

BOUND FOR THE PROMISED LAND

KATE CLIFFORD LARSON



“Larson has captured Harriet Tubman's clandestine nature ... reading Ms. Larson made me wonder if Tubman is not, in fact, the greatest spy this country has ever produced.”

—*The New York Sun*

“[A] brilliant biography ... Drawing on groundbreaking field research as well as long-neglected sources, Larson demonstrates that Tubman relied on an intricate network of slaves, free blacks and whites that enabled her to move about virtually unseen as she led fugitives to freedom.”

—*Smithsonian Magazine*

“[An] epic new biography ... written with passion for the subject and meticulous attention to detail ... [Larson's] book is nothing less than an encyclopedic chronicle of a rip-roaring American adventure.”

—*The San Antonio Express-News*

“Well-written ... [Larson] provides a thorough sociological grounding in Tubman's world.”

—*USA Today*

“Essential for those interested in Tubman and her causes ... [Larson] has done her homework....”

—*The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“Skillfully written ... Larson's book includes several maps that help readers understand the workings of the Underground Railroad.... Larson present[s] a richly drawn portrait of Tubman as a deeply spiritual woman, a ‘Moses’ and ‘Joan of Ark’ as contemporaries were wont to describe her.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*

“A n engrossing biography of an extraordinary woman.”

—*Green Bay Press-Gazette*

“Mesmerizing and exceedingly well-documented ... As Larson recounts in absorbing incident after absorbing incident, the brilliant Harriet Tubman was courageous, witty, and as determined as a body could be.”

—*Bay State Banner*

“Historian Kate Clifford Larson gives Tubman the powerful, intimate, meticulously detailed life she deserves.”

—*The Herald American*

“[*Bound for the Promised Land*] appropriately reads like fiction, for Tubman's exploits required such intelligence, physical stamina and pure fearlessness that only a very few would have even contemplated the feats that she actually undertook.... Larson captures Tubman's determination and seeming imperviousness to pain and suffering, coupled with an extraordinary selflessness and caring for others.”

—*The Seattle Times*

“Although Tubman's life story has been told before, it has *never* been told in such a comprehensive way.”

“Larson's thorough and readable effort is a must for armchair historians who haven't looked at Tubman in a while, if ever.”

—*Cape Cod Times*

“Larson gives readers a rare peek at Tubman's battle with epilepsy and the invaluable help she received from wealthy white patrons.”

—*Detroit News*



BOUND *for the*
PROMISED LAND

—
Harriet Tubman,

PORTRAIT OF AN AMERICAN HERO

KATE CLIFFORD LARSON



ONE WORLD
BALLANTINE BOOKS
NEW YORK

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INTRODUCTION

THEY LITTER THE FOREST FLOOR, SOMETIMES INCHES DEEP, NATURE'S bed of nails. The seedpods of the sweet gum tree, common in the forests of the Eastern Shore of Maryland, are large, round, and covered with spiny, prickly burrs. The spines pierce the calloused, unprotected feet of terrified runaway slaves. Struggling to contain the involuntary impulse to wince in pain, the fugitive slaves hesitate, knowing that a moment taken to pause or cry out could end their dream of freedom. The lucky ones had shoes. The children never did, and they suffered the most. How ironic that the sweet gum would be so cruel.

For many of these slaves, the sweet gum tree had provided for them since birth. A hollowed-out trunk would be fashioned into a cradle, affectionately referred to as “the gum,” for generations of slave children. The sweet gum's bright green star-shaped leaves, which turn a magnificent scarlet in the fall, emit an aromatic fragrance, a subtle hint of its therapeutic properties. A cut in its bark reveals a yellowish resin used in making folk treatments for skin irritations, wounds, and dysentery. Yet for these runaways the burrs of the sweet gum tree would be among the first of many barriers—whether natural or human—on the road to freedom. Harriet Tubman knew this was where the weakest would turn back. For the faint of heart she carried a pistol, telling her charges to go on or die, for a dead fugitive slave could tell no tales. Not all the tracks on the Underground Railroad were smooth.

It was late November 1860, and Harriet Tubman had returned to Dorchester County, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, to rescue her sister Rachel and Rachel's children, Ben and Angerine, from slavery. Tubman had spent ten years trying to bring them to freedom. Time and time again, Rachel had been unable to join Harriet; separated from her children, Rachel had been unwilling to leave them behind, and Harriet had been unsuccessful in retrieving them. This attempt would end in failure, too. Unbeknownst to Harriet, Rachel had died some months before. To compound the tragedy, her nephew Ben and niece Angerine remained out of Tubman's grasp. Overcoming deep anguish and profound sadness, Tubman turned her attention instead to rescuing another family from slavery: Stephen and Maria Ennals and their three children.

The weather was bitter cold, and the unexpected driving snow and icy rain made this trip with children particularly dangerous and tense. With little planning and no additional clothing or food, the Ennals trusted Tubman to bring them through to freedom. They suffered terribly. The baby had to be drugged with opium to keep it from crying and revealing their hiding place as slave patrols passed by. They starved and froze, but they eventually celebrated Christmas in freedom. Though this was another successful trip for Harriet, the loss of her sister and the debilitating effects on her health from the difficult trip were almost too much for her to bear. A decade of bringing family and friends to the North and freedom had taken a great toll. This would be Tubman's last rescue mission.

