

# Analyzing Harriet Tubman Through Sources

**Directions:** Click to reach selection about moments from Harriet Tubman's life. In the second column, briefly describe what happens in the source and in the last column explain what this shows you about her character.

Source	Description	Harriet's Character
<a href="#"><u>Early Years</u></a>		
<a href="#"><u>First Taste of Freedom</u></a>		
<a href="#"><u>View of Uncle Tom's Cabin</u></a>		
<a href="#"><u>Songs from the Underground Railroad</u></a>		
<a href="#"><u>Rescuing Her Brothers from Auction</u></a>		
<a href="#"><u>A Heroic Rescue in New York</u></a>		
<a href="#"><u>Harriett's Clairvoyance</u></a>		
<a href="#"><u>A Letter from Frederick Douglass</u></a>		
<a href="#"><u>View on Ending the Civil War</u></a>		

# Analysis Questions

Describe Harriet Tubman. What kind of person was she?

Which of these events do you think had the biggest impact on Harriet's life and why?

Why do you think Harriet Tubman was so successful in helping people escape slavery?

Do you have any qualities in common with Harriet Tubman? Use the Venn diagram table below to compare your and Harriet's personalities:

Harriet Tubman's Qualities	Both of Us	My Qualities

# Early Years

Araminta Ross, now known by her married name of Tubman, with her sounding Christian name changed to Harriet, is the granddaughter of a slave imported from Africa. Her parents were Benjamin Ross and Harriet Greene, both slaves, but married and faithful to each other. They still live in old age and poverty, but free, on a little property at Auburn, NY, which their daughter purchased for them from Mr. Seward, the Secretary of State.

She was born, as near as she can remember, in 1820 or in 1821, in Dorchester County, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and not far from the town of Cambridge. She had 10 brothers and sisters, of whom three are now living, all at the North, and all rescued from slavery by Harriet, before the War. She went back just as the South was preparing to secede, to bring away a fourth, but before she could reach her, she was dead. Three years before, she had brought away her old father and mother, at great risk to herself.

When Harriet was 6-years-old, she was taken from her mother and carried ten miles to live with James Cook, whose wife was a weaver, to learn the trade of weaving. Attempts were made to teach her weaving, but she would not learn, for she hated her mistress, and did not want to live at home. Soon after she entered her teens she was hired out as a field hand, and it was while thus employed that she received a wound which nearly proved fatal, from the effects of which she still suffers.

In the fall of the year, the slaves there work in the evening, cleaning up wheat, husking corn, etc. On this occasion, one of the slaves of a farmer named Barrett, left his work, and went to the village store in the evening. The overseer followed him, and so did Harriet. When the slave was found, the overseer swore he should be whipped, and called on Harriet, among others, to help tie him. She refused, and as the man ran away, she placed herself in the door to stop pursuit. The overseer caught up a two-pound weight from the counter and threw it at the fugitive, but it fell short and struck Harriet a stunning blow on the head. It was long before she recovered from this, and it has left her subject to a sort of stupor or lethargy at times; coming upon her in the midst of conversation, or whatever she may be doing, and throwing her into a deep slumber, from which she will presently rouse herself, and go on with her conversation or work.

Source: From a Memoir published in *The Commonwealth*, a Boston newspaper, in 1863.



# First Taste of Freedom

[When Harriet decided to escape,] she knew that [her mother] would raise an uproar and prevent her going, or insist upon going with her, and the time for this was not yet. But she must give some intimation to those she was going to leave of her intention and send such a farewell as she might to the friends and relations on the plantation. Those communications were generally made by singing. They sang as they walked along the country roads, and the chorus was taken up by others, and the uninitiated knew not the hidden meaning of the words—

When that ole chariot comes,  
I'm going to leave you;  
I'm boun' for the promised land,  
I'm going to leave you.

I'll meet you in the mornin',  
Safe in de promised land,  
On the other side of Jordan,  
Bound for the promised land.



Harriet started on her journey, “not knowing whither she went,” except that she was going to follow the North Star, till it led her to liberty. Cautiously and by night she traveled, cunningly feeling her way, and finding out who were friends; till after a long and painful journey she found, in answer to careful inquiries, that she had at last crossed that magic “line” which then separated the land of bondage from the land of freedom; for this was before we were commanded by law to take part in the iniquity of slavery, and aid in taking and sending back those poor hunted fugitives who had manhood and intelligence enough to enable them to make their way thus far towards freedom.

