

Harriet Tubman

Madame Tussauds
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BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The Underground Railroad terminology refers to the secret routes that enslaved men, women, and children followed to obtain their freedom. This network contained several branches and extended throughout the United States from as far south as Mexico and north to Canada. (Mexico and Canada already had abolished slavery.) This flight to freedom usually involved walking miles during the evening. Though many made the trip without assistance, there were several agents who selflessly guided some slaves to freedom. The Mississippi River could be a water highway to freedom in Mexico for slaves traveling at night, and the Appalachian Mountains offered cover during the day and a clear route north.

African Americans fled from slavery for many reasons: brutal physical punishment, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and unreasonable hours of uncompensated labor. In the event of a master's death, slaves seriously considered escaping because their families were at risk of being divided and sold to various masters in different locations.



Even though slaves desiring freedom faced journeys of hundreds of miles with limited food and medical care as well as the threat of being returned to their masters, these fears did not quench their desire for freedom. Of the thousands of slaves who began this journey, most slaves never obtained freedom. Some were captured and others returned to their master after a few days or weeks because of hunger, fatigue, or a lack of survival skills. Because most slaves were isolated on plantations, many had little knowledge of surrounding areas or how to travel safely. Lawmen or professional slave catchers captured some runaways. Captured slaves were punished with severe beatings, death, or sold to another master. The Fugitive Slave Act in 1793 outlawed anyone's effort to interfere with the return of runaway slaves regardless of the state in which the escaping slave was found. By 1808 the United States banned slave importation from Africa; however, smuggling continued to exist, and children born to slaves were automatically enslaved. Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act on September 18, 1850.

By the 1840s the Underground Railroad was in high gear. The use of secret symbols, signs, songs, and terms were combined to guide enslaved men, women, and children to freedom. Underground Railroad agents were strategically located along various routes to assist slaves to their destinations and to provide for their needs while they traveled to freedom. Stations or "safe places" were maintained by "station masters" to provide food, shelter, and protection.



Harriet Tubman



BACKGROUND INFORMATION continued:

Harriet Tubman, whose code name became Moses, was born into slavery in 1819 in Dorchester County, Maryland. As a child, she dreamed of freedom; this dream continued even after her marriage in 1844 to John Tubman, a free African American. In 1849 Harriet left her husband to fulfill her longing for freedom and to live in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Tubman traveled the perilous route of the Underground Railroad and reached freedom on Philadelphia. Once Harriet was free, she realized that her own freedom was not enough. She became a conductor on the Underground Railroad and devoted her life to securing the freedom of other enslaved men, women, and children. Her first goal was to free her sister and her family. She was able to send a message to her sister's son and instruct them to take a boat up the Chesapeake Bay to Bodkin's Point. Tubman met them there and led them from safe house to safe house all the way to Philadelphia.

The Underground Railroad accomplished more than freedom for enslaved men, women, and children. It began the transformation of North American society from segregated Northern and Southern states to a united nation where slavery was finally abolished in 1865 with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: *A Play for your Students*

Synopsis:

Slavery was a powerful system, and the South's economy depended on it. Because they did not pay their slaves, slave owners could produce more crops and earn large profits. While the slaves did receive shelter and food, their masters often mistreated them. In addition, slaves could be sold, separating them from the rest of their family. In the Northern states, many people who opposed slavery wanted to help slaves to escape from their masters. These people were abolitionists. Among them was Harriet Tubman, an ex-slave who had escaped her oppression and wanted to lead others to freedom. She became a conductor on the Underground Railroad and returned to the South to help other slaves escape to freedom.

Estimated time of play: 15 minutes

Flesch-Kincaid Level: 3.9

Cast of Characters (7):

Narrator 1

Narrator 2

Nellie (young slave girl traveling on the Underground Railroad)

Tess (Nellie's mother)

Auntie Sally (Nellie's aunt who stays behind)

Harriet Tubman (conductor on the Underground Railroad)

Mrs. White (safehouse owner)



Harriet Tubman



CLASSROOM ACTIVITY continued:

Scene I

Narrator 1: Although slaves were important as cheap labor in the South, they often were treated poorly. Many were beaten, hurt, and lived in horrible conditions.

