Weekly Reading # 25
Article 1: Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman was an escaped slave who returned many times to the South to lead other slaves to freedom. She was an individual of great courage and strong personality who impressed all who met her, including the anonymous author of the selection that follows. This account of Tubman was based on actual interviews in the abolitionist journals Commonwealth and Freeman's Record. As you read the excerpts, think about the strategies used by Tubman in her successful raids into Maryland.

One of the teachers lately commissioned by the New-England Freedmen's Aid Society is probably the most remarkable woman of this age. That is to say, she has performed more wonderful deeds by the native power of her own spirit against adverse circumstances than any other. She is well known to many by the various names which her eventful life has given her, Harriet Garrison, Gen. Tubman, &c., but among the slaves she is universally known by her well earned title of Moses,—Moses the deliverer. She is a rare instance, in the midst of high civilization and intellectual culture, of a being of great native powers, working powerfully, and to beneficent ends, entirely untaught by schools or books.

Her maiden name was Araminta Ross. She is the granddaughter of a native African, and has not a drop of white blood in her veins. She was born in 1820 or 1821, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Her parents were slaves, but married and faithful to each other, and the family affection is very strong. She claims that she was legally freed by a will of her first master, but his wishes were not carried into effect.

She seldom lived with her owner, but was usually “hired out” to different persons. She once “hired her time,” and employed it in rudest farming labors, ploughing, carting, driving the oxen, &c., to so good advantage that she was able in one year to buy a pair of steers worth forty dollars.

From Commonwealth, July 17, 1864, and Freeman's Record, March 1865, in The Underground Railroad by Charles L. Blockson.

During the 1850s Harriet Tubman made 19 trips from the North to the South and led about 300 slaves to freedom. Always a fighter for freedom, she also joined the movement for woman's rights that started in the late 1850s in New York and New England.
When quite young she lived with a very pious mistress, but the slaveholder's religion did not prevent her from whipping the young girl for every slight or fancied fault. Araminta found that this was usually a morning exercise, so she prepared for it by putting on all the thick clothes she could procure to protect her skin. She made sufficient outcry, however, to convince her mistress that her blows had full effect, and in the afternoon she would take off her wrappings, and dress as well as she could. When invited into family prayers, she preferred to stay on the landing, and pray for herself; "and I prayed to God," she says "to make me strong and able to fight and that's what I've alders prayed for ever since." It is in vain to try to persuade her that her prayer was a wrong one. She always maintains it to be sincere and right, and it has certainly been fully answered.

Owing to changes in her owner's family, it was determined to sell her and some other slaves, but her health was so much injured, that a purchaser was not easily found. At length she became convinced that she would soon be carried away, and she decided to escape.

Wise judges are we of each other!—She was only quitting home, husband, father, mother, friends, to go out alone, friendless and penniless into the world.

She remained two years in Philadelphia working hard and carefully hoarding her money. Then she hired a room, furnished it as well as she could, bought a nice suit of men's clothes, and went back to Maryland for her husband. But the faithless man had taken to himself another wife. . . . Thus all personal aims died out of her heart, and with her simple brave motto, "I can't die but once," she began the work which has made her Moses,—the deliverer of her people. Seven or eight times she has returned to the neighborhood of her former home, always at the risk of death in the most terrible forms, and each time has brought away a company of fugitive slaves, and led them safely to the free States, or to Canada. Every time she went, the dangers increased. In 1857 she brought away her old parents, and, as they were too feeble to walk, she was obliged to hire a wagon, which added greatly to the perils of the journey. In 1860 she went for the last time, and among her troop was an infant whom they were obliged to keep stupefied [drugged] with laudanum to prevent its outcries.
She has shown in them all the characteristics of a great leader: courage, foresight, prudence, self-control, ingenuity, subtle perception, command over others' minds. Her nature is at once profoundly practical and highly imaginative. She is economical as Dr. Franklin, and as firm in the conviction of supernatural help as Mahomet. . . . She would never allow more to join her than she could properly care for, though she often gave others directions by which they succeeded in escaping. She always came in the winter when the nights are long and dark, and people who have homes stay in them. She was never seen on the plantation herself, but appointed a rendezvous for her company eight or ten miles distant, so that if they were discovered at the first start she was not compromised. She started on Saturday night, the slaves at that time being allowed to go away from home to visit their friends—so that they would not be missed until Monday morning. Even then they were supposed to have loitered on the way, and it would often be late on Monday afternoon before the flight would be certainly known. If by any further delay the advertisement was not sent out before Tuesday morning, she felt secure of keeping ahead of it, but if it were, it required all her ingenuity to escape. She resorted to various devices, she had confidential friends all along the road. She would hire a man to follow the one who put up the notices, and take them down as soon as his back was turned. She crossed creeks on railroad bridges by night, she hid her company in the woods while she herself not being advertised went into the towns in search of information. If met on the road, her face was always to the south, and she was always a very respectable looking darkey, not at all a poor fugitive. She would get into the cars near her pursuers and manage to hear their plans.

