

Harriet Tubman deserves to be understood as one of the great minds of the American freedom struggle. Her courage is rightly celebrated, but courage alone does not explain what she accomplished. She studied people, understood landscapes, cultivated relationships, protected information, and made consequential decisions under extraordinary pressure. She transformed personal escape into a continuing commitment to the freedom of others. To appreciate her character—the values and habits revealed through a person’s choices—we have to examine how she acted when those values became costly. Her life gives us a demanding understanding of mental strength: the ability to exercise judgment, maintain purpose, and accept responsibility while facing circumstances that could not be made safe by determination alone.

She was born Araminta Ross, around 1822, in Dorchester County on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. Her family called her Minty. Her parents were Harriet “Rit” Green and Ben Ross, and she was one of nine children. She entered a society organized around chattel slavery, a system that legally treated human beings as property that could be bought, sold, inherited, and compelled to work. Enslavement generally followed the status of the mother, meaning that children could be claimed as property from birth. This was the legal and economic structure surrounding her earliest experiences. Understanding that structure helps us recognize the magnitude of her later actions: she challenged people who claimed ownership over her, the financial interests supporting them, and public institutions that enforced their claims. womenshistory.org

Within that system, family love existed under the constant threat of forced separation. Three of Tubman’s older sisters were sold away and lost to the family. These losses give substance to a word that is sometimes used too casually: dehumanization, the treatment of people as though their feelings, relationships, and rights have no claim on our consideration. A sale could generate income for an enslaver while destroying a family’s everyday life. Tubman’s later rescue work directly opposed this treatment. Her commitment to relatives and neighbors affirmed that their attachments had value, that their lives belonged to them, and that a person’s financial investment could never establish a legitimate right to possess another human being. Her story belongs to the history of family preservation as much as it belongs to the history of escape. home.nps.gov

Her childhood involved exhausting labor and physical abuse. She was hired out to other households while still very young, meaning that her enslaver received compensation for allowing others to control her work. Maryland’s historical records describe her being sent into marshes to trap muskrats and becoming ill. Vulnerability means being exposed to harm while having limited power to prevent it, and children held in slavery faced that condition with particular severity. We should resist the temptation to describe such suffering as preparation that she somehow needed. The people who harmed her deserve no credit for the woman she became. The achievement belongs to Tubman and to the relationships, knowledge, convictions, and decisions through which she resisted the conditions imposed upon her. msa.maryland.gov

One incident from her youth reveals an early expression of moral courage, the willingness to act on an ethical conviction despite the possibility of punishment. At a store in Bucktown, she refused to help an overseer restrain another enslaved person. The overseer threw a heavy weight at the man, but it struck Tubman's head instead, nearly killing her. The injury had lasting consequences, including episodes described in historical accounts as seizures or sudden sleeping spells. Her refusal is significant because it shows a boundary she would not willingly cross: being ordered to assist someone exercising oppressive power did not make that assistance right. Even before her famous rescue missions, she had resisted becoming an instrument of another person's captivity. [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov)

That injury also changes how we should understand her endurance. Fortitude is the capacity to sustain effort and purpose through pain, difficulty, or fear. Tubman's later accomplishments occurred while she lived with the continuing effects of serious physical harm. In the late 1890s, she sought treatment at Massachusetts General Hospital and underwent surgery in an effort to relieve symptoms that had troubled her for decades. This part of her life deserves attention alongside the accounts of daring escapes. She was a person with a body that hurt and needs that required care. Respecting her strength includes recognizing those needs. Her achievements do not support the idea that illness can be overcome simply by wanting something badly enough; they show what she managed to accomplish while carrying burdens that other people had forced upon her. [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov)

Her work in Maryland also brought extensive practical knowledge. She became familiar with woods, marshes, waterways, and the movement of people through the region. Black American mariners and workers were part of the world in which she learned. Resourcefulness, recognizing what is available and finding effective ways to use it, and Tubman's resourcefulness developed through careful attention to her surroundings. Terrain that appeared confusing to an outsider could contain recognizable routes, landmarks, and possibilities to someone who knew it intimately. Her later leadership drew on this accumulated understanding. Knowledge carried in memory, shared through conversation, or acquired through physical work could become an instrument of liberation. [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov)

