ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Harriet Ross Tubman

By **Kate C. Larson**

On September 17, 1849, twenty-seven-year old Harriet Ross Tubman took her first hazardous steps toward self-liberation. The death of her enslaver, Edward Brodess, six months earlier had marked a turning point in the transformation of Tubman from slave to free woman. Hastened by rumors of impending sale to satisfy creditors of Brodess's estate, Tubman and her two brothers, Ben and Henry Ross, ran away to hoped-for-freedom beyond slavery's borders.[1] Though this first escape attempt failed, Tubman would soon strike out again this time successfully, alone, and embark on a decade battling slavery to liberate her family and friends on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Harriet Tubman's struggle to secure freedom, equality, justice and self-determination for herself and others also brought her to the front lines of the Civil War in South Carolina, and, later, from her home base in Auburn, NY, activism demanding equal rights for women and minorities, fixing her firmly among our nation's most enduring icons.

Myths and folk tales concerning Tubman's life persist in spite of historical documentation and the publication of 21st century biographies. Many of these myths have been heavily influenced by numerous fictionalized versions of Tubman's life story that conflate flawed biographies written in the 19th and mid-20th centuries, with scores of fictionalized children's histories flourishing since the 1950s. These sources have served to suppress the documented historical record and first-person oral traditions rooted in the antebellum period, leaving most Americans with a vague and mostly limited understanding of who Tubman really was. [2]

Harriet Tubman was born Araminta, or "Minty," Ross in early 1822 on Anthony Thompson's 1,000 acres plantation, the "Mansion Farm", south of Madison in Dorchester County, Maryland. She was the fifth of nine children of Ben and Rit Green Ross, both slaves. Her father was a highly skilled carpenter who supervised logging operations on Thompson's land, while her mother worked in Thompson's house and in the fields.

[1] Eliza Ann Brodess, "Three Hundred Dollars Reward," *Cambridge Democrat*, Cambridge, MD, October 3, 1849.

[2] Kate Clifford Larson. *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* New York: Ballantine Books, 2004; Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman: The Life and Life Stories* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2004); Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (Boston: Little Brown, 2004); Milton Sernett, *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory and History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2008).

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Tubman, her brothers Robert, Ben, Henry and Moses, and sisters Linah, Mariah Ritty, Soph, and Rachel, and their mother belonged to Thompson's stepson, Edward Brodess, the child of Thompson's deceased second wife Mary Pattison Brodess. When Tubman was a small child during the 1820s, Brodess took Rit and her children to his own small inherited farm in Bucktown, ten miles to the east.

Separated from their father and the large familial and social community of her birth on the Thompson plantation, Tubman and her siblings experienced unbearable physical and emotional abuse and hardship under Brodess's control. Lacking a professional education that would have secured his future as a member of the growing middle class, or a large inheritance to fix his place among the landed elite in the region, Brodess struggled to operate his farm and manage the dozen slaves that he had inherited. Short on cash, he leased many of his enslaved people to area farmers to help augment his meager earnings from agriculture. From the age of six, Tubman was taken from her mother and hired out to a series of abusive masters, who physically and emotionally mistreated her. She later told an interviewer that she used to cry herself to sleep at night, wishing she could be with her family.[3]

During the late 1790s and early 1800s timber and seafood remained staples of Chesapeake economies, while agriculture on the Eastern Shore of Maryland shifted from tobacco to grains and other foodstuffs. The planting and harvesting of wheat, corn, oats and flax required a smaller labor force, and many Eastern Shore slaveholders discovered that they no longer needed a large, fulltime, enslaved labor force. Some slaveholders, deeply influenced by the ideals of the American Revolution and some by religious enlightenment—Quakers, early Methodists and Baptists—chose to set their enslaved people free. Others chose to profit from their ownership of human beings. Cotton production was expanding rapidly in the Deep South, leaving southern planters looking for new sources of slave labor to clear hundreds of thousands of acres in newly opened territories. In 1808, the international trade in enslaved African peoples was banned, creating a significant demand for Upper South slaves by land owners in Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. Lured by high prices, Brodess sold some of his enslaved people to southern slave traders, including Tubman's sisters, Linah, Soph and Mariah Ritty, between 1825 and 1844 permanently tearing her family apart.[4]

