

North to Freedom: Harriet Tubman's Eastern Shore

What is the Underground Railroad?

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.

-Harriet Tubman, 1896

The **Underground Railroad**—the resistance to enslavement through escape and flight, through the end of the Civil War—refers to the efforts of enslaved African Americans to gain their freedom by escaping bondage. Wherever slavery existed, there were efforts to escape. At first to maroon communities in remote or rugged terrain on the edge of settled areas and eventually across state and international borders. These acts of self-emancipation labeled slaves as "fugitives," "escapees," or "runaways," but in retrospect "[freedom seeker](#)" is a more accurate description. Many freedom seekers began their journey unaided and many completed their self-emancipation without assistance, but each subsequent decade in which slavery was legal in the United States, there was an increase in active efforts to assist escape.

The decision to assist a freedom seeker may have been spontaneous. However, in some places, especially after the [Fugitive Slave Act of 1850](#), the Underground Railroad was deliberate and organized. Despite the illegality of their actions, people of all races, class and genders participated in this widespread form of civil disobedience. Freedom seekers went in

many directions - Canada, Mexico, Spanish Florida, Indian territory, the West, Caribbean islands and Europe. Wherever there were enslaved African Americans, there were people eager to escape. There was slavery in all original thirteen colonies, in Spanish California, Louisiana, and Florida; Central and South America; and on all of the Caribbean islands until the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and British abolition of slavery (1834).

The Underground Railroad started at the place of enslavement. The routes followed natural and man-made modes of transportation - rivers, canals, bays, the Atlantic Coast, ferries and river crossings, road and trails. Locations close to ports, free territories and international boundaries prompted many escapes. As research continues, new routes are discovered and will be represented on the map.

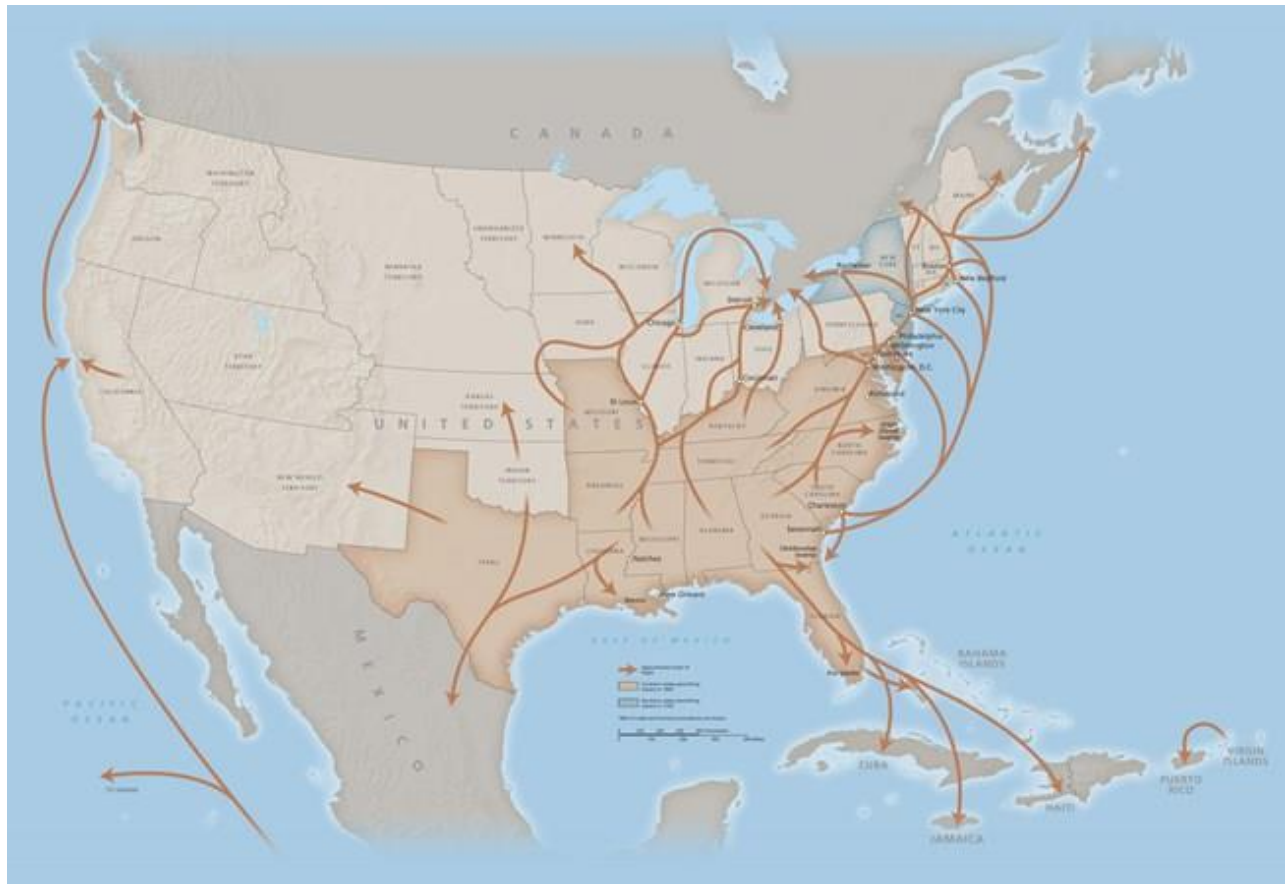
Using ingenuity, freedom seekers drew on courage and intelligence to concoct disguises, forgeries and other strategies. Slave catchers and enslavers watched for runaways on the expected routes of escape and used the stimulus of advertised rewards to encourage public complicity in apprehension. Help came from diverse groups: enslaved and free blacks, American Indians, and people of different religious and ethnic groups.

