



BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

Touched by the Better Angels: Freedom

Part One of a five-part series

Robert C. Plumb, December 11, 2020

blueandgrayeducation.org



Harriet Tubman, 1868 or 1869 | Library of Congress

Starting in the antebellum period in America and continuing through the Civil War, five women performed extraordinary actions that supported the Union cause. They accomplished these acts amid the chaos and gloom during a period that left little room for anything but suffering and loss. Harriet Tubman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Julia Ward Howe, Clara Barton, and Sarah Josepha Hale boldly made contributions that were manifested in acts of freedom, truth, inspiration, compassion, and reconciliation. And, importantly, their legacies live on today after more than a century and a half. Over the course of a five-part series, we will be taking a look at each one between now and February. Here we present Part One, Harriet Tubman: Freedom.

Young Harriet Tubman, an enslaved resident of Dorchester County, Maryland, made the decision at the age of 27 to escape to freedom in the North. Initially, she began her journey with her two brothers, Henry and Ben. Not long after they began their trip to freedom with their sister, Henry and Ben decided that the risks were too high; they left their sister to continue on her trip by herself. The consequences of being caught as a “runaway slave” in 1849 were severe. Beatings were meted out or, in some cases, the enslaved person would be sold to slave owners in the Deep South where conditions were harsher than in Dorchester County. Tubman’s husband John refused to accompany his wife on her escape. As a free Black man, he feared that if he was caught with his wife he would be treated as an enslaved person with all the consequences that would entail.

As if this solo attempt at freeing herself was not extraordinarily brave itself, Harriet Tubman returned to the Eastern Shore 11 times to free over 80 enslaved people. Using the resources and locations associated with the Underground Railroad, Tubman liberated scores of people using a trail that wound from safe haven to safe house through Maryland and Delaware to Philadelphia, then on to New York State. In the latter years of these treks, she escorted her charges on to Canada. Passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 criminalized escape efforts throughout the United States, including indictment of all who aided in the process. Canada did not recognize the Act and refused to extradite previously enslaved people.

Tubman’s reputation spread, and archabolitionist John Brown sought her help as a guide for his planned raid on Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. For a variety of reasons, not the least of which was caring for her elderly parents in Canada, Tubman refused to accompany Brown on what became his failed attempt to provoke a slave insurrection in Virginia in 1858.

During the war, Harriet Tubman participated in a variety of roles with the Union Army—scout, guide, nurse, laundress—supporting troop activities in South Carolina. In June 1863, Tubman assisted in the raid up the Combahee River, where Union troops seized or destroyed Confederate supplies, and freed nearly 800 enslaved residents without a single casualty.

Despite her severe life while she was enslaved and as a free woman, Tubman lived to age 91; she died in 1913 in Auburn, New York, where she lived in a home provided by William Seward, Lincoln’s Secretary of State. It was Seward’s generous philanthropy that helped Harriet Tubman support her efforts such as starting the Home for Aged and Indigent Negroes in Auburn.

In 1944 a Liberty ship, the SS *Harriet Tubman*, was launched for the war effort. In conjunction with this launch, the National Council of Negro Women sponsored a war bond drive using the slogan: “Buy a Harriet Tubman War Bond for Freedom.”



Harriet Tubman, Auburn, New York, 1911 | Library of Congress



Launching of the SS *Harriet Tubman*, June 1944. South Portland Maine | National Archives



This Civil War Dispatch has been brought to you by the Blue and Gray Education Society, a non-profit 501-3C educational organization. Please visit us at www.blueandgrayeducation.org.

Share this email:



[Manage](#) your preferences | [Opt out](#) using TrueRemove®

Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.

View this email [online](#).

P.O. Box 1176
Chatham, VA | 24531 US

This email was sent to .

To continue receiving our emails, add us to your address book.

emma

[Subscribe](#) to our email list.