Let My People Go: Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad

Benjamin Quarles

The famed Underground Railroad consisted of secret routes that runaway slaves took to the North and freedom. Though one historian has argued that the Underground Railroad was never as highly organized as legend claims, the system did exist, and its conductors, always black, were brave men and women who stole into slave territory and escorted bands of slaves to the North, relying on black and white homesteads, called "stations," to hide and feed them along the way. Harriet Beecher Stowe said that she and her husband hid fugitives in their ham while they were living in Cincinnati, Ohio, and her great novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, drew on a real-life story in describing how Eliza Harris and her child escaped north on the Underground Railroad.

For African Americans of the antebellum period, as Benjamin Quarles says in the following selection, the Underground Railroad was the most effective means of undermining the slave system and the white-owned myth of the slaves as "cheerful" Sambo, who were happy with their lot. But since most of the northern states had black laws that discriminated against African Americans, denying them the right to vote, run for political office, sit on juries, attend public schools, marry whites, work at skilled jobs, and even be buried in white cemeteries, many fugitives went on to Canada, with the full approval of the Canadian government, where they could work as skilled laborers and enjoy a greater degree of freedom than they could in the United States. After the passage of the stringent new federal fugitive slave law in 1850, more runaways than ever sought refuge in Canada.

Harriet Tubman was the Underground Railroad's most famous conductor. Born a slave on Maryland's Eastern Shore, Tubman "fled" herself in 1849 by escaping to Philadelphia. In the years that followed, she slipped back into slaveholding Maryland, rifle in hand, at least fifteen times, and escorted some two hundred slaves, including her own parents, to freedom. In his magnificent book, Proponents in Protest (1968), Lerone Bennett, Jr., describes how Tubman operated once she was in slave territory: "She made her way to selected plantations where slaves were informed of her presence by code songs, prayers, or some other stratagem. Selected slaves were then approached of the rendezvous area and the time of departure. Once the slaves were assembled, Harriet sized them up, searching them closely with her eyes. Satisfied, she placed the group under strict military discipline. During the trip, she was in absolute and total control and no one could question her orders. William Still, the black rebel who operated the key Philadelphia station of the Underground Railroad, said me 'had a very short and pointed tone of law of her own which implied death to anyone who talked of giving out and going back.' Once a slave committed himself to a Tubman escape, he was committed to freedom or death. On
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Benjamin Quarles, one of our most eminent historians and an African American, offers a warm and sympathetic portrait of the great conductor, gently pulling back the veil that surrounds her to show us what she was like as a human being. Along the way, Quarles gives us judicious insights into the operations and significance of the Underground Railroad, and he concludes with a profound statement about Harriet Tubman as a symbol for the black struggle today.

GLOSSARY

BROWN, JOHN Militant white abolitionist who believed that slavery was too entrenched in the American system ever to be removed except by violent means. In 1859, he led a raid against the federal arsenal and armory at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, and seized the guns there. His goal was to destroy slavery by invading the South and inciting a vast slave uprising or, failing that, by politicizing the actions and provoking a violent upheaval in which slavery would be wiped out. He was captured at Harper's Ferry and hanged.

GARRETT, THOMAS Delaware abolitionist and leader of the Society of Friends who assisted Harriet Tubman, providing money and shelter at the "brought slave north on the Underground Railroad."

JEFFERSON, WILLIAM H. United States senator from New York and a powerful leader of the all-black Republican party.

STILL, WILLIAM Prominent free black who headed the General Vigilance Committee of Philadelphia and the Underground Railroad's "key station" in that city. He, too, assisted Harriet Tubman in her slave-liberating operations.

STOWE, HARRIET BEECHER Author of Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), the most popular novel of the nineteenth century and a passionate indictment of the cruelties of the South's slave system.

TRUTH, SOJOURNER Like Tubman, a "deeply religious former slave" who was unlettered but eloquent. Truth was "primarily a women's rights activist" in the North.
"I grew up like a neglected weed—ignorant of liberty, having no experience of it."

