

# Harriet Ross Tubman

Abolitionist

**Harriet Tubman** was born a slave on a plantation in Dorchester County, Maryland. Her given name was Araminta Ross. When she was five years old, Tubman began working as a maid and a children's nurse until she was old enough to work in the fields at age twelve. Tubman was very smart, but as was the case with all slaves, she was not allowed to go to school or to learn to read and write.

In 1849, when she was twenty-eight years old, Tubman escaped to Pennsylvania. There she became actively involved with the abolitionists in their quest to end slavery.

In 1850, Tubman became a "conductor" on the underground railroad, a highly organized group of antislavery activists who provided safe havens for runaway slaves on their way to freedom in the North. Using her skills as a conductor, Tubman was able to help countless people escape from slavery, including her elderly parents and many of her own family members. She remained a conductor for a ten-year period, during which time she personally led nineteen rescue trips and guided about three hundred people to freedom in the North.

Tubman had four cardinal rules that she required all runaway slaves on the underground railroad to follow

without question: to be on time, to keep their escape plans absolutely secret from everyone, to follow all orders quickly

and without protest, and to be ready to die rather than to turn back. These may seem like difficult rules to follow, but they were absolutely essential in making the slaves' escape successful and as safe as possible. Tubman never had a problem gaining the runaway slaves' trust and cooperation with her rules.

During the Civil War, Tubman served the U.S. Army in several positions: as a scout, a spy, and a nurse. She was in charge of a raid that freed over 750 slaves. Because of her outstanding efforts to secure freedom for so many African Americans, Tubman earned the titles "the Moses of her people" and "the General."

After the Civil War ended, Tubman continued to work for the rights of African Americans. Her focus shifted to establishing schools for African American children. This was a very important issue to Tubman as she had been denied an education because of her race. She also later became involved in women's rights issues.

Tubman died in 1913 at the age of 92. In 1974, her former home was named a national historic landmark. In 1978, the U.S. Postal Service honored her many contributions with a commemorative stamp.



## Activities

1. Why was Harriet Tubman called "the Moses of her people?"
2. Using a map of the United States, draw the path of the underground railroad. Why do you think Harriet Tubman was so successful in her efforts with the underground railroad?