

Harriet Tubman: Leader and Patriot

- Harriet Tubman was born a slave around 1821 and she lived with her many brothers and sisters in the Bucktown District on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.
- Harriet once stepped in between an overseer and a runaway slave. The overseer threw a weight at the runaway, but hit Harriet in the head. The blow dented her skull and caused her to suffer chronic narcolepsy (sleeping spells) for the rest of her life.
- Harriet worked extra jobs to raise money to buy her freedom. In 1845 she married John Tubman, a free black man, and struggled with her slave status in light of his freedom. Later fearing she might be sold, she became determined to escape to the North.
- In 1849 she left alone and followed the Underground Railroad to Philadelphia.
- William Still persuaded Harriet to join the Underground Railroad and to lead other slaves to freedom, a very dangerous task because slaves were considered property and escaped slaves were tracked by merciless bounty hunters.
- Harriet's extraordinary tracking ability, her mystical premonitions, and her own belief that God had called her to lead her people out of bondage as Moses had led the people of Israel out of Egypt, guided and sustained her on many rescue missions.
- Harriet never lost a passenger on the Underground Railroad.
- During the Civil War she served as a spy, a scout and a nurse. She used skills honed on the Underground Railroad to rescue hundreds of slaves, and she worked feverishly under primitive conditions as a nurse to wounded Union soldiers. She received a pass allowing her to travel on any government transport throughout the area.
- The Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War did not mean an end to racial prejudice. When riding a train in the South, Harriet was injured because she refused to leave her seat.
- After the Civil War she returned to Auburn, NY to care for her aging parents. Her house was opened to numerous blacks and Union soldiers. After much public pressure Congress awarded her a small pension, and she spent the rest of her life caring for others and speaking out against injustice.
- Harriet Tubman died on March 10, 1913.



A photograph of Harriet Tubman taken later in her life.

The Underground Railroad

- In 1831, a slave ran away from his master and headed up the Ohio River towards the North. Unable to find his runaway slave, his master concluded that the slave must have escaped down "an underground road." As this story was repeated, the road became a railroad, reflecting the popularity of the new form of transportation, the steam engine railroad. The term Underground Railroad grew in popularity and was first used in print in 1840 to describe the routes of escape being used by fugitive slaves seeking freedom in the North and in Canada.
- The Underground Railroad was actually a loose network of anti-slavery white northerners and free black men who helped slaves reach freedom.
- Other railroad terms were adopted to describe the activities of the Underground railroad: the escaped slaves were called "parcels" or "passengers"; those who helped them along their way were called "conductors"; and those who offered the use of their homes as "stations" or "depots" were called "station masters."
- It is estimated that more than 60,000 slaves gained their freedom by following the North Star and using the protection provided by the Underground Railroad.
- The federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 made it illegal to help an escaped slave or prevent his or her arrest. While many northerners ignored this law and many northern states passed personal liberty laws which prohibited state authorities from recapturing slaves, the railroad's efforts were still thwarted by professional slave catchers who worked to gain the financial rewards of returning an escaped slave to his or her master.
- In 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law was passed. This new law gave federal officers the power to bring back fugitives, provided fees to be paid the officers, and decreed that anyone caught helping a slave could be fined so severely that they could lose everything they owned.
- The 1850's saw the greatest activity aboard the Underground Railroad after the Fugitive Slave Law was passed.
- On April 14, 1861, the Civil War began and on January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation putting an end to the need for the Underground Railroad.

Slave life:

The lives of slaves, also known as bondsmen and bond women, were extremely harsh. In many instances, they were not allowed to speak to each other without the presence of a white man because the whites believed they would plan uprisings. Slaves were completely dependent on their masters for most of the necessities of life. They were not allowed to leave the plantation without a pass. Patrollers regularly roared through the primitive slave quarters, trampling their gardens, burning their houses, and murdering anyone who got in their way. Slaves also received beatings if they mishandled their chores or failed to maintain a subservient attitude.

