



AUNT HARRIET'S HOME

*For 50 years
after Emancipation,
Harriet Tubman
fought other battles*

by Marc Ferris

HARRIET TUBMAN EXPERIENCED A RUDE introduction to her life in the North after the Civil War when in 1865 a conductor attempted to remove her from her seat on a train as she rode from Philadelphia to New York City. She was traveling with a soldier's pass, and the conductor assumed her papers were either forged or stolen. Displaying characteristic grit, she refused to budge. After Tubman called the conductor a racist scoundrel, he started to choke her. Two other men jumped in, and during the scuffle her arm was broken. No one came to her aid. Eventually, the conductor and his cohorts pushed her into the baggage car. After arriving at her homestead in Auburn, New York, her arm in a sling and her ribs bruised, she and her friends considered suing the railway company, but once she'd recovered they abandoned the idea.

Born into slavery around 1820, Tubman certainly deserved a rest. During her teenage years in Maryland, her owner hired her out to work on a nearby farm. When the overseer there once threw a heavy weight at another person, it accidentally hit Tubman in the head; as a result, she would suffer from narcolepsy and recurrent seizures for the rest of her life. She escaped from slavery in 1849 but returned



Harriet Tubman, 90 years old, in Auburn, New York, 1911. She spent her last years in the home for the aged (top) that she herself had founded.

IN HER LATER YEARS SHE FOUGHT FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND JOINED THE TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT.

South more than a dozen times to lead others to freedom by the Underground Railroad, undertaking daring rescues, of which she later boasted, "I never run my train off the track . . . never lost a passenger." Folklore has it that she brought 300 people up North, but she herself estimated that the number was closer to 60.

Almost every American is familiar with Tubman's role as the "African-American Moses." Less well known, however, is the rest of her story. Tubman lived for 50 years after the adoption of the Emancipation Proclamation, and until her death in 1913, she fought for women's rights; she joined the temperance movement and donated 25 acres to her local A.M.E. Zion church to establish a nursing home. All the while, she supported her extended family along with scores of poor and sick people who showed up at her door, many of them strangers.

FOR "PASSENGERS" AND "CONDUCTORS" aboard the Underground Railroad, the corridor between Albany and Niagara served as the express track to Canada. In 1857 Tubman brought her parents, Benjamin and Harriet, from

Maryland (both were free), along the route, settling them in St. Catharines, Ontario. While crisscrossing the region, she met several prominent citizens, including William H. Seward, a former New York governor and U.S. senator and President Abraham Lincoln's secretary of state, who in 1859 sold Tubman a seven-acre farm for \$1,200. The transaction was illegal at the time, since the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision of 1857 ruled that slaves, runaway or otherwise, were not citizens, and thus had no right to own property.

After the Civil War, Tubman moved her family, including her infirm parents, six other relatives, and a boarder, to Auburn. Privation marked their first

winter there. Not only did Tubman need time to recover from her fight with the conductor, but the family had so little money they had to burn their fence for firewood. When word circulated about Tubman's problems, her wealthy friends, including Seward and other abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Lucretia Mott, offered her money. Though proud, she had no choice but to accept.

Known universally as Aunt Harriet, Tubman vexed her benefactors by constantly putting the needs of others before her own. In 1867 and 1868, for example, she organized Freedmen's Fairs, which collected clothing and hundreds of dollars for two schools in South Carolina, even though she had to support herself by bartering crops and taking in boarders.

Based on her three years of service to the Union Army in the Civil War, during which time she had worked as a nurse and helped lead a raid against a Rebel position in South Carolina, Tubman unsuccessfully applied for back pay and, later, a pension from the federal government.

In 1868 her friends hired the author Sarah Bradford to write her biography.

Tubman (far left) poses with family members including her husband, Nelson Davis (seated, with hat), and residents of her home, around 1887.



IN 1896 SHE CLASPED HANDS WITH SUSAN B. ANTHONY AT A SUFFRAGIST MEETING IN ROCHESTER.

Donors underwrote the printing costs, and Bradford gave all the royalties to Tubman. *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* appeared the next year, solidifying her public image as an Underground Railway conductor and Civil War spy. The volume went through several editions and income from it helped Tubman pay off debts on her home by 1873.

The year Bradford's book appeared, Tubman married Nelson Davis, one of her boarders. (Her estranged first husband, John Tubman, had been killed by a white man in a dispute in Maryland in 1867.) Davis, 20 years her junior, suffered from tuberculosis. When he was strong enough to ply his trade as a brick-maker, he contributed to the household income and turned part of the property into a brickyard. The Tubmans, who also operated a pig farm, struggled to survive, though Harriet continued to open their home to the sick and the poor.

THE 1880S BROUGHT TUBMAN one setback after another. Her father had passed away in 1871 and her mother died in 1880. Shortly thereafter, her wood-frame house burned down, along with her prized collection of letters from prominent abolitionists and Union Army officers. A sturdy brick structure, which still stands, replaced it. In 1884 her husband's health deteriorated.

In 1886 Bradford revised Tubman's biography, renamed *Harriet, The Moses of Her People*. The reissue generated renewed interest in the ex-slave's life and provided a modest income. A magazine writer named Rosa Belle Holt visited Auburn around this time. "Modest and quiet in demeanor," she wrote about Tubman in the magazine *The Chatauquan*; "a stranger would never guess what depths there are in her nature." Tubman's resolve would again be tested in 1887, when she petitioned Congress to release her Civil War file and reopen her pension claim.

Her second husband, who had fought in the Civil War, died in 1888. Two years later Congress passed the Dependent



This brick house replaced Tubman's first residence, destroyed in a fire.

