

Harriet Tubman: A Most Exemplary American

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On the 100th anniversary of the passing of the American icon Harriet Tubman, no figure among the uncounted heroic souls of the Underground Railroad, the institution called the war for the soul of America, is better remembered 160 years later than is Harriet Tubman.

After fading for close to a century, recognition of the moral example which Tubman set as Underground Railroad conductor and safe-house operator has grown rapidly since the national resurgence of Underground Railroad interest swelled about fifteen years ago.

In 1990, Tubman's descendants persuaded Congress to declare March 10 as an annually observed Harriet Tubman Day, and on the same day, Canada began observing Harriet Tubman Day. In 2000 Baltimore's Louis Fields persuaded the Maryland legislature to become the first state to do the same. After several attempts in recent years, Maryland's and New York's Senators have reintroduced a bill in the 2013 Congress to establish Harriet Tubman National Parks on Maryland's Eastern Shore where Tubman was born in 1822 and escaped slavery in 1849, and at Auburn, New York, where she lived out her life after the Civil War. In 2012, Maryland passed legislation to commission and donate a Tubman statue to the new National Capitol Visitors Center.

Not as well remembered among Tubman's Underground Railroad accomplishments are those over the last half century of her long life.

During the Civil War, she became the first American woman to lead troops when she captured plantations on South Carolina's Combahee River, in one week freeing over 700 slaves, more than twice as many as she had liberated during her decade on the Underground Railroad.

For most of the rest of her life, Tubman made her living here and abroad as one of her era's most sought-after speakers. Overcoming obstacles of race and gender, it took her 30 years until 1895 to receive her soldier's pension, using it to realize her long-held dream of a home for elderly indigent women which she operated in Auburn. By her eighties, Tubman herself was cared for there as in her photograph on page 1 here.

Aged 91 or thereabouts, Harriet Tubman died at the home on March 10, 1913, at the time one of her nation's most revered figures, literally a legend in her own time, and the last major figure of the Underground Railroad to die.

With her passing, Americans' memories of the Underground Railroad began to ebb until by the 1960s only one in five students was receiving any instruction about the Underground Railroad from kindergarten through graduate school. Beginning in the 1960s, elementary and high school teachers and then entire school districts were the first to begin reawakening the North American memory of the Underground Railroad. Research through one of the annual *Free Press* surveys of the international Underground Railroad community showed that by the decade of the 2000s over 90 percent of American and Canadian school children were receiving instruction on the Underground Railroad, up from 20 percent at best 40 years before.

A spark that went far in rekindling the nation's consciousness of the Underground Railroad is credited to Anthony Cohen whose 1995 walk of the route of his Underground Railroad fugitive ancestor from Maryland to Canada was reported in a seminal *Smithsonian* article.

By 1998, the federal government had established the first of three Underground Railroad programs, the National Park Service's Network to Freedom. The two others are run by the Smith-

sonian Institution and the Department of Education. In 2004 the centerpiece of the international Underground Railroad renaissance, the superb new National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, was dedicated in Cincinnati. In 2005 Fergus Bordewich's definitive Underground Railroad history, *Bound for Canaan*, was published, and the National Abolition Hall of Fame was established in Peterboro, New York. In 2006, *Underground Railroad Free Press* began publication becoming the most read Underground Railroad news publication within two years, now with about 80,000 readers. Its central international registries of Underground Railroad organizations and events, Lynx and Datebook, were launched in 2006, followed in 2008 by the Free Press Prizes, the Underground Railroad community's top awards.

Perhaps what has reacquainted the public with the Underground Railroad more directly than anything has been owners of Underground Railroad safe-houses and routes who have put their sites on the Internet and site maps, and opened their properties to public tours. The most authentic we have seen is Dobbin House in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. It is hard to count how many Underground Railroad sites have been opened or listed but it now would be well into three figures.

Visit find.mapmuse.com/map/underground-rr to locate sites and use the maps of MapMuse. Visit also (pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/interactive-map/abolitionists-map).

The public now enjoys a network of Underground Railroad sites open to the public, excellent histories, biographies and novels, the grand Freedom Center, a hall of fame, federal, state and local programs, near universal instruction on the Underground Railroad, and even a burgeoning network of bicycle tours, all in the last 15 years. Perhaps the greatest gift of this resurgence is the recapturing of bedrock moral principles.

As a result of all of this, we now also see Underground Railroad figures being recognized in the pantheon of American greats, as it was they, more than the nation's Nobelists, explorers, inventors or generals, who most clearly articulated the moral bedrock of what it means to be an American, no one more so than the modest, determined and inspiring Harriet Tubman. In this resurgence of interest in the Underground Railroad in which a growing number of all-but-forgotten American and Canadian heroes have become most deservedly reilluminated, it is Tubman who seems to have become the foremost symbol of the institution and of what it delivered to American morality.

Let us all honor the exemplary American, Araminta Harriet Ross Tubman Davis, this and every March 10.