

**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**
reads like fiction but
it's all true

Nonfiction



ESCAPE FROM SLAVERY

The incredible true story of **Harriet Tubman**, who risked her life helping enslaved men, women, and children escape to freedom
By Lauren Tarshis

As You Read What was life like for enslaved people?

The night was cold and dark as three men and two women crouched silently in a potato field. One cough, one sneeze—any noise at all—and they could be captured.



The year was 1855, and this small, silent group was trying to get from Maryland to the North. They had spent their entire lives enslaved, but now they were making a desperate bid for freedom.

Their journey was perilous. Freezing wind chilled their bones, hunger tore at their stomachs, and rushing rivers threatened to overtake them. Most threatening of all were the slave catchers, ruthless, cunning men who collected cash rewards for capturing escaped slaves. Traveling on horseback, slave catchers moved stealthily in the night, led by ferocious bloodhounds that could pick up the scent of a human miles away.

The runaways knew what would happen if they were caught. They would be chained, tied together, and marched back to their “owners.” They would surely be whipped—or worse. Slaves were sometimes put to death for trying to flee, a gruesome warning to others contemplating escape.

Yet on that frigid night, the person leading this group was unafraid. Her name was Harriet Tubman, and she had made this journey many times before.

Stolen Away

Tubman was born on a Maryland farm around 1820. (Few enslaved people knew their actual birthdays.) Her given

name was Araminta, “Minty” for short; she changed her name to Harriet in 1849. Though historical records are incomplete, it’s likely that her mother, Rit, and her father, Benjamin, had at least nine children. Their two oldest daughters, Soph and Linneah, were sold to different slave owners when Tubman was young.

Try to imagine the horror of it: having family members stolen away from you, never to see or hear from them again.

Rit and Benjamin’s owner, Edward Brodess, didn’t believe that selling the girls was wrong though. According to the law at the time, Rit, Benjamin, and their children belonged to Brodess. They were his property, no different from his horses or plows, and Brodess could do whatever he wished with them.

That’s what it meant to be enslaved: You had no say over your own life. Everything was controlled by another person.

Slavery in America

In 1619, a Dutch slave ship brought the first Africans to the shores of what would become



ENSLAVED LIFE

Most enslaved people were forced to live in crowded cabins like these. The cabins boiled in summer and froze in winter. Disease spread quickly.

the United States. They were sold in Jamestown, Virginia, beginning a centuries-long legacy of human **bondage**. Over the next 200 years, millions of Africans were kidnapped and shipped across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas.

By the time Tubman was born, agriculture had become a **lucrative** business in the American South. **Plantation** owners relied on slaves for cheap labor. Slaves labored from sunup to sundown planting and harvesting wheat, tobacco, cotton, and other crops. They also cleaned houses, built furniture, washed clothes, and cooked meals for their “masters.” Even young children were put to work.

Getting Bold

Edward Brodess owned many slaves—too many to keep busy on his own property. So when Tubman was 5 or 6 years old, he began “renting” her to others. For months at a time, Tubman lived