“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.”

But then came the bitter drop in the cup of joy. She said she felt like a man who was put in State Prison for 25 years. All these 25 years he was thinking of his home and longing for the time when he would see it again. At last the day comes—he leaves the prison gates—he makes his way to his old home, but his old home is not there. The house has been pulled down, and a new one has been put up in its place; his family and friends are gone nobody knows where; there is no one to take him by the hand, no one to welcome him.

“So, it was with me,” she said. “I had crossed the line. I was free; but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land; and my home, after all, was down in Maryland; because my father, my mother, my brothers, and sisters, and friends were there. But I was free, and they should be free. I would make a home in the North and bring them there, God helping me. Oh, how I prayed then,” she said; “I said to the Lord, ‘I'm going to hold steady on to you, and I know you'll see me through.’”

Source: Bradford, Sarah Hopkins. *Harriet, the Moses of Her People*. University of North Carolina Press, 1886.

# View of Uncle Tom's Cabin

While Harriet was working as a cook in one of the large hotels in Philadelphia, the play of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was being performed for many weeks every night. Some of her fellow-servants wanted her to go and see it. "No," said Harriet, "I haven't got no heart to go and see the sufferings of my people played on stage. I've heard *Uncle Tom's Cabin* read, and I tell you Mrs. Stowe's pen hasn't begun to paint what slavery is as I have seen it at the far South. I've seen the real thing, and I don't want to see it on no stage or in no theater."



Image: Scene from a 1901 stage production of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" Retrieved from <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004681923/>



# Songs from the Underground Railroad

*Harriet would often lead her groups in song as they headed north to keep up morale. This one, Away to Canada, is attributed to Joshua McCarter Simpson, a well-known abolitionist songwriter and Underground Railroad conductor.*

I'm on my way to Canada,  
That cold and dreary land;  
The sad effects of slavery,  
I can't no longer stand.  
I've served my master all my days,  
Without a dime's reward;  
And now I'm forced to run away,  
To flee the lash abroad  
Farewell, ole master, don't think hard of me,  
I'll travel on to Canada, where all the slaves are free  
The hounds are baying on my track,  
Ole master comes behind,  
Resolved that he will bring me back,  
Before I cross de line;  
I'm now embarked for yonder shore,  
There a man's a man by law;  
The iron horse will bear me o'er,  
To shake de lion's paw.  
Oh, righteous Father, wilt thou not pity me,  
And aid me on to Canada where all the slaves are free.  
Oh, I heard Queen Victoria say,  
That if we would forsake  
Our native land of slavery,  
And come across the lake;  
That she was standin' on de shore,  
With arms extended wide, To give us all a peaceful home  
Beyond the rolling tide.

# Rescuing Her Brothers from Auction

In late 1854, Harriet was much troubled in spirit about her three brothers (Robert, Ben, and Henry Ross), feeling sure that some great evil was impending over their heads. She wrote a letter, by the hand of a friend, to a man named Jacob Jackson, who lived near there. Jacob was free, could both read and write, and was under suspicion at that time, as it was thought he had something to do with the disappearance of so many slaves. It was necessary, therefore, to be very cautious in writing to him. Jacob had an adopted son, William Henry Jackson, also free, who had come South; so, Harriet determined to sign her letter with his name, knowing that Jacob would be clever enough to understand what meaning she intended to convey to him.

After speaking of indifferent matters, she said, "Read my letter to the old folks, and give my love to them, and tell my brothers to be always watching unto prayer, and when the good old ship of Zion comes along, to be ready to step aboard."

The letter was signed "William Henry Jackson." Jacob was not allowed to have his letters until the self-elected inspectors had read them and studied into their secret meaning. They, therefore, got together, wiped their glasses, and got them on, and proceeded to a careful perusal of this mysterious document. What it meant, they could not imagine; William Henry Jackson had no parents or brothers, and the letter was incomprehensible. White genius having exhausted itself, black genius was called in, and Jacob's letter was at last handed to him.

Jacob saw at once what it meant, but tossed it down, saying, "That letter can't be meant for me, no how. I can't make head nor tail of it," and walked off and took immediate measures to let Harriet's brothers know secretly that she was coming, and they must be ready to start at a moment's notice for the North.

