

Working on the “Railroad”

by Jake Walsh



In 1849, there was slavery in the United States. Slaves lived in many places, but most were in the South. Many slaves dreamed of going to the northern states. They would be free there. However, the journey to the North was long and dangerous.

One woman who made that journey was Harriet Tubman. Harriet was born into slavery in the state of Maryland around 1820. However, she always fought against slavery, even when she was still a slave herself. When Harriet was a young teenager, she tried to stop a slaveholder from hurting another slave. After that, the slaveholder became angry and hit her over the head with a heavy weight.

In 1849, Harriet escaped to the North on the Underground Railroad. The “railroad” was not really a railroad. It didn’t have rails or trains. The Underground Railroad was the name of a system that worked to free slaves. This system was run by a group of people who wanted slaves to be free. Their activities were called “underground” because they were secret. The system worked like this: First, the people of the Underground Railroad hid runaway slaves in their houses, called “stations.” Next, they gave the slaves food and clothing. Then they gave them directions to the next “station.” If they were careful and lucky, the escaped slaves would reach freedom.

Some members of the Underground Railroad were slaves themselves. Even if they could not escape, they could help others who were passing by. Other members of the Underground Railroad were free blacks in the South and North. White people who were against slavery helped too.

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Working on the “Railroad” *(Continued)*

Part 2

Harriet Tubman found her way to freedom in 1849. Yet she could not forget the people she had left behind. So she worked very hard to free other slaves. She became a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad. This means that it was her job to lead groups of escaping slaves to safety. Harriet’s father had taught her how to survive in the woods. She used what she had learned from her father in her work on the railroad. She successfully led many escaped slaves through the woods at night. She helped them hide at each station on the railroad. There, the tired slaves could rest on their journey.

Part 3

Harriet first made sure each station was safe. The escaping slaves hid undercover in the woods nearby and waited. Then when she knew the house was safeguarded, she sang a freedom song. The song told the slaves that all was well. It was important for the slaves not to be caught.

Even in the North, runaway slaves could be returned to their owners. They were often punished when they returned. A law that was passed in 1850 made it a crime to help a runaway slave. Anyone who helped—black or white—could go to jail. So Harriet and other conductors had to be very careful.

Harriet Tubman carried all of her “passengers” safely to the North. Slave owners were angry. They promised to pay large rewards for her capture. But this did not stop Harriet. She went back to the South nineteen times. She helped free more than 300 slaves. She even rescued both her parents from slavery. Harriet Tubman truly was one of the “engines” that drove the Underground Railroad.

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Name _____

Sequence of Events

Things that happen in a story or in real life are called **events**.
A **sequence** is the order in which events take place. Try these ideas to help you keep track of the order of events in a text.

- Watch for time-order words, such as *first*, *next*, *after*, *then*, and *finally*.
- Look for clues that something might be happening out of order.

Write one event in each box in order.

Passage: _____

A vertical sequence of four rounded rectangular boxes, each intended for writing an event. The boxes are connected by downward-pointing arrows, indicating a chronological order from top to bottom.

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Resource Links

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