WE ALL BELIEVE that we know Harriet Tubman, who lived from 1822 to 1913; referred to as “Moses” in her time, Tubman is best known for her role as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Her secret journeys into the slave states to rescue women, men, and children have immortalized her in the minds of Americans for 130 years. These accomplishments, however, have also served to create a mythological image of a woman about whose actual life we know little. Though she is one of the most famous women in our nation's history, most of us have come to know the narrative of her life through biographies written for young people. In fact, the last adult biography of Tubman, Earl Conrad's *Harriet Tubman*, was published in 1943.

In 1863 Franklin B. Sanborn, editor of the *Boston Commonwealth*, an antislavery newspaper, published the first biographical sketch of Harriet Tubman. “The true romance of America,” he wrote, could be found “in the story of the fugitive slaves.” Setting the stage for future biographies, Sanborn claimed that the drama of Tubman's life story had the “power to shake the nation that so long was deaf to her cries.”¹ Two years later, Ednah Dow Cheney added to Sanborn's sketch, describing Tubman as “probably the most remarkable woman of this age,” who “has performed more wonderful deeds by the native power of her own spirit than any other.”² A more detailed biography by Sarah Bradford appeared a few years later; released in 1869 as *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, it set Tubman's early life permanently in the historical record. By the time William Still's famous 1871 documentary volume, *The Underground Railroad*, was published, Tubman's status as a heroine without equal was established.³

In elementary schools across America, children now learn of Tubman's heroic deeds. Relegated to the dustbin of history before the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Tubman reemerged during the 1970s and 1980s as one of the ten most famous Americans in history, after Betsy Ross (number one) and Paul Revere (number two).⁴ Harriet Tubman has become part of the core American historical memory. But incredibly, what children learn about Tubman is largely all that we as a nation know of her.

The reality of Harriet Tubman's life is far more compelling than the partly fictionalized biography so familiar to schoolchildren. Why have we been satisfied with the mythical Tubman and why has her biography remained within the province of children's literature? Although the myths are rooted in actual achievements and serve to enhance the legend of Harriet Tubman, they do so at the expense of her real life story. The true facts of Tubman's long life, including her years under slavery, her family life, her profound spirituality, her accomplishments as a freedom fighter from her Underground Railroad days to her Civil War exploits and then later her suffrage and community activism, reveal a remarkably powerful and influential life endured during some of the darkest days in American history. Motivated by a deep love of family, Tubman struggled against great odds to bring scores of relatives and friends to freedom in the North. Necessarily shrouded in secrecy at the time, the details of her escape missions have been buried in the historical record for generations. There is, therefore, a need to rediscover Harriet Tubman, to separate reality from myth and to reconstruct a richer and far more accurate historical account of her life.

HARRIET TUBMAN WAS BORN Araminta “Minty” Ross on the plantation of Anthony Thompson, south of Madison in the Parsons Creek district of Dorchester County, Maryland, probably in late February or early March 1822. She was the fifth of nine children born to Harriet “Rit” Green and Ben Ross.⁵ Both slaves, Rit and Ben were owned by different masters: Rit was enslaved by Edward Brodess, Anthony Thompson's stepson, and Ben, a highly skilled timber man, belonged to Thompson, who was a wealthy and prominent landowner. The Ross family's relatively stable life on Thompson's plantation came to an abrupt end sometime in late 1823 or early 1824, when Edward Brodess claimed ownership of Rit and her children through the estate of his mother, Mary Pattison Brodess Thompson. He took Rit and her five children, including Minty, away from Ben to his own farm in Bucktown, ten miles to the east. Brodess often hired Minty out to temporary masters, some of whom were cruel and negligent, while selling some of her siblings and their children illegally to out-of-state buyers, permanently fracturing the Ross family.

Working as a field hand while a young teen, Minty was nearly killed by a blow to the head from an iron weight thrown by an angry overseer at another fleeing slave. She suffered from headaches, seizures, and sleeping spells (probably symptoms of temporal lobe epilepsy) for the rest of her life. During the late 1830s and early 1840s Tubman worked for John T. Stewart, a Madison merchant and shipbuilder, bringing her back to the community near where her father lived and where she had been born. About 1844 she married a local free black named John Tubman, shedding her childhood name, Minty, in favor of Harriet, possibly in honor of her mother.

When Edward Brodess died at the age of forty-seven in 1849, his many debts left Harriet and her siblings at risk of

being sold. To avoid an unknown fate on the auction block, Tubman took her own liberty in the late fall of 1849. She ~~tapped into an underground organization that was already functioning well on the Eastern Shore.~~ Traveling by night, using the North Star and instructions from black and white helpers, she found her way to freedom in Philadelphia.