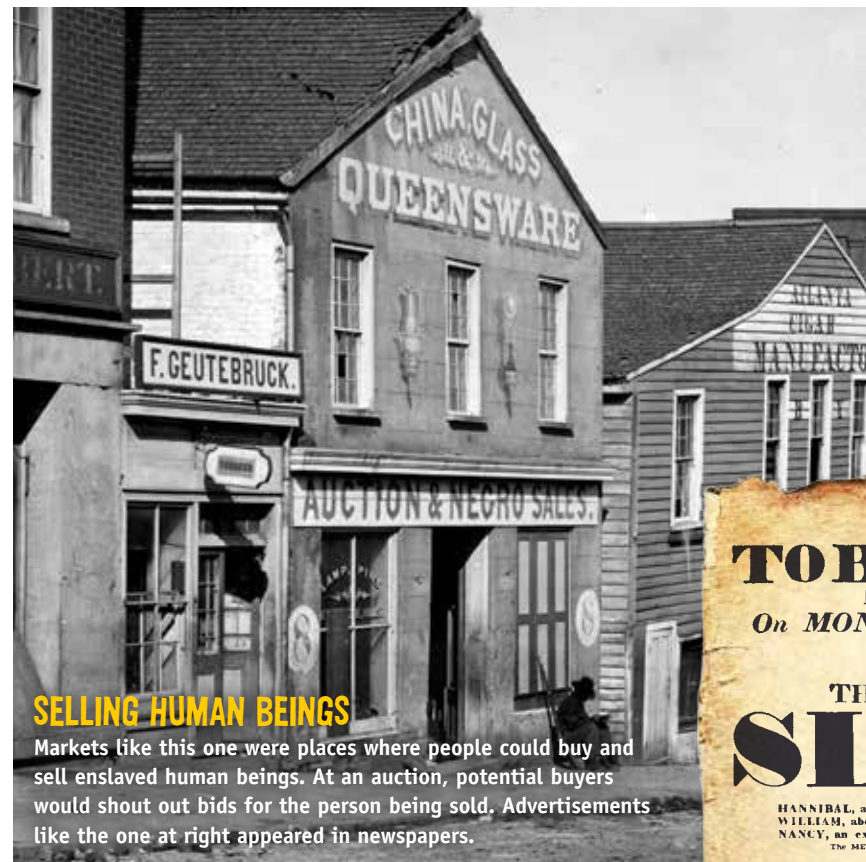
far from her parents, working for people who mistreated her. The cruelest of these was “Miss Susan,” who hired Tubman to watch over her baby. Tubman was barely big enough to hold the little boy, yet it was her job to take care of him 24 hours a day. Miss Susan kept a whip by her bedside. At night, if the baby’s crying awakened her, she viciously whipped Tubman. Tubman carried scars from these beatings for the rest of her life.

As she got older, Tubman worked mainly outdoors, plowing fields and clearing timber. The work was backbreaking, but it afforded her an opportunity to mingle with the free black people who were sometimes hired to work alongside slaves.

Tubman listened closely to stories they told of slaves who had escaped to the North by following the North Star. They described escape routes and the kind people who opened their homes to men, women, and children on the run.

A few years later, when Tubman heard that the Brodess family planned to sell her, she recalled these stories. Terrified that she would disappear like her sisters and never see her family again, she decided to run.

Tubman would later say this of her decision to flee: “I had reasoned this out in my mind; there was one of two things I had a right to—liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other.”



SELLING HUMAN BEINGS

Markets like this one were places where people could buy and sell enslaved human beings. At an auction, potential buyers would shout out bids for the person being sold. Advertisements like the one at right appeared in newspapers.

TO BE SOLD & LET
BY PUBLIC AUCTION,
On MONDAY the 18th of MAY, 1829,
UNDER THE TREES.

FOR SALE,
THE THREE FOLLOWING
SLAVES,

VIZ.
HANNIBAL, about 30 Years old, an excellent House Servant, of Good Character.
WILLIAM, about 35 Years old, a Labourer.
NANCY, an excellent House Servant and Nurse.
THE MEN Belonging to "LEITCH'S" Estate, and the WOMAN to MRS. D. SMIT.

TO BE LET,
On the usual conditions of the Hirer finding them in Food, Clo' in' and Medical succ.
THE FOLLOWING
MALE and FEMALE
SLAVES,

FOR each separate party.
ROBERT BAGLEY, about 20 Years old, a good House Servant.
WILLIAM BAGLEY, about 18 Years old, a Labourer.
JOHN ARMN, about 18 Years old.
JACK ANTONIA, about 40 Years old, a Labourer.
PHILIP an Excellent Fisherman.
HARRY, about 27 Years old, a good House Servant.
ELLY, a Young Woman of good Character, used to House Work and the Nursery.
LILOA, an Excellent Washerwoman.

