



Harriet the Moses of Her People

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Harriet Tubman is one of the most famous women in American history, and from an early age every American learns of her contributions to abolition and the Underground Railroad. The woman who became known as the Moses of her people personally led more than 13 expeditions to free slaves in the South, and she was so integral in helping escaped slaves achieve freedom that her name is practically synonymous with the Underground Railroad today.

If anything, the central role she played in the Underground Railroad has become so ingrained among subsequent generations that Tubman's life has been shrouded in legend, and other important aspects have been overlooked. In order to fully appreciate and understand both Harriet Tubman's life and the important role she played in the abolitionist movement, it is necessary to examine the circumstances in which she was raised and what events drove her to the path she chose. Anthropologist Douglas Armstrong notes “[s]o little information about Tubman has been based on fact and so much based on myth and created history” that it has only been recently that historians have “come to the point where we can recognize her true contributions.”

In fact, Tubman's entire life consisted of struggles and persistence, whether she was fighting on behalf of slaves, the Union army during the Civil War, or women's rights. After managing to escape the severe beatings and humiliation of slavery herself, she put her life on the line over and over again to help others, and she could proudly boast, “I was the conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can't say — I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger.” But that was only part of her involvement with abolition; Tubman was well-acquainted with other famous abolitionists of her time, including Frederick Douglass and John Brown, and she threw herself into efforts to further the cause of abolition in various ways. Her life and work were publicized nearly 50 years before her death by Franklin Sanborn, who worked as an editor in an abolitionist newspaper and detailed the work of the Underground Railroad in the Boston Commonwealth in 1863.

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