Narrator 2: Many slaves sought freedom by following the Underground Railroad even though this decision came with great risk.

Narrator 1: Young Nellie and her mother, Tess, were given the chance to escape slavery by following the guide, Harriet Tubman, one of the most famous railroad conductors.

Narrator 2: As they said goodbye, they realized this probably was the last time they ever would ever see their friends and family staying behind.

Aunt Sally: (wailing) Oh, my dear girl! You will have such a fine life as a free person! It's not every slave who gets the chance to escape to freedom, especially with a guide as famous as Harriet Tubman!

Nellie: Aunt Sally, I'll never see you again, nor my uncle Henry. I can't imagine life without your hoecakes!

Tess: Nellie, I'll make them for you, once we are free. Besides, your freedom is more important than your family at this point. You must have the chance for a better life.

Nellie: Why can't Aunt Sally and Henry come, too?

Aunt Sally: We're too old. We would slow you down, and it's more important for you to get your freedom. You have your whole life ahead of you, and that life deserves to be free.

Tess: Nellie, it is important we travel in small groups, to avoid the chance of capture. You know what will happen if we are caught escaping, don't you?

Nellie: Yes, Mama. I heard you and Aunt Sally talking the other night about the Fugitive Slave Act. It says if a slave tries to escape and is caught; the slave will be returned to his master.

Tess: That's right. Who knows what Master Butler will do to us if we are returned to him! I'm sure a beating will be in order. So, we don't want to be caught.

Nellie: What are the chances we'll be caught?

Aunt Sally: Any citizen in the North or South can turn you in, so you must be very careful. They might even receive a reward for finding you.

Nellie: Why won't Harriet Tubman turn us in for the reward?



Harriet Tubman



CLASSROOM ACTIVITY continued:

Tess: She's an escaped slave herself. Even though it's illegal for citizens to assist escaped slaves, many people want to help us because they don't believe in slavery. She's one of them.

Nellie: What if she is caught?

Aunt Sally: I'm sure she is aware of the consequences, but it's important to her to help us to freedom; so she is willing to take the chance.

Tess: Now, Nellie, are you ready? We have to get to the meeting place after dark tonight, and you need to be ready. It's going to be a long, slow, difficult journey. You are my brave girl, and I know you're up to it.

Nellie: Yes, Mama. I'll miss you, Aunt Sally!

Aunt Sally: I'll miss you, too. Make us proud, Nellie girl. Fight for all our freedoms like Harriet Tubman!

Narrator 1: These goodbyes were often full of tears, but the slaves knew the risk of escape and capture was worth the chance to live as a free person.

Narrator 2: Many slaves dreamed of a time when they would be able to live as they wished, equal to white people. The Underground Railroad was one step toward this.

Scene II

Narrator 1: Once slaves slipped away from their plantations, they met with a railroad conductor, who would lead them from safehouse to safehouse along the route to the North.

Narrator 2: This conductor was usually someone who opposed slavery, and often was an escaped slave such as Harriet Tubman.

Harriet: Nellie and Tess! You made it! Are you ready? We have to move fast. We need to move at night under the cover of darkness. We will rest during the day. We will be less likely to be caught this way.

Nellie: It's so dark! I can't see!

Tess: Shhhh, Nellie. You need to do your best. We're ready to follow you anywhere, Miss Tubman.

Harriet: You'll need to trust me. I've traveled this route at least ten times, and each time we've made it to safety. You have to do what I say. Once I agree to lead you, you're not allowed to turn back. Your choices are the North or death. Do you understand?

Tess: Absolutely.



Harriet Tubman



CLASSROOM ACTIVITY continued:

Nellie: How far do we have to travel?

Harriet: About twelve miles tonight. Our first safehouse is with Mrs. White. The route we need to travel from safehouse to safehouse is a line; and the safehouse is a station, just like a real train line.

Nellie: Twelve miles is so far!

Tess: Hush, Nellie! Think of your freedom!

Harriet: Yes, it is far; but the distances between safehouses will get shorter as we move farther north. In the South there are fewer people who want to help slaves, so the first part of the trip is more difficult.

