

# Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad

Harriet Tubman was named Araminta Ross when she was born around 1820–1821 in Dorchester County, Maryland. Her nickname was “Minty.” When she was about eleven, Araminta changed her name to Harriet in honor of her mother, who was named Harriet. Her last name changed when she was forced to marry a man with the last name Tubman.

Tubman grew up as a slave under the harshest conditions, and although she was frequently beaten, she often tried to run away. At about age ten, she received a serious head injury when refusing to help tie up a fellow slave. The overseer hit her so hard with an iron weight that it left a permanent indentation in her forehead, and she suffered from headaches and blackouts for the rest of her life.

When she reached about thirty years of age, Tubman ran away to Philadelphia, where she found work and a new purpose in life. She and a group of close friends and relatives started working to form the Underground Railroad.

The “railroad” was a series of safe houses called “stations.” The runaways traveled by

night, with the help of “conductors,” or guides, who led them from one safe house, or “station,” to the next. Freed slaves were called “freight,” and routes were called “lines.”

Tubman helped free hundreds of slaves. The Underground Railroad operated in fourteen states from Maine to Nebraska. Northern states and Canada had laws that made it difficult for slaves to be recaptured. In all, Tubman made nineteen trips back into the South. She freed her sister and her children in 1850. Then in 1857, she rescued her parents, Benjamin and Harriet Greene Ross.

Tubman formed friendships with abolitionists Thomas Garrett and John Brown. She was so strong in her leadership skills that Brown nicknamed her General Tubman. She spoke often at meetings for women’s rights and abolition. She helped Brown plan his famous raid on the arsenal at Harper’s Ferry (now in West Virginia), although illness prevented her participation. When the Civil War started, Tubman worked for the Union army as a cook, nurse, and spy. She spent the rest of her life (d. 1913) working for African-American rights.

## Exercise

1. Why would the method of helping slaves escape be called “underground”? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. Explain one reason why Tubman and Brown might want to raid an arsenal. \_\_\_\_\_

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3. How did Tubman’s work for the Underground Railroad help prepare her to be a spy? \_\_\_\_\_

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