

# Bound For The Promised Land:

## Harriet Tubman, Portrait of An American Hero

**Dr. Kate Clifford Larson**

Harriet Tubman's life was defined by strong ties to *family, community, and faith*. These three things enabled her to pursue lifelong passions for *freedom, equality, justice, and self-determination*.



Road near former Thompson plantation, leading to presumed site of Ben Ross's cabin.  
Courtesy: Kate Clifford Larson

Harriet Tubman was born Araminta, or “Minty,” Ross in late February or early March 1822, on the plantation of Anthony Thompson, south of Madison in Dorchester County, Maryland. Tubman was the fifth of nine children of Ben and Rit Green Ross. Ben supervised the cutting of timber on Thompson’s large plantation, while Rit probably worked in Thompson’s house or in the fields. Little Minty, her brothers, sisters, and mother belonged to Thompson’s stepson, Edward Brodess. When Minty was a small child Brodess took them to his own small farm ten miles away in Bucktown. Separated from Ben, Minty and her family experienced intense hardship and loneliness. The free Black and enslaved community surrounding this plantation played a significant role in the Ross family’s social world.



Civil War commemorative marker near the former Brodess farm and Tubman childhood home near Bucktown, MD.  
Courtesy: Kate Clifford Larson

Edward Brodess had too many enslaved people to work on his small farm near Bucktown, so he hired some of them out to other farmers. From the young age of six Harriet was hired out to a series of cruel masters who physically and emotionally abused her. She later told an interviewer that she used to cry herself to sleep at night, wishing she could be with her family. Brodess also sold some of his enslaved people to slave traders from the Deep South, including Harriet's sisters, Linah, Soph and Mariah Ritty, forever tearing the Ross family apart.



Only remaining Bucktown Village Store. Built circa 1860. Courtesy: Kate Clifford Larson

While working as a field hand for a neighboring planter in the Bucktown area during the mid 1830s, Tubman was ordered to accompany the plantation cook to the local dry goods store. While there, Tubman was called to help capture a young enslaved man who had run away from his work assignment in the fields. She refused. As the young man fled the store, the angry overseer threw an iron weight from the store counter, hoping to strike the young man, but it hit Harriet in the head with such force that it crushed her young skull, nearly killing her. It took months for her mother to nurse her back to health. The severe injury left her suffering from headaches, seizures, vivid visions and sleeping spells that affected her for the rest of her life.



Stewart's Canal near Madison and Parson's Creek, Dorchester County, MD. Dug by hand by free and enslaved African Americans circa 1810-1830. Courtesy: Kate Clifford Larson

After she recovered, however, Brodess hired Harriet out to John T. Stewart, a Madison merchant and shipbuilder. This was a fortuitous event in Tubman's life; it brought her back to the African American community of free and enslaved people where her father Ben lived and where she had been born. It was during this time that she learned valuable survival skills that would contribute to her success on the Underground Railroad and during the Civil War. She discovered the ways of the forests from her father, and she learned important information about freedom in the North from African American sailors, who may have told her of safe places in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and New England. She also may have learned about the hidden communication networks that were supported by Black watermen, shipyard, and dock workers, who were perfectly positioned to carry messages back and forth between family and friends in different communities throughout the Chesapeake Bay and along the Atlantic seaboard.



Tubman circa 1868 or later? Library of Congress LC-USZ62-7816

About 1844, when she was twenty-two years old, Harriet Ross married freeman, John Tubman. It was during this period she shed her childhood name Minty in favor of Harriet. Hired out to the Madison area near her father and other family and friends, Harriet worked very hard, earning extra money on the side, which Brodess allowed her to keep. She bought a pair of oxen and soon increased her earnings by plowing fields and hauling timber. Perhaps she was hoping to buy her freedom. On March 7, 1849, however, Edward Brodess died on his farm in Bucktown at the age of 47, leaving Tubman and the rest of her family at risk of being sold to settle his many debts.