The speaker, a short, spare, black-skinned woman of thirty-five, was being interviewed at her home in St. Catharines, Ontario, in the summer of 1882. "Now, I've been free," she added, "I know what a dreadful condition slavery is." The speaker's interviewer, Benjamin Drew, a Boston school principal and part-time journalist, made "verbal alterations" (as he put it) in the broken English of Harriet Tubman, but he caught the animated spirit that would give meaning and purpose to a long career then in its budding stages.

A runaway slave, Tubman had achieved near mythical status within ten years after her own dash for freedom. Save for the white South, contemporay references to her invariably bore a eulogistic ring. The author and reformer Thomas Wentworth Higginson dubbed her "the greatest heroine of the age," in a letter (June 17, 1839) to his mother. "Her deeds of adventure are beyond anything in fiction and her ingenuity and generalship are extrascrip. I have known, her for some time—she of course call her Moses." A present-day schoolgirl, Larry Graft, holds that "the legendary exploits of Harriet Tubman are undoubtedly exaggerated." But it is equally undeniable that Tubman has resisted being demythologized. One who lived into her early nineties, she proved to be a legend that would not fade in the memories of her contemporaries and a figure who would find a niche in folk literature ("a heroine in homespun") as well as on the pages of the more formally written histories.

Harriet Tubman (1820-1913), known as "the Moses of her people" because of her heroic work on the Underground Railroad. She helped some two hundred slaves in Maryland and conveyed them north to freedom. (North Wind Picture Archives)

Wherefore the source of Tubman's immeasurable legendary status as the premiere conductor on the Underground Railroad, Tubman might eulogize the snuffing dogs of the slave catchers but she could hardly assign the legends that would attach to her name. Tales of daring do inevitably cluster around those whose operations, by their very nature, have to be clothed in secrecy. Moreover, in the case of the right-handed Tubman, legend had to fill in for her ingrained reticence about her activities, a circumstance growing out of her experiences as a slave and as a rescuer of slaves. Even

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A rescuer of slaves, Tubman had achieved nearly mythical status within ten years after her own dash for freedom. She was the white Souther, contemporary reference to her inevitably bore a derogatory ring. The author and reformer Thomas Wentworth Higginson dubbed her “the great heroine of the age,” in a letter (June 17, 1859) to his mother. “Her tale of adventure is beyond anything in fiction and her generosity andgenerality are extraordinary. I have known her for some time—the slaves call her Moses.”

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Harriet Tubman (c. 1820-1913), known as “the Moses of her people” because of her heroic work on the Underground Railroad, moved scores of hundreds slaves in Maryland and directed men to freedom. (North Wind Picture Archives)

When the source of Tubman’s indescribable legendary status? As the premier conductor on a legendary liberty line, the Underground Railroad, Tubman might elude the sniffing dogs of the slave catchers but she could hardly escape the legend that would attach to her name. Tales of derring-do inevitably cluster around those whose operations, like her very nature, have to be cloaked in secrecy. Moreover, in the eyes of the tireless Tubman, legend had to fill it in for her ingrained reticence about her activities, a circumstance growing out of her experiences as a slave and as a rescuer of slaves. Even

But the crusade against slavery and its death in the Civil War, Tubman’s moody keeps her from resuming her role in other circumstances—a brief, passing experience on a rare occasion was the extent to which she ever unburdened herself as those bygone days. The Tubman legend was also stimuli-ated by her illiteracy, her fear of filling in all her written records.

Contradictory significantly in its fate, Tubman’s legendary status played an important part in elevating her to a leadership level that she had not sought but could not escape. Believing that her actions were pro-claimed, she remained indifferent to whatever the causes of her power, whether stemming from her personal accomplishments or her romance’s ex-cessively of spirit.

Even shorn of mythology the existential Tubman com-plied an impressive record, leaving her work on our national history. This influence may be assessed by seeing in turn her interventions with other blocks of her own day and time and her interaction with her black contemporaries, closing with a glance at her hold on the American mind since her death in 1913—an image that has not lost its luster.

