By 1855, 4 million people living in America were slaves, like these parents and children. Harriet Tubman led many to freedom.
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The amazing story of
Harriet Tubman
and the Underground Railroad  BY LAUREN TARSHIS
It was a cold night in the winter of 1855, in a potato field in Maryland. Three men and a woman were rushing through the darkness, guided by the light of the North Star. They were escaped slaves desperate to get to the North—to freedom.

Danger was all around them—freezing wind that chilled their bones, hunger that tore at their stomachs, rushing rivers that could drown them. Most threatening of all: slave catchers, ruthless men who collected rewards for capturing escaped slaves. Traveling on swift horses, these men were cunning. They moved quietly in the night, led by vicious bloodhounds, dogs that could smell a human from miles away.

The runaways knew what would happen if they were caught: They’d be chained up, tied together, and marched back to their owners. Punishment for running away was harsh. They would surely be brutally whipped. Some slaves were even killed for trying to escape, a gruesome warning to others thinking about trying to become free.

But the person leading this group was not afraid. Her name was Harriet Tubman, and she’d made this same journey many times before.

Right: Slave owners put advertisements in newspapers and posted signs offering rewards for runaway slaves. Harriet hired people to tear down the posters.

To Be a Slave

Harriet was born on a Maryland farm in 1822 or 1823—few slaves knew their birthdays. Her real name was Araminta, “Minty” for short; she later changed her name to Harriet. Her mother, Rit, and her father, John, had nine children together. But their three oldest daughters, Soph, Mariah, and Linnieh, were sold before Harriet was born. Try to imagine being a parent and having your children stolen from you, never to see or hear from them again.

Their owner, Mr. Brodess, didn’t believe what was stealing the children. Harriet and her father were slaves. They were his property, like his horses and his plows. Legally, slave owners could do anything they wished with their slaves.

That’s what it meant to be a slave: to have no say over your life, to have everything controlled by another person.

There was nothing Harriet could do to be...
A Divided Nation

In 1855, America was a very different country than it is today. There were only 31 states. Other parts of the country were territories. This meant that the land belonged to the United States, but the areas were not officially states.

America was also very divided—by slavery. Some states were "slave states." Others were "free." This division led to the terrible Civil War between the Northern and Southern states, which lasted from 1861 to 1865. The North won the war. In 1865, slavery was outlawed throughout the United States.

The United States in 1855

- Free state
- Slave state
- Territory

her oldest sisters back. One day, though, she would risk everything trying to keep the rest of her family together.

Mr. Brodess owned many slaves—too many to keep busy on his own property. So beginning when Harriet was 5 or 6 years old, he rented her to other people. For months at a time, she lived far from her parents, working for people who mistreated and sometimes beat her.

The cruelest of these temporary masters was "Miss Susan," who hired Harriet to watch over her baby. Harriet was barely big enough to hold the little boy, yet it was her job to take care of him 24 hours a day. Miss Susan kept a whip by her bedside. At night, if the baby's crying awakened her, she viciously whipped Harriet. Harriet would carry scars from these beatings for the rest of her life.

As she got older, Harriet worked mainly outdoors, plowing fields and clearing timber. The work was backbreaking. But it gave her a chance to mingle with free black people who were sometimes hired to work alongside slaves.

Harriet listened closely as the men told about slaves who had escaped to the North, following the North Star. They described escape routes. They said there were kind people who opened their homes to slaves to run. Harriet had never gone to school—it was illegal throughout the South for slaves to learn to read or write. But she was extremely smart, with a powerful memory. A few years later, when she heard that the Brodess family planned to sell her, she remembered these stories. Terrified that she'd disappear like her sisters and never see her family again, she fled.

Risking Capture—or Worse

Harriet had a gift for following the stars, for finding the routes the men had described in their stories. All of that hard work outdoors had made her strong. And she was unafraid of the long dark nights, of the wild sounds that echoed through the forests and swamps. It took her a week to travel 120 miles to Philadelphia in Pennsylvania. This was one of 15 "free states" in the North, where slavery was illegal.

She quickly found a job working at a hotel, where she blended in easily with the many free black people living in that bustling city.

But Harriet wasn't happy in her new life. How could she be content when her parents and brothers and sisters were still enslaved? Soon it became clear to her what she needed to do, what
deep inside she knew she had to do.

Within months she was on the move again, making her way under the night sky through now-familiar marshes and forests. Except now she was heading back to Maryland. It was extraordinary for an escaped slave to return to the land where she had been enslaved, to risk capture—or worse.

She brought her niece Kessiah and Kessiah’s children to Philadelphia and was soon heading South again to liberate her brother and two of his friends. After that she helped another brother escape, along with his family and several others.

In between her journeys, she worked at hotels and restaurants, saving money she would need to buy food and other supplies for her rescue missions. By then she was officially part of the Underground Railroad.

**The Underground Railroad**

The Underground Railroad was not a real railroad. The term was a code name for a network of people, routes, and hiding places that enabled slaves to escape to the North. Hundreds of people were part of the Underground Railroad, a diverse group that included wealthy white people, Christian ministers, housewives, farmers, free black people, slaves, and many others. Working in total secrecy, members of the Underground Railroad communicated with each other using special code words and signals. Many turned their own homes into safe houses, creating hiding places in attics and cellars.

Everyone working in the Underground Railroad took enormous risks; helping a runaway slave was against the law, even in free states. Many were sent to jail. Free blacks were often sold back into slavery.

A law that was passed in 1850 forbade people in free states, like Pennsylvania, from helping escaped slaves. This meant that escaped slaves had to travel all the way to Canada, where slavery was outlawed, in order to be safe.

Harriet became well-known for her courage and success as a leader of the Underground Railroad. She was clever, but a harsh. Once, midway through her journey North, a man in her group—a fearful and hungry, wanted to return to his owner. In Harriet’s mind, departure threatened the safety of the whole group. She pulled out her pistol she always carried with her and pointed it at the man’s chest. “I keep moving,” she said.

He kept moving.

Not all of her journeys went smoothly—which brings us back to that potato field in 1855. One of the three men she was leading, named Jim Bailey, was especially prizec...
his owner. The owner was offering an enormous reward for Jim's return, and swarms of slave catchers were after him.

To evade capture, Harriet had to detour from her preferred routes. The slave catchers tracked them south into a potato field near Maryland's border with Delaware. Harriet and the men hid in holes, shivering in the dirt, as their pursuers passed within a few feet of them.

It was the closest Harriet ever came to capture. But, yet again, Harriet Tubman led the way to freedom.

In all, Harriet made 13 trips, freeing about 70 to 80 slaves. She helped her parents escape too, along with all four of her brothers and their families.

In the end, Harriet and her family were together—and free.  

**WRITE TO WIN!**

Harriet Tubman is one of the most famous women in American history. What traits make her heroic? Write your answer in a paragraph, using at least three examples from the article. Send your entries to "Harriet Contest" by March 15, 2013. Ten winners will each receive a signed copy of the newest book in Lauren Tarshis's I Survived series, I Survived the Battle of Gettysburg. See page 2 for details.