

STUDY GUIDE

Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad

HARRIET TUBMAN AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Book and Lyrics by Douglas Jones
Music by Ron Barnett

TEACHER RESOURCES

Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad and this study guide are produced in support of the teaching of the Virginia Standards of Learning in History, Social Sciences, Language Arts, Theater Arts and Music.

AT THE LIBRARY

Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman
by Dorothy Sterling

Harriet Tubman, Secret Agent: How Daring Slaves and Free Blacks Spied for the Union During the Civil War
by Thomas B. Allen

Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom
by Carole Boston

ON THE WEB

PBS: Tubman Biography
pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1535.html

National Geographic: The Underground Railroad
nationalgeographic.org/maps/underground-railroad-journey-freedom/

INTRODUCTION

Harriet Tubman was a great American who freed herself and hundreds of others from the bonds of slavery. She faced many challenges over the course of her lifetime; nevertheless she was determined to change the world with her courage.

Our drama begins as Harriet's friend, Sarah Bradford, author of *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, is persuading a publisher to print her book. The publisher is not enthusiastic until he begins to read through the stories of Harriet's life.

As our story unfolds, we learn of Harriet's early years in slavery, her escape to freedom, and her time as a conductor on the Underground Railroad.

The Underground Railroad was a lifeline for slaves escaping to freedom, and Harriet Tubman was undoubtedly one of its most famous conductors.

During the Civil War, Harriet became a spy for the Union Army and later she served as a nurse and a scout. The North won the war, bringing emancipation to the slaves, but that did not end Harriet's struggle for freedom.

Turning her attention to women's suffrage, she continued fighting for everyone who suffered inequality.



Harriet Tubman wearing a shawl given to her by Queen Victoria, ca. 1897. Photograph by Benjamin F. Powelson, Collection of the National Museum of African American History and Culture shared with the Library of Congress.

Discovering Harriet Tubman

STUDY GUIDE

You have an important part to play! How to play your part:

A play is different than television or a movie. The actors are right in front of you and can see your reactions, feel your attention, and hear your laughter and applause. Watch and listen carefully to understand the story. The story is told by actors and comes to life through your imagination.

Harriet Tubman, an icon of American history, was born a slave and raised on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, where the lines between slavery and freedom were often blurred. It was not unusual for families in this area to include both free and enslaved members. Harriet would remain enslaved until she fled to Pennsylvania in 1849.

In 1849, Harriet Tubman, worried that she and the other slaves on the plantation were going to be sold, decided to run away. Tubman believed she had two choices: freedom or death.

In Philadelphia, Tubman joined the Abolitionist Movement and became a conductor on the Underground Railroad, earning her the nickname “Moses” after the prophet Moses in the Bible who led his people to freedom. In all her journeys, Harriet never lost a passenger.

Harriet’s work was a constant threat to her own freedom and safety. Slave holders placed a bounty for her capture and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was an ever-present danger, imposing severe punishments on any person who assisted the escape of a slave.

Over the course of 10 years, and at great personal risk, Tubman made 19 trips to Maryland and helped 300 people escape to freedom along the Underground Railroad.

During the Civil War (1860-1865), Tubman was a scout, spy, and nurse for the federal forces in South Carolina. Tubman was the first woman to lead an assault. She conducted the Combahee River Raid which set free 700 slaves.

After the war, Tubman continued the struggle for freedom as a leader in the suffrage movement. She died from pneumonia on March 10, 1913 in Auburn, New York and was buried with military honors.

“I had reasoned this out in my mind, there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other.”

-Harriet Tubman

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why do you think Harriet’s brothers turned back when they decided to escape? Why would choosing to escape have been such a difficult decision for a slave?
2. Harriet Tubman lived from 1820-1913, a time of great changes. In what ways do you think this time in history would have been different if she had never lived?
3. Using the information above, create a timeline of important events in Harriet Tubman’s life. Add boxes if you need to.