We therefore need to speak accurately about her intelligence. Tubman did not acquire conventional literacy, but reading and writing are particular learned skills, not the boundaries of human thought. Historian Cheryl Janifer LaRoche has specifically challenged interpretations that confuse Tubman's lack of literacy with limited intellectual ability. Acuity is sharpness of perception and understanding: noticing important details, recognizing relationships, and judging their significance. Someone coordinating dangerous journeys needed to remember information, interpret behavior, and adjust to changing circumstances. Tubman's life requires us to take those abilities seriously. It also reminds us to distinguish between an opportunity denied and a capacity absent. Educational exclusion tells us about the society restricting access; it does not establish the intellectual limits of the person excluded. [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov)

Around the time of her marriage to John Tubman, a free Black man, in 1844, she took the name Harriet Tubman. Marriage to a free person did not release her from slavery. In 1849, the death of her enslaver, Edward Brodess, intensified the danger that she would be sold. That year she escaped and reached Philadelphia. Here we can define agency as the capacity to make choices and act toward an intended outcome, even within severe constraints. Her escape was an exercise of agency against a system designed to deny it. However, recognizing her initiative should never lead us to assume that everyone who remained enslaved lacked determination. Opportunities differed, surveillance varied, and parents faced agonizing decisions about children and relatives who might be left behind. home.nps.gov

Her path to freedom included an earlier attempt with her brothers that ended when they turned back; she subsequently escaped without them. This sequence illustrates resolve, a settled commitment that survives an interruption or disappointment. A first attempt failing to reach its destination did not settle the question of what her future could become. At the same time, the history gives us no reason to dismiss her brothers as weak. Escape threatened family relationships as well as individual lives, and one brother may have recently become a father. Tubman's determination becomes more intelligible when we acknowledge the seriousness of the decision. She acted within circumstances where every available choice could involve loss, and she chose to pursue freedom despite the uncertainty ahead. nps.gov

The defining expansion of her purpose came after she reached freedom. Beginning in 1850, Tubman returned to Maryland to help others escape. Her first rescue involved her niece Kessiah and Kessiah's two children. Solidarity is a commitment to the well-being and rights of others that leads to shared action, and her return journeys gave that commitment a concrete form. She could identify what captivity meant because she had experienced it, but identification alone did not produce a rescue. Someone still had to arrange assistance, travel into danger, and help people move. Tubman repeatedly accepted that responsibility. Her attachment to her family became organized action against the system separating and exploiting them. dnr.maryland.gov

The Underground Railroad, through which much of this work occurred, was a collection of people, relationships, routes, and places that assisted escape from slavery. Its name borrowed the language of rail travel: a "conductor" guided freedom seekers, while a "station" could provide temporary shelter. It was not a single railroad, a continuous tunnel, or a centrally managed organization. Tubman became an exceptionally effective participant in this wider struggle. Interdependence means that people's efforts and well-being rely partly on one another, and that concept helps us understand how escape became possible. Guides, hosts, boatmen, donors, messengers, and the freedom seekers themselves contributed to journeys whose success could depend on a series of decisions made by different people. home.nps.gov

Tubman's relationships included abolitionists such as William Still, Thomas Garrett, and Lucretia Mott. An abolitionist was someone working to end slavery. Her network

extended through places including Philadelphia, Wilmington, New England, and Canada, and she sought money and assistance to sustain her missions. Collaboration is coordinating different people's contributions toward a shared objective. Her example shows why a leader's greatness can be demonstrated through the ability to work with others. A guide might know a route but need shelter along it; a supporter might have money but need someone capable of organizing a rescue. Tubman helped connect commitment with capability. Her authority grew through work that other people could trust. msa.maryland.gov

That trust required discernment, the ability to judge carefully between possibilities that may look similar on the surface. A friendly manner did not necessarily establish that someone was safe. A familiar route did not guarantee that conditions along it remained unchanged. Tubman used disguises, trusted contacts, different forms of transportation, and communication suited to dangerous circumstances. Her prewar rescue journeys returned to Maryland, where she knew people and the landscape. That geographic concentration reveals judgment about the limits of her knowledge. Effective courage includes recognizing where one has reliable information and where uncertainty becomes too great. Her willingness to take risks operated alongside an effort to understand and reduce them. nps.gov

