

The Underground Railroad

We escaped from the plantation in Dorchester County, Maryland. Ben, Henry and I.

Helped by the Underground Railroad.

You'd think that the Underground Railroad was a train under the ground but it's not. It's people. Lots of people. All of them risking their lives to help others get to freedom. People like me. Conductors they called them, the people who guided me to hiding places all over the place. In time, I became one of them.

It was a hard decision to escape. There was always the constant threat of capture hanging over you. The knowledge that the slave catchers and their dogs were on the hunt for runaways. Being caught meant a return to the plantation where we'd be whipped, branded, beaten or killed. I'd had my fair share of misery on the plantation where I was born. My parents named me Araminta Ross and called me 'Minty' but when I was older, I changed my name to Harriet in honour of my mother.

Mother worked as a cook up at the big house and Father was a timber worker. I had eight brothers and sisters but slavery forced us apart and some of them were sold to other plantations. When I was just five, I was rented out as a nursemaid. Even though I was tiny, they whipped me when the baby cried and that was often. Two years later, I was rented out to a planter to set muskrat traps and then I was set to work in the fields. I was 12 when the accident happened which

would affect me all my life. It was the first time I understood what injustice was. An overseer was about to throw a metal weight at an escaped slave but I stepped in front of him, taking the blow to my head. I was knocked unconscious and the blow broke my skull. They carried me cut and bleeding into the house and, since there was no bed for me to lie down, I had to sit on the seat of the weaving loom all that day and the next without any medical attention at all. As a result of this accident, I was subject to headaches for the rest of my life and occasionally I would fall into a deep sleep for hours at a time.

In 1844 I married John Tubman and changed my name from Ross to Tubman.



It wasn't a good marriage and when I learnt that my brothers Ben and Henry were about to be sold, I decided to escape. In 1849 we left, but my brothers changed their minds and turned back. I fled the plantation in Maryland and trekked alone for nearly 90 miles to the city of Philadelphia in the free state of Pennsylvania, leaving behind my husband, parents and siblings. I followed the North Star, making my way across the country by night and hiding by day. I would never have made it to Philadelphia if it hadn't been for the network of safe houses along the way that gave me sanctuary. I learnt about these by word of mouth from helpful people keen to assist me. One time, I was told to sweep the yard by the lady of the house, so it would look as if I was working for them, before they put me into the back of a cart and took me to the next friendly house. It took days to reach Philadelphia, but soon after I arrived, I found work as a housekeeper. I returned to Maryland, determined to rescue my sister and her children. I even tried rescuing my husband but he refused to escape and I learnt that he had married again.

Eager to help others, I joined the Underground Railroad. I learnt it was the Quakers who played a huge role in the Railroad's formation. Isaac Hopper was one of the first conductors. He hid runaways in his own home and organised a series of safe havens where the fugitives could hide. People operating the safe houses were known as the 'stationmasters' and safe houses could be anywhere: in a church, a schoolhouse, a private home.

I was careful! Oh so very careful! You had to watch out for those you could and couldn't trust. I learnt to communicate with people and gather intelligence about the

slave catchers. We had special tactics we would use to keep hidden. Winter was the best time for escape; the nights were longer and we could remain hidden better and cover more ground. Runaways had their names printed in the newspapers on Mondays, so I learnt to ensure escapes took place on a Saturday before the papers could print any names. I sang special songs to warn fugitives to remain hidden. 'Swing low, sweet chariot' was my favourite song to sing to let them know it was safe to come out of hiding. We used code words as a means of protection. Fugitives were code named 'bundles of wood' or 'parcels'.

I always carried a pistol with me for protection and to make sure those in my care didn't try to turn back. I wasn't afraid to carry drugs with me either and many's the time I've had to give some to a child to make them go to sleep or their crying might have given us all away. Eventually the slave catchers put up wanted posters for me and there was a price on my head. There were plenty of people happy to earn some extra money to capture fugitives. I became known as 'Moses' because I was leading my people out of slavery and into freedom, just like the Biblical figure himself.

I used disguises to change my appearance too. Some days I might pose as a man, some days as a middle class free black woman. Sometimes I might disguise myself as young, sometimes old. I also carried clothes with me for the runaways to change into or their slave rags would have given them away immediately. Our overall aim was to try and get the fugitives to Canada where the laws allowed Black people the freedom to live and work where they wanted. Over the years, I must have helped over 300 people to escape and I never lost a single passenger.