Over the next eleven years Tubman returned to the Eastern Shore of Maryland approximately thirteen times to liberate family and friends; in all, she personally brought away about seventy former slaves, including her brothers and other family and friends. She also gave instructions to approximately fifty more slaves who found their way to freedom independently. When Sarah Bradford published her first biography of Tubman in 1869, she flagrantly exaggerated those numbers to nineteen trips and three hundred rescued. Tubman herself claimed to have made only eight or nine trips and rescued approximately fifty people by the summer of 1859.⁶ Even this, however, was enough to earn her the byname Moses. Her monumental and dangerous efforts to bring away her enslaved family and friends elevated her status to that of a heroine without equal. Long obscured in the historical record, the details of these escape missions reveal intricate planning involving complex networks of black and white supporters who risked their own lives to help Tubman achieve her goals. Compelling and moving, these stories testify to multiple acts of heroism inspired by the pursuit of freedom.

Tubman relied heavily upon a long-established, intricate, and secretive web of communication and support among African Americans to effect her rescues. The collective efforts of free and enslaved African Americans operating beyond the scrutiny of whites along the various routes to freedom were crucial to her success. Though white Quaker and abolitionist support was vital to Tubman's survival and success, it was the African American community from the Eastern Shore of Maryland and the Chesapeake Bay to Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York, New England, and Canada that provided the protection, communication, and sustenance she required during the darkest and most dangerous days of fighting for freedom.

Tubman's father, Ben Ross, who had been freed in 1840, greatly influenced her. An Underground Railroad agent himself, Ross faced arrest after he was exposed in 1857. At enormous risk, Tubman returned to the Eastern Shore to rescue him and her mother, and bring them to safety in Canada. There never was a \$40,000 reward for Tubman's capture, a figure that became grossly exaggerated through the retelling of her story. It was not until eight or nine years after Tubman had run away and had made several trips back to rescue family and friends in late 1857 and early 1858, that slaveholders on the Eastern Shore became aware that someone was likely helping slaves run away from their masters. Even then, they did not know the identity of the culprit, or whether that person was a man or woman, black or white.

Tubman's remarkable ability to travel undetected in slave territory piqued the interest of John Brown, a radical abolitionist and fiery freedom fighter. Tubman became a devoted supporter and confidante, helping Brown plan for his ultimately flawed attack on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859. Her total commitment to destroying the slave system eventually led her to South Carolina during the Civil War, where she alternated roles as nurse and scout, cook and spy, in the service of the Union army. Eventually she became the first American woman ever to lead an armed raid into enemy territory.

Settling in Fleming, New York, outside the city of Auburn, after the Civil War, Tubman became an active member of the local African American community. She welcomed scores of orphaned children, destitute and sick former slaves, and others in need into her home, and was often reduced to begging for food, money, and clothing. Maintaining her relationships with a multitude of former white abolitionists, Tubman moved between two very different and highly segregated worlds. Through them, however, she remained an active presence in the woman suffrage movement that struggled, foundered, and renewed itself in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Though destitute and frail, she continued her campaign for civil rights until her death in 1913.

IN 1907 AN ARTICLE about Harriet's life appeared in the *New York Herald*. "There is not a trace in her countenance of intelligence or courage, but seldom has there been placed in any woman's hide a soul moved by a higher impulse, a purer benevolence, a more dauntless resolution, a more passionate love of freedom. This poor, ignorant, common looking black woman was fully capable of acting the part of Joan d'Arc."⁷ This imagery of a "poor, ignorant, common looking black woman" belies Tubman's intellectual development and her evolving confidence in her own abilities, and it demonstrates the journalist's failure to grasp the substance of Tubman. While enslavement itself was certainly motivation enough for Tubman to seek freedom, ignoring the other aspects of her life and times makes it impossible to fully explore her rich and productive intellectual and spiritual life. This is a reflection of the limited potential identities available to black women as historical actors.

In the years following Tubman's death in 1913, the black community maintained Tubman's memory, mostly in segregated classrooms. With her story shortened and simplified, she entered the pantheon of black achievers, where her narrative became part of a usable past for African Americans. Highly fictionalized accounts of her life started appearing in the late 1920s and early 1930s, specifically works for children and young adults that highlighted the history of the Underground Railroad, which had caught the interest of the nation.⁸ In 1938 a reporter named Earl Conrad began researching a full-length biography of Tubman. In the age of Jim Crow, Conrad's efforts to shed light on certain aspects of Tubman's life were thwarted repeatedly by uninterested archivists, librarians, and publishers who found no value in the biography of a black woman. Conrad's book, *Harriet Tubman*, did help lay the foundation for the scores of juvenile biographies published over the last six decades.

Harriet Tubman was unable to read and write for herself, and so her narrative has come down to us as a series of mediated images created and exploited by others. Tubman's life story has been reduced to a simple account of a courageous mother figure rather than the complex story of an intelligent, crafty woman, with flaws and needs of her own, who transcended negative assumptions about black women's abilities and achieved what very few men or women, black or white, have accomplished. We may never know how selective or creative Tubman was when she revealed her life story to her friends, but she ultimately played a significant role in the crafting of her image as one of the most famous Underground Railroad conductors of her time.