Her heroic work was really grasped, diminishing back-ground and providing a glimpse into the Tubman psyche, her value systems, and her vision of the world. Born in 1821 in Dorchester County, not far from the present-day Cambridge to Maryland’s Eastern Shore, she was one of the eleven children of Harriet Greene and Benjamin Ross, both slaves. Called Araminta as a baby, but later choosing the name of her mother, Harri-ett was put to work by the time she was five. For seven years she did general housework, including serv-ices as a child’s nurse and maid. Losing her house-slave status while still in her teens, Harriet then learned in the fields, a circumstance that would lead to her forced muscular strength and the physical endurance that be-dued her spare figure and haltingly underlooked her.

Two or three years after becoming a fieldhand, Harriet had an experience that marked her life. She was struck on the head by a two-pound weight hurled at another slave, whom she was attempting to shield from a wrathful overseer. She never fully recov-ered from this nearly fatal blow. By swerving her head at a turn she could conceal the deep scar on her skull, but for the rest of her life she was prone to recurring seizures of deep, sudden sleep. She did regin her strength, however, and her capacity for manual labor raised to that of a man by the time she was twenties.

Harriet’s hard life in slavery was eased a little by her marriage in 1844 to John Tubman. A free black, he lacked his wife’s willpower and sense of mission and scorned at her foibles. Not fully reciprocating her deep affection for him, he did not join her after she made the dash for freedom; instead, he soon took another wife. Losing the man, Harriet kept the name, even after taking a second husband in 1869.

One of Harriet Tubman’s forays, the daring of being sold to the Deep South, took on a new in-ten-sity in 1849 upon the death of her master and the rumor that his estate would be broken up and his property dispersed. Resolved to delay no longer, she made her way via free soil Pennsylvania. Upon arrival the fall, she said, like she was in heaven.

Tubman’s mood of evaluation quickly gave way to a resolve to help others become free. As her schemes required money, she moved to Philadelphia and took work in a hotel, the first of a series of part-time jobs. After a year of petty pinching frugality, she had saved enough to launch the free of her uniformly successful operations, a trip to Baltimore to rescue her sister, Mary Ann Bowley, and her two children.

To give a consistent twist of Tubman’s subse-quent journeys into slavery tales is not possible. Instead as she could, she operated in secret. Even had she been able to read and write, her taste of taking no unnessary risks would have inhibited her from keep-ing a record of her experiences. In some ten years of rescue work, she made at least fifteen trips southward, personally escaping at least 200 free-dom-bound slaves.
Tubman's traits of character and her methods of operation help to explain this extraordinary record. She was courageous, undeterred by the knowledge that there was a price upon her head. Her bravery was matched, moreover, by her coolness in a tight spot, her resourcefulness in a perilous situation. If the fugitives she led lacked her fearlessness, they were silenced by her blunt, no-nonsense manner. The rifle she carried while on rescue trips was not only for protection against slave catchers but also to intimidate any fugitive who became faint of heart and wished to turn back.

Her character molded by a deep reservoir of faith in God, Tubman felt that Divine Providence had willed her freedom and that a guardian angel accompanied her, particularly on her missions of deliverance. Gospel exhortations and spirituals came readily to her lips. When she was referred to as Moses, she did not demur.

If Tubman had complete trust in the Infinite, she also exercised great care in planning operations. She was unsurpassed in the logistics of escape—in anticipating the needs of her fugitive flocks, whether for food or clothes, disguises or forged papers, train tickets or wagons. Every precaution was carefully considered, down to carrying a cut of meat for infant babies whose crying might jeopardize the escaping party. Well might she boast that she never lost a passenger.

Tubman was not a one-woman Underground Railroad, however, as this secretive mode of passage required a concerted effort. Her careful planning included full cooperation with others, and she worked hand in hand with two of the most dedicated stationmasters, Thomas Garrett in Wilmington, Delaware, and William Still in Philadelphia. Both assisted her by providing shelter for the fugitives she conducted and by making arrangements, if necessary, for their transportation further north.

