

present.⁴⁵ An unpaved private access drive leads to the modern day farmhouse. The existing deciduous shade trees present on the site likely postdate the Tubman period, but are assumed to be similar in size and location to trees of the period.

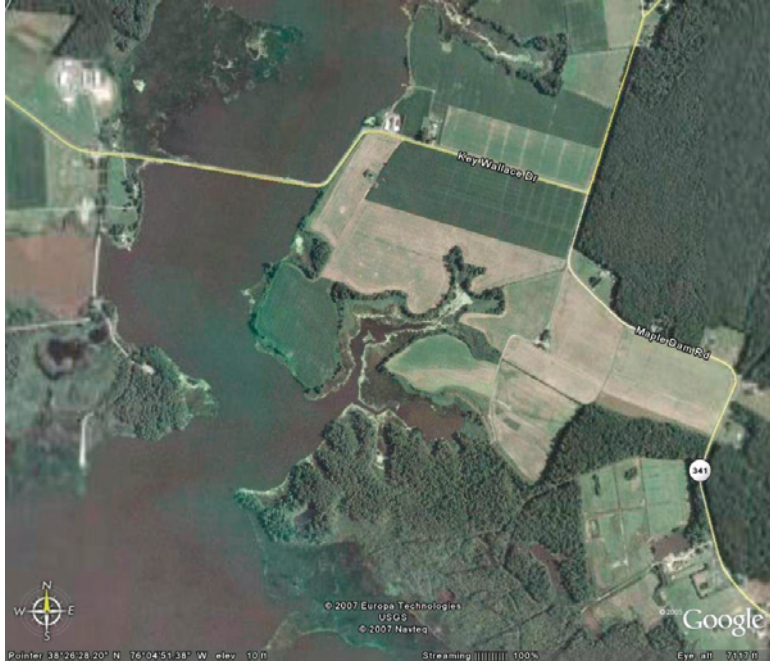


Figure 2-17. Contemporary aerial view of Dorchester County shows persistent pattern of fields, forests, and wetlands.

Views of the historic Brodess Farm are open and unobstructed along its frontage on Greenbriar Road. The forests surrounding the agricultural fields provide a backdrop to the farm. A mixture of loblolly pine and oak-hickory forests provides the context for the farm, framing the site on the east, west, and south. Greenbriar Swamp occupies the land to the east and west and forms the western and southern boundaries of the Brodess Farm. All these features were present during Tubman’s period.

Across from the Brodess Plantation is the home site of Polish Mills, who hired Harriet’s mother, Rit, and Linah, one of Harriet’s sisters, in the early 1830s. This is

⁴⁵ Standing structures for enslaved persons are extremely rare in 21st century America. “Living and working quarters for slaves were usually temporary structures, built quickly and cheaply and meant to last a decade or two, then demolished or salvaged and replaced. Few survived into the 20th century, and those that did often suffered severe deterioration.” National Park Service, Booker T. Washington National Monument Cultural Landscape Report, [date], page 146.

where Tubman and her family witnessed the famous Leonid Meteor Shower on the night of November 12-13, 1833, when they thought the world was coming to an end. The story was recorded later by Tubman biographer Sarah Bradford.

Bucktown Crossroads

By 1835 four buildings existed at the crossroads of Bucktown, Greenbriar, and Bestpitch Ferry roads. One was located in approximately the same spot as the present Bucktown Store.⁴⁶

The crossroads today contains a small cluster of buildings including the Bucktown Store, an adjacent storekeeper's house,⁴⁷ four small frame outbuildings, and the more elegant Meredith House, which has stood in this location since the second quarter of the 19th century and is regarded by the Maryland Historical Trust as one of the most important buildings to have survived in this area of Dorchester County because it retains so much original and early detail; it provides a good model for the study of vernacular dwellings.⁴⁸ Agricultural fields of corn and soybeans provide the larger context of this crossroads community, a context that strongly evokes that of Tubman's time, despite the presence of two 20th century homes.

