

Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman was born on a Maryland plantation and worked as a field slave until she escaped to the North in 1849. At the time of her escape, she was about thirty years old. A tough, fearless woman who stood only five feet tall, Tubman felt it was her mission to return to the slave states and lead her people to freedom. She made nineteen trips, mostly to Maryland and Delaware, to lead runaways northward. The slaves in the area called her “Moses,” after Moses of the Bible, who led his people out of slavery and to the Promised land.

Tubman usually made her trips during the winter, when the nights were long, and she led slaves in the darkness along backroads and through the woods. During the day, she hid them in barns, potato holes, swamps, and in the homes of antislavery people who were a part of a secret network called the “Underground Railroad.”

A brilliant planner, Tubman carried forged passes to fool patrolmen on the lookout for runaways, and she paid local blacks to take down fugitive posters. She also used disguises. Once, when she had to travel through a town where one of her former masters lived, she dressed as an old woman and shuffled down the street carrying several live chickens tied with a string. When she turned a corner and saw her old master walking toward her, she quickly released the string, and as the chickens flew off in a squawking cloud of feathers, she ran after them. Her former master never saw her face.

Tubman became friends with many leading **abolitionists** in the North. A number of them allowed her to hide fugitive slaves in their homes along the escape route to Canada, where runaways were safe from slave catchers. She also became an antislavery speaker, lecturing on her experiences in slavery and her dangerous rescue missions. Tubman liked to tell the story of one trip in which she and twenty-five runaways hid in a swamp all day and night. One of the men lost his nerve and decided to turn back. Unwilling to let him endanger the others, Tubman pulled out a revolver and pointed it at his head. “Move or die!” she told him. He kept going, and a few days later was a free man.

<p>Abolitionists: People who believed slavery should not exist.</p>
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During the war, Tubman worked as a nurse and a scout for the Union Army. Afterward, she settled in Auburn, New York, with her elderly parents, who she had rescued from Maryland years before. With help from abolitionist friends, she opened a home for elderly blacks in Auburn and continued to give speeches. At a woman’s rights meeting in Rochester, New York, in the 1880s, she told her audience, “Yes, ladies, I was the conductor of 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.”

Excerpted from: *A Separate Battle: Women and the Civil War*, by Ina Chang. New York: Puffin Books, 1996.