To blacks of the antebellum period, North and South, the central theme was the abolition of slavery. Of all the ways to bring this about the most direct, short of insurrection or war, was hence the most satisfying, was the Underground Railroad—the cooperative work of assisting slaves to run away and then assisting them to get a fresh start as free men, women, and children. In matters relating to fugitive slaves, blacks had a personal and vital interest, a particular sense of responsibility toward one another, in the process of striking at slavery, a black Underground Railroad operator was also striking at the conjoined conscience of a free black as a shamed ne'er-do-well and of the slave as a subhuman nubia.

In the operations of the Underground Railroad the conductors, those who ventured into slave terrain seeking out prospective escapes, were invariably black, and none was better known than Harriet Tubman. To Afro-Americans she personified resistance to slavery as did no other single figure of her generation. She symbolized courage, determination, and strength.

In slave circles her status was unexcelled. The folklorist Harold Courlander points out that in the isolated communities in which many slaves were located Tubman's name was hardly likely to have been a household word, and when some slaves sang "Go Down, Moses," they must have done so "in the belief that Moses simply meant Moses." True enough. Yet Tubman's name was likely to have been an inspiration to thousands she never met, slave communities having their own systems of communication. Thomas Cole, a runaway slave from Huntsville, Alabama, said that during his escape he "was hoping and praying all day that I could meet up with the Harriet Tubman woman." Whether in the flesh or as a symbol, Tubman made slave property less secure.

Tubman's sway over the slaves she sought to rescue was unquestionably absolute. In her relationships with those fugitives her unselfish and unusual inclination toward self-denial came into its fullest sway. Communicating with slaves was easy for her. In overcoming the barrier of their mutual illiteracy, Tubman was verbally resourceful to the point of creativity, an unpolished eloquence being second na-
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Tubman’s sway over the slaves she sought to rescue was unquestionably absolute. In her relationship with those fugitives her unconscious and unstudied inclination toward self-dramatization came into its fullest sway. Communicating with slaves was easy for her. In overcoming the barrier of their mutual illiteracy, Tubman was verbally resourceful to the point of creativity, an unpolished elocution being second-nature sometimes have wondered whether this held for Harriet Tubman. If she and fugitives revered her, the free blacks held her in the highest esteem short of worship. In the South her free black admirers would have spoken of her praises privately and in hushed tones; but blacks north of slavery sang her name in full voice, removing any doubt as to their claims. The black in the best position to appraise Tubman and her work was the Philadelphia-based William Still, second only to Tubman herself as the leading black figure in the Underground Railroad. As secretary and executive director of the General Vigilance Committee, Still assisted the runaways reaching Philadelphia. Every major northern city had a similar vigilance committee, but the group in Philadelphia had no equal, in large part because of Still’s energetic and resourceful leadership. From his many years of working in concert with Tubman, in 1872 Still offered this assessment of her: “A more ordinary specimen of humanity could hardly be found among the most unfortunate-looking farm hands of the South. Yet in point of courage, shrewdness and disinterested exertions to rescue her fellow-men, she was without equal. . . . Her like it is probable was never known before or since.”

A similarly belated appraisal came from Frederick Douglass, like Tubman an escaped slave from Maryland. In a letter he told her that she had “wrought in the day” and to public attention and applause, whereas she had “wrought in the night,” her witness to the midnight sky and the silent stars. But, he went on, “exercising John Brown—of sacred memory—I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you.”

In referring to Tubman, her northern-born black contemporaries readily used the term “heroine.” When in April 1860 in Troy, New York, she led a group of rescuers that overpowered the officers and assisted Charles Nalle, a fugitive slave, to escape to Canada, The Weekly Anglo-African (May 12, 1860)
praised her "intrepidity," capping their assessment with a complimentary comparison: "She acted like a heroine." During the Civil War, when the young schoolteacher Charlotte L. Forten visited Beaufort, South Carolina, she was ecstatic about Tubman, an entry in her diary for January 31, 1863, expressing her admiration: "We spent all our time at Harriet Tubman's. She is a wonderful woman—a real heroine." This theme recurs in a later notation in the diary for the same day: "My own eyes were full as I listened to her—the heroic woman.