Pension Act, which granted widows of veterans a monthly stipend. After overcoming numerous bureaucratic obstacles, in 1895 Tubman received her widow's pension of \$8 per month as well as a lump sum of \$500 to cover the more than 60 months that had passed since she first applied. But she continued to fight for recompense for her own service to the Union cause. "You wouldn't think that after I served the flag so faithfully I should come to want under its folds," she told a local newspaper reporter. Her U.S. representative, Sereno E. Payne, introduced a bill to Congress and lobbied on her behalf, finally winning her a \$12 monthly pension in 1899 for her work as a nurse.

Throughout her years in Auburn, Tubman supported the drive to secure women the right to vote, appearing at suffrage rallies in Washington, D.C., New

York, and Boston. Tubman, wrote her biographer Sarah Bradford, "generally attended every meeting of women, on whatever subject, if possible to do so." An 1888 newspaper account paraphrased her remarks to a crowd in Auburn: During the Civil War, "Loving women were on the scene to administer to the injured, to bind up their wounds and tend them through weary months of suffering in the army hospitals. If those deeds did not place woman as man's equal, what do? The speaker said that her prayers carried her through and they would eventually place woman at the ballot box with man, as his equal."

When in 1896 a group of college-educated church women formed the National Association of Colored Women to fight for civil rights, Tubman appeared at the inaugural convention as a featured guest. Later that year, she clasped hands with Susan B. Anthony on the podium at a suffragist meeting in Rochester and addressed the group. Tubman, wrote one newspaper reporter, impressed the audience "with the venerable dignity of her appearance" and possessed an "honesty and true benevolence of purpose which commanded respect."

By this time Tubman's main goal was to establish a home for the aged. She had been running an informal shelter for the infirm, but as she advanced in years, she yearned to provide her charges with a more professional and permanent institution. In 1894, while helping with a church clothing drive, Tubman dictated a letter to an acquaintance stating that she was "very well for a woman of her advanced years and is as busy as ever going about doing good to every body[;] her home is filled with 'odds and ends' of society and to every one outcast she gives food and shelter. She is still trying to establish a home for old colored women but as yet has succeeded very slightly in collecting funds for that purpose—yet she is not discouraged but is working always with that object still in view."

In 1895 she incorporated her residence

TUBMAN'S LIFE AFTER THE CIVIL WAR IS FINALLY BEGINNING TO RECEIVE REAL RECOGNITION.

as the Harriet Tubman Home and, to see the project through, bought the 25-acre farm that adjoined hers at auction the next year, receiving contributions of \$350 and a \$1,000 mortgage. She deeded the property to the A.M.E. Zion Church in 1903, but was disappointed with one of its leaders' first decisions. "When I give the home over to Zion Church what you suppose they done?" she told a reporter from *The Sun*, a Harlem newspaper. "Why, they make a rule that nobody should come in without they have a hundred dollars. Now I wanted to make a rule that nobody should come in unless they didn't have no money at all."

Despite her bouts with seizures and narcolepsy, at the age of 85 she still found the strength to travel to Boston to attend a meeting of the Christian Temperance Union in 1905, a group dedicated to ridding the country of the evils of alcohol, among other reforms.

In 1908 a huge crowd turned out for the dedication of the Harriet Tubman Home for Aged and Infirm Negroes. Speaking to the assemblage, she said that "I did not take up this work for my own benefit . . . but for those of my race who need help. The work is now well started and I know God will raise up

others to take care of the future. All I ask for is united effort, for 'united we stand; divided we fall.'"

Tubman's health began to fail soon after the dedication. By 1910 she was confined to a wheelchair and had to enter the home she'd founded in feeble physical health, though still strong mentally. She died in 1913 at around the age of 93.

Throughout her decline, Tubman continued to be celebrated in upstate New York. "No one of our fellow citizens of late years has conferred greater distinction upon us than has she," said John F. Jaekel, the president of the Auburn Common Council, at her packed funeral. "I may say that I have known 'Aunt Harriet' during my whole lifetime. The boys of my time always regarded her as a sort of supernatural being; our youth-

ful imaginations were fired by the tales we had heard of her adventures and we stood in great awe of her."

Compared with her daring exploits below the Mason-Dixon Line, Tubman lived what might almost be considered a humdrum life in New York. This partially accounts for the neglect of her later years. After almost a century of being relegated mostly to the realm of juvenile literature, however, Tubman's entire life is now beginning to receive recognition. The Syracuse University Department of Anthropology has conducted archeological studies at her property in Auburn, and the National Park Service plans to deliver a report to Congress this fall containing recommendations for how best to honor Tubman's memory. These include adding the Auburn parcel and her birthplace in Dorchester County, Maryland, to the National Park system. Three new biographies, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* by Kate Clifford Larson, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* by Catherine Clinton, and *Harriet Tubman: The Life and Life Stories* by Jean M. Humez, have recently been published.

IN HER FINAL YEARS, TUBMAN arguably accomplished as much as during the dark days of slavery, and she never held hatred in her heart, "even for her worst oppressors," wrote her friend Franklin B. Sanborn. A month before Tubman's death, another acquaintance, Mary Talbert, visited her and said that the retired "conductor" exhorted her to "Tell the women to stand together for God will never forsake us." As Talbert took her hand to say good-bye, Tubman "smiled that peaceful smile of hers and said, 'I am at peace with God and all mankind.'" ✪

Marc Ferris is a freelance writer living in Dobbs Ferry, New York. For information about visiting the Harriet Tubman Home in Auburn, New York, call 315-252-2081 or e-mail HTHome@localnet.com.

Located on 26 acres of land, the Harriet Tubman Home is open to visitors year-round.