George N. Barnard/Buyenlarge/Getty Images (market); The Print Collector/Print Collector/Getty Images (slave ad)

Corbis via Getty Images (slaves); Tim Graham/Getty Images (cabin)

Risking Capture

Tubman had a powerful memory and a gift for following the stars; she had great success finding the escape routes that had been described to her. The strenuous outdoor work had made her strong, and she was not afraid of the long dark nights, of the wild sounds that echoed through the forests and swamps.

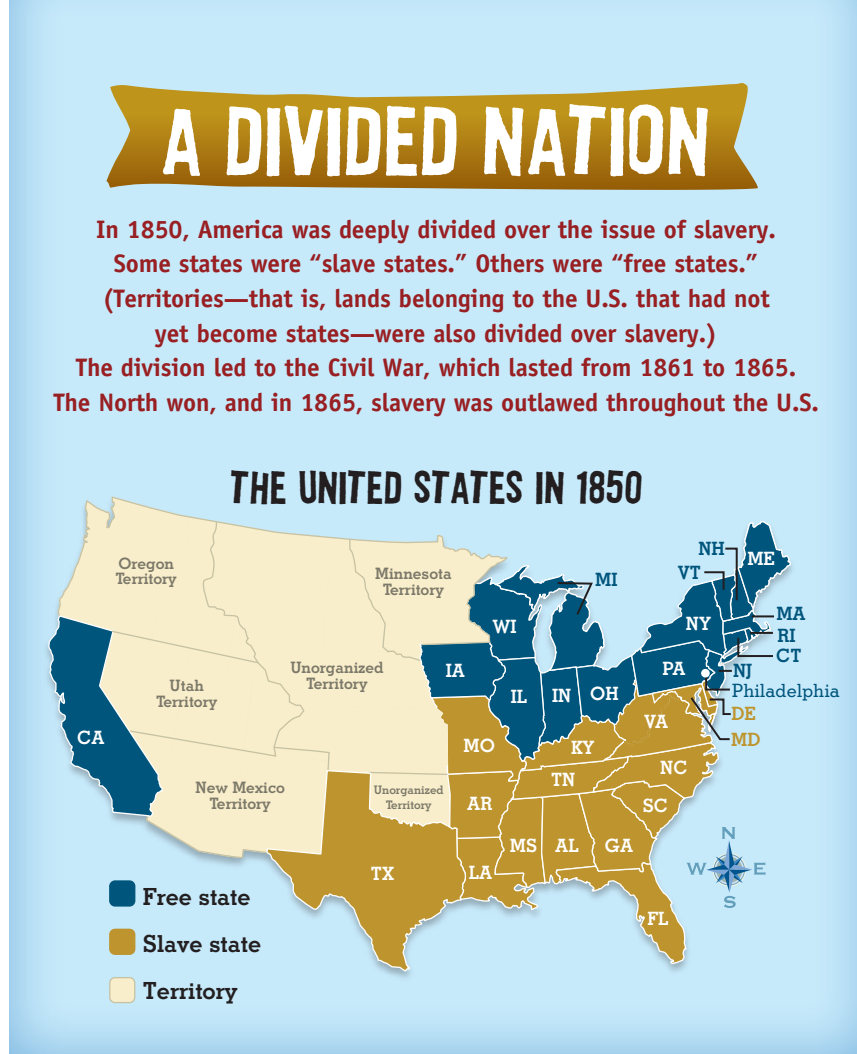
Still, fleeing took enormous courage. Tubman had few resources. She had never traveled beyond Maryland, and she had no guide to help her.

It took about a week for Tubman to travel the 120 miles to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania was one of 15 “free states” in the North, where slavery was illegal. At the time, many **fugitive** slaves took refuge in Philadelphia, where there was a strong **abolitionist** movement.

In Philadelphia, Tubman quickly found a job at a hotel, where she blended in easily with the many free black people living in that bustling city. Tubman wasn’t happy in her new life though. How could she be content when her parents and brothers and sisters were still enslaved?