Nevertheless, in the absence of a written personal record we are left with accounts of her life that reflect a variety of contrived and incomplete portraits. The significance of a new biography of Tubman lies not only in its detail but also in the way it illuminates the patterns of neglect and complacency expressed in the racial stereotypes that have minimized, if not erased, her many contributions. Based on new information and fresh sources from hidden and long-forgotten private and public records, a more accurate life story of the real Harriet Tubman is finally possible.

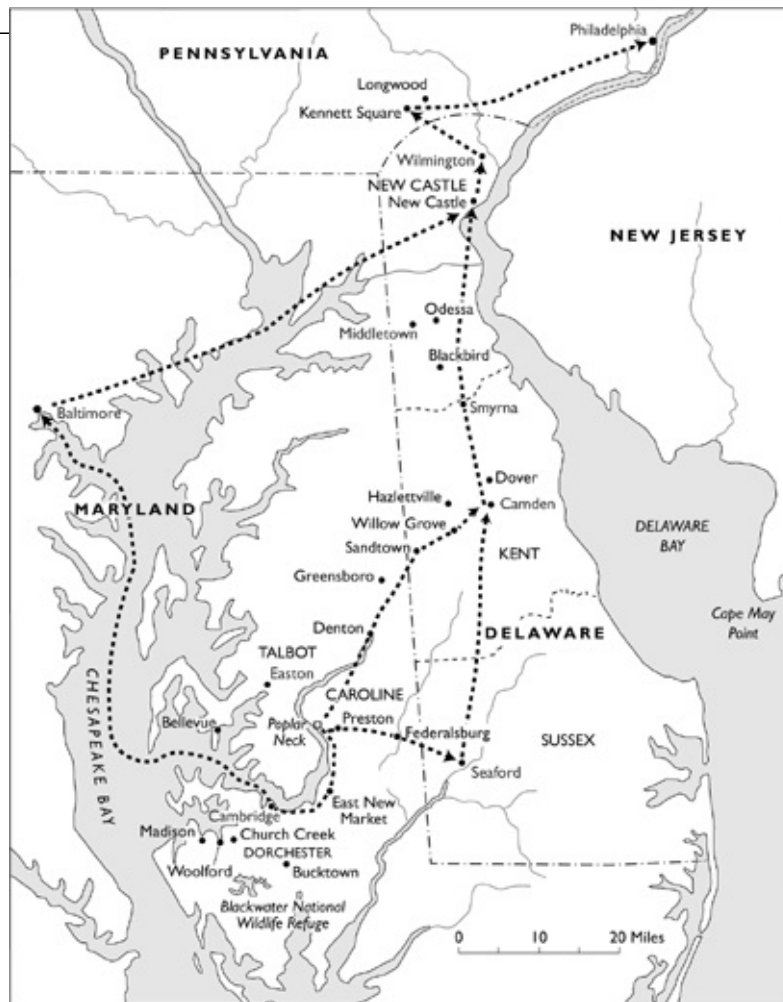
TUBMAN WAS GUIDED by an interior life shaped by a particular slave experience. Suffering under the lash, disabled by a near-fatal head injury, Tubman rose above horrific childhood adversity to emerge with a will of steel. Refusing to be bound by the chains of slavery or by the low expectations limiting the lives of women and African Americans, Tubman struggled against amazing odds to pursue her lifelong commitment to liberty, equal rights, justice, and self-determination. Owing her success to unique survival techniques, Tubman managed to transcend victimization to achieve emotional and physical freedom from her oppressors. Supported by a deep spiritual faith and a lifelong humanitarian passion for family and community, Tubman demonstrated an unyielding and seemingly fearless resolve to secure liberty and equality for others.

She died a free woman, surrounded by family and friends in the home for aged African Americans she had dreamed of for decades. Although she did not live long enough to witness the granting of the vote to women, Harriet Tubman's role as an ardent suffragist and political activist, fighting for the rights of African Americans, has inspired generations of Americans who have been deeply moved by her lifelong quest. Like the biblical Moses who led the

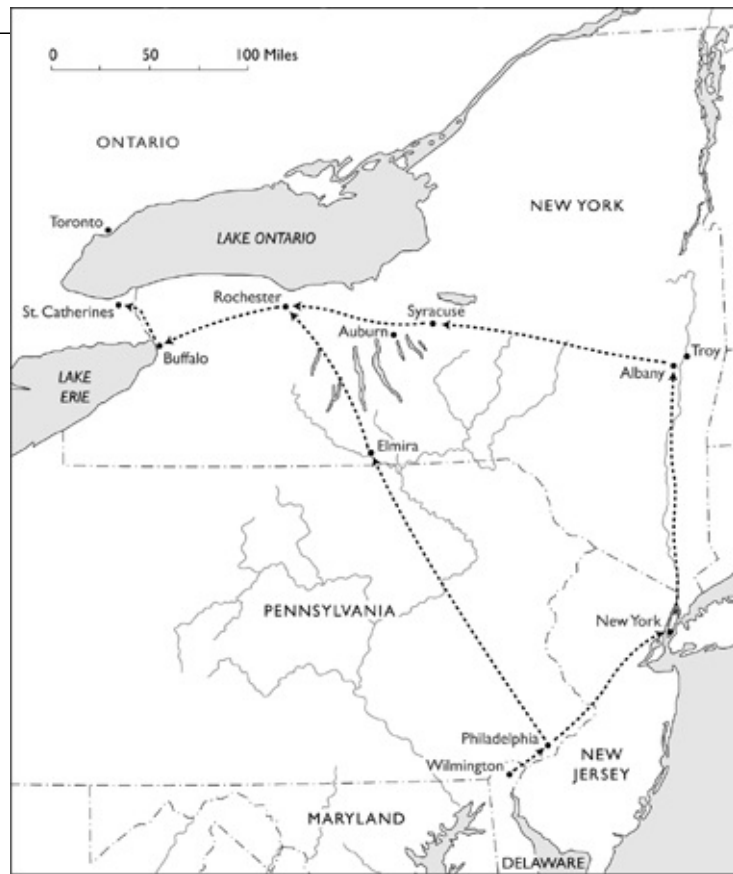
Jews out of Egypt, Tubman sprang from an unlikely background—uneducated, female, and black— to emerge as a leader among men. It is this tale of physical and spiritual struggle that has resonated with Americans of many backgrounds into the twenty-first century. Tubman's remarkable life, more powerful and extraordinary in its reality, is the stuff of legend and, ultimately, of a true American hero.