When Harriet arrived there, it was the day before Christmas, and she found her three brothers were advertised to be sold on Christmas day to the highest bidder, to go down to the cotton and rice fields with the chain-gang. Christmas came on Sunday, and therefore they were not to be sold till Monday. Harriet arrived on Saturday and gave them secret notice to be ready to start Saturday night, immediately after dark. In a fortnight from that time, the whole party were safe in Canada.



When they arrived in Philadelphia, Tubman's brothers changed their names. Henry Ross, above, became William Henry Stewart. His brother Robert became John, and Ben became James Stewart. They settled safely in St. Catharines, Ontario, and later in Auburn, NY.

Image courtesy Judith Bryant.

# A Heroic Rescue in New York

In April 1860, Harriet Tubman was visiting a cousin in Troy, New York. While there, word spread that a fugitive slave by the name of Charles Nalle had been followed by his master (who was his younger brother, and not one grain whiter than he), and that he was already in the hands of officers to be taken back to the South. The instant Harriet heard the news, she started for the office of the US Commissioner. An excited crowd gathered about the office, through which Harriet forced her way, and rushed up stairs to the door of the room where the fugitive was detained.

A wagon was already waiting before the door to carry off the man, but the crowd was even then so great, and in such a state of excitement, that the officers did not dare to bring the man down. On the opposite side of the street stood a crowd of free blacks, watching the window where they could see Harriet's bonnet, and feeling assured that so long as she stood there, the fugitive was still in the office. Time passed on, and he did not appear.

Harriet, now seeing the necessity for a tremendous effort for his rescue, sent out some little boys to cry fire. The bells rang, the crowd increased, till the whole street was a dense mass of people. Again, and again the officers came out to try and clear the stairs to take their captive down, but Harriet stood her ground, her head bent down, and her arms folded.

"Come, old woman, you must get out of this," said one of the officers. "I must have the way cleared!"

Offers were made to buy Charles from his master, who at first agreed to take \$1,200 for him; but when that was subscribed, he immediately raised the price to \$1,500. The crowd grew more excited.

A gentleman raised a window and called out, "Two hundred dollars for his rescue, but not one cent to his master!" This was responded to by a roar of satisfaction from the crowd below.

The lane was opened, and the man was brought out — a tall, handsome, intelligent white man (he might have been biracial), with his wrists manacled together, walking between the US Marshal and another officer, and behind him his brother and his master, so like him that one could hardly be told from the other.

The moment they appeared, Harriet roused from her stooping posture, threw up a window, and cried to her friends: "Here he comes — take him!" And then darted down the stairs like a wild-cat. She seized one officer and pulled him down, then another, and tore him away from the man; and keeping her arms about the slave, she cried to her friends: "Drag us out! Drag him to the river!"

They were knocked down together, and while down, she tore off her bonnet and tied it on the head of the fugitive. When he rose, only his head could be seen, and amid the surging mass of people the slave was no longer recognized, while the master appeared like the slave. Again, and again they were knocked down, the poor slave utterly helpless, with his manacled wrists streaming with blood. Harriet's outer clothes were torn from her, yet she never relinquished her hold of the man, till she had dragged him to the river, where he was tumbled into a boat. Harriet followed in a ferryboat to the other side.

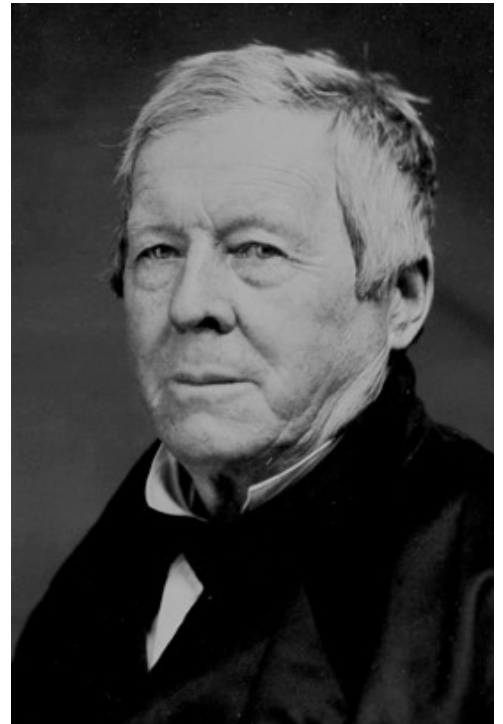
*Charles was re-arrested across the river in Watervliet. However, Tubman and a crowd of African Americans and whites together stormed the building where he was being held and, through gunfire, liberated him again. Ultimately, money was raised to buy his freedom.*





# Harriett's Clairvoyance

*Thomas Garrett was a Quaker an American abolitionist and worked as a stationmaster on the Underground Railroad. He provided this anecdote on Harriet Tubman's almost supernatural power to know when he had received money for her.*



The date of the commencement of her labors, I cannot certainly give; but I think it must have been about 1845; from that time till 1860, I think she must have brought from the neighborhood where she had been held as a slave, from 60 to 80 persons, from Maryland, some 80 miles from here.

