

# They Fought for Freedom



by Peter Morris

*The story of Blacks in the United States —  
from the beginnings of slavery to Barack Obama*

*A workbook for this reader is available separately.  
It contains a very extensive selection of comprehension material  
and grammar exercises, all keyed to the reader text.*

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whose suggestions helped greatly in improving this text!*



*Slaves bringing cotton from the fields in the 1860s.*

*We hold these truths to be self-evident,  
that all men are created equal,  
that they are endowed by their Creator  
with certain unalienable rights,  
that among these are life, liberty,  
and the pursuit of happiness ...*

FROM THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, 1776



*Slave Auction, Charleston, South Carolina, 1853. Illustrated London News, Nov. 29, 1856*

## CHAPTER 1

### HELPING RUNAWAY SLAVES: HARRIET TUBMAN

#### HER EARLY LIFE

Harriet Tubman is famous for her work on the 'Underground Railroad', which helped runaway slaves escape to the North and Canada.

She was the daughter of slaves on a plantation in Maryland. We don't know the year she was born — most slave owners didn't write such things down — but it was probably between 1820 and 1825. Her name then was Araminta Ross, and she was called Minty until as a teenager she began to use her mother's name, Harriet.

Life as a slave was hard, and she was often beaten. When she was still a young girl, three of her sisters were sold to other plantations, breaking up the family. She was badly hurt when a slave owner threw a piece of metal at one of his slaves, but hit Harriet in the head. She was unconscious for days, and for the rest of her life she had headaches and blackouts. But she was very strong, working not only in the house but also outside in the fields.

**RUNNING AWAY**

When she was about 24, Harriet married a free black called John Tubman, and took his name. Black families then quite often had both free people and slaves, and among Harriet's relatives there were both. But slaves could be sold at any time, often to white people far away, where they would have no contact with their families. In 1849, it seemed that Harriet and other slaves on the plantation would soon be sold, and she decided to run away.

Her husband refused to come with her, so Harriet left with her two brothers, walking to the North — and freedom! That part of Maryland was full of woods, and runaway slaves would look for the moss which grew on the north side of the trees, to show them the way. And at night, they followed the North Star in the sky.

On the way, her brothers became frightened and said they would go back. So Harriet went on alone. Finally she reached Philadelphia, a free city, where she found a job and began to save money. Later she said that when she arrived in the North, *"I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now that I was free. The sun came up like gold through the trees and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven."*

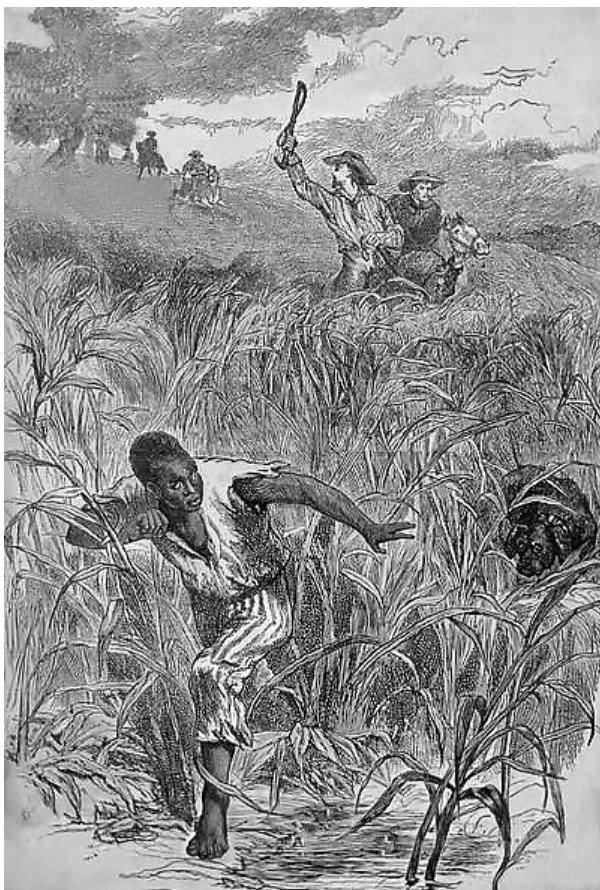
**HELPING OTHERS**

In December 1850 she heard that her niece Kessiah was going to be sold, together with her children. At the slave market in Baltimore, Kessiah's husband, who was a free black, was able to buy his wife. Harriet then helped the family to come to Philadelphia.

Soon, she decided to return to Maryland to free more of her relatives.

*Harriet Tubman during the Civil War*





*Hunting an escaped slave  
with dogs,  
(American school,  
19th century)*

This was dangerous. The Southern states had laws against helping runaway slaves, and of course Harriet was a runaway slave herself. On this first trip, she helped her sister and mother to reach the north, taking the same route that she had used before. Later she went back again and brought her father and brother north.

### THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

By the time the Civil War began in 1861, she had made 19 trips and brought over 300 black people out of slavery. In this way she became part of the *Underground Railroad*, a network of people and groups who were ready to help slaves on the way to freedom.

