

Harriet Tubman Task

Prompt: Analyze how the early years of Harriet Tubman contributed to her later becoming a conductor on the Underground Railroad, attending to how the authors portray the events in Tubman's life.



Text 1: Leading the way to freedom

Harriet Tubman was just honored with two new national historical parks. Harriet Tubman is famous for risking her life to help slaves escape to freedom in the 1850s and 1860s. Schools, streets, and bridges have been named after her. Now her bravery is being remembered in an even bigger way. Two new national historical parks have been named in Tubman's honor.

Harriet Tubman was born a slave in Maryland, probably in 1822. (Few slaves knew their exact birthdays.) At that time, Maryland was one of 13 states where slavery was still legal. As slaves, Tubman and her family were treated as property by their owner. They were forced to work on his plantation, picking cotton and doing other backbreaking work without pay. Slaves who tried to escape put themselves in serious danger. They were often tracked down by slave catchers, who returned them to their owners for a reward. Captured slaves faced harsh punishment, including being whipped and sometimes even killed.

Yet in 1849, Tubman decided she was willing to take the risk. She fled to the free state of Pennsylvania by using the Underground Railroad. This wasn't a real railroad. Instead, it was a secret network of people, routes, and safe hiding places (or "stations") that enabled thousands of runaway slaves to escape to freedom. Though Tubman was free, the family and friends she had left behind weren't. She returned to Maryland about a dozen times as a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad. Tubman led at least 70 other slaves to freedom, including her parents and several other family members.

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Text 2: Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad

By the time Harriet Ross was six years old, she had unconsciously absorbed many kinds of knowledge, almost with the air she breathed. She could not, for example, have said how or at what moment she knew that she was a slave. She knew that her brothers and sisters, her father and mother, and all the other people who lived in the quarter, men, women and children were slaves. She had been taught to say, "Yes, Missus," "No, Missus," to white women, "Yes, Mas'r," "No, Mas'r" to white men. Or, "Yes, sah," "No, sah."

At the same time someone had taught her where to look for the North Star, the star that stayed constant, not rising in the east and setting in the west as the other stars appeared to do; and told her that anyone walking toward the North could use that star as a guide.

She knew about fear, too. Sometimes at night, or during the day, she heard the furious galloping of horses, not just one horse, several horses, thud of the hoofbeats along the road, jingle of harness. She saw the grown folks freeze into stillness, not moving, scarcely breathing, while they listened. She could not remember who first told her that those furious hoofbeats meant that patrollers were going in pursuit of a runaway. Only the slaves said patrollers, whispering the word.

By Ann Petry. New York: HarperCollins, 1983. (1955) From Chapter 3: "Six Years Old" Posted at:
<http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?=3405>

Text 3: Tubman's Early Years and Escape from Slavery

Harriet Tubman was one of 11 children of Harriet and Benjamin Ross born into slavery in Dorchester County, Maryland. As a child, Harriet was "hired out" by her master as a nursemaid for a small baby. She had to stay awake all night so that the baby wouldn't cry and wake the mother. If Harriet fell asleep, the baby's mother whipped her. From a very young age, she was determined to gain her freedom.

Tubman's Early Years and Escape from Slavery

As a slave, Harriet was scarred for life when she refused to help in the punishment of another young slave. A young man had gone to the store without permission, and when he returned, the overseer wanted to whip him. He asked Harriet to help but she refused. When the young man started to run away, the overseer picked up a heavy iron weight and threw it at him. He missed the young man and hit Harriet instead. The weight nearly crushed her skull and left a deep scar. She was unconscious for days, and suffered from seizures for the rest of her life.

http://www.americaslibrary.gov/aa/tubman/aa_tubman_youth_3.html

Text 4: Harriet Tubman's Childhood

Tubman's childhood was cut short when she was hired out at age 5 to take care of an infant. This was her first job, of many to come, away from her mother. Harriet was far too young to assume such a responsibility in addition to household work. She recalled being on duty at nights to make sure the baby did not cry, she had to continuously rock the baby's cradle or hold her in her arms. Every time a cry was heard her mistress, Miss Susan, would whip her around the neck. These were her first scars and they remained for the rest of her life. Harriet was weak and malnourished so she was sent home.

At the plantation her mother would nurse her back to health and she would be hired to other households again and again. According to her recollections, she was always homesick. When Tubman was about seven years old she was hired out to collect muskrats from traps. The job required being constantly wet from the waist down. She had contracted measles and gone to work; as a result, she was extremely weak and collapsed.

When she was about eight she was hired to another household, one day while her masters were having an argument, she took a lump of sugar which she had never tasted. Her mistress found out, and afraid of the punishment she ran away. For three days he found shelter in a pigpen where she had to compete with pigs for scrapes of food.

Later in her life she described this period of her life as being severely neglected.

From: <http://www.harriet-tubman.org/early-life/>