**THREE HUNDRED DOLLARS  
REWARD.**

**R**ANAWAY from the subscriber on Monday the 17th ult., three negroes, named as follows: HARRY, aged about 19 years, has on one side of his neck a wen, just under the ear, he is of a dark chestnut color, about 5 feet 8 or 9 inches high; BEN, aged about 25 years, is very quick to speak when spoken to, he is of a chestnut color, about six feet high; MINTY, aged about 27 years, is of a chestnut color, fine looking, and about 5 feet high. One hundred dollars reward will be given for each of the above named negroes, if taken out of the State, and \$50 each if taken in the State. They must be lodged in Baltimore, Easton or Cambridge Jail, in Maryland.

ELIZA ANN BRODESS,  
Near Bucktown, Dorchester county, Md.  
Oct. 3d, 1849.

The Delaware Gazette will please copy the above three weeks, and charge this office.

Only known copy of Harriet Tubman's (Minty) runaway advertisement. From the Cambridge Democrat, October 3, 1849. Courtesy: Jay Meredith.

Tubman felt threatened, so she decided to run away. At first she fled with her two brothers, Ben and Henry, but they became frightened and returned to the Eastern Shore of Maryland. But Harriet knew she was going to be sold, so she decided to flee on her own. Later that fall, she took her own liberty. She tapped into an Underground Railroad that was already operating secretly on the Eastern Shore: traveling by night, using the North Star and instructions from white and Black helpers, she found her way to Philadelphia. She began working as a housekeeper, laundress, and cook, saving her money to help the rest of her family escape.



Tubman circa 1901. Cayuga Museum of History and Art, Auburn, NY


Tubman settled in Philadelphia. But freedom felt empty without her beloved family and friends. She found work as a domestic, saving her money to finance her escape plans. Tapping into a well organized Underground Railroad network supported by Black and white helpers, Tubman began her decade long mission of liberation. Her first attempt involved a complicated plan to rescue her niece, Kessiah Jolley Bowley, from the auction block. Over the next ten years Tubman brought away her brothers Moses, Robert, Ben, and Henry; her parents Ben and Rit; and scores more totaling approximately 70 friends and family members. She gave instructions to at least 70 more who found their way to freedom independently. Unfortunately, Tubman's sister Rachel, the last one left in slavery, died before she could be rescued. This brought great grief to Tubman and her family.

**NEGRO FOR SALE.**

**I** WILL sell at public sale to the highest bidder for cash, at the Court house door in the town of Cambridge, on **MONDAY** the 10th day of September next, a negro woman named **KIZZIAH**, aged about 25 years. She will be sold for life, and a good title will be given. Attendance given by

**JOHN MILLS,**  
Agent for Elizabeth Brodess.

**August 29th 1849.** 2w



Auction sale advertisement for Harriet Tubman's niece Kessiah Jolley Bowley. The auction was postponed until December 1850, when the above-described rescue occurred. Cambridge Democrat, 5 September 1849.

In December 1850, Tubman conducted her first rescue mission. Her niece, Kessiah and Kessiah's two children were set to be auctioned to the highest bidder at the Court House in Cambridge, MD. By way of secret communication with Tubman in Philadelphia, Kessiah's free husband, John Bowley, devised a plan to rescue his family. On the day of the auction, John bid on his wife and children, even though he did not have the money to pay for them. Before the auctioneer knew what was happening, John whisked his family away and sailed them all the way to Baltimore's busy waterfront. There, the Bowleys were met by Tubman, and other family members and friends from Dorchester County who worked as seamen, stevedores, ship carpenters, and caulkers on the wharves in Fells Point. They were hidden safely among family and friends living along Slemmer's Alley, Dallas, Bond and Pratt Streets, until Tubman could safely bring them on to Philadelphia.





Road to the Poplar Neck farm in Caroline County where Ben Ross lived and operated his own Underground Railroad station. Tubman met her brothers here on Christmas Day 1854 before escorting them to freedom. Courtesy: Kate Clifford Larson

Tubman's keen intelligence and deep faith guided her throughout her long life. On the Underground Railroad, she used survival skills she learned from her father, mother, and Black mariners to help navigate her way along the routes to freedom. Members of the region's free and enslaved African American community, like Jacob Jackson and Samuel Green in Dorchester County, Tom Tubman and others in Baltimore; William and Nathaniel Brinkley, and Abraham Gibbs in Delaware; and William Still of Philadelphia aided Tubman and risked their lives to assist freedom seekers reach safety in the North. This network was also supported by white abolitionists, including Quakers Jonah Kelley and Jacob Leverton from the Eastern Shore, and Thomas Garrett of Wilmington, Delaware. Tubman employed various strategies to fool pursuing slave catchers: acting as an old woman, dressing like a man, or traveling south to throw hunters off her tracks. She often found solace in her belief that God was guiding and protecting her.



