

# Following the North Star

## Honoring Our Abolitionists

BY ERMA JONES



Inset: Yvonne Hileman

**“When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven,” said Harriet Tubman, recalling her escape. Inset: Pauline Johnson (left), the great-great niece of Harriet Tubman, answered questions from USAME participant Erma Jones.**

During the 2019 USA Mission Experience, we visited historical sites commemorating several leaders and supporters of the abolition movement—Harriet Tubman, John Jones, Frederick Douglass and Mark Twain. We learned that other individuals best known for their suffrage work also supported the abolition movement—Matilda J. Gage, William and Frances Seward, Elizabeth Blackwell, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Coffin Mott.

We learned about local and denominational heroes, who may not be included in national history, but helped turn the tide against slavery in small ways. For example, Rhoda Bement was an antislavery activist who confronted her pastor for ignoring the antislavery notices she had left

on his desk. She was censured and removed from the rolls at First Presbyterian Church in Seneca Falls in 1844. The Session removed the censure in 2013.

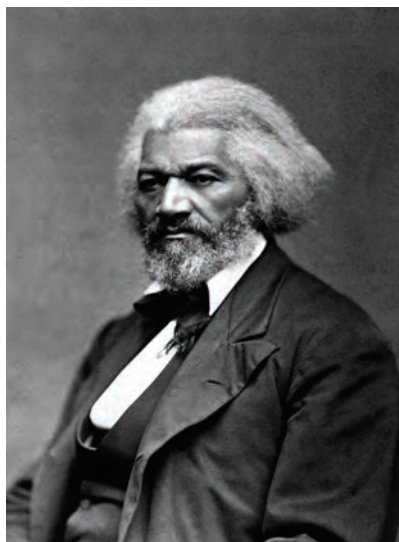
We even met Harriet Tubman’s great-great-niece Pauline Johnson at the Tubman Museum! I asked her what her favorite hymn is (“Steal Away to Jesus”) and what more would she like to do to honor her aunt. She wants to make the release of the \$20 bill with Harriet’s portrait a reality as soon as possible.<sup>1</sup> Let’s honor Harriet and another great abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, by telling their stories.

### The Moses of Her People

Araminta “Minty” Ross was born between 1820 and 1822 to Harriet Green and Ben Ross, who were enslaved in Dorchester County, Maryland.<sup>2</sup> She was the fifth of nine children. As a child, she was often “hired out” by her owner but would be sent home because she was considered “stubborn.” As a result, she was confined to working in the fields where she often experienced lashings. She bore scars from those lashings her entire life. As a teen, Minty sustained a head injury that left her with headaches and blackouts for the rest of her life.

In 1844, Minty married a free black man named John Tubman. Little is known about their marriage, but we do know he declined to go with her when she planned her escape to the North. After her owner died, Araminta began planning her escape, changing her name to Harriet Tubman (her mother’s first name and husband’s last name). Harriet escaped in 1849 via the Underground Railroad, a network of safe houses and transportation for fugitive slaves.

Once she had her freedom, Harriet vowed to help others. Between 1850 and 1860, she made 19 trips from the South to the North following the Underground Railroad, guiding more than 300 people, including her parents and siblings, from slavery to freedom. She earned the nickname



National Archives and Records Administration

In his abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star*, Frederick Douglass described his escape from slavery: “[T]hanks be to the Most High, who is ever the God of the oppressed, at the moment which was to determine my whole earthly career, His grace was sufficient, my mind was made up. I embraced the golden opportunity, took the morning tide at the flood, and a free man, young, active and strong, is the result” (published September 3, 1848).

“Moses” for all the people she brought to freedom.

Through her work on the Underground Railroad, she learned towns and transportation routes across the South, which made her valuable to Union military commanders. She served during the war as a Union spy, scout and nurse. She wandered the streets under Confederate control, disguised as an aging woman and learning from the enslaved population about Confederate troop placements and supply lines.<sup>3</sup> She even led an armed expedition of black Union soldiers in South Carolina, which liberated more than 700 enslaved people.

In New York, Harriet befriended many abolitionists, including senator William H. Seward and his wife Frances. They offered their home as a stop on the Underground Railroad and sold her a small piece of land on the outskirts of Auburn. She used the land as a haven for family and friends. In 1869, she married Nelson Davis. In 1874, they adopted a daughter.

Harriet spent the post-war years in Auburn, tending to her family, the elderly and people who escaped slavery, and joining Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in their quest for women’s suffrage. In 1896, she purchased a site in Auburn to

establish the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged. It still stands as a monument to her.

Despite her fame and reputation, Harriett was never financially secure. As she aged, the head injury sustained in early life became more painful and debilitating. She underwent surgery in the 1890s to alleviate the headaches. She was eventually admitted into the rest home named in her honor. Harriet remained active in the suffrage movement until her death. She died in 1913 and was buried with military honors at Fort Hill Cemetery in Auburn.

### Orator, Writer and Advocate

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born into slavery in February 1818 in Maryland. His mother died when he was very young and he never knew his father.<sup>4</sup> When Frederick was eight, his owner hired him out to work as a house servant for the Auld family in Baltimore. Mrs. Auld taught young Frederick to read, but Mr. Auld opposed the activity, saying learning would make Frederick unfit for slavery. Not allowed to attend school, Frederick finished learning to read and write on his own. At 12, he bought a book called *The Columbian Orator*, a collection of speeches and writings on human rights.