HARRIET TUBMAN TIMELINE



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Underground Railroad is a term that people first used before the American Civil War to describe the organized efforts to help runaway slaves escape to freedom. These activities were often secret, sometimes dangerous, and almost always illegal, but many of the people who helped runaways flee on the Underground Railroad did so openly because they hated slavery so much and because they believed that any laws protecting slavery were wrong and should be broken.

Station refers to a home or location that provided fugitive slaves or runaways with a safe resting place during their escape. Today, there are lots of stories about secret stations along the Underground Railroad, but many of them cannot be proven to be true.

Abolitionist refers to someone who wanted to see an immediate end to slavery. In the early history of the United States, many people were opposed to slavery, but there were few true abolitionists. However, these abolitionists had influence far beyond their numbers, because they were so active in the struggle. That is why many, but not all of them, supported the Underground Railroad. Some abolitionists wanted to end slavery but still could not support the idea of breaking the law to free individual slaves.

Canaan is a place described in the Bible as land promised by God to Abraham and his descendants. For runaway slaves, “Canaan” was a word they used to describe Canada, which was then a country that had banned slavery and bravely refused to send escaped slaves back to their masters.

Conductor refers to people who helped runaway slaves move from place to place during their flight to freedom. Today, Harriet Tubman is the best known conductor of the Underground Railroad, but there were hundreds of others who performed this most dangerous job.

Fugitive is a word that Americans used in the nineteenth century to describe a slave who ran away from his or her master. Fugitives were also called “runaways” but today many people prefer to think of them as “freedom seekers.” Not all fugitives escaped on the Underground Railroad — many left slavery on their own and ran away without any organized help.

North Star refers to the star “Polaris” which can only be seen in the northern hemisphere and which can be used to help guide travel in a northern direction. Some runaway slaves relied on the North Star as their main navigational tool during their flight to freedom.

Slavery was a system of laws and customs that existed in the United States until 1865 which treated most black people as property. Masters owned slaves and could decide every aspect of their lives, from where they lived (and with whom) to what they did each day. Different forms of slavery had existed throughout the world’s history, but there was something especially cruel about an American slave system that was based on race and offered almost no hope of freedom.

“I was the conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can’t say; I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger.”

-Harriet Tubman



CHALLENGE

Think about it: Abolitionists who ran the Underground Railroad system were following their personal beliefs instead of their country’s laws. Throughout history, people have used passive and nonviolent disobedience to protest laws and enact change. In your opinion, is civil disobedience ever justified? Why or why not?

STUDY GUIDE

HARRIET TUBMAN

Her birth name was **Araminta Ross**. She was nicknamed “Minty” by her mother. She would later adopt the name “Harriet” after her mother: Harriet Ross.

Harriet Tubman’s **actual birthday is unknown**. It is believed that she was born between 1819 and 1823.

When Harriet was a teenager, she **suffered a head injury** when an overseer threw a heavy piece of metal at a runaway slave and instead hit her in the head.

As a result of the injury, she suffered from sleeping spells, when she would **suddenly fall asleep and it was difficult to wake her up**. It gave her **visions and dreams** that she considered signs from God. Religion and faith were the reasons she risked her life guiding slaves to freedom.

During her time as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, she worked during winter months to avoid being seen and on Saturday night because **newspapers would publish runaway notices on Monday morning**.

She earned the nickname **General Tubman** by John Brown.

Tubman **used disguises** to avoid getting caught. She dressed as a man, old woman or middle class free African American.

During the Civil War, she was paid \$200 over a period of three years. **She supported herself by selling pies**.

During the Civil War, **she worked as a nurse and a cook**. Her knowledge of local plants helped her cure soldiers with dysentery.

Her **first authorized biography**, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, was published in 1869 by Sarah Hopkins Bradford. She received \$1,200 from its publication.

After the Civil War, she became involved in the cause for **women’s suffrage**. She gave speeches in Boston, New York and Washington.

Just before Harriet’s death from pneumonia in 1913, she told friends and family, “I go to prepare a place for you.” She was **buried with military honors** in Fort Hill Cemetery in New York.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

The Underground Railroad (UR) was **not underground**, nor was it a railroad. It was called “underground” because of its secretive nature and “railroad” because it was an emerging form of transportation.