Tubman circa 1896. Ohio Historical Society

Though Tubman sent many of her charges to St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada for protection, she remained in Philadelphia so she could continue planning rescue missions. It was extremely dangerous for her to remain there, however, so, after she brought her parents to Canada in the late spring of 1857, she settled into the growing refugee community in St. Catharines. For the next three years Tubman traveled throughout New England and New York lecturing about the horrors of slavery and raising funds to help support herself and her aged parents. In 1858, Tubman met with the legendary John Brown in her North Street home in St. Catharines. Impressed by his passion for ending slavery, she committed herself to helping him with his planned raid at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Though she hoped to be at his side when the attack took place in October 1859, illness may have prevented her from joining him.



Tubman during the Civil War. Originally from Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, Auburn, NY, 1869.

In early 1862 Tubman traveled to Port Royal, South Carolina, to aid the Union efforts. Throughout the Civil War she provided important medical care to Black soldiers and newly liberated slaves who crowded Union camps. Tubman's military service included spying and scouting behind Confederate lines. In early June 1863, she became the first woman to command an armed military raid when she guided Col. James Montgomery and his 2nd South Carolina Black Volunteers up the Combahee River, where they forced the retreat of Confederate forces and liberated over 750 enslaved people.



Auburn, outside Tubman's barn, circa 1887. Left to right: Harriet Tubman, adopted daughter Gertie Davis, Nelson Davis, neighbor Lee Cheney, John Alexander, Walter Green, Sarah Parker, and niece Dora Stewart. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

In 1859, William Henry Seward, President Lincoln's Secretary of State, sold Tubman a home on the outskirts of Auburn, New York, and in 1861 she safely settled her aged parents and other family members there. After the war, Tubman rejoined them and others who had moved to Auburn from Canada to be near her. She began another career as a community and civil rights activist, humanitarian, and suffragist. In 1869, she married Nelson Davis, a veteran, after her husband John Tubman had been killed in Dorchester County. She and Davis ran a brick making business and sold crops grown on their small farm. Though Tubman struggled financially, her home remained open to anyone in need. Surrounded by family and friends, her deep faith and humanitarian work remained the focus of the rest of her life.



Harriet Tubman, circa 1908. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

Denied her own military pension, she eventually received a widow's pension as the wife of Nelson Davis, and, later, a Civil War nurse's pension. One of her proudest achievements was the opening of the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged, located on land she bought and then transferred to the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in 1903. Active in the woman's suffrage movement since 1860, Tubman continued to appear at local and national suffrage conventions until the early 1900s. She died of pneumonia at the age of 91 on March 10, 1913 in Auburn, New York.

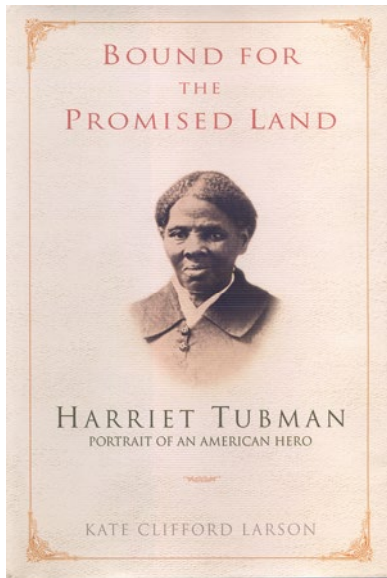


From Franklin B. Sanborn, *Colonel James Montgomery: Recollections of 70 Years*, Boston: R.G. Badger, 1909

Harriet Ross Tubman 1822- March 10, 1913.

Freedom Fighter, American Hero.

International Symbol for Freedom Equality, Justice and Self Determination.



*Kate Clifford Larson is the author of the critically acclaimed biography, Bound For The Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of An American Hero, published in January 2004. She earned her Ph.D. in History from the University of New Hampshire, where she completed her doctoral dissertation on the life and memory of Harriet Tubman. She teaches at Simmons College in Boston.*