Upon the death of his master, Frederick, then 15, was returned to the plantation as a field hand. He made an unsuccessful attempt to escape. Frustrated, his slaveowner returned him to Baltimore, where he

was hired out as a ship caulker. He met a free woman named Anna Murray, who helped him buy a train ticket to New York, and would later become his wife. On September 3, 1838, he boarded a northbound train and, upon his arrival in New York, declared himself a free man.

Frederick and Anna felt unsafe in New York City, so they moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, and changed their surname to Douglass. There, Frederick began to attend abolitionist meetings; he increasingly spoke about his experiences in slavery, and was increasingly well-received. Still not feeling safe, the Douglasses moved to Europe. After two years spent in Europe, abolitionists offered to purchase his freedom. He accepted and he and his family moved to Rochester, New York. Following Anna’s death, Frederick married Helen Pitts in 1844. In 1845, he published his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. In 1847, he bought a printing press and began publishing his own newspaper, *The North Star*.<sup>5</sup>

In Rochester, Frederick embraced the women’s rights movement. He and Susan B. Anthony became friends, and in 1848 Frederick spoke at the first Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Frederick also worked on the Underground Railroad and continued to speak and write about slavery and emancipation. The National Park Service notes, “In 1861, the nation erupted into civil war over the issue of slavery. [Frederick] worked tirelessly



**Let's Have Tea (Pepsy Kettavong), a sculpture near Rochester's Susan B. Anthony Museum & House, features Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass sitting together for tea.**

to ensure that emancipation would be one of the war's outcomes." Frederick met with Abraham Lincoln to advocate for black troops. "A series of postwar amendments sought to make some of the changes [that Frederick advocated.] The 13th Amendment (ratified in 1865) abolished slavery, the 14th Amendment (ratified in 1868) granted national birthright citizenship, and the 15th

Amendment (ratified in 1870) stated that no one could be denied voting rights on the basis of race, skin color or previous servitude."

In 1872, Frederick and his family moved to Washington, D.C., and by the time of Reconstruction, began to hold prestigious offices in government. In 1895, Douglass died of a heart attack. As a speaker, writer, publisher, Underground Railroad supporter and advocate, Frederick Douglass was a central figure in the fight for equality and justice his entire life. 🍷

## Notes

1. In 2016, the U.S. Treasury Department announced the \$20 bill would feature Harriet Tubman rather than Andrew Jackson. The release was scheduled for 2020 to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment. However, according to the *New York Times* (Alan Rappeport, "See a Design of the Harriet Tubman \$20 Bill That Mnuchin Delayed," June 14, 2019, NYT), the new bill has been delayed for at least six years due to reported technical issues. It is unclear whether Harriet Tubman will appear on it.
2. Unless otherwise noted, Harriet's biographical information is from "Harriet Tubman," Biography.com; [www.biography.com/activist/harriet-tubman](http://www.biography.com/activist/harriet-tubman); accessed October 31, 2019.
3. Debra Michals, ed., "Harriet Tubman," National Women's Museum, 2015; [www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/harriet-tubman](http://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/harriet-tubman); accessed October 31, 2019.
4. Frederick Douglass's biographical information is from the National Park Service, "Frederick Douglass"; [www.nps.gov/frdo/learn/historyculture/frederickdouglass.htm](http://www.nps.gov/frdo/learn/historyculture/frederickdouglass.htm); accessed October 31, 2019.

## Author's Note

I was born and reared in the segregated South. I was blessed to have parents who tried to protect my sister and me from the injustices that surrounded us. They were intentional in teaching us that all white people were not like the people we heard about in the news. They instilled in us that there were many good people trying to do the right thing. An excellent example was Mr. Cobb, the owner of the company where my father worked. On holidays, we were invited to their home for dinner and my mom would take her renowned fruit cake. When my dad was hospitalized in a sanitarium for about a year, Mr. Cobb paid my dad's salary.

I heard the brutal stories of lynching and stealing. My grandparents experienced the confiscation of their land. When they wanted an automobile, there were only able to buy a hearse. My family was unable to buy furnishings or major appliances on credit for many years. They were subjected to higher than normal interest rates and unfair insurance rates. My father was denied a welder's license until the system was personally challenged by an influential white man who attested to the quality of his work. I experienced separate facilities, segregated churches and movie theaters, and used textbooks that were passed to the black schools from the white schools. There was no mention of abolitionists or their work in our textbooks. There are many more examples that can be attested to by anyone living as a person of color in the South.

While writing this article, I read the letter written by Frederick Douglass to his former slave master, Thomas Auld.\* I was so moved by this letter. For example, Frederick's mother worked in the fields on another plantation, so she only saw her son when she could sneak away during the night and return to the field early in the morning.

Frederick Douglass detailed the horrifying, incestuous, infectious behaviors that slavery breeds—the trading, buying and selling of another human being, the beatings "to break the will" of another person, the murders, the destruction of the nuclear family, the brutal assaults on one's body, the outrageous assaults upon one's soul and the centuries of inexplicable horror. . . . Reading his words, I felt like I needed to sit and grieve. I needed to grieve for those who lost their lives during the trading and passage to these shores; for those who were maimed, castrated or murdered if they survived the trip here; for those who never experienced freedom; for those whose faith was diminished; for those who perpetrated the deeds; for those who failed to work for justice.

Holy, Loving God, remove any remaining grief and allow me to be your servant as a worker for your justice.

Erma Jones is the 2018–2021 moderator for PW's Search Committee.

\*Read or listen to Frederick Douglass's "Letter to My Old Master" at <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/45/my-bondage-and-my-freedom/1509/letter-to-his-old-master-to-my-old-master-thomas-auld/>