Soon it became clear to her what she needed to do, what deep inside she knew she *had* to do.

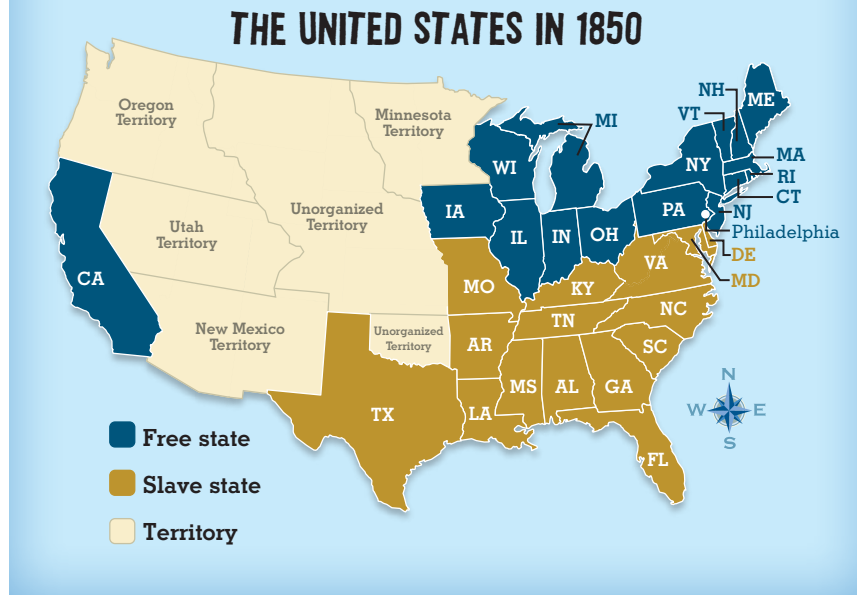
Within the year, Tubman was on the move again, making her way under the night sky through now-familiar marshes and forests. Except now she was not fleeing. She was returning to Maryland.



A DIVIDED NATION

In 1850, America was deeply divided over the issue of slavery. Some states were “slave states.” Others were “free states.” (Territories—that is, lands belonging to the U.S. that had not yet become states—were also divided over slavery.)

The division led to the Civil War, which lasted from 1861 to 1865. The North won, and in 1865, slavery was outlawed throughout the U.S.



It was extraordinary for someone who had escaped slavery to return to the land where they had been enslaved, to risk capture—or worse. But that is exactly what Tubman did.

In Maryland, she rescued her niece Kessiah and Kessiah’s children and led them to Philadelphia. Tubman soon headed South again, this time to **liberate** one of her brothers and two of his friends. After that, she helped another brother escape, along with as many as 10 others.

Between her journeys, Tubman worked at hotels and restaurants, saving the money she would need

