

Civil Rights Activists: Harriet Tubman

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Early Life

Harriet Tubman was born to slave parents in Maryland. She was probably born in the 1820s. Her real name was Araminta Harriet Ross.

Her early life was very tough. Her master sold three of her sisters to other slave owners. This split her family apart. But her mother stopped a trader from buying her youngest brother. This set a strong example for young Tubman.

Pain was a part of Harriet's everyday life. The worst incident occurred when she was a teenager. She met a slave who had left the fields without permission. The slave's owner told Tubman to stop his runaway. Tubman refused, so the owner threw a weight at her head.

By the time Tubman was an adult, many African-American people in Maryland had been freed. She married a man named John Tubman. He was one of these newly free people.



Escape From Slavery

Tubman decided to escape after her owner died. She feared that her family would be separated. So in 1849, she and two of her brothers ran away. There was a \$300 reward for their capture. Her brothers were afraid of being caught, so they returned home. Tubman went alone to Pennsylvania.

Tubman used the Underground Railroad to travel 90 miles to Philadelphia. The Underground Railroad was a secret network of safe houses and places to rest. Runaway slaves used this network to travel North. The Northern states did not have slavery. If slaves made it there, they would be free. Tubman crossed into the free state of Pennsylvania with a feeling of relief. She said that "the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven."

Tubman decided to rescue her family and bring them North. She guided her parents, brothers and sisters to Philadelphia. She also led about 60 other slaves to freedom. This was the first of her many trips.

A Scout And A Spy

A new law changed things in 1850. It was called the Fugitive Slave Law. This law stated that escaped slaves could be captured in the North. If they were caught, they would be taken back to their owners. To keep from getting caught, Tubman changed the route of the Underground Railroad. Canada did not have this law, so Tubman led the runaway slaves to Canada instead.

When the Civil War broke out, Harriet Tubman helped the antislavery North. She worked for the Union Army as a cook and a nurse. She soon became a scout and a spy. At one point she helped free 750 slaves in South Carolina.