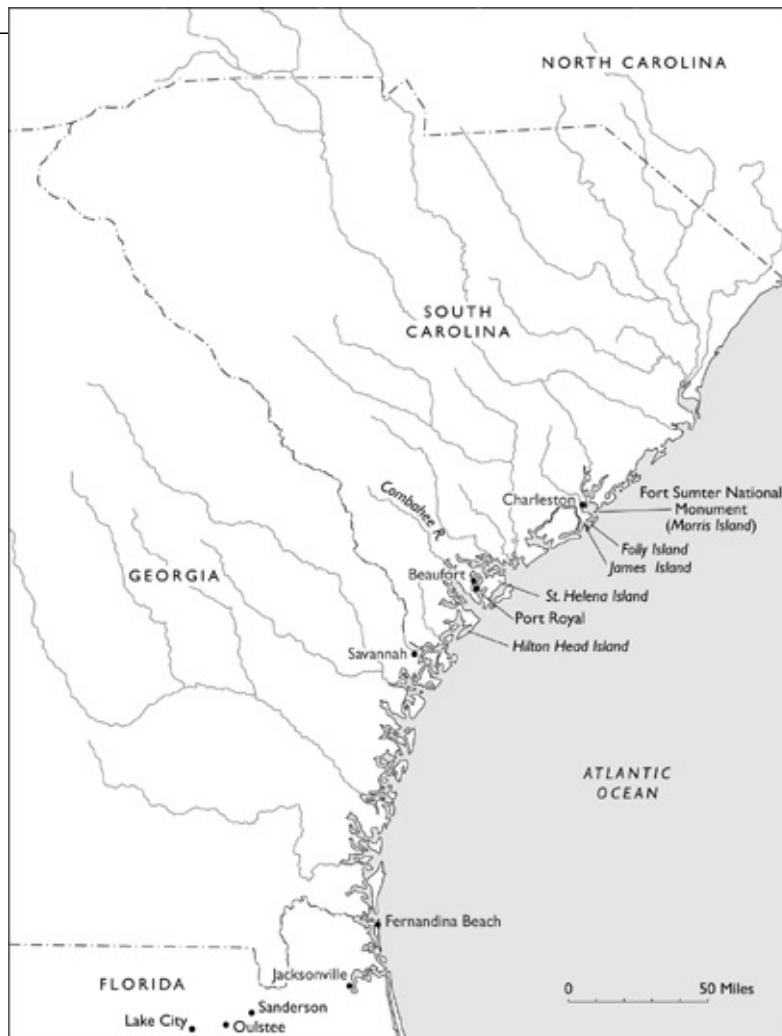
Dorchester County, circa 1800-1860.



Harriet Tubman's southern Underground Railroad routes to Philadelphia.



Harriet Tubman's northern Underground Railroad routes to freedom.



Harriet Tubman's Civil War theater.

LIFE ON THE CHESAPEAKE IN BLACK AND WHITE

WHEN HARRIET TUBMAN FLED HER DEAD MASTER'S FAMILY IN 1849, she was not the only slave from the Eastern Shore of Maryland racing for liberty. In 1850 a total of 279 runaway slaves earned Maryland the dubious distinction of leading the slave states in successfully executed escapes.¹ The motivations for running away are no mystery; however, in many cases the methods of escape remain unknown even to this day. Despite stepped-up efforts in Maryland and other southern states to thwart escapes during the ten years before the Civil War, some slaves did marshal the strength and courage to take their liberty. But few returned to the land of their enslavement, risking capture and reenslavement, even lynching, to help others seek their own emancipation.

How did Tubman successfully escape bondage in Dorchester County, and how did she manage to return many times to lead out family and friends? Not merely the recipient of white abolitionist support, Tubman was the beneficiary of, and a participant in, an African American community that challenged the control of white Marylanders, from the time of the earliest Africans brought from Africa to the outbreak of the Civil War.

