**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)