Many antebellum blacks linked Tubman's name with that of Sojourner Truth, the two having much in common. Both were deeply religious former slaves. Like Tubman, the un schooled Truth had a rude eloquence, but unlike Tubman, she was a familiar figure on the lecture circuit, her six-foot frame and deep, resonant voice op without their effects on an audience. Primarily a woman's rights activist, Truth played only a minor role in the Underground Railroad. Apparently the first time the two reformers met was in Boston in August 1864, Truth then urging Tubman that President Lincoln was "our friend," and in an effort to allay the latter's doubts on that score...

"Not many of us are animated with the idea which seems to have possessed Harriet Tubman throughout her eventful life—to lay out time, talents, and opp--monies for God's glory, and the good of our fellow--men," wrote schoolteacher Pauline E. Hopkins in 1902 in The Colored American Magazine. It was an evaluation that few blacks of her day would have questioned. Who among them, in a single person, had demonstrated more of a physical courage amounting to bravery, had lived a life more dedicated to the service of others, had exhibited more traits of an impeccable character, or had a deeper faith in the working of a Divine Providence?

An appraisal somewhat less celebratory and expansive characterized the reaction to Tubman by her white reformer allies. While praising her praises, white admirers hardly viewed her in the capacity of a leader or role model. While ever cordial and deferential in the face of the person-to-person tensions so characterizing, among black and white co-workers in reform movements, Tubman's experiences across the color line were not free of racial overtones, reflecting something of the prevailing patterns in race relations and attitudes. Her earliest experiences with white people were hardly reassuring. As a slave she had been constantly over-worked and often whipped, whether by her master or those to whom she was hired out. She could never forget the angry overseer who had marked her for life, and she would have no fond memories of a kind and indulgent mistress. As she later explained, she had "heard tell" that there were good masters and mistresses but had not come across any of them.

Locating in Philadelphia after her escape, Tubman came in contact with a white population many of whom were in sympathy with runaway slaves and would incur any risk in assisting them. In 1775 the first organized society against slavery was founded there, in lengthly tiding its broad program: the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the African Race. Tubman became acquainted with abolitionist whites through her association with the General Vigilance Committee, which, though headed by William Still, was interracial in composition. White Underground Railroad operators in Pennsylvania and Delaware reflected a strong Quaker influence, a Tubman quickly found out.

The single white with whom Tubman worked most closely was Thomas Garrett of Wilmington, Delaware, a lifelong member of the Society of Friends. A key figure in slave rescue work along the mid-Atlantic corridor, Garrett gave much of his time and means and ran some risks to his personal safety, Delaware being a slave state. He provided shelter for the fugitives Tubman led and furnished her with the money to carry them on to Philadelphia and beyond.
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Yet another reason Tubman became a person-to-person contact she did not make them feel uncomfortable, burdening them with a sense of guilt. Her language and manner were marked by an absence of bitterness. To whites she was unthreatening, not pushy, not peer-kins-minded, not status conscious, and hence not given to self-pity or beat on upward mobility. In speaking in public she tended to be subtle, anecdotal, and given to reminiscence. She spoke in a style of quaint simplicity," wrote a reporter in 1859. Tubman was not likely to pose questions to predominantly white audiences would find awkward, such as Sojourner Truth's "Is God dead?" or the Frederick Douglass inquiry as to what the Fourth of July might or might not mean to the slaves.

By their financial support the white abolitionists expressed their kindly sentiments toward Tubman. In addition to raising money specifically for her slave rescue work, they assisted her in purchasing a house in Auburn, New York, for her parents. A befriender of Tubman's, Senator William H. Seward of New York, had sold her the home on liberal terms, and paid for it she received unsolicited donations from other white supporters. At the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1859, its president, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, asked for a collection to assist her in buying the house so that "her father and mother could support themselves, and enable her to resume the practice of her profession." Higginson's observation was greeted by "laughter and applause."

In private, as in public, Tubman and her white associates apparently had little trouble adjusting to each other. In their homes, as in their public gatherings, Tubman expected to be hospitably received, and to a greater extent than any other antebellum black she was. Unlike some former slaves, the unashamed Tubman seems not to have felt ill at ease in a white household, however educated or affluent the household might be.