The Bucktown Store at the crossroads today is thought to be associated with one of Harriet Tubman's earliest acts of defiance. This account is recorded in Sarah Bradford's *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*:

Soon after she entered her teens she was hired out as a field hand, and it was while thus employed that she received a wound which nearly proved fatal, for the effects of which she still suffers. In the fall of the year, the slaves there work in the evening, cleaning up wheat, husking corn, etc. On this occasion, one of the slaves of a farmer named Barrett, left his work, and went to the village store in the evening. The overseer followed him, and so did Harriet. When the slave was found, the overseer swore he should be whipped, and called on Harriet, among others, to help tie him. She refused, and as the man ran away, she placed herself in the door to stop pursuit. The overseer caught up a two-pound weight from the counter and threw it at the fugitive, but it fell short and struck Harriet a stunning blow on the head. It was long before she recovered from this, and it has left her subject to a sort of stupor or

⁴⁶ John Henry Alexander, "Map A" from *Report on the New Map of Maryland*. 1835. Maryland Hall of Records, MdHR G 1213-503), reprinted in Edward C. Papenfuss and Joseph M. Coale III, *Atlas of Historical Maps of Maryland*, 1608-1908 Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, 70.

⁴⁷ Stephen G. Del Sordo, Heritage Resource Group, Inc. "Meredith House, Bucktown, Dorchester County, Maryland: Historic Assessment and Overview," n.d., p. 5.

⁴⁸ Michael Bourne. "Maryland Historical Trust Worksheet," Lewis House, D-81, November 1975.

lethargy at time; coming upon her in the midst of conversation, or whatever she may be doing, and throwing her into a deep slumber, from which she will presently rouse herself, and go on with her conversation or work.⁴⁹

Although it has not been ascertained whether the **Bucktown Store** is the “village store” at which Tubman was struck in the head, its setting at the crossroads contributes to a scene that resembles Tubman’s time. It is a wood-frame structure, thought to have been built after 1850, but it may contain materials from the original building. Accurate dating has yet to be done. It displays 19th century implements and goods collected from the region. Further evaluation is necessary to determine its status as a contributing resource. The owner currently operates it as a museum providing a narrative of Tubman’s life in the area. The Bucktown Store is open to the public upon request.

One-quarter mile north of the crossroads is **Scotts Chapel**, founded in 1812 as a Methodist church. African Americans split off from the congregation in the mid 19th century and formed Bazel Church. Across from Scotts Chapel is an African-American graveyard with headstones dating to 1792.

Bazel Church, on Bestpitch Ferry Road, is located on a one-acre clearing edged by the road and otherwise surrounded by cultivated fields and the forested boundary of Blackwater Wildlife Refuge. The church was organized in 1876 as a Methodist Church by and for African Americans who were no longer welcome at the nearby Scotts Chapel. The building continues to be used today intermittently for services, and is in good condition.

Although Tubman had fled Maryland 27 years before Bazel Church was constructed, local tradition holds that this is the site of earlier African American outdoor worship. A general pattern of the founding of African American churches was that worship services started on the land where the edifice would be built. The site is important to many local residents for its tradition. Since Tubman lived nearby on the Brodess farm, it is conceivable that she participated in worship at this site. Standing on the grounds today, it is easy to visualize a place where Tubman’s family and friends worshipped. The setting, a clearing between fields and forest, can be powerfully evocative for visitors seeking to observe a countryside resembling that of the last days of slavery in this part of Maryland.

⁴⁹ Bradford. *Scenes*, 74-75.

Other Dorchester Sites

Other notable Tubman sites are the **Dorchester County Courthouse** and **Bellefield** in Cambridge. Slave auctions, including one involving Tubman's niece in 1850, took place at the courthouse. Tubman later engineered her niece's escape and met her and her husband in Baltimore, then escorted them to Canada. The courthouse is also the site of the trial of at least two Underground Railroad agents, one of whom helped Harriet Tubman during the 1850s. The building is still in use as a courthouse and contains a plaque and outside, an interpretive wayside citing its importance to the story of the struggles of freedom seekers and their Underground Railroad helpers. **Bellefield**, on Race Street and Boundary Avenue, was the small farm residence in Dorchester County of Dr. Anthony C. Thompson, who purchased a large farm north in Caroline County. Bellefield is one of two likely sites of Tubman's 1849 escape. It is no longer extant and the exact location of the property has yet to be determined.