Theatre IV's Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad

Discussion and Activities

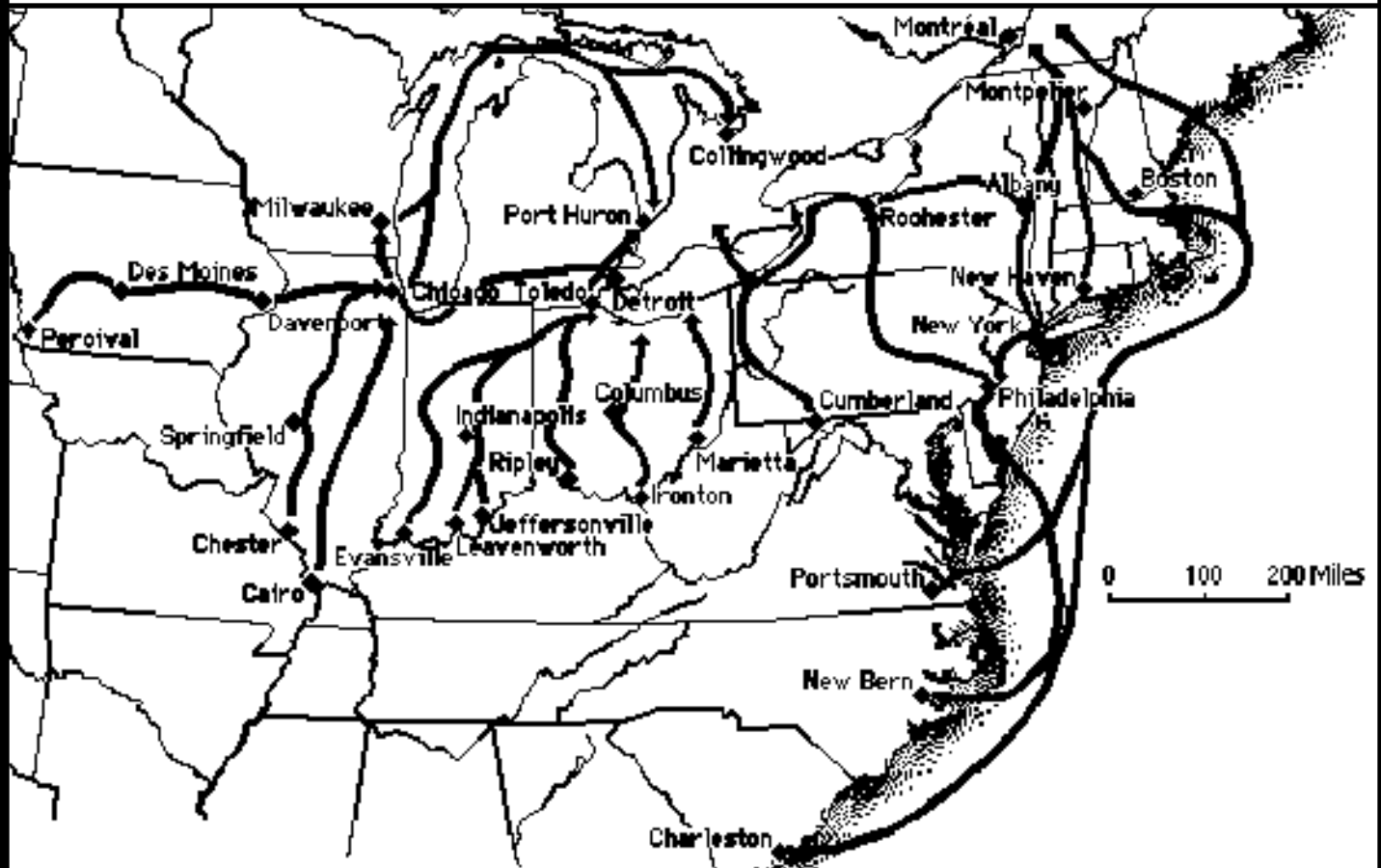
1. Imagine being a slave on one of Harriet Tubman's trips. What would it be like? How would you travel? How would you hide? What would happen if you were caught? Why would you take the risk?
2. Discuss why Harriet Tubman was called Moses. Read the biblical account of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt.
3. Discuss the concept of slavery, how slave families could be separated by sales, how slaves were subject to harsh beatings if they made a mistake in their chores or if they spoke back to their white masters. Explain how the slaves could not even leave the plantation to go to town for supplies without the written permission of their masters.
4. Discuss how the Civil War started. Did the Emancipation Proclamation solve the problems of slavery by freeing the slaves? What good was freedom without an education and the skills necessary to make a living? What about society's attitude toward the slaves freed by the Civil War as well as the slaves who had bought their own freedom before the war.
5. Discuss the difference in a free man and a slave or bondsman. Discuss bounty hunters.
6. What are other examples where people who longed for freedom have had to be smuggled out with a system like the Underground Railroad? (Nazi Germany, World War II and the French Resistance, The Berlin Wall.) Consider the wars and the changes that have taken place in the countries where "Underground Railroads" have existed.
7. Harriet Tubman and others who worked for the Underground Railroad did so because they believed in the freedom and dignity of all human beings. Discuss their work in relation to other countries where freedom and the dignity of all human beings are not respected.