Harriet was a good organizer, and had a strong will. She was only about five feet tall — a little more than one meter fifty — but she was strong, and she was smart. And she carried a gun. She used this not only to defend herself, but also to frighten any slaves who wanted to back out and leave. If any slave went back to the plantation, white slave owners would learn too many secrets: how contact was made with blacks, what paths they used, and who the helpers were. So Harriet would show frightened slaves the gun and say to them, “Dead Negroes can’t talk.”

*Wanted poster for a  
runaway slave, 1853*

# 100 DOLLARS REWARD!

Runaway from the subscriber on the 27th of July,  
my Black Woman, named

## EMILY,

Seventeen years of age, well grown, black color,  
has a whining voice. She took with her one dark  
calico and one blue and white dress, a red cord-  
ed gingham bonnet, a white striped shawl and slip-  
pers. I will pay the above reward if taken near  
the Ohio river on the Kentucky side, or **THREE  
HUNDRED DOLLARS**, if taken in the State of  
Ohio, and delivered to me near Lewisburg, Mason  
County, Ky. **THO'S. H. WILLIAMS.**  
August 4, 1853.

Plantation owners saw her as a real threat. Slaves cost a lot of money, and big rewards were given for catching runaways. By 1856, there was \$40,000 on Harriet's head. In today's money, that would be more than a million dollars! But she was never caught, and never lost any of her "passengers". In one famous story, the slave hunters were right behind her at a bus station. To trick them, she took out a book and began turning the pages. Since hardly any slaves could read, the slave hunters ignored her and passed by.

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### HER LATER LIFE

As well as these trips back to Maryland, which she made twice a year, Harriet became a public speaker. She spoke at anti-slavery meetings, and later at meetings for women's rights too.

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During the Civil War (1861–65), she worked as a cook, nurse and as a spy for the Northern Armies. After the war, she went to live in New York State. There she worked for social reform, founding homes for poor and old black people. When the first national group for black women was founded in 1896, Harriet Tubman spoke at its first meeting. She died in 1913.

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Her fight for freedom and equal rights has been an inspiration to many people.

*If you hear the dogs, keep going. If you  
see the torches in the woods, keep going.  
If there's shouting after you, keep going.  
Don't ever stop.  
If you want a taste of freedom, keep going.*

*I had crossed the line. I was free. But there  
was no one to welcome me to the land of  
freedom.  
I was a stranger in a strange land.*

*Every great dream begins with a dreamer.  
Always remember, you have within you  
the strength, the patience, and the  
passion to reach for the stars  
to change the world.*

HARRIET TUBMAN

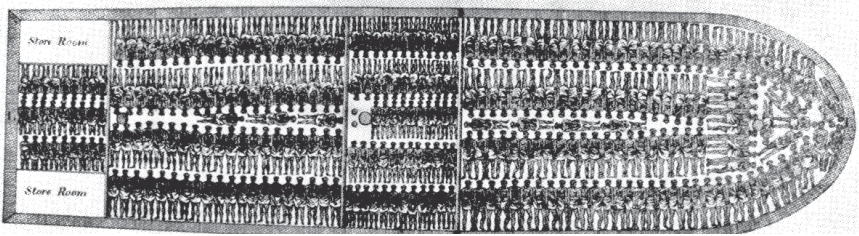
## FIND OUT MORE: HOW SLAVERY IN AMERICA BEGAN

The first black people were brought to the American colonies in 1619, and worked as servants. But after only a few years there was full slavery everywhere in the South.

Why only here?

In the North, there were thousands of people and small farms. They didn't need a lot of extra workers. The South, however, had wonderful land for farming, but few people. So there was a great need for workers — as many as possible — but not much money to pay them.

At that time, the law gave Africans no rights at all. Most whites thought slavery was the perfect answer, and soon slave traders were importing thousands of new slaves from Africa every year.



**ABOVE:** Plan of a slave ship in 1786, showing how the slaves were packed together

**LEFT:** Poster advertising black slaves for sale

**BELOW:** A black soldier outside a slave auction house in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1864

*Charleston, July 24th, 1769.*

**TO BE SOLD,**  
On THURSDAY the third Day  
of AUGUST next,  
**A CARGO**  
OF  
**NINETY-FOUR**  
PRIME, HEALTHY  
**NEGROES,**  
CONSISTING OF  
Thirty-nine MEN, Fifteen BOYS,  
Twenty-four WOMEN, and  
Sixteen GIRLS.  
JUST ARRIVED,  
In the Brigantine *DEMBA, Francis Bare,* Master, from SIERRA-  
LEON, by  
**DAVID & JOHN DEAS.**



Slaves grew tobacco, and later rice, sugar and cotton. The long, hot work was all done by hand, and needed many people in the fields. Slave owners became rich, and made their plantations bigger.

5 More and more Africans were packed together in slave ships and brought across the Atlantic in chains. Today we think that almost twenty percent died on the way; their bodies were thrown into the ocean.

After Independence, Northern states made laws against slavery, but the South did not. Without slaves, the rich plantation owners would be poor again, and so would the rich slave traders in the North and in England.

10 In 1807, the British ended the slave trade. But just at this time, there was a boom in cotton. More and more cotton plantations were started across the South. These all needed slaves too, and so in the South the slave trade went on.

There were no more new slaves from Africa now, and this made the price of slaves higher. So the reforms had made slaves even more valuable than before.

*Slaves on a cotton plantation in Georgia in the 1860s.*