There is also a practical quality we can call discretion: protecting sensitive information and deciding carefully when, how, and with whom to share it. Underground rescue made careless disclosure potentially catastrophic. Tubman's work invites us to think about a form of leadership that gains effectiveness through restraint. A person can be committed without announcing every intention. Information can be valuable precisely because it is entrusted to someone who understands its consequences. Applied to ordinary life, the lesson concerns reliability: protecting another person's confidence, checking what we repeat, and understanding that access to information creates responsibility. In Tubman's circumstances, such responsibility concerned people whose capture could return them to violent exploitation.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 increased the danger facing freedom seekers by strengthening federal mechanisms for their capture and return. Reaching a Northern state did not reliably end the threat. Tubman helped people reach Canada, where United States fugitive-slave law did not govern their lives in the same way. Adaptability: revising one's methods when conditions change while preserving the underlying purpose. Her goal remained freedom, but the destination and arrangements needed to reflect the legal reality. This is a useful distinction between conviction and rigidity. Conviction holds to a principle; rigidity insists on repeating a method even when that method no longer serves the principle effectively. home.nps.gov

Modern historical estimates place her direct Underground Railroad rescues at approximately seventy people over about thirteen journeys, with additional people receiving instructions that helped them escape independently. These figures are smaller than some older popular accounts, and they describe an extraordinary achievement.

Historical integrity is allowing evidence to guide our account, including when familiar stories require correction. Seventy people represented seventy individual lives, along with relationships and futures that could develop beyond an enslaver's control. Her importance does not depend on exaggerating a total. Careful history gives us something more valuable than an inflated legend: a clearer understanding of what she actually undertook and accomplished. [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov)

We should bring the same care to statements attributed to her. The widely circulated quotation claiming that she could have freed more people if they had known they were enslaved has no credible basis as a Tubman quotation. It also distorts the circumstances of captivity by implying that awareness alone determined whether someone escaped. People knew that they were being controlled. The obstacles included violence, pursuit, children's safety, uncertain assistance, and the danger of forced separation. Empathy is the effort to understand another person's experience and constraints without reducing them to a convenient judgment. Honoring Tubman should enlarge our respect for the people she helped and those she could not reach. It should never become a way to blame enslaved people for the power exercised against them. [reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com)

Faith was central to Tubman's understanding of her life. She believed that God guided and protected her, and accounts of her experiences include dreams and visions that she understood spiritually. Conviction is a firmly held belief that influences conduct, and hers helped sustain a commitment that exposed her repeatedly to danger. A respectful account takes her religious life seriously while recognizing that historians cannot independently verify supernatural explanations. Her actions also involved practical preparation, human assistance, and knowledge of her surroundings. For readers with different beliefs, the relevant question is how a guiding commitment becomes dependable conduct. Tubman's faith was expressed through returning, organizing, protecting, and caring for people. [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov)

When we speak about her mental strength, we should be precise about what the evidence allows. We cannot reconstruct every private feeling, measure her fear, or assign her a modern psychological profile. We can examine her decisions and the sustained work they made possible. Composure is the ability to preserve enough steadiness to respond usefully under pressure; it does not require a person to feel calm at every moment. Tubman's repeated participation in dangerous operations supports an understanding of her as capable of purposeful action amid uncertainty. The lesson is more realistic than imagining an absence of fear. An emotion can be present without becoming the sole authority over a decision.

Her work also demanded a relationship between compassion and firmness. Compassion is concern for suffering joined to a willingness to help, while firmness is the ability to maintain a necessary boundary or decision. Guiding people through danger could require both. A leader responsible for a group has to consider how one person's actions affect everyone else. This does not mean that every severe measure described in accounts of Tubman should become a model for daily relationships. It means her

leadership developed within an emergency created by slavery. To understand her character fairly, we have to consider the conditions under which she exercised authority and the lives that authority was intended to protect.

