

## The Conductress

Araminta stood looking at the overseer. The white man's face flushed with anger as he yelled at the young boy. "What did you do, you imbecile! Pick up that pail now! Look at all of the fruit you have wasted! Why you..." Harriet acted, she pushed the boy out of the way, only to be hit harder than she had ever been hit. Something hard struck her on the head and everything went black.

Araminta opened her eyes to see her mother hovering over her and dabbing her skin. She felt the softness of the cot and she understood she was lying on her bed. Oh. She felt such pain! Her mother was blurry. She could hardly see and the pain was excruciating. She whispered, for she could not find her voice, "Mother, why am I here?" Her mother looked at her with concern in her eyes. "Daughter, you were hit. You have been unconscious for two days. I have been so worried. Thank the lord you have come back to us." Araminta went to sit up, but as soon as her head came up, she felt a wave of dizziness fall upon her. As soon as her head touched the mat, her eyesight wavered and she closed her eyes. Her world went black once more.

Her mother, Harriet, was torn. She needed for Araminta to come out of this soon or else they would incur the master's wrath. Concern marred her weathered face. The red welt across Araminta's forehead was less swollen. The scar however, would remain. The overseer had been furious as he had recounted her daughter's insolence in getting in the way. As she looked upon her daughter's bruised face, she remembered the day Araminta was born. It was a blessed day.

Araminta was born on a dangerously hot summer day in 1820; Harriet remembered that she had been happy to have taken refuge from the heat in order to give birth. Araminta's cries were a blessing, for she had four sons and had been eager for another daughter as her two other daughters had been sold to work in another household. They had only been 5 and 7. So young and she did not know how they had fared. Her little girl's hands grasped her fingers and she cried in sorrow. How long would she have with this babe?

Araminta was soon back in the field along with the other slaves in the plantation. Her head ached from the bruise. Every time she would bend over, she would get a terrible headache. She even got a little dizzy, but that could also be because of the heat. Slaves were out in the field from sunup to sundown. From the looks of it, there were still a few more hours of daylight. As she gathered the corn husks, she looked across the field. Every face looked haggard. Their bodies scarred and broken. "There had to be a better life than this, thought Araminta, "There had to be."

Araminta had heard about the Underground Railroad. There were whispers about secret passages and hymns that mentioned conductors and railroad stations that led north. She had heard her brothers talking about it out in the fields. Could they do it? How would they go with mama? Mama was not even out in the fields anymore due to a back injury. Her mama could not walk fast. She would never be able to run.

There was no slavery in the North. Araminta and her family talked about the North, but it was a dangerous journey that many did not survive. There were seven in her family and as a large group, escape seemed an impossibility.

Everyone looked forward to Saturday evenings. There was dancing, singing and time to relax and talk to friends. During one of these gatherings Araminta met John Tubman who was a free man. Araminta and John met over a period of several weeks and Araminta's mother, seeing the interest the man had with Araminta, encouraged the union. Araminta and John were married soon after.

Araminta, now married, continued to work on the plantation because she was still a slave. However, marriage to John had provided her with some money that led her to hire a lawyer. She wanted to find out about the details of the slave contract that held her family. The lawyer came back with good news. According to the documents, Araminta and her family should not have been slaves. Her mother should have been freed at the age of 45 when the lady of the house passed away. Which meant that some of her siblings should also have been born free. The news made Araminta both sad and angry. She couldn't do anything about it since she didn't have the money to hire the lawyer to fight this in court.

She decided it was time to do something about her situation. She wanted to be free. She wanted her family to be free too. Under the cover of the night, Araminta began to meet with railroad activists. She found out about which routes were safer and the people she would meet. Her husband, John, was against this as he thought it was too dangerous. He even threatened to report her to the authorities. Her mind was made up. She knew it was dangerous, but she wanted to be free.

Fall came and she decided it was the best time to flee. Wintertime would be brutal and the cold weather would make her escape even more difficult. Araminta decided she needed a new name for the journey. In honor of her mother she was going to be called Harriet Tubman. She gathered a few of her belongings in a sack and took off during the night.

She met five others along the way and they headed towards Delaware. They made their way along the Choptank River and followed the river down to the Pennsylvania state line. The terrain was full of bushes and trees that were very hard to see in the dark. Harriet had worked in the fields and endured hours of physical labor, but she had never walked for hours on end. They stopped to rest along the way, but only for a few minutes. They had to use the darkness of the night to hide them. They used the North Star to guide them north. Harriet was exhausted and hungry. She only had a bit of bread and some cheese. The rest of her sack had a blanket which served as a place to rest and as warmth for the evenings. According to the Big Dipper, it was going to be daylight soon.

All of the sudden, they heard leaves rustling. Someone was coming. They stopped dead

in their tracks and got down low. Harriet placed her sack in front of her as if it would shield her. Whatever it was, was coming closer. Harriet held her breath and waited. It was dark, but a beam of moonlight was close. Eyes wide with fear, she looked and held a scream as something moved in front of her. That was when she heard little feet moving away from her. It had only been a small animal! She practically wept with relief.

They continued on, following the river. They soon came upon a house which had a lamp by the window. The conductor, Tom, had mentioned they were looking for a green house that had a porch with a white railing. Tom cupped his mouth and made a bird sound. They heard a movement inside the house. Suddenly, bright light came from the house as the door was opened. Tom motioned for them to follow him. Harriet followed her group, but looked back to make sure no one was following.

The “station master” and his wife had food ready for them. They were taken to a basement where they spent the day and rested until it became dark again. As soon as her head hit the mat, Harriet fell asleep. It had been a long night.