POPLAR NECK, CAROLINE COUNTY

Poplar Neck on the Choptank River in Caroline County is the location of the farm of Dr. Anthony C. Thompson, son of Anthony Thompson, Sr., of Peters Neck, Dorchester County. From about 1847 to 1857, Tubman's parents worked on this plantation.

Dr. Thompson divided his time between this 2,167-acre farm, which he purchased in 1846, and his smaller farm Bellefield in Cambridge. When Dr. Thompson's father died in 1837, he inherited Harriet Tubman's father, Ben Ross. Three years later he manumitted Ben as required by his father's will, and Ben continued to work for him for pay as a timber inspector. In 1855 Ben was able to purchase his wife's freedom from the widow Eliza Brodess.

It is likely that Harriet Tubman also worked at Poplar Neck, for by 1847 she was working full time for Dr. Thompson and paying Brodess a \$60 annual fee to hire herself out. Working at Poplar Neck would have kept her close to her family. It may also be the location of her escape from slavery. Although we know that while in Dr. Thompson's employment Tubman ran away from slavery in 1849, it is not clear which of Thompson's properties she left from: this Caroline County property or Bellefield. The Poplar Neck property is directly on the Choptank River, which is presumed to have been used in some of Tubman's escapes.

This farm is the site of Tubman's 1854 Christmas Day rescue of three of her brothers, made famous when recorded in Bradford's book. Tubman had arranged



Figure 2-18. 1875 map depicting Poplar Neck, home of Dr. Anthony C. Thompson, where Tubman's parents worked and from where they escaped in 1857. Thompson Farm is located between Skelton Creek and Marsh Creek.

to meet her brothers and several other freedom seekers near her parents' home at the Thompson plantation. They hid in a nearby corn crib until the appointed time to flee. Her father, Ben, helped them, but tragically, they could not reveal their presence to their mother, Rit, as they feared she would be too heartbroken to let them leave. She had already lost too many of her children. Recent archaeological and structural investigations at the farm reveal a possible trace of this original corn crib. In 1857, with the assistance of Thomas Garrett and other Underground Railroad operatives, Harriet Tubman returned to Poplar Neck to take her parents to St. Catharines, Canada, averting her father's arrest for his Underground Railroad activities.

The original Thompson farm, located between Skillington – or Skeleton – Creek and Marsh Creek, has been subdivided into nearly 90 parcels. The majority of the land is retained in large tracts kept in agricultural production. A significant portion of the riverfront contains marshland. The core of the property, 378 acres, has been held by a single family for more than 50 years.

It has one mile of waterfront on the Choptank River. From high ground back of the house, it offers a compelling picture of the river and it allows one to imagine the scene during 19th century when the river was a main artery for commerce. Across the river is Talbot County, an area of largely undeveloped land which

forms an important viewshed from the historic Thompson property. Today's core Poplar Neck property encompasses a farmhouse located on the site of the original Thompson House which is believed to have been built in the late 19th century but contains elements from the original house. The farmhouse was rehabilitated and remains in good condition and serves as an office for the current owner. At the north end of the riverfront parcel are two contemporary houses occupied by the owners.

Together, the landscapes associated with Harriet Tubman in Dorchester, Caroline and Talbot counties provide superlative opportunities for the public to understand Tubman's "home ground," the region in which she was born, which shaped her early life and the region that provides the backdrop to the legendary exploits for which she is best known. These landscapes are beginning to be impacted by development pressures and their preservation in the future is not ensured.