Her reputation reached other major abolitionists. John Brown met her in 1858 and addressed her as “General” Tubman, an expression of respect for her ability and courage. She assisted his antislavery organizing, although she did not participate in his 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry. That association places her within the serious political conflicts of her time. Radical, in its historical sense, describes an approach that seeks fundamental change at the root of a problem. Tubman worked toward the destruction of a system that powerful institutions defended. Remembering her solely as a kind helper misses the scale of that commitment. Her care for people led her into organized resistance against the arrangement that held them captive. [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov)

The Civil War opened another field for her abilities. She served the Union cause as a nurse, cook, scout, and spy, particularly in South Carolina. Versatility is the capacity to contribute effectively in different roles, and Tubman brought skills suited to both immediate care and military operations. Intelligence, in a military setting, is information collected and evaluated to support decisions about an opponent, terrain, or conditions. Her experience establishing contacts and moving through dangerous environments had obvious value. She helped recruit scouts and gather information from people whose local knowledge could guide Union forces. Her wartime work reveals the continuity between her earlier organizing and her later service: she already understood how to turn relationships and observation into action. [CIA](https://www.cia.gov)

The Combahee River Raid in South Carolina, on June 2, 1863, stands among her most consequential achievements. Working with Union forces under Colonel James Montgomery, Tubman contributed intelligence and guidance to an operation that liberated more than seven hundred enslaved people. The troops included Black soldiers, many with their own direct connection to the struggle against slavery. Strategy is arranging actions and resources to achieve a larger objective. Here, liberation and military purpose were closely connected: the operation struck plantation resources supporting the Confederacy while enabling people to escape. Tubman’s contribution deserves recognition as serious operational leadership. Accurate acknowledgment also preserves Montgomery’s military command and the essential work of the soldiers and other participants. [nmaahc.si.edu](https://www.nmaahc.si.edu)

The people who approached the Union boats were themselves active participants in their liberation. National Park Service accounts describe enslaved people running and swimming toward the vessels, while Tubman helped organize their boarding and spread word of the opportunity. Coordination is the process of bringing separate actions together so that they support a common result. The raid depended on a convergence of local knowledge, military force, communication, and decisions made by people seeking freedom. This fuller account strengthens our appreciation of Tubman. She helped create

an opening through which hundreds could act. Her leadership increased other people's ability to change their circumstances. home.nps.gov

Her wartime care work deserves equal seriousness. Nursing, preparing food, and helping people survive displacement can disappear from accounts that concentrate on a single dramatic operation. Yet an army and a displaced community both depend on labor that keeps people alive from day to day. Archival research describes Tubman working in hospitals and making food for sale after long hours. Diligence is sustained, careful attention to work, including work that receives little recognition. In her case, the practical tasks were part of the same commitment expressed through rescue. A person escaping captivity still needed food, treatment, shelter, and a way to continue living. Her service extended into those ordinary necessities. National Archives

After the war, the government did not promptly compensate her in a manner that reflected the breadth of her contribution. She received a pension as the widow of Union veteran Nelson Davis and pursued additional recognition for her own service. In 1899, legislation increased her pension to twenty dollars a month in recognition of her nursing work. Self-advocacy: speaking and acting to secure appropriate recognition, treatment, or resources for oneself. Tubman's pursuit of compensation belongs within her story of strength. Generosity does not cancel a person's legitimate needs, and devotion to public service does not make fair payment unnecessary. Her example allows us to value both service to others and the insistence that one's own labor be acknowledged. National Archives

Auburn, New York, became the center of her later life. She had purchased property there in 1859, and relatives lived with her at different times. She married Nelson Davis in 1869, and they adopted a daughter, Gertie. These relationships remind us that Tubman had a life extending beyond the public tasks for which she is remembered. She was a family member, spouse, parent, neighbor, and aging woman. Reciprocity means that care and assistance can move in more than one direction. Family members helped maintain the property as she grew older. Receiving assistance did not diminish the authority of someone who had provided so much of it. It made visible the continuing human relationships that supported her life. home.nps.gov

She also worked for women's suffrage—the right of women to vote—and participated in public organizing for civil rights. Her postwar commitments reflected an understanding that the end of legal slavery did not settle every question of equality. Citizenship concerns membership in a political community and the rights and responsibilities attached to that membership. The ability to move freely, exercise political influence, receive protection, and live with dignity required further struggle. Tubman brought the authority of her experience to that work. She had already demonstrated the capacity to make decisions affecting many lives in moments of extreme danger; her advocacy confronted a society that continued to restrict women's formal political participation. nmaahc.si.edu