They continued their journey for 16 days. They would rest by day and walk by night. If they heard warning hymns, they would stop since that was a signal that slavery catchers were nearby. Being captured was a constant fear.

Harriet finally reached Pennsylvania. So relieved at having escaped after such a perilous journey, Harriet said, “When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven.”

Harriet got a job in Pennsylvania. She worked washing dishes in a small restaurant. When she received her first paycheck, she went out and bought clothes. Her own clothes, not hand me downs, not old clothes which she had to repair to make decent. She looked at herself in the store’s mirror and saw herself in a different light. She was no longer a slave. Her face was clean. There was no dirt on her dress. She decided she needed to buy new shoes. Her moccasins had taken her to freedom, but she needed to feel like a new person.

Harriet was not done. She was free, but she continued to make plans to free her family. She met with other underground railroad activists to plan routes and expand their networks. It was a very dangerous undertaking as there was a law called the “Bloodhound Law” which legally authorized federal authorities to capture runaway slaves and take them back to the South. She decided it was time to act when she heard that one of her nieces, Keziah, was to be sold.

In 1850, Harriet returned to Maryland in order to free Keziah. Traveling by night, she traversed through swamps and stayed away from crocodiles again. Since she was familiar with the territory and the journey itself, it wasn’t as scary this time around. She knew where to go and who to meet. She was successful and was able to free not only Keziah, but Keziah’s husband as well. In

1851, she went back again and rescued two of her brothers. She pleaded with her husband to go as well, but her husband would not leave. This time, Harriet took her family to Canada and she became a free woman. No one could take away her freedom now.

Harriet became convinced that this was her calling, to free her people from slavery. Harriet learned that taking smaller groups was easier than taking big groups, but she became such an experienced “abductor” that she was able to take big groups as well. She became known as “Moses” as she had taken so many slaves to freedom. Harriet Tubman became a well known name in the North. Abolitionists in Boston and New York praised her for her heroic acts. Unfortunately, her fame also brought trouble. There was a \$40,000 reward for her capture.

Harriet had to make one more trip. She had to rescue her parents who were now 70 years old. Even though she had years of experience, she had never taken elderly before. Two weeks of walking was something her parents could not do. Using some of her savings, she purchased a wagon. She would also need to take a new route since traveling by wagon would not be possible along the Delaware river route. She also purchased a gun since she knew that traveling had gotten even more dangerous since there was a bounty on her head.

Harriet set out during a spring night. The nights were getting a little warmer in the month of March and she had her parents to think of that had always complained about the cold weather. She could also use the excuse of having a wagon to bring Canadian seeds for planting. She had two men with her who were also trying to get family members out of Maryland. The men also had guns on them. She felt much safer in a wagon, but they could be stopped at any time.

On the seventh night, they came to the edge of a forest where a house was situated. They rested during the day and at night, they left the wagon by the barnyard. They had to travel on foot since they would need to meet with their party close to the plantation where Harriet had lived all of her young life. As soon as the terrain became familiar, dread and hope mingled. She was excited to see her parents, but she was also afraid of the memories the plantation summoned. The scars, the whippings were part of her past, but she still felt fear as she stepped closer to the fields where she had toiled when she was young.

She waited by a tree and mimicked the sound of a bird. She repeated it four times. Suddenly, she heard footsteps. She stayed behind the tree as a group of bodies came closer. Someone whispered, “Rita?” It was her mother! Only her mother used that name for her. She came from behind the tree and wrapped her mother in a hug. Her mom was so frail. She looked into her mother’s eyes and smiled. She looked to her mother’s left and found her father standing next to two other men and an older woman. She embraced her father and whispered, “let’s go.”

They made it back to the house safely and everyone got in the wagon. They had food for a few days and they could also sleep in the wagon, so they would only need to stop in places that would hide a wagon. The Appalachian mountains were full of forests and since less people lived there, they would encounter less danger. The way North would be longer, but it was a necessity.

During their trip through the Appalachians, they had a few scares. The first one was a black bear who decided to follow them. As they rested during the day, the bear came up to the wagon and tried climbing in to join them! Harriet and the men took their rifles and poked the bear with the rifle to make it go back where it came from! The elderly woman who was with them started screaming. They were able to calm her down as the wagon pulled away and left the bear behind.

Everything was quiet until they came to a clearing where they saw buffalo. The elderly woman had never seen buffalo and wanted to jump out. She kept screaming to let her out. Harriet had never used the rifle before, but she was determined to get her parents back to safety, took control of the situation. The woman had managed to jump out and as she was getting up to run, Harriet trained her rifle and bellowed, "You can choose freedom or death. It is up to you!" The woman trembled as she slowly made her way to the wagon. Once she was back in, they made sure she sat in the back and two of the men kept an eye on her. Her parents looked at Harriet. She was no longer a child, no longer a slave. In front of them stood a fierce, free woman.

Harriet was able to complete her journey to Canada. Harriet was given a piece of land by senator William Seward. She lived with her parents and siblings in a small town in Canada. She had achieved her goals. Her family was free! Harriet Tubman had done much more than earning her family's freedom. In her lifetime, Harriet made 18 trips south and freed approximately 80 slaves.

Harriet Tubman's legacy in the history of the United States has endured. The U.S. treasury plans to place Harriet Tubman on the \$20 bill to commemorate her role in the Underground Railroad and an symbol of the fight for freedom. She will be an icon for all to see and to celebrate her heroic efforts.