Maryland's free black population had been growing steadily since the American Revolution, and by the time Tubman was born, 27% of the total black population in the state was free. In Dorchester County, the rate was even higher—a full one-third of the black community was free. Many African American families in Maryland were made up of both free and enslaved members, and they lived with the constant threat of permanent separations through sales of loved ones. Free people could buy their enslaved relatives, but the difficulty in acquiring enough assets to compete with deep-pocketed white buyers

[3] Emma P. Telford. "Harriet: The Modern Moses of Heroism and Visions," Cayuga County Museum, Auburn, NY: circa 1905.
[4] Edward Brodess to Dempsey P. Kane, Vol. Liber 9 ER 624 p. 625, Dorchester County Land Records (Annapolis, MD: MDSA, July, 1825).

kept such sales to a minimum. Tubman's parents struggled to keep their family bonds tethered in the face of Brodess's decision to sell some of their children and in spite of the great distance separating their living and work sites. [5]

Though Tubman believed that she was descended from Asante peoples in West Africa, there is no primary evidence to suggest this is true. Interpretation of the cultural influences in Tubman's life is a matter of conjecture. Though the details of where and when the white families who enslaved Tubman's family acquired their slaves is not known, historical records reveal an active slave trade from Africa to the Chesapeake during the early to mid-18th century, disembarking over 18,000 slaves directly onto Maryland soil.[6] In 1863, Bostonian Franklin Sanborn penned the first of several Tubman's biographies, in the antislavery newspaper, *The Commonwealth*. According to Sanborn, Tubman was "the grand-daughter of a slave imported from Africa, and has not a drop of white blood in her veins."[7] In a later interview, The *New York Herald* reporter, Frank Drake, wrote that "the old mammies to whom she told [her] dreams were wont to nod knowingly and say, 'I reckon youse one o' dem 'Shantees', chile.' For they knew the tradition of the unconquerable Ashantee blood, which in a slave made him a thorn in the side of the planter or cane grower whose property he became, so that few of that race were in bondage."[8] Another interviewer wrote that Tubman "knows that her mother's mother," Modesty, "was brought in a slave ship from Africa, that her mother was the daughter of a white man, an American, and her father, a full blooded Negro."[9] The "creolization" of this family more accurately reflects the blending of cultures from West Africa, Northern Europe, and local Indian peoples in the Chesapeake. As historian Mechal Sobel put it, this was a "world they made together."[10]

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[5] US Census, 1820. See *Historical Census Browser,* University of Virginia Library, http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/; see also, Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

[6] Lorena Walsh, "The Chesapeake Slave Trade: Regional Patterns, African Origins, and Some Implications," *The William and Mary Quarterly* LVIII, no. 1(2001): David Eltis, "The Volume and Structure of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment," *The William and Mary Quarterly* LVIII, no. 1(2001):148.

[7] Sanborn, "Harriet Tubman," *The Commonwealth,* July 17, 1863. Sanborn would later write that Tubman was "one degree removed from the wolds [sic] of Africa, her grandfather being an imported African of a chieftan family…" "The Late Araminta Davis: Better Known as 'Moses' or 'Harriet Tubman'." Franklin B. Sanborn Papers. Box 1, Folder 5. Box 1, Folder 5, American Antiquarian Society. Worcester, MA.

[8] Frank C. Drake, "The Moses of Her People. Amazing Life Work of Harriet Tubman," *New York Herald*, Sept. 22, 1907.

[9] Ann Fitzhugh, "Harriet Tubman.," *American Review* (August 1912):420. See also, Sanborn, "Harriet Tubman," *The Commonwealth,* July 17, 1863; and "Thompson Deposition, 1853." "Equity Papers 249." Dorchester County Circuit Court. Box 57. Loc. OR/8/12/2, MDSA. Annapolis, MD; "Thompson Deposition." Equity Papers 249. MDSA. Annapolis, MD.. Eliza Ann Brodess, "Three Hundred Dollars Reward," (Cambridge, MD) *Cambridge Democrat*, October 3, 1849. Extensive analysis of manumission records, chattel records and court documents support the view that in general slave children carried the surname of the father, when known, in Dorchester County.