The expedition was governed by the strictest rules. If any man gave out, he must be shot. "Would you really do that?" she was asked. "Yes," she replied, "if he was weak enough to give out, he'd be weak enough to betray us all, and all who had helped us, and do you think I'd let so many die just for one coward man." "Did you ever have to shoot any one?" she was asked. "One time," she said, "a man gave out the second night, his feet were sore and swollen, he couldn't go any further, he'd rather go back and die, if he must." They tried all arguments in vain, bathed his feet, tried to strengthen him, but it was of no use, he would go back. Then she said, "I told the boys to get their guns ready, and shoot him. They'd have done it in a minute, but when he heard that, he jumped right up and went on as well as any body." She can tell the time by the stars, and find her way by natural signs as well as any hunter, and yet she scarcely knows of the existence of England or any other foreign country.

She has a very affectionate nature, and forms the strongest personal attachments. She has great simplicity of character; she states her wants very freely, and believes you are ready to help her; but if you have nothing to give, or have given to another, she is content. She is not sensitive to indignities to her color in her own person, but knows and claims her rights. She will eat at your table if she sees you really desire it, but she goes as willingly to the kitchen. She is very abstemious [sparing] in her diet, fruit being the only luxury she cares for. Her personal appearance is very peculiar. She is thoroughly negro, and very plain. She has needed disguise so often that she seems to have command over her face, and can banish all expression from her features, and look so stupid that nobody would suspect her of knowing enough to be dangerous, but her eye flashes with intelligence and power when she is roused.
We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The time was 1860, and Americans had a problem. It wasn’t a new problem; they’d been living with it since the nation began. There were those words in the Declaration of Independence—all men are created equal. It had turned out that not all people were equal in the United States. One large group of people was not even free.

Slavery had come to the land with the Spanish and English settlers. But they weren’t the first to enslave people on the American continents. Some Native American nations had used captives as slaves. It was an evil but common practice across the world. There were jobs that no one wanted to do and, in the days before machinery, slaves seemed an answer. So if you were on the losing side of a war, or were kidnapped by a rival tribe, or by a thief, you might have ended up a slave.

In colonial times, there was slavery in both North and South. But slavery didn’t make much sense in the North; farms were small and the farmer and his family could often handle the farm work themselves. After the Revolutionary War, slavery was outlawed in most northern states.

The situation was different in the South. From the earliest colonial days, the crops that grew well there—tobacco, cotton, rice, and...
Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of heaven on a country. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes and effects providence punishes national sins by national calamities.

—GEORGE MASON, AUTHOR OF THE VIRGINIA BILL OF RIGHTS, AND A SLAVE OWNER

sugar—demanded large numbers of fieldworkers. But there were few workers to be had—until a Dutch ship arrived at Jamestown in 1619 with a boatload of Africans. At first the Africans were indentured servants. Then they became slaves. It solved an economic problem for planters: slaves made a cheap, easy source of labor. After the Revolutionary War, slave laws grew harsher and harsher in the South.

Slavery raised issues besides economics. One was racism. In the United States the slaves were all people of color: either Indians or blacks. And there was the issue of right and wrong. Some Northerners—and some Southerners—thought slavery morally wrong. Yet few of them were willing to do anything about it. The Southerners who opposed slavery did not speak up loudly and, as long as slavery stayed in the South, most Northerners were happy to forget about it.

But there were western lands coming into the country—and that was where problems developed. Southerners wanted slavery to expand. They wanted the new territories in the West to be slave territories. Northerners didn’t.

Remember, most of the white people who didn’t like slavery kept quiet. They didn’t do anything about it. Was that wrong? Why didn’t they speak out? Maybe because it wasn’t easy to attack slavery. Those who did speak out weren’t very popular. They were called “abolitionists” (ab-uh-LISH-uh-ists) because they wanted to abolish, or end, slavery. Today we know that the abolitionists wanted to do the right thing. But if you want to understand history—to understand why things happened the way they did—you have to try to think as people did in the past. You have to put yourself in their times. Slavery had been around for a long time. But people who weren’t enslaved didn’t realize how terrible it was. Most

Three generations of a slave family dressed in their Sunday best for the photographer. Some families didn’t get a chance to stay together; fathers, mothers, or children might be sold away.

There were machines in the South, as this illustration of cotton pressing shows. But what powered the machines?

I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just. His justice cannot sleep forever.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON, VIRGINIA SLAVE OWNER
Northerners didn’t know any slaves, and many white Southerners fooled themselves into thinking the slaves were happy.

What would happen to the South’s economy if slavery were abolished? No one knew. It was said that businesses—in the North as well as the South—would be hurt. To people who were content with things as they were, the abolitionists seemed like troublemakers. They wanted to change other people’s lives.

The Southern leaders wanted to change things, too. They wanted slavery extended to the western territories. They wanted to be able to bring slaves with them when they traveled north. They said the whole nation needed to allow slavery.

A few sensible people tried to find ways to end slavery without destroying the Southern economy. Ralph Waldo Emerson (who was a poet and writer) suggested that the government pay the slave owners for their slaves and then set them free.

That would have cost a whole lot less than going to war. But both sides rejected the idea. In the South, John Calhoun said that slavery was a wonderful, God-inspired system—good for slaves and good for the nation. Others, like Abraham Lincoln, saw clearly that slavery was evil and could only breed evil.

“We began,” said Lincoln, “by declaring that all men are created equal; but now from that beginning we have run down to the other declaration, that for some men to enslave others is a ‘sacred right of government.’ These principles cannot stand together.”

By 1860, there seemed to be no way around it. If the Union was to survive, and be true to its founding principles, there would have to be a war.

Solomon Northup, an escaped slave, wrote of slaves who worked in the cotton fields: “They are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see.”