Auburn, New York

The Tubman sites in Auburn consist of her residence, the Home for the Aged, Thompson Memorial AME Zion Church, and her gravesite. They are at three separate sites. The Tubman Home on South Street, owned by the AME Zion Church, appears as an integrated single site with the residence and the home for the aged plus two modern buildings visible from the road, one an administration building and the other a contemporary visitor center visible at the back of the cleared area. Deep in the rear of the property, out of sight from the road, is the foundation of the brick structure that Tubman named John Brown Hall. In this building, Tubman cared for aged and ill people. The structure disintegrated early in the 20th century, and extensive vegetation covers the foundation and the remainder of the property. Thompson Memorial Church, also owned by AME Zion Church, is about one mile away on a street adjacent to Fort Hill Cemetery, where Tubman's gravesite is located.

See Figures 1-4, 1-5, 1-6, 1-7, 1-8 in Chapter 1.

Harriet Tubman Residence, 182 South Street

In 1859, Tubman purchased a seven-acre farm on the outskirts of Auburn (in the Town of Fleming), where she took up residence in the early 1860s. Because of increased slave-catcher activities in Auburn, Tubman's parents and other family members were not able to move permanently from Canada to this home until the late winter of 1861.

Tubman had purchased the property from then U.S. Senator William Henry Seward, who later became Secretary of State in the cabinet of President Abraham

Lincoln. It was here, at the home she made for her family, that Tubman began taking in elderly and ill people before she formally established the Home for the Aged.

After the original house, a frame structure, was destroyed by fire in 1880, she and her second husband, Charles Nelson Davis (a Civil War veteran whom she married in 1869), built a brick residence on the house site in 1883. This became her permanent home for the remaining three decades of her life.

The brick house was sold in 1914, a year after Tubman's death, and was occupied by a single family until 1990 when it was purchased by the AME Zion Church to be joined with the Tubman Home for the Aged property. In 1999 it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the "Historic Properties Relating to Harriet Tubman in Auburn, New York" multiple property submission. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2000 when the NHL boundary was expanded to include the Harriet Tubman Residence and the Thompson AME Zion Church.

Renovations have been made since Tubman's occupancy, but the original configuration is clearly evident. The two-story house faces South Street. Its vernacular style is simple, without architectural embellishments, except for arches over the windows. A one-story frame addition and an enclosed porch were added after Tubman's death. Behind the house is a garage built around an original barn.

The dwelling retains original fabric, despite its renovations from several periods. The latest renovation, starting in 2000, was halted when a historic structures investigation began. Interior partitions had been relocated and new stairs added. The house is currently undergoing restoration according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties by the owner with state, federal, and private funds. The garage or barn is a four-bay frame and concrete block structure of which the two central frame bays were originally part of Tubman's small farm and is believed to date to c.1896. It too will be restored.

The home is managed by a nonprofit entity, the Harriet Tubman Home, Inc, created by the AME Zion Church. It plans to open the house to the public for the first time when the work is completed.

Tubman Home for the Aged, 180 South Street

In 1896, when Tubman was in her mid seventies, she obtained a bank loan to purchase property adjoining her residence on which to establish a home for aged African Americans. It was a 25-acre lot containing barns, outbuildings, and three

houses. The surviving, and most significant structure is a frame building, the Tubman Home for the Aged.

Soon after the purchase, Tubman established the Home for the Aged to care for elderly family members and friends. Created during the social reform movements of the late 19th century, it was one of the first such institutions for African-Americans. As she grew older, Tubman hoped to give the home over to the care of the National Association of Colored Women, which, because of financial constraints, declined to accept it. In 1903, she deeded the 25-acre Home for the Aged property to the AME Zion Church, which paid the mortgage of \$1,575, with the understanding that the church would continue to operate the Home.

The AME Zion Church kept the Home open until the last resident died. Then the property fell into disuse, probably in the 1920s, and by the late 1930s it had become derelict. In 1944, AME Zion Bishop William J. Walls spearheaded efforts to rebuild the frame house, which was completed in the 1950s.

Today the reconstructed frame building is open to visitors for guided tours. It's a two-story house with a front porch that wraps around one side. It has little original fabric. In addition to the property and the frame house, there is a small collection of donated Tubman related objects plus artifacts unearthed in archaeological investigations undertaken since 1998.