Her concern for elderly and impoverished people eventually took institutional form through the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged. She purchased the relevant property in 1896 and worked with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church to realize the project, which opened in 1908. Stewardship is taking sustained responsibility for resources so that they serve an enduring purpose. The home shows that her commitment to freedom included concern for what happened when a person could no longer work or live independently. Liberation required more than an opportunity to leave captivity; a humane society also needed places where vulnerable people could receive care. Tubman helped build such a place. [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov/hath)

She entered the home herself in 1911 and died on March 10, 1913, at approximately ninety-one years of age. That final chapter should shape how we speak about her strength. A woman who had guided others to safety eventually needed a community to care for her. Dignity is the inherent worth that belongs to a person throughout life, including periods of dependence. Tubman's worth did not rise and fall with her ability to travel, work, organize, or lead. Remembering her final years helps us reject the expectation that respected elders must remain endlessly productive to deserve support. The care she envisioned for others was care that she, too, had every right to receive. [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov/hath)

Frederick Douglass offered a particularly revealing assessment of her character in an 1868 letter. He observed that much of his own work had occurred publicly, with encouragement and recognition, while hers had often taken place in secrecy. He called her "truthful and trustworthy." Trustworthiness is the quality of being reliably worthy of another person's confidence. Coming from a fellow abolitionist familiar with the stakes of the struggle, this was substantial praise. Tubman's reputation rested on what happened when people entrusted her with their lives. Douglass recognized the significance of work whose success often depended on remaining unseen. His letter invites us to judge leadership by the responsibilities fulfilled, including those that generate little public applause. [gutenberg.org](https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/54400)

Her importance within the Black community is rooted in this record of action. She stands in a tradition of people who refused the claim that Black Americans should wait passively for others to determine their future. Her life demonstrates intellectual authority, organized resistance, family commitment, and the ability to build alliances without surrendering purpose. For Black women especially, her history provides a powerful record of leadership in circumstances where both racial and gender hierarchies restricted recognition. Yet honoring her requires more than repeating that she was strong. We should be able to identify the qualities within that strength: her judgment about risk, her knowledge of people and places, her persistence across decades, and her willingness to connect personal freedom with responsibility toward others.

There is an obligation in how we use her example. Tubman should never become a standard used to demand limitless sacrifice from Black women or to suggest that asking for help reveals insufficient character. Her exceptional service exposes how much a

society can take from a person while failing to provide adequate protection or recognition. Justice is giving serious attention to people's rights and to the fairness of the institutions governing their lives. A community that values her legacy should care about those institutions as well as individual perseverance. It should recognize caregivers, support elders, respect disabled people's needs, preserve historical knowledge, and provide resources for people doing difficult public work. Admiration becomes more substantial when it influences what we protect and fund.

We can also learn from her methods without treating ordinary frustrations as equivalent to enslavement. Tubman encourages us to ask better questions about our own conduct. Is our judgment informed by observation? Have we built relationships in which trust is earned and protected? Can we change an ineffective method without abandoning a worthwhile purpose? Do we recognize the work that continues after a dramatic achievement? Accountability, accepting responsibility for the effects of our decisions and for the commitments we make. Applied in a family, workplace, classroom, or community organization, these questions direct attention toward dependable behavior. Her life teaches that conviction gains practical force through preparation, cooperation, and follow-through.

To value Harriet Tubman fully is to remember the person capable of all these forms of work: the young woman who resisted an overseer, the freedom seeker who acted under threat of sale, the organizer who returned for others, the intelligence worker who contributed to a military operation, the advocate who pursued compensation, and the elder who helped establish a home for people needing care. Legacy is the continuing influence of a life through its consequences, examples, and institutions. Hers reaches far beyond a familiar image or a short classroom account. She helped people regain control over their lives and devoted decades to the conditions that make freedom meaningful. The most serious tribute we can offer is sustained attention to what she knew, what she chose, what she accomplished, and what we owe the people whose freedom and dignity remain entrusted to our care.