Its most famous conductor was Harriet Tubman.

The UR was an informal network and had many routes. Most routes went to **northern states** and, after 1850, to Canada. Others went south to **Mexico** or the **Caribbean**.

Historians estimate that about **100,000 slaves escaped** using the UR network.

Most actions by people who helped slaves escape were **spontaneous actions of generosity**. They were women, men, and children, white and black. Many were Quakers or Methodists.

Railroad language was adopted as secret codes used by agents, station masters, conductors, operators, stockholders and all of those involved in saving slaves. Coded songs were used by slaves.

Levi Coffin was known as the “President of the Underground Railroad” and his home was called the “Grand Station of the Underground Railroad.”

The history of the UR goes back to the 1780s and became known in the 1830s. **It reached its height in the 1850s and ended in 1863 when President Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation.**

The **most famous supporters** of the UR were Harriet Tubman, Levi Coffin, William Still, Frederick Douglass, Thomas Garrett, William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, Samuel Green, Gerrit Smith, and Lucretia Coffin Mott, among others.

UR stations had **secret hideouts** such as passages, basements, cellars, and hidden compartments in cupboards where slaves were safely hidden.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made it more difficult for slaves to escape. The law allowed for slaves to be returned to their masters even though they were in a free state. The final destination became Canada.

Under the Fugitive Slave Act, any person who was caught helping a slave escape or offering shelter could be sent to **jail for 6 months** or subjected to a **\$1,000 fine**.

STUDY GUIDE



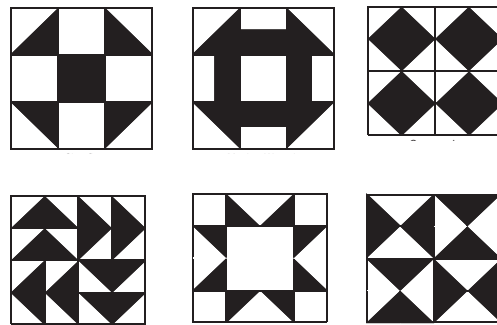
CRITICAL THINKING DISCUSSIONS

1. There were many other men and women who wanted to help slaves gain their freedom. Read about other people, such as Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass, who used lectures, newspapers, and books to tell people why slavery was bad.
2. Slave owners usually did not like to let their slaves learn to read or write. Why do you think this is so? It has been said that “readers are leaders.” How would this have been true for the slaves?
3. Many brave people endangered their lives and homes to help slaves escape using the Underground Railroad. Write a diary entry that you think you might have made while helping a slave escape.
4. The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified in 1865 when Harriet Tubman was 45 years old. Read a copy of this amendment and think about how Harriet must have felt when she learned about this new law.
5. Imagine you are a slave. You have no rights and no freedom. Six days a week you toil in the fields for your master making him wealthy. One of your friends is talking about escaping north to freedom. Do you go with them? Explain your answer. Be sure to include reasons for escaping, hardships you must face/overcome, and possible sources of help. If you choose not to escape, explain your reasons.
6. You have been asked to hide a fugitive slave overnight. If you get caught, you will be sent to prison. What would you do? Explain your answer. Be sure to include your reasons for aiding the fugitive slave. If you decide not to hide the fugitive slave, explain your reasons.

FREEDOM QUILTS

Did you know that quilts were used to aid runaways on the Underground Railroad? Slaves made coded quilts and used them to communicate information to each other about how to navigate their escape on the Underground Railroad.

Activity: Use the templates to provide uniform quilt blocks. Have each student create a paper quilt block for a class freedom quilt. Assemble the finished blocks using additional construction paper for the binding on edges and between blocks to create a class quilt:
<http://mathwire.com/quilts/freedomtemplates.pdf>



Bear Paw code instructed runaway slaves to follow the bear tracks through the mountains, staying away from roads.
 Courtesy Smith Robertson Museum

Cues at the Theatre

STUDY GUIDE

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