

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • LEGEND

Thirteen Trips North

Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad

Prepared for the Two Americas Archive

September 13, 2026

Contribution Track • ERA III • Dorchester County, Maryland

Who She Is

Harriet Tubman was born enslaved around March 1822 in Dorchester County, Maryland — no birth record exists, so even the year is an estimate. As a teenager she suffered a severe head injury when an overseer threw a heavy weight at another enslaved person and struck her instead, causing seizures and severe headaches for the rest of her life. She escaped slavery alone in 1849, crossing into Pennsylvania, and then did something almost no one who reached freedom did: she went back.

Thirteen Trips

Over the following decade Tubman returned to the South roughly thirteen times, personally guiding an estimated seventy enslaved people to freedom, including much of her own family. The figure of three hundred people freed, still widely repeated, traces back to her own 1868 biographer Sarah Bradford and is not supported by the documentary record — this entry uses the more conservative, better-sourced number rather than the popular one.

The Combahee River

During the Civil War Tubman served the Union as a scout, spy, and nurse in South Carolina. In June 1863 she guided Union gunboats up the Combahee River in a raid that freed more than seven hundred enslaved people in a single night — command of the operation is formally credited to Colonel James Montgomery, with Tubman as the scout whose knowledge of the terrain and enslaved communities made it possible, a distinction worth preserving accurately rather than repeating the popular framing that she personally commanded it.

After the War

She spent her later decades in Auburn, New York, campaigning for women's suffrage alongside Susan B. Anthony and founding a home for elderly and indigent Black Americans on her own property in 1908. She died there March 10, 1913, in her nineties.

NC Local Lens

No documented connection between Harriet Tubman and North Carolina or Fayetteville/Cumberland County was found. Her escape routes ran Maryland to Delaware to Pennsylvania, and the Combahee River raid took place in South Carolina — neither passes through North Carolina. One item surfaced worth noting for context only: a Harriet Tubman YWCA in Durham, NC, was named in her honor as part of a national wave of such namings, with no direct historical connection to her presence. This entry claims no NC tie.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Number of people freed: the widely repeated "300" figure originates in Sarah Bradford's 1868 biography and is debunked by the National Park Service's own materials; roughly 70 is the better-supported figure.

Combahee River Raid command: formally credited to Col. James Montgomery, not Tubman personally, despite popular framing describing it as the first U.S. military operation planned and led by a woman.

Birth year and childhood injury date: both estimated; no birth record exists.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Harriet Tubman," National Park Service, Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/hatu/learn/historyculture/harriet-tubman.htm>.
2. "Harriet Tubman: Myths and Facts," National Park Service, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/hatu/>.
3. "Harriet Tubman," Library of Congress, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/harriet-tubman-papers/>.
4. "Harriet Tubman," National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/harriet-tubman>.
5. "Harriet Tubman," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harriet-Tubman>.

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