Maritime industry was an important source for spreading information, in addition to offering employment and transportation. The Pacific West Coast and possibly Alaska became destinations because of ties to the whaling industry. Military service was an additional option; thousands of African Americans joined from the Colonial Era to the Civil War to gain their freedom. During the Civil War, many freedom seekers sought protection and liberty by escaping to the lines of the Union army.

<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/undergroundrailroad/what-is-the-underground-railroad.htm>



Tubman, photographed by Harvey Lindsley. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



A United States map showing the differing routes that freedom seekers would take to reach freedom. *NPS*

Biography of Harriet Tubman

Harriet Ross Tubman, born Araminta "Minty" Ross around 1822, began her extraordinary life on the Brodas Plantation in Dorchester County, Maryland. As one of nine children born to Harriet "Rit" Green and Ben Ross, Harriet's early years were marked by the harsh realities of slavery. Dorchester County, with its sprawling plantations and turbulent history, played a crucial role in shaping the woman who would become a symbol of courage and freedom. At just thirteen, Harriet experienced a life-changing injury. While assisting a runaway slave, she was struck in the head by an iron weight thrown by an overseer. This severe injury caused lifelong episodes of narcolepsy and vivid dreams, which she would later interpret as visions from God. Despite this, Harriet's resolve only strengthened. In 1849, facing the threat of being sold, Harriet made the daring decision to escape. Guided by the North Star, she traversed the perilous path to freedom, crossing into Pennsylvania. Her first steps to freedom were a significant victory, but Harriet knew her mission was far from over. Harriet Tubman returned to Dorchester County and other Southern regions nineteen times over the next decade, orchestrating the escape of over 70 enslaved people via the Underground Railroad. Each journey was fraught with danger, yet she never lost a passenger. Her deep connection to Dorchester County was evident as she navigated familiar landscapes, utilizing her intimate knowledge of the area to outsmart slave catchers.

One notable incident occurred in Bucktown, Dorchester County. While on a rescue mission, Harriet encountered her former master. Quick-thinking, she bought a flock of chickens and created a distraction by releasing them and chasing after them, thus avoiding recognition. In 1857, Harriet led her parents out of Maryland to Auburn, New York, where they lived the rest of their lives in freedom. This move underscored her unyielding commitment to family and her strategic acumen in ensuring their safety.



During the Civil War, Harriet's bravery extended beyond Dorchester County. She served as a scout, spy, and nurse for the Union Army, playing a pivotal role in liberating hundreds of slaves in the Combahee River Raid. Her wartime efforts further solidified her legacy as a formidable force for justice. After the war, Harriet returned to Auburn, where she established The Harriet Tubman Home for the Elderly and Indigent Negroes. This institution reflected her lifelong dedication to the well-being of her community.

Harriet Tubman's life story is a testament to her indomitable spirit and relentless pursuit of freedom. Visitors to Dorchester County can visit our museum, the Harriet Tubman Museum and Educational Center, as well as explore the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park, to be immersed in the history surrounding her extraordinary life. Harriet Ross Tubman remains a beacon of hope and an enduring symbol of the fight for liberty and equality today.

<https://www.harriettubmanmuseumcenter.org/about-harriet>

About the Harriet Tubman Museum and Education Center

The Harriet Tubman Organization, Inc. is a community-based association in Cambridge, Maryland. Its roots trace back to 1983, when a committee was formed to assist the Trustees of Bazzel United Methodist Church in Bucktown, Maryland, in organizing a three-day event to honor Harriet Ross Tubman. Before the organization was formally established, local historian Addie Clash Travers was the primary contact for information about Harriet Tubman. Residents and visitors seeking to learn about Tubman's legacy in Dorchester County would often be directed to Ms. Addie's home. Her enthusiasm for Tubman's history was well-received by her family and the community. Addie Clash Travers



encouraged others to commemorate Harriet Tubman's legacy at Bazzel Church in Bucktown. She collaborated with the Rev. Richard D. Jackson family to establish Harriet Ross Tubman Day, which became an annual event.

The Harriet Tubman Organization began as the Harriet Tubman Association of Dorchester County, founded on September 24, 1972, at the home of Rev. Blanch Bailey. Russell Bailey and his wife supported the early efforts of co-founders Addie Clash Travers and Rev. Edward Jackson by hosting meetings at their home on Pine Street in Cambridge. The Harriet Tubman Committee was officially organized on January 31, 1983, at Waugh Chapel United Methodist Church in Cambridge, with founding members including Addie Clash Travers, Richard Bailey, Woodrow A. Pinder, and others. The founding members aimed to create a community cultural center to provide cultural, educational, social, economic, and historical services. Their goal was to preserve and promote the life and legacy of Harriet Ross Tubman.



In 1996, the Board of Directors voted to rename the organization to the Harriet Tubman Organization, Inc., to better reflect its future vision and mission. The organization's mission is to develop programs and services for children and families, preserve Harriet Tubman's history, and offer the public an interpretive history of her achievements. Additionally, the organization advocates for children, youth, and families while promoting historical preservation.

<https://www.harriettubmanmuseumcenter.org/about-1>