[10] See Michel Sobel, *The World They Made Together. Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). See also, *Maryland's Lower Choptank River and Tuckahoe River Cultural Resource Inventory by* Ralph E. Eshelman and Carl W. Scheffel, Jr.

Tubman's Christian faith was derived from a spirituality nurtured through a blending of a variety of African cultural traditions and powerful Protestant evangelical thought. Assessments of the influence of European, African, and Native American cultural and spiritual values on Tubman's life have been limited in scope. While there has been a significant body of new research in the past two decades about African cultural retentions in various regions in mainland United States, the persistence and co-modification of these practices and values in Eastern Shore communities remains understudied.[11]

By the time Tubman was born, first generation Africans were visible presences in Dorchester County and are evidenced by such African names as Ibo, Mingo, Winnebar, Sinta, Suke, and Binah, descriptions in county manumission records and advertisements for runaway slaves that include physical descriptions such as "has holes in his ears for bobs," and "pattern on jaws." One Eastern Shore resident recalled that his grandfather enslaved an African woman by the name of "Suck," and that his grandfather had purchased her from a "slave ship which had come up the Chesapeake Bay." When he was a young boy, Suck told him that she had been a member of an African tribe that "was defeated in battle with another tribe and numbers of her people were captured" and sold to slave traders plying the African coast.[12]

Tubman and her family integrated a number of religious practices and beliefs into their daily lives, including Episcopal, Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, and even Quaker teachings, all religious denominations supported by local white masters and their neighbors who were intimately involved with Tubman's family. Many slaves were required to attend the churches of their owners and temporary masters. Tubman's religiosity, however, was a deeply personal spiritual experience, rooted in evangelical Christian teachings and familial traditions. Thomas Garrett, a famous Underground Railroad agent and a Quaker, later wrote of Tubman 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."[13]

Regardless of the exact nature of Tubman's religious instructions and the roots of her spirituality, Tubman's faith was also deeply influenced by her experiences on the landscape where daily survival remained her biggest challenge. Her work ranged from

[11] See The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database at Emory University: http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces. For Maryland Specifically, see Lorena Walsh, "The Chesapeake Slave Trade: Regional Patterns, African Origins, and Some Implications," *The William and Mary Quarterly* LVIII, no. 1 (2001): David Elytis, "The Volume and Structure of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment," *The William and Mary Quarterly* LVIII, no. 1 (2001):148. For Discussions of Africa and African retentions see: Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks. The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 41-72. See also, Gomez, *Exchanging*, 105-13; and, T.C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[12] Joseph B. Seth and Mary W. Seth, *Recollections of a Long Life on the Eastern Shore*, (Easton, MD: Press of the Star-Democrat, 1926), 31.

[13] Sarah Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, New York: W.J. Moses, 1869), 49. This is an early biography of Harriet Tubman using first person testimony.

domestic chores to field work, animal trapping, and wood cutting. While a young teenager during the mid-1830s, Tubman was hired to a neighboring farmer in Bucktown when she was nearly killed by a blow to her head from an iron weight thrown by an angry overseer at another slave. It took months for her mother to nurse her back to health. The severe wound left her suffering from disabling headaches and epileptic seizures that afflicted her for the rest of her life.

After she recovered her strength, Brodess hired Tubman out to John T. Stewart, a Madison, Maryland merchant and shipbuilder. This was a fortuitous event in Tubman's life; it brought her back to the African American community of free and enslaved people where her father lived and where she had been born. It was during this time that she learned valuable survival skills that would contribute to her success on the Underground Railroad and during the Civil War. She discovered the ways of the forests from her father, and she learned important information about freedom in the North from black watermen, shipyard and dock workers, who brought news and valuable information from ports near and far.

In April 1840, Ben Ross received his freedom, land and material support through provisions in Anthony Thompson Sr.'s last will and testament. Ross continued working as a timber inspector for other land owners and shipbuilders in need of his skills, enabling him to stay in the region while his wife and children remained held in bondage. Tubman and her siblings were able to live with him when Brodess hired them to masters living in Madison near Ross.