The Tubman Home for the Aged is managed as a house museum, open daily year round for guided tours.

The Home for the Aged was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1974 and was part of expansion of the NHL in 2000.

At the time of Tubman's purchase, the property also contained the John Brown Hall, a brick structure at the back of the property, which Tubman also used to care for ill relatives and friends. Early 20th century photographs show it was a substantial one-and-a-half story brick building on a high stone foundation. It was photographed standing as late as 1939 and in 1949 suffered fire damage. Sometime later it was demolished as a hazard, and today's remnant is a foundation which has recently been uncovered by archeologists.

Thompson Memorial AME Zion Church, 33 Parker Street

Thompson Memorial AME Zion Church was built in 1891 one block from Fort Hill Cemetery. Tubman raised funds to construct the church, and her funeral was held here in 1913. The building was nominated as part of the "Historic Properties

Relating to Harriet Tubman in Auburn, New York” multiple property submission. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2000 when the NHL boundary was expanded to include the Harriet Tubman Residence and Home for the Aged. The active congregation moved to another church building in Auburn in 1993.

This modest rectangular two-story frame building with a steeple is set in a residential neighborhood with comparably scaled buildings. The interior contains a small vestibule inside the front doors, a small office, and stairs leading to the basement and the balcony. Through interior doors is the double-aisle sanctuary with pulpit and choir seats on low platforms with low wooden railings. A mural thought to refer to “Sister Harriet” is on the wall behind the pulpit and choir.

The current condition is poor, but it contains potentially the most original fabric of all the buildings associated with Tubman. Recently, the building has been stabilized, the roof replaced, and plans developed to undertake restoration. The site is not open to the public at this time, but the Tubman Home plans to offer opportunities for visitation in the future.

Next to the church is the vacant rectory, for which there are no current plans for reuse.

Harriet Tubman's Grave, Fort Hill Cemetery, 19 Fort Street

Harriet Tubman was laid to rest at Fort Hill Cemetery in a section of the cemetery designed in the Olmsted tradition of curving roads and paths winding through hilly terrain. She is buried next to her brother, William Henry Stewart, Sr., who had died eight months earlier. Immediately adjacent to them are her nephew, William Henry Stewart, Jr., and his wife, Emma. Their children, Alida and Charles Stewart planted the now towering spruce tree as a grave marker before Tubman died. Tubman had selected and purchased her plot with other members of her family.

In 1914, the Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs, which included African American Women's clubs from Buffalo and New York City, erected a granite marker, sculpted by an African American artist, Mrs. Jackson Stewart, on Tubman's grave. The marker fell into disrepair, and in 1937, the Federation again erected a new monument at Tubman's gravesite, which can be seen today.

Harriet Tubman's Grave property was listed in the National Register in 1999 when it was nominated as part of the “Historic Properties Relating to Harriet Tubman in Auburn, New York” multiple property submission. It was not included in the National Historic Landmark boundary increase of 2000. The National Historic Landmark program does not designate gravesites except in cases when it is the

only remaining resource associated with an important historical figure or when it is part of a larger resource such as formally designed landscape. The grave is a focus of the annual Memorial Day pilgrimage conducted by the AME Zion Church to commemorate Harriet Tubman's life and work; it is also is a place of informal year-round pilgrimage.

The cemetery is well maintained by the owner, Fort Hill Cemetery Association, Inc. and is open to the public during daylight hours. The Harriet Tubman Home occasionally leads visitors on tours to Thompson Memorial Church and the gravesite.

Other Sites

More than 100 sites that were thought to have an association with Tubman were tallied by the NPS study team. Many of these places where Harriet Tubman lived and worked have no resources evident today, except potentially archeological resources. Tubman moved up and down the eastern United States over a long lifetime, yet the nature of her life and work in these places required that she often be "invisible." Thus many sites cannot be located today. Yet, Tubman research and documentation have advanced greatly just in the last five years, and it is possible that some sites will be verified and authenticated in coming years.