No white reformer held Tubman in higher respect and esteem than John Brown, who made it a point to establish personal contacts with black leaders. He regarded her as a "kindred spirit," and he fitted into his plans as the shepherd of the slaves he proposed to run off, by force of arms, if necessary. He was well aware that Tubman was not gun-shy. Who in abolitionist circles had not heard of the long rifle she carried on her slave rescue trips? Brown was also aware that the Tubman name would help him raise more money from her white admirers, particularly those in Massachusetts. During the eighteen months before he laid his hand on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in October 1859, Brown met with Tubman on some half dozen occasions, one of them lasting nearly a week. His opinion of her testified, he called her "General," and, according to his confidant and biographer, Franklin B. Sanborn, "she was fully conversant with his plans."
Apparently due to illness, Tubman did not accompany Brown to Harper’s Ferry. Immediately after the abortive raid Frederick Douglass led to Canada to avoid being served an arrest warrant issued against him as a Brown accomplice. No such warrant was issued for Tubman; even had there been legally admissible evidence of her complicity, an arrest warrant would hardly have been practical for someone whose whereabouts were a mystery.

Brown’s hanging inspired Tubman to give his life a scriptural interpretation. She promptly confided to Sashen that she had “been studying and studying upon it, and its claim to me, it wasn’t John Brown that died on the gallows. When I think how he gave up his life for our people, and how he never flinched, but was so brave to the end; its claim to me it wasn’t mortal man, it was God in him.” The hanged Brown never left Tubman’s memory. In an interview in 1912, reporter Anne Fadough Miller quoted her as referring to Brown as “my dearest friend”...

[During the Civil War, which she had predicted, Tubman served as a spy and a scout for the Union army, leading expeditions into the Confederate interior to liberate slaves from enemy plantations. Her services at the battlefront drew high praise from the white officers who fought with her. After the war, she devoted herself to charitable work for African Americans and was an outspoken advocate for women’s rights. For her, women’s liberation and racial liberation were “inseparably linked.”]

Tubman’s broad appeal, cutting across lines of race and class, age and gender, received public expression upon her death. The New York Times carried a two-paragraph obituary (March 14, 1913), and her funeral was attended by the local post of the Grand Army of the Republic. The city of Auburn, after a year’s preparation, held a day-long memorial service on June 14, 1914, unveiling a tablet in her honor. On that day many homes flew the Stars and Stripes, thereby demonstrating “that we are not forgetful of those who suffered for the cause of freedom,” in the eulogistic accounts of Major Charles W. Bixler. At the evening exercises held in the city auditorium she featured speakers, Booker T. Washington, eulogized Tubman as one who “brought the two races together.”

Beginning rather than ending with the observance at Auburn, the memorial to Harriet Tubman would continue over the years, taking a variety of forms and expressions. The national sentiment toward her was conveyed by agencies of the federal government. During World War II a Liberty ship was christened the Harriet Tubman, prompting President Franklin D. Roosevelt to praise the U.S. Maritime Commission for having chosen as appropriate a name. In 1974 the Department of the Interior gave her Auburn, home of the statue of a national historic landmark, and four years later the U.S. Postal Service issued a thirteen-cent Harriet Tubman commemorative stamp, the first in a “Black Heritage U.S.A. Series.”

The mounting interest in women’s history, a field sorely neglected until recent decades, has aided in keeping Tubman before us. Pointing out (in 1978) that black protest literature had focused largely on male, historian George P. Rawick advanced a corrective suggestion: “Why must we always use Nat as the name for the rebellious slave? Why not Harriet? The women’s liberation movement has for some time used a point that reproduces the image of Harriet Tubman with a long edge, I think that might be a good symbol for the black struggle.”...

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What were Harriet’s experiences in being under the law as a slaveholding Maryland? What factors prompted her to “steal” herself and escape to the North?

2. Why do you think Tubman invaded the South fifteen times to bring at least two hundred of her
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