Sometime around 1844, Araminta Ross married a local free black named John Tubman. It was at this time she shed her childhood name "Minty" in favor of Harriet. Brodess allowed her to hire herself to a master of her own choosing after paying him a yearly fee of $60. Any excess earning she kept, enabling her to buy a pair of oxen and increase her earnings by plowing fields, transporting products, and hauling timber.

On March 7, 1849, Edward Brodess died on his farm in Bucktown at the age of 47, leaving Tubman and the rest of her family at risk of being sold to settle his many debts. Tubman could not risk being sold to the Deep South, so in the late fall of 1849, she took her own liberty. Trusting in the confidence of a local unidentified white woman, Tubman was introduced to a network of black and white sympathetic anti-slavery activists who had loosely organized into a system of safe houses along various paths out of the slave states to free states in the North. The Underground Railroad, as it was called, was already operating on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Traveling by night, using the North Star and instructions from helpers, Tubman found her way to Philadelphia. She began working as a domestic in hotels and private homes, saving her money to help her family escape.

In December 1850, Tubman conducted her first rescue mission. Her niece, Kessiah and Kessiah's two children, James and Araminta, were set to be auctioned to the highest bidder at the court house in Cambridge, Maryland. Through secret communication with Tubman in Philadelphia, Kessiah's free husband, John Bowley, devised a plan to rescue Kessiah and their children. On the day of the auction, John bid on his wife and children,

even though he did not have the money to pay for them. Before the auctioneer knew what was happening, John whisked his family away and sailed them to Baltimore's busy waterfront, seventy miles away. Tubman met them there, secreting them with other family members and friends who worked as stevedores, ship carpenters, and caulkers on the wharves in Fells Point. They remained hidden until Tubman could safely bring them on to Philadelphia.

Tubman's dangerous missions continued throughout the 1850s, as she sought to bring away her sister Rachel, Rachel's two children, Ben and Angerine, her brothers Robert, Ben, Henry and Moses, her parents, and other friends and family members. In all, Tubman conducted approximately thirteen escape missions, personally bringing away about seventy individuals, while also giving instructions to about seventy more who found their way to freedom independently. Tubman used a variety of routes to move back and forth between Maryland and the North; some traversed Caroline County, MD into Delaware, others by water through the Chesapeake Bay to Baltimore and then Philadelphia and beyond.

The Underground network that Tubman relied upon was dominated by free African Americans, like Jacob Jackson and Samuel Green in Dorchester County, Tom Tubman and others in Baltimore; William Brinkley, Nat and Abraham Gibbs in Delaware; and William Still of Philadelphia. These people risked their lives to assist freedom seekers escape bondage. This network was also supported by enslaved people unwilling to leave families behind, and white abolitionists, including Quakers Jonah Kelley and Jacob Leverton from the Eastern Shore, and Thomas Garrett of Wilmington, Delaware. Tubman employed various strategies to allude pursuing slave catchers: acting as an old woman, dressing like a man, or traveling south to throw hunters of her tracks. She used songs, like "Go Down Moses" and "Bound for the Promised Land," to signal to her charges that it was safe to come out of their hiding places. She also carried a pistol for protection and to encourage weary and hesitant freedom seekers who wanted to turn back. [14]

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 left most refugee slaves vulnerable to recapture and many fled to the safety of Canada. Tubman brought many of her family and friends to St. Catharines, Ontario, where they settled into a growing community of freedom seekers who sought to recreate a community of mutual support and assistance. Her dangerous missions won the admiration of black and white abolitionists throughout the North who provided her with funds to continue her activities. In 1858, Tubman met with the legendary freedom fighter, John Brown, in her North Street home in St. Catharines. Impressed by his passion for ending slavery, she committed herself to helping him recruit former slaves to join him on his planned raid at Harper's Ferry, Va. Though she hoped to be at his side when the raid took place in October 1859, illness may have prevented her from joining him. In 1859, William Henry Seward, Lincoln's future Secretary of State, sold Tubman a home on the outskirts of Auburn, New York, where she eventually settled her aged parents and other

[14] "Interview with Harriet Tubman," in "New York." The Underground Railroad: Manuscript materials collected by Professor Siebert. Houghton Library, Harvard University. Cambridge, MA.

family members. On her way to Boston in April 1860, Tubman became the heroine of the day when she helped rescue a fugitive slave, Charles Nalle, from the custody of United States Marshals commissioned with returning him to his Virginia master under provisions in the Fugitive Slave Law.

