

Harriet Tubman – The Woman called “Moses”

Slavery began in America in the 1600s and lasted for more than 200 years. In order to escape dehumanizing conditions, many blacks were led to freedom via an elaborate network of tunnels, roads and safehouses known as the Underground Railroad.

Along its routes, slaves were led from one station to the next by conductors who were abolitionists and former slaves. The most famous guide among these was the legendary Harriet Tubman.

Harriet was born Araminta Harriet Ross in 1820 to African parents in Bucktown, Maryland. Life was extremely hard for the family of 11 children.

At the age of 5, Harriet was hired out as an inside laborer. She grew to be physically strong and strong-willed. Her favorite Bible story was that of Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Harriet's masters considered her to be hardworking but often defiant. She was beaten frequently and eventually hired out as a field laborer.

When she was 15, Harriet tried to stop an overseer from capturing a runaway slave. The overseer struck her in the head with a lead weight. It took months for her to recover and caused her to experience dizzy spells and narcolepsy for the rest of her life.

Harriet married a free black man when she was 25, but she remained a slave. When her owner died, to avoid being sold and shipped farther south, Harriet escaped to freedom with the

help of a Quaker woman and various Underground Railroad contacts.

Crossing the state line into Pennsylvania, Harriet said: "I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now I was free. There was such glory over everything. The sun came like gold through the trees and over the fields, and I felt I was in heaven."

Harriet settled in the Philadelphia area, where she worked as a maid. Passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 led her to join the Underground Railroad.

She conducted her first mission in 1851 to rescue her sister and her sister's children in Baltimore. Later she rescued her brothers and her parents.

Altogether she made 19 trips to the South, rescuing more than 300 slaves. Her bravery earned her the name "Moses" for leading her people to the "promised land."

In the Civil War, Harriet served as a cook, nurse, scout and spy for the Union Army. During a military gunboat raid in 1863, she led a group of black soldiers that rescued more than 750 slaves.

Harriet returned home to Auburn, New York, after the war and became active in the women's rights movement. She later established a home for former slaves that became known as the Harriet Tubman Home.

In 1913, Harriet Tubman died in Auburn, New York, at the age of 93. She was buried with full military honors.