Tubman's story begins several decades before her birth with a complicated set of interrelationships, black and white, enslaved and free, of several generations of families living on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. As historian Mechal Sobel describes it, this was “world they made together.”²

DORCHESTER COUNTY LIES between two rivers, the Choptank to the north and the Nanticoke to the south and east, and extends from the Chesapeake Bay to the Delaware state line encompassing almost 400,000 acres of dense forest full of oak, hickory, pine, walnut, and sweet gum; marshes and waterways; and extensive farmland. Numerous navigable rivers and creeks crisscross the county, offering access to trade and suitable sites for shipbuilding. The flat terrain provides abundant tillable lands for tobacco, wheat, corn, fruit, and other agricultural products, and before modern times, the vast supply of oyster shells helped keep soils fertile.

The Choptank River rises near the Delaware line, flowing south between Caroline and Talbot Counties and on to Dorchester County, finally emptying into the Chesapeake. In the nineteenth century, the river remained navigable for nearly forty miles upstream from the Chesapeake Bay.³ Dorchester's southern border, the Nanticoke River, was navigable throughout its course from Seaford, Delaware, to the Chesapeake; the town of Vienna served as its port of entry and became a major trading center during the early nineteenth century.

providing bay access to neighboring Somerset County and southwestern Delaware.⁴

It was to this landscape that Harriet Tubman's African ancestors were forcibly brought to labor in servitude to white masters. Enslavement of Africans in Maryland, and the laws and regulations that codified slavery's existence, evolved slowly over a hundred-year period. Until the early eighteenth century white indentured servitude was common, particularly on the Eastern Shore. Some planters had both slaves and indentured servants; by the 1730s and 1740s, however, shipments of black captives from Africa to the Americas had increased dramatically. Numerous laws were enacted relating to ownership of slaves, including one specifying that any children born to an enslaved woman would carry the status of the mother, with ownership remaining with the slave woman's owner, even if the father was a free black or a white man.⁵

Thus Tubman's story begins with the history of some of the white families who claimed ownership of her and her family. The detailed records of the lives of the white families who enslaved Tubman, her family, and her friends, demonstrate the sharp contrast between the lives of whites and blacks, lives intimately entwined yet irreconcilably different. Following these white families' lives as closely as the remaining records allow reveals the lives of the enslaved people, bringing to life the web of community into which Tubman was born. The white Pattisons, the Thompsons, the Stewarts, and the Brodesses played key roles in the lives of Tubman's family. On the Eastern Shore of Maryland, most black people, slave and free alike, moved around according to the land ownership patterns, occupational choices, and living arrangements of the region's white families. Out of necessity, many black families maintained familial and community ties throughout a wide geographic area. Family separations were not always precipitated by sale; some whites owned (or rented) land and farms across great distances, requiring a shifting of their enslaved and hired black labor force at varying times throughout the year, or at various times over a period of decades when new land had been purchased and the cycle of clearing and establishing new farms began. This pattern of intraregional movement forced families and friends (both black and white) to create communication and travel networks in order to maintain ties with family and community. These complicated networks made it possible for Tubman to become one of the rare individuals capable of executing successful and daring rescues repeatedly.

A devastating fire at the Dorchester County courthouse, set by an unknown arsonist in March 1852, destroyed a great portion of Dorchester County's historical records.⁶ Because few records survived from before 1852, piecing together the nature of black and white relationships in Dorchester County can be done in only a limited way. For instance, we do not know the names of all the slaves owned by Edward Brodess, Harriet Tubman's owner, nor all of those owned by Anthony Thompson, the owner of Tubman's father, Ben Ross, from the first half of the nineteenth century.

Several documents did survive the fire: the records of the Orphans Court from 1847 to 1852 were saved because the clerk of the court brought the logbook home to work on it over the weekend. This quirk of fate secured a five-year segment of history important to revealing details of Tubman's life and of those black and white families who were part of her community. Other records were saved, too: the books listing manumissions, freedom papers, and many chattel records (where slave sales were recorded) were preserved, providing

important information about the black community and vital genealogical data for many families in the area. District court cases, heard at the appeals court located in neighboring Talbot County, were recorded at the state level, as were most land transactions, thereby preserving some information from the colonial era and the early republic. Fortunately, these court records contain some of the most dramatic documentation available detailing Harriet Tubman's life in slavery.

Reaching Beyond the Grave: The Legacy of a Patriarch

In 1791 Atthow Pattison, the patriarch of a long-established Eastern Shore family, sat down to contemplate his legacy to his children and grandchildren. A Revolutionary War veteran, modest farmer, and an even more modest slaveholder, Pattison could proudly trace his roots in Dorchester County back at least a century. Intermarrying for generations, the Pattisons and other Eastern Shore families consolidated their control over vast tracts of dense timberland, rich marshlands, and productive farms.