Nellie: Where does the Underground Railroad go?

Harriet: It stretches for thousands of miles. It runs from Kentucky and Virginia all the way across Pennsylvania and New York. It ends in New England or Canada.

Tess: We're going all the way to Canada?

Harriet: That's the safest place for you. Anywhere else in the United States means you could be captured and returned to your master.

Nellie: How long will it take us?

Harriet: It may take a very long time. We're more interested in safety than speed. Sometimes I have to change the routes we take because there are slave catchers nearby. We need to zigzag our way across the states to make sure no one finds us. Now follow me. We need to disguise our trail and go through the lake.

Nellie: Why can't we just go around it?

Harriet: If we go through the water, it will hide our footprints. Go carefully and move slowly because there are snakes in this lake.

Tess: I hate snakes! I won't go through that lake!

Harriet: Remember what I said; you either continue with me, or I kill you. Your actions may get us all killed!

Tess: Oh, fine! Nellie, hold my hand. I am not going to enjoy this!

Harriet: Would you rather go back to your master?



Harriet Tubman



CLASSROOM ACTIVITY continued:

Tess: Of course not. Lead on.

Narrator 1: Risking her life each time, Harriet Tubman led many slaves to freedom.

Narrator 2: Some slave owners even offered a \$12,000 reward for her capture, though she was never captured.

Scene III

Narrator 1: Along the routes, the conductors and escaped slaves traveled to stations, or safehouses, where people would hide them.

Narrator 2: Along the rough journey, these safehouses were a place for travelers to stop and rest. The safehouses also provided food, medicine, and clothing for the escaping slaves.

Mrs. White: Welcome, you poor, tired dears! I'm Mrs. White. Welcome to my home.

Tess: Thank you so much! We are so tired. We've been traveling all night!

Harriet: Mrs. White, thank you for your bird call. It really helped us find our way through the swamp to your home.

Mrs. White: I always thought noise signals like that would help without drawing too much attention from other people.

Nellie: How long will we be here?

Mrs. White: Well, during daylight you'll have to hide in the basement; but once it gets dark, I'll be hiding you in my wagon and taking you a bit farther north. It'll give your tired feet a rest. I can't take you far because there are a number of slave catchers in this area, and it's illegal to help you. Using the wagon will help though because if anyone is following you, the dogs won't be able to pick up your scent.

Nellie: The dogs?

Harriet: Many slave catchers use bloodhounds to track your scent. We'll be giving you different clothes, too.

Tess: Those slave catchers really want the rewards, don't they?

Harriet: It's not a small amount of money. If they return both of you, they'll probably receive a reward of \$100 on each of you.



Harriet Tubman



CLASSROOM ACTIVITY continued:

Mrs. White: That's why we're being so careful. It's also why you can't stay in one place for very long. The next safehouse will have a lantern outside, and the one after that will have a chimney with a row of bricks painted white. These are your signals the people will help you.

Tubman: It will be awhile until we make it to the next safehouse, so eat up. While we're on the next line, we'll pick berries and nuts; but don't expect a good meal for a while. You'll just have to find your strength in your desire to be free.

Nellie: Mama, will we ever make it to freedom?

Tess: Yes, Nellie. Just keep believing. There is a better life than this, but we need to be careful so we don't ruin our chances. We'll make it, don't you worry.

Narrator 1: Many slaves who escaped never made it to freedom. Many slave catchers hid in the woods looking for slaves and collecting rewards for the ones they captured.

Narrator 2: Nevertheless, the Underground Railroad helped an estimated 100,000 slaves escape from the South, although it often took a year to reach a free state in the North or Canada.

AFTERWORD

Despite the odds, many slaves dreamed of a better life, especially for their children. They took the risk of capture and traveled north with the help of the Underground Railroad. They dreamed of earning wages for their work and controlling their lives. The Fugitive Slave Act was meant to discourage slaves from escaping and to make it possible for them to be returned to their masters, but it did little to stop slaves' desire for freedom. Instead, it angered those who opposed slavery and encouraged them to do more to help escaping slaves. After the law was passed, the number of volunteers on the Underground Railroad increased.

Play written by CICERO Systems

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