Questions

1. What exactly is the Underground Railroad?

2. By what nickname was Harriet known when she was a child?

3. Where was the plantation which Harriet escaped from? Tick **one**.
A. Georgia C. Pennsylvania
B. Oklahoma D. Maryland
4. Where did fugitives hope to escape to? Tick **one**.
A. Maryland C. Philadelphia
B. Pennsylvania D. Canada
5. Which tactic is not given for keeping hidden? Tick **one**.
A. Singing special songs C. Escaping on Saturdays
B. Following the North Star D. Escaping in the winter months
6. How did Harriet know that the slave catchers were after her?

7. What did Harriet have to do to alter her appearance?

8. If Harriet sang '*Swing low, sweet chariot*', what would fugitives do? Tick **one**.
A. They would know it was time to escape.
B. They would remain hidden.
C. They would know it was a code word that they were safe.
D. They would know they were going to be moved by cart.
9. Which items were not carried by Harriet when she was helping fugitives escape? Tick **two**.
A. rope C. drugs
B. money D. pistol

10. Why was Saturday a good day to escape? Tick **two**.

- A. because it meant your name would be in the papers
- B. because it meant your name wouldn't be in the papers
- C. because no one hunted fugitives at the weekend
- D. because Saturday was a day of rest for the slave catchers

11. Draw **six lines** to match each part of the story to the correct quotation from the passage.

| |
|--------------------|
| A. setting |
| B. character |
| C. action |
| D. previous events |
| E. suspense |
| F. difficulties |

| |
|---|
| <i>'... their dogs were on the hunt for runaways'</i> |
| <i>'Over the years, I must have helped over 300 people ...'</i> |
| <i>'There was always the constant threat of capture ...'</i> |
| <i>'I always carried a pistol ...'</i> |
| <i>'... in the fields.'</i> |
| <i>'... the Quakers ...'</i> |

12. *'When I was just five, I was rented out as a nursemaid.'*

What impression of Harriet's situation does the word *'rented'* give us? Give **two impressions**.

- A. _____
- B. _____

13. Fugitives were code named *'bundles of wood'* or *'parcels'*.

Why do you think these code words were chosen to represent fugitives? Give **two reasons**.

- A. _____
- B. _____

14. Predict what you think might have happened had Harriet's brothers not changed their minds and had escaped with her?

15. Harriet explains:

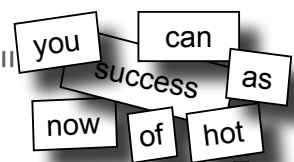
'I was careful! Oh so very careful! You had to watch out for those you could and couldn't trust.'

Explain in detail how you think she might have felt at the time when meeting someone new.

Answer the following questions with complete sentences:

16. Do you think the Underground Railroad was a good name for what they did?
17. How do we know that Harriet had to be careful as a member of the Railroad? Give evidence from the passage to support your response.
18. For what purpose would Harriet have used the drugs she carried with her?
19. Why was Canada a vital destination for fugitives?

Word work



1. Write a short definition for each of these words.

- | | |
|---------------|--------------|
| A. sanctuary | E. disguises |
| B. network | F. formation |
| C. fugitives | G. overseer |
| D. plantation | H. muskrat |

Extension work



Class Discussion

1. What were your first thoughts when you heard the words 'Underground Railroad'? What did you think it was?
2. Do you think you would have escaped? What might have stopped you? What might have encouraged you?
3. Do you think Harriet's brothers were right to turn back or not? What might have made them turn back do you think?

Small Group or Pair Discussion

4. Can you come up with another clever name to describe the Underground Railroad?
5. What disguises can you come up with to help escaping slaves?
6. How would you make it look as if you were keeping slaves and yet you were actually helping them to escape? (Look at the section of the passage where the lady helps Harriet and gets her to sweep the yard.)
7. Is there a song you know that you think could be used to lure slaves out of hiding like Harriet did?

Design/Create

8. Look at a map of the United States. Try to plot the journey Harriet could have taken from the plantation which was in Dorchester County, Maryland to Philadelphia.
9. Draw a picture of Harriet helping people to escape.

Write

10. Imagine you are Harriet and you have just helped some slaves escape. Describe how you helped them and what you did to get them away safely.
11. Imagine you are an escaped slave who has reached freedom in Philadelphia. Write to your folks back home telling them you are safe and how you were helped by Harriet.

Investigate/Research

12. Find out more about the life of Harriet Tubman.
13. Investigate the work of the Underground Railroad.
14. Find out if there were other stories of dramatic rescues.
15. Find out more about the plantation where Harriet was born and lived.
16. Find out more about muskrats. Where do they live? What do they eat?