Standing at his front door, Pattison could view much of his approximately 265-acre farm situated on the east side of the Little Blackwater River, near its confluence with the large Blackwater River.⁷ From the wharf in front of his home Pattison probably shipped tobacco, timber, and grain, destined for England and other markets, and received goods originating from the West Indies or England as well as other trading points in New England and along the Chesapeake.⁸

After dividing tracts of land, including his home plantation, and arranging for payments to his grandchildren when they came of age, Atthow bequeathed his remaining slaves and livestock to his surviving daughter, Elizabeth, and her children, Gourney Crow, James Elizabeth, Achsah, and Mary Pattison, and to his son-in-law, Ezekiel Keene, and his children Samuel and Anna Keene. Elizabeth, in keeping with her father's implicit understanding that his children marry "in the family," had married her cousin William Pattison, and they lived on a nearby plantation.⁹ Atthow's second daughter, Mary, had married her cousin Ezekiel Keene and moved to a farm south of Atthow's land, though she was dead by the time the will was written.

When Atthow Pattison died in January 1797 he gave to his granddaughter Mary Pattison one enslaved girl named "Rittia and her increase until she and they arrive to forty five years of age."¹⁰ This phrase, limiting Rit's and her children's terms of service to forty-five years, provided for Rit's eventual manumission, or freedom, from slavery.¹¹ Maryland manumissions had taken place even in the earliest days of slavery. Never an informal procedure, manumissions were taken quite seriously and were often recorded in land records (as deeds) for each county. Some slaves were able to earn enough money to buy their own freedom, and on occasion slaves sued for their freedom, some eventually prevailing. In 1753 Maryland passed a law restricting manumission by will to slaves "sound in body and mind capable of labor and not over fifty years of age," so as to prevent slaveholders or estates from avoiding responsibility for the care and maintenance of "disabled and superannuated

slaves.” Manumitting slaves was illegal if the grant of manumission was written in part “during the last fatal illness of the master,” or if the freeing of slaves affected the ability of creditors to settle their claims against the estate of the deceased.¹² This legislation, it was hoped, would slow the increasing number of deathbed manumissions and hold slaveholders more accountable for the support and maintenance of indigent slaves.

Limiting Rit's term of service lowered her market value to Pattison's heirs if they were inclined to sell her after gaining possession of her. No doubt Pattison was aware of this, but he may have been influenced by the spirit of the times. On the Eastern Shore, as elsewhere in the new nation, a complex movement was emerging, both religious and secular, that spurred a marked increase in manumissions during the 1790s. While elite families still maintained much control, wealth could be achieved readily with the expanding production of wheat and other grains for export markets, providing viable roads to prosperity for entrepreneurial families in Dorchester and the surrounding counties. The rise of intensive grain agriculture and timber harvesting transformed work patterns on the Eastern Shore. Tobacco production required a year-round labor force, but grain agriculture did not. While timber harvesting could be carried on throughout the year, it also required continuous acquisition of land once one lot had been cut, and it demanded a predominantly male labor force. These factors, among others, altered the nature of black slavery and freedom on the Eastern Shore by 1800: on one hand, free black labor became, to some extent, a more attractive economic alternative to owning slaves, while on the other hand, some white slaveholders found it lucrative to sell off their excess slaves.¹³

The Debate over Slavery: Manumission and the Question of Freedom

An increasingly important religious awakening—founded upon Quakerism and Methodism—and an ideological legacy of freedom from the American Revolution sparked intense debate about the moral, political, and economic validity of slavery. While the rise in manumissions and petitions for freedom immediately following the American Revolution was in part a function of the Revolution's rhetoric of liberty, it was also a function of fluctuating economic conditions, less labor-intensive agricultural work, and a self-sustaining and economically viable free African American population, all of which made term limits and manumissions more palatable to slaveholders as an alternative to perpetual bondage.

An increasingly pronounced antislavery sentiment in England also sparked intense debate in America. In Maryland, citizens from the Eastern Shore, including those from Talbot, Dorchester, and Caroline Counties, petitioned the House of Delegates in 1785 for the abolition of slavery. Abolitionist voices throughout Maryland became quite influential, so much so that increasing numbers of slaves initiated successful lawsuits against their masters for their freedom. Outraged, slaveholders forced the Maryland state legislature to impose sanctions against the Maryland Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, effectively dismantling it by the mid-1790s.¹⁴

On the Eastern Shore, Quakers manumitted hundreds of slaves by deed and by will in the

1780s. Methodism evolved slowly in Maryland at first, but during the 1790s it spread rapidly throughout Dorchester and surrounding counties. Though the most elite families of the Eastern Shore initially remained loyal to the Anglican Church, Methodism played an important role in the increasing number of manumissions.