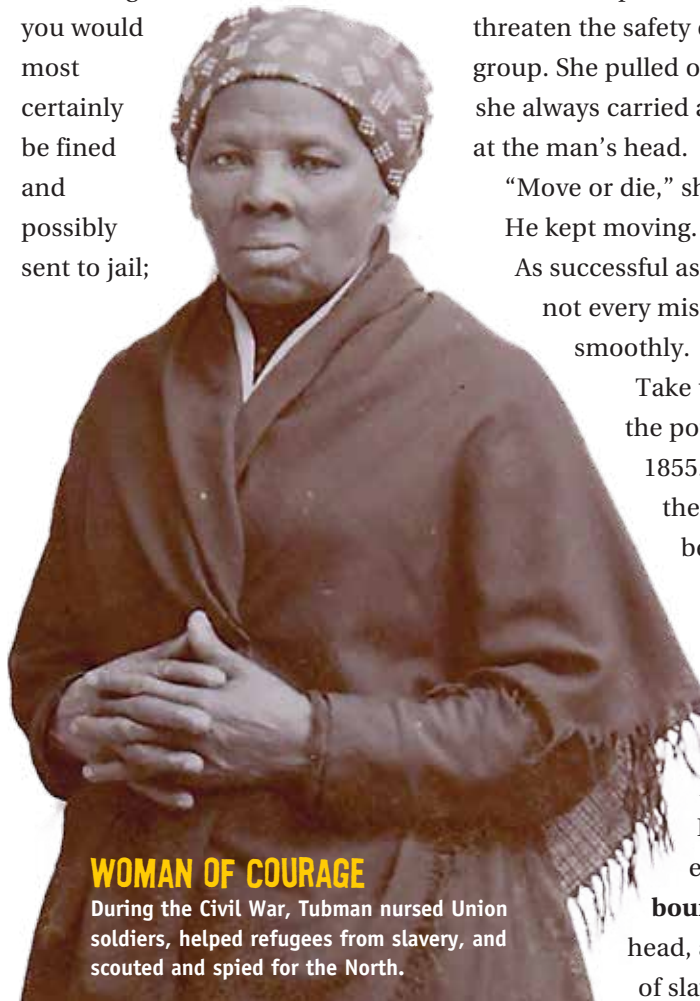
to buy food and other supplies for her rescue missions. By then she was officially part of the Underground Railroad.

Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad was not a real railroad. The term was a code name for a network of people, routes, and hiding places that enabled slaves to escape to the North. Hundreds of people were part of the Underground Railroad, a diverse group that included wealthy white people, Christian ministers, farmers, free black people, and many others. Working in total secrecy,

members of the Underground Railroad communicated with each other using special code words and signals. Many turned their homes into safe houses, creating hiding places in attics and cellars.

Everyone working in the Underground Railroad took enormous risks; by 1850, helping a runaway slave was against the law, even in free states. If you were caught, you would most certainly be fined and possibly sent to jail;



WOMAN OF COURAGE

During the Civil War, Tubman nursed Union soldiers, helped refugees from slavery, and scouted and spied for the North.

free blacks were often sold into slavery. To be truly safe, many who had escaped slavery traveled all the way to Canada, where slavery was entirely outlawed.

As a leader of the Underground Railroad, Tubman became well-known for her bravery and success. She was clever but harsh. On one rescue mission, a man in her group, fearful and hungry, wanted to turn back. In Tubman’s mind, his departure would threaten the safety of the whole group. She pulled out the pistol she always carried and pointed it at the man’s head.

“Move or die,” she said.

He kept moving.

As successful as Tubman was, not every mission went smoothly.

Take that night in the potato field in 1855. Crossing the field had not been part of Tubman’s plan. But one of the three men she was leading, Joe Bailey, had an especially large **bounty** on his head, and swarms of slave catchers

were after him. To **evade** capture, Tubman had to detour from her preferred routes and lead the group south, toward the Delaware border.

Even so, slave catchers nearly caught them. The group hid in holes in the potato field, shivering in the dirt as their pursuers passed within a few feet of them.

It was the closest Tubman ever came to capture.

Determined Liberator

In all, Tubman led 13 rescue missions, freeing 70 to 80 people. Among those she led to freedom were her parents and all four of her brothers and their families.

Tubman went on to serve in the Civil War, which brought an end to slavery in 1865. But her work was far from over. She aided disabled veterans, orphans, and others. And she campaigned for women to be given the right to vote, though she would not live to see that happen in 1920. Tubman died in 1913 in her home in Auburn, New York, surrounded by her family.

Today, Tubman is remembered as one of America’s most courageous and important figures—a tenacious and doggedly determined liberator whose legacy shaped the course of American history. ●

Writing Contest

Your legacy is how you are remembered and the contributions you make during your life. What is Harriet Tubman’s legacy? Answer in a well-organized essay. Send it to **Harriet Tubman Contest**. Five winners will get *Unbound* by Ann E. Burg. See page 2 for details.

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