**Harriet Tubman**

Harriet Tubman became famous as a "conductor" on the [Underground Railroad](http://www.history.com/topics/underground-railroad) during the turbulent 1850s. Born a slave on [Maryland](http://www.history.com/topics/maryland)'s eastern shore, she endured brutal beatings by her master and the harsh regime of the field hand. Her life was a testimony to the fierce resistance of African-American people to slavery.

In 1849 Tubman fled Maryland, leaving behind her free husband of five years, John Tubman, and her parents, sisters, and brothers. "Mah people mus' go free," her constant refrain, suggests a determination uncommon among even the most militant slaves. She returned to the South at least nineteen times to lead her family and hundreds of other slaves to freedom via the Underground Railroad. Utilizing her native intelligence and drawing on her boundless courage, she eluded bounty hunters seeking a reward for her capture, which eventually went as high as $40,000. She never lost a fugitive or allowed one to turn back.

Two things sustained her: the pistol at her side and her faith in God. She would not hesitate to use the pistol in self-defense, but it was also a symbol to instruct slaves, making it clear that "dead Negroes tell no tales." Timid slaves seemed to find courage in her presence; no one ever betrayed her. She affirmed her faith in God in her statement, "I always told God, I'm gonna to hold steady on to you, an' you've got to see me [through]."

Tubman collaborated with [John Brown](http://www.history.com/topics/john-brown) in 1858 in planning his raid on Harpers Ferry. The two met in Canada where she told him all she knew of the Underground Railroad in the East. Advising him on the area in which he planned to operate, she promised to deliver aid from fugitives in the region. Brown's admiration for her was immeasurable, and he wanted her to accompany him on the raid. Tubman planned to be present but was ill at the time and could not participate.

Tubman's resistance to slavery did not end with the outbreak of the [Civil War](http://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war). Her services as nurse, scout, and spy were solicited by the Union government. For more than three years she nursed the sick and wounded in [Florida](http://www.history.com/topics/florida) and the Carolinas, tending whites and blacks, soldiers and contrabands. Tubman was a short woman without distinctive features. With a bandanna on her head and several front teeth missing, she moved unnoticed through rebel territory. This made her invaluable as a scout and spy under the command of Col. James Montgomery of the Second Carolina Volunteers. As leader of a corps of local blacks, she made several forays into rebel territory, collecting information. Armed with knowledge of the location of [cotton](http://www.history.com/topics/cotton) warehouses, ammunition depots, and slaves waiting to be liberated, Colonel Montgomery made several raids in southern coastal areas. Tubman led the way on his celebrated expedition up the Combahee River in June 1863. For all of her work, Tubman was paid only two hundred dollars over a three-year period and had to support herself by selling pies, gingerbread, and root beer.

After the war, Tubman returned to Auburn, [New York](http://www.history.com/topics/new-york), and continued to help blacks forge new lives in freedom. She cared for her parents and other needy relatives, turning her residence into the Home for Indigent and Aged Negroes. Lack of money continued to be a pressing problem, and she financed the home by selling copies of her biography and giving speeches. Her most memorable appearance was at the organizing meeting of the National Association of Colored Women in 1896 in [Washington, D.C.](http://www.history.com/topics/washington-dc) Two generations came together to celebrate the strength of black women and to continue their struggle for a life of dignity and respect. Harriet Tubman, the oldest member present, was the embodiment of their strength and their struggle.

*Sarah Bradford, Harriet: The Moses of Her People (1886); Earl Conrad, Harriet Tubman (1943); Dorothy Sterling, ed., We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century (1984).* [*http://www.history.com/topics/harriet-tubman*](http://www.history.com/topics/harriet-tubman)

**Frederick Douglas**

An abolitionist, writer and orator Frederick Douglass was the most important black American leader of the nineteenth century. Born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey on [Maryland](http://www.history.com/topics/maryland)'s Eastern Shore, he was the son of a slave woman and, probably, her white master. Upon his escape from slavery at age twenty, he adopted the name of the hero of Sir Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake.* Douglass immortalized his years as a slave in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). This and two subsequent autobiographies, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), mark his greatest contributions to American culture. Written as antislavery propaganda and personal revelation, they are regarded as the finest examples of the slave narrative tradition and as classics of American autobiography.

Douglass's life as a reformer ranged from his abolitionist activities in the early 1840s to his attacks on Jim Crow and lynching in the 1890s. For sixteen years he edited an influential black newspaper (Morning Star) and achieved international fame as an orator and writer of great persuasive power. In thousands of speeches and editorials he levied an irresistible indictment against slavery and racism, provided an indomitable voice of hope for his people, embraced antislavery politics, and preached his own brand of American ideals. In the 1850s he broke with the strictly moralist brand of abolitionism led by William Lloyd Garrison; he supported the early women's rights movement; and he gave direct assistance to [John Brown](http://www.history.com/topics/john-brown)'s conspiracy that led to the raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859.

Rhetorically, Douglass was a master of irony, as illustrated by his famous Fourth of July speech in 1852: "This Fourth of July is *yours,* not *mine.* You may rejoice, *I* must mourn," he declared. Moreover, for understanding prejudice, there are few better starting points than his timeless definition of racism as a "diseased imagination."

Douglass welcomed the [Civil War](http://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war) in 1861 as a moral crusade against slavery. During the war he labored as a propagandist of the Union cause and emancipation, a recruiter of black troops, and (on two occasions) an adviser to President [Abraham Lincoln](http://www.history.com/topics/abraham-lincoln). He viewed the Union victory as an apocalyptic rebirth of America as a nation rooted in a rewritten Constitution and the ideal of racial equality. Some of his hopes were dashed during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, but he continued to travel widely and lecture on racial issues, national politics, and women's rights. In the 1870s Douglass moved to [Washington, D.C.](http://www.history.com/topics/washington-dc), where he edited a newspaper and became president of the ill-fated Freedman's Bank. As a stalwart Republican, Douglass was appointed marshal (1877-1881) and recorder of deeds (1881-1886) for the District of Columbia, and chargé d'affaires for Santo Domingo and minister to Haiti (1889-1891).

Brilliant, heroic, and complex, Douglass became a symbol of his age and a unique voice for humanism and social justice. His life and thought will always speak profoundly to the meaning of being black in America, as well as the human calling to resist oppression. Douglass died in 1895 after years of trying to preserve a black abolitionist's meaning and memory of the great events he had witnessed and helped to shape.

David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (1989); Waldo E. Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (1984). The Reader's Companion to American History. Eric Foner and John A. Garraty, Editors. Copyright © 1991 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.