In early 1862, Tubman joined Northern abolitionists in support of Union activities at Port Royal, South Carolina. Throughout the Civil War she provided expert nursing care to black soldiers and hundreds of newly liberated slaves who crowded Union camps. Tubman's military service expanded to include spying and scouting behind Confederate lines. She skillfully navigated the landscapes of the region, bringing her in contact with local slaves who relayed strategic intelligence about enemy movements and plans. In early June 1863, she became the first woman to command an armed military raid when she guided Colonel James Montgomery and his 2nd South Carolina Black regiment up the Combahee River, routing out Confederate outposts, destroying stockpiles of cotton, food and weapons, and liberating over 750 slaves. Tubman later followed Montgomery into Georgia and Florida as a spy, nurse, and domestic laborer. She purportedly served Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, of the famed Massachusetts 54th, his last meal before the assault on Fort Wagner that claimed his life. Her reputation as a brilliant strategist and liberator won her many admirers, securing her unfettered access to Union officers and their camps.

After the war, Tubman rejoined family and friends who had settled in Auburn, NY. Those early years after the war were overshadowed by extreme poverty and hardship; Tubman resorted to chopping fences for fuel to heat her home. Through the collective efforts of boarders, family, and friends, Tubman managed to retain ownership of her home. In 1869, Sarah Bradford, a modestly successful Victorian-era author, published a short biography of Tubman called "Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman," bringing brief fame and financial relief to Tubman and her family. Tubman married Nelson Davis, a veteran twenty-two years her junior, that same year; her husband John Tubman had been killed in 1867 in Dorchester County. She and Davis adopted a baby girl, Gertie, in 1874, and together they ran a brick making business and sold crops from their small farm.

Once settled into community life, Tubman began another career as a civil rights activist, humanitarian, and suffragist. Many of the abolitionists she had been close to during the prewar years were actively involved in women's suffrage, and Tubman joined them. By the turn of the century, and in spite of her age and declining health, she was still appearing at suffrage meetings and conventions in Boston, New York, Chicago, and Washington, DC where she was greeted by enthusiastic audiences.

Her home became a safe haven for the homeless, sick, and indigent, including orphaned children, the disabled, and the elderly. She struggled financially most of her life, however, and her commitment to helping those more disadvantaged further drained the few resources she could acquire. Denied her own military pension, she eventually received a widow's pension as the wife of Nelson Davis, and, later, a Civil War nurse's pension. Sarah Bradford rewrote Tubman's biography in 1886, publishing it as "Harriet, the Moses of Her

People." Reprinted two more times over the next fifteen years, the book provided additional income and renewed notoriety for the aging activist.

Institutional care for sick and aged African Americans was nearly nonexistent, so Tubman dreamed of creating a nursing facility and rest home on her property. Her humanitarian work triumphed with the opening of the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged, located on land abutting her own property in Auburn, which she successfully purchased and then transferred to the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in 1903. Fundraising for the home occupied much of her later years. Tubman eventually became wheelchair bound and moved into the home in 1911, where she died of pneumonia at the age of 91 on March 10, 1913. .The *New York Times* listed her as one of the most important people in the world to have died that year.

Facing formidable obstacles constructed on race, gender, economics, and political entitlements, Tubman forged ahead with a lifelong commitment to securing freedom, equality, justice and self-determination. In doing so, she has captured the imaginations of generations of Americans who recognize in her spirit more than a legend, but a true American hero.

Harriet Ross Tubman

Born	c.March 1822, Mansion Farm Dorchester County MD.
Died	March 10, 1913, Auburn NY.
Buried	Fort Hill Cemetery, Auburn NY.
Father	Ben Ross
Mother	Harriet "Rit" (Green) Ross
Career Milestones	1825-1844 three sisters sold, permanently breaking up the family | c1844 married John Tubman | fall 1849 ran to Philadelphia | December 1850 conducted her first rescue of slaves | during 1850s conducted approximately 13 escape missions for about 70 individual slaves | 1861-1865 acted as a nurse, spy and scout | 1869 married Nelson Davis |1908 opened Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged

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