I had been in the habit of furnishing her and those that accompanied her, as she returned from her acts of mercy, with new shoes; and on one occasion when I had not seen her for three months, she came into my store.

I said, "Harriet, I am glad to see thee! I suppose thee wants a pair of new shoes."

Her reply was, "I want more than that."

I, in jest, said, "I have always been liberal with thee, and wish to be; but I am not rich, and cannot afford to give much."

Her reply was: "God tells me you have money for me."

I asked her, "if God never deceived her?"

"No!" she said.

"Well, how much does thee want?"

After studying a moment, she said: "About 23 dollars."

I then gave her \$24 and some odd cents, the net proceeds of five pounds sterling, received through Eliza Wigham, of Scotland, for her. I had given some accounts of Harriet's labor to the Anti-Slavery Society of Edinburgh, of which Eliza Wigham was Secretary. On the reading of my letter, a gentleman present said he would send Harriet four pounds if he knew of any way to get it to her. Eliza Wigham offered to forward it to me for her, and that was the first money I ever received for her.

Some 12 months after, she called on me again, and said that God told her I had some money for her, but not so much as before. I had, a few days previous, received the net proceeds of one pound ten shillings from Europe for her. To say the least, there was something remarkable in these facts, whether clairvoyance, or the divine impression on her mind from the source of all power, I cannot tell.

- Thomas Garrett, the Wilmington Quaker:

# A Letter from Frederick Douglass

ROCHESTER, August 29, 1868.

DEAR HARRIET: I am glad to know that the story of your eventful life has been written by a kind lady, and that the same is soon to be published. You ask for what you do not need when you call upon me for a word of commendation. I need such words from you far more than you can need them from me, especially where your superior labors and devotion to the cause of the lately enslaved of our land are known as I know them.

The difference between us is very marked. Most that I have done and suffered in the service of our cause has been in public, and I have received much encouragement at every step of the way. You on the other hand have labored in a private way. I have wrought in the day—you in the night. I have had the applause of the crowd and the satisfaction that comes of being approved by the multitude, while the most that you have done has been witnessed by a few trembling, scarred, and foot-sore bondmen and women, whom you have led out of the house of bondage, and whose heartfelt “God bless you” has been your only reward. The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism.

Excepting John Brown—of sacred memory—I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you have. Much that you have done would seem improbable to those who do not know you as I know you. It is to me a great pleasure and a great privilege to bear testimony to your character and your works, and to say to those to whom you may come, that I regard you in every way truthful and trustworthy.

Your friend,

FREDERICK DOUGLASS.



Source: Bradford, Sarah Hopkins. *Harriet, the Moses of Her People*. University of North Carolina Press, 1886.

# View on Ending the Civil War

*During the Civil war, Harriet Tubman volunteered to help the Union army. She met Lydia Maria Child, a white abolitionist and women's rights activist from Massachusetts, at a Union army camp in Hampton, Virginia. Both were helping those freed from slavery by the Union army. Tubman could not read or write, but Child recorded her words on slavery and defeating the Confederacy:*

God won't let Master Lincoln beat the South until he does right thing. Master Lincoln, he's a great man, and I'm a poor Negro but this Negro can tell Master Lincoln how to save money and young men. He can do it by setting the Negroes free. Suppose there was an awful big snake down there on the floor. He bites you. Folks all scared, because you may die. You send for doctor to cut the bite; but the snake rolled up there, and while doctor is doing it, he bites you again. The doctor cuts out that bite; but while he's doing it, the snake springs up and bites you again, and so he keeps doing it, till you kill him. That's what Master Lincoln ought to know.



Source: "Letter from Lydia Maria Child to John G. Whittier," January 21, 1862, in *Letters from Lydia Maria Child* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1882), 161.