Theatre IV is the second largest theatre for young audiences in the nation and is the Children's Theatre of Virginia. We encourage your comments about *Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad*. Please send your letters to:

Theatre IV, 114 West Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23220

If you need to reach Theatre IV by phone, please call **1-800-235-8687**.

The Underground Railroad



1. Using the map of the Underground Railroad, identify the states which had major stations along the railway.
2. From where you live now, plan an escape route to the North along the Underground Railroad. How many miles would you have to travel to get to Montreal or Collingwood in Canada? How long do you think your journey would take? Describe your trip in detail.
3. Remember that there were no roads or signs leading the escaped slaves to their destination. What tools or objects found in nature do you think they used to guide their way North?

Song or Secret Code?

Music and songs played an important role in the life of slaves. The words to many songs or spirituals had double meanings and were often used to send secret messages between the slaves. Many of these songs reflected the suffering of the slaves and their longing for freedom by using references from the Bible stories about the Israelites in slavery in Egypt and their flight to freedom.

When Harriet Tubman decided to escape from her master's plantation, she announced her intentions by singing *When That Old Chariot Comes*. This song refers to crossing the River Jordan. According to the Bible, the Jordan River was the scene of the the baptism of Jesus and in many spirituals it is the river that must be crossed before reaching the promised land which to escaped slaves was the free states or Canada.

When That Old Chariot Comes

**When that old chariot comes,
I'm going to leave you,
I'm bound for the promised land,
Friends, I'm going to leave you.**

**I'm sorry, friends, to leave you,
Farewell! Oh, farewell!**

**But I'll meet you in the morning,
Farewell! Oh, farewell!
I'll meet you in the morning,
When I reach the promised land;
On the other side of Jordan,
For I'm bound for the promised
land.**

According to Underground Railroad legend, a one-legged sailor and free black man named Peg Leg Joe would hire himself to plantation owners as a handy-man. Once on the plantation, he would make friends with the slaves and give them directions to the Underground Railroad by teaching them the song *Follow the Drinking Gourd*. Peg Leg Joe would then leave the plantation and meet the runaway slaves on the "great big river" and ferry them to a free state where they could board the Underground Railroad.

In the song, the drinking gourd refers to the Big Dipper which points to the North Star. "When the sun comes back" tells the slaves to travel in the spring. The river that "ends between two hills" was the Tombigbee River in Mississippi and the second was the Tennessee River. The "great big river" was the Ohio River.

Follow the Drinking Gourd

**Follow the drinking gourd! Follow the
drinking gourd.
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry
you to freedom.
If you follow the drinking gourd.
When the sun comes back and the first
quail calls,
Follow the drinking gourd.
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry
you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.**

**The riverbank makes a very good road,
The dead trees will show you the way.
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on,
Follow the drinking gourd.**

**The riverbank makes a very good road,
The dead trees will show you the way.
Left foot, pet foot, traveling on,
Follow the drinking gourd.**

**The river ends between two hills,
Follow the drinking gourd.
There's another river on the other side,
Follow the drinking gourd.**

**When the great big river meets the little
river,
Follow the drinking gourd.
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry
you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.**