But elite slaveholder concerns about the impact of the growing free black population on their ability to control the economic, political, and social dynamics in their communities became a powerful counterpoint to antislavery sentiment on the Eastern Shore. While immediate emancipation remained a choice for some Methodist slaveholders (and some non-Methodist ones), it appears that the majority who considered manumission for their enslaved people followed a policy of delayed manumissions, executing deeds of manumission for some future date. In this way, the slaveholder ensured that he remained the beneficiary of a slave's most productive years. Others sold their slaves for a limited term of years, putting cash in their pockets while assuaging their consciences by providing for eventual manumission, which in all cases of delayed manumission "afforded the greatest amount of protection for the master's purse while still appeasing the troubled conscience."¹⁵

The Abolition Society argued in the 1780s that restrictions on the ability of a slaveholder to manumit his slaves (as defined in the 1752 law) was in direct conflict with the rights of free individuals to control their property, regardless of whether it was a slave or a piece of land. The question of limits on deeds of manumission was debated at yearly meetings of the Society of Friends, at the General Court, and finally before the House of Delegates in Maryland. After several defeats in the Maryland Senate, a revised bill was passed in 1790 allowing for "manumission freely by deed, properly executed, as before [per the 1752 law] or by will at any time, saving only the rights of creditors, and provided that the slave be not over fifty years and be able to work, at the time he was to be free." In 1796 the law was amended to restrict manumissions to those slaves under forty-five, which at the time was still a relatively advanced age.¹⁶ Atthow Pattison's intention was to manumit those slaves specifically mentioned in his last will and testament of 1791 when they turned forty-five, five years sooner than the maximum allowed under the 1790 law.¹⁷

Limiting a slave's term of service was one method of ensuring loyalty from enslaved people, who could eventually join the growing freed and freeborn black population. Term limits also allowed slaveholders to ease their conscience within the context of the newly formed ideas of democracy and Christianity in the early republic.¹⁸ This attitude was not incompatible with a belief that slavery could remain intact and be perpetuated.

Born sometime between 1785 and 1789, Tubman's mother, Rit, grew up in the Pattison household, probably with her mother, Modesty, and other close kin. According to Maryland's colonial census taken in 1776, Atthow Pattison owned five slaves.¹⁹ Slave names were rarely recorded in the census, as slaves were considered chattel, much like sheep, cattle, and horses. By 1790 Pattison's household consisted of twelve individuals, five whites and seven slaves. The higher number could reflect the birth of additional slave children to the enslaved women in Pattison's household. While Modesty is not mentioned in Atthow Pattison's will of 1791, she was at one time owned by Pattison and may have been one of the seven slaves listed in 1790.²¹ Another slave, Minty, was bequeathed to Pattison's grandson Samuel Keene. Pat-tison

bequeathed two enslaved women, Bess and Suke, to his daughter Elizabeth Pattison. All of them were to be freed when they turned forty-five.²² These enslaved women were more than likely part of a family grouping of their own. As a child, Tubman had been given the name Araminta and was called Minty. Rit might have named her daughter after a favorite aunt, perhaps the sister of her mother. At the least, she named her child after a woman for whom she felt familial affection.²³ Later, Samuel Keene sold the elder Minty and a child called Rit to his cousin, also named Samuel Keene.²⁴

Atthow Pattison's granddaughter Mary Pattison married Joseph Brodess, a local farmer from Bucktown, in central Dorchester County, in 1800. Joseph and Mary settled into a home adjacent to her mother Elizabeth's plantation, south of the Little Blackwater Bridge, with five slaves.²⁵ Elizabeth, a widow in 1800, was the head of a rather large household of fifteen white and black people, including seven slaves. Brodess probably helped his mother-in-law manage her plantation. Indeed, given such a large household, including six minor white children and no adult white males, Elizabeth most likely needed her son-in-law's assistance. Joseph's own property, north and slightly east of his mother-in-law's, had not been developed yet, or his family was farming the land for him.²⁶ Brodess and his siblings, Edward and Elizabeth, had inherited several hundred acres in Bucktown from their father, Edward Brodess Sr., who died in 1796.

Mary Pattison Brodess gave birth to a son, Edward, on June 14, 1801. Sometime after June 1802 Joseph Brodess died, leaving Mary a young widow.²⁷ By 1803 Mary had married Anthony Thompson, a moderately successful landowner, with interests in several businesses on the Eastern Shore, and a descendant of early Dorchester County settlers. Mary's rapid remarriage represented the reality of life for women in the early republic. In need of support, possessing some limited wealth of her own, and the custodian of her infant son's inheritance, Mary sought to secure her future and that of her son by marrying within the community a man of equal or better social and financial standing. A woman's right to her own inheritance or to that of her dead husband was circumscribed by laws that limited her ability to control and own property outright. Though Mary entered the marriage with perhaps some yearly income from the residue of her grandfather's estate, she was more than likely not secure enough to maintain herself and her son independently.

Anthony Thompson was also a widower; Polly (Mary) King, his first wife, died sometime between 1800 and 1803. Thompson inherited his property in the 1780s; the majority of it was near the Blackwater River in central Dorchester County. Over the years he added considerably to his land holdings in the area.²⁸ When Polly died, she left Anthony with three young sons, Edward, Anthony C., and Absalom Thompson, who were all under the age of fifteen. Thompson, who lived in Church Creek at the time, also owned about nine slaves.

It was to this household that Mary Pattison Brodess brought her young son, Edward, her personal slave, Rit (Harriet Tubman's mother), and four male slaves who had been owned by her deceased husband, Joseph.²⁹ One of Thompson's slaves, Ben Ross, was a highly skilled and valued timber inspector and foreman, who managed the timbering operations on Thompson's heavily forested property. Through Mary and Anthony's marriage, Rit and Ben became members of the same household, and they eventually married and started their own

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