

HARRIET TUBMAN AND JOHN BROWN: MODELS FOR UNITY AND ACTION

"I bring you one of the best and bravest persons on this continent--General Tubman, as we call her."

With these words, John Brown introduced Harriet Tubman to a group of Bostonian abolitionists, using the nickname he had given her at their first meeting in St. Catharines, Canada.

On October 17, 2009, the John Brown-Harriet Tubman Historical Society will celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Harper's Ferry raid against slavery. John Brown's connection to the raid is common knowledge, but few history lessons teach students about his association with Tubman. They met in 1858, the year before the raid, when Brown was gathering money, arms, and--most importantly--volunteers. Tubman was well-known to the black fugitive slave community in St. Catharines, many of whom she had personally guided to freedom. Brown confided in her his plans to attack Harper's Ferry, and Tubman supported him, urging him to set July 4, 1858, as the day for the raid and promising to bring volunteers. They parted with the understanding that they would communicate through their mutual friend Frederick Douglass.

Tubman's experience as an escaped slave herself and as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, as well as her militancy, made her and Brown natural allies. Common white liberal rhetoric at the time called on abolitionists to "rescue" black slaves, who were too inherently docile to fight back against their own oppressors. Tubman's example, however, along with hundreds escaped slaves and the black volunteers who joined Brown, disproved this racist stereotype.

On a Dorchester County, MD, plantation, Tubman was born the daughter of slaves in about 1820. Her life was similar to other slaves: her exact birth date and location were not recorded, she performed house and field work, was subjected to physical abuse, and many of her nine siblings were sold away from the family. As an adolescent, a weight thrown at another slave struck Tubman in the head and, as she described, it "broke my skull." The injury affected her throughout her life with seizures, severe headaches, hypersomnia, and visions she attributed to God. Like Brown, she was a deeply religious individual who saw slavery as a moral evil that God called upon her to fight.

By 1849, her injury had diminished her work capacity and, therefore, her value to her owner; his solution was to sell her. Said Tubman later, "There was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death. If I could not have one I would have the other." She chose liberty. Through the Underground Railroad she traveled the 90 miles to Philadelphia. The journey on foot, mostly at night, took weeks.

Like other fugitives, Tubman had faced the excruciating decision to separate from her family who were still enslaved. She almost immediately started making plans to travel back into Maryland, at great personal peril, to guide them to freedom. Eventually she was able to settle

her parents in St. Catharines. Yet she herself did not stop. Over the 11 years following her escape, with a bounty on her head, Tubman made approximately 13 trips south and guided an estimated 300 slaves to freedom in Canada, earning her the nickname Moses. Her actions demonstrate the extraordinary resolve of her character, as well as her solidarity with not only her family but all slaves. "I never ran my train off the tracks and I never lost a passenger," she said proudly.

Earl Conrad, author of *Harriet Tubman: Negro Soldier and Abolitionist*, writes that during her work as a conductor, Tubman heard of Brown's armed struggles in Kansas, and was "amazed how an old man fought for her people." Tubman had a premonition of their meeting, a dream in which she saw "the head of an old man with a long white beard." When they did meet on April 7, 1858, Tubman identified Brown as this figure from her dream. For his part, Brown knew Tubman's knowledge of the land and Underground Railroad network would help the raiders; he was also impressed by Tubman's courage and commitment. Friends of Tubman said he addressed her as "General Tubman" three times as they met and once again as they parted. Both had chosen a personal crusade against slavery, and their relationship was formed on mutual belief in direct action and armed violence to end slavery. No eye-witness record exists of what exactly they discussed, but Brown wrote enthusiastically to one of his sons the next day, "Harriet Tubman hooked on his [Tubman's] whole team at once." Throughout this letter, Brown refers to Tubman in masculine terms. Her character not only disproved the image of blacks as passive victims of slavery, but also defied stereotypes of meek women—a sexist image that even Brown had perhaps not rid himself. He could only describe her character as "the most of a man, naturally."

It is difficult to trace Tubman and Brown's association exactly after this meeting. Tubman was invited to a convention in Chatham, May 8, 1858, at which Brown and his supporters drew up a provisional constitution that was to take effect following their rebellion. Central to this constitution was the equality of all men and women, regardless of race and property ownership. Though Tubman did not attend this convention (perhaps due to a mix-up in the location) Conrad writes, "If anything took precedence over her work as a conductor, it was her developing association with John Brown, and their plans for raiding the Government arsenal at Harpers Ferry at a later date." One abolitionist's letter to Brown's son John Jr. indicates that Tubman and Brown may have lost touch in the weeks before the raid, but that other abolitionists among Brown's supporters had written to her and expected her presence. She was in New Bedford, MA, when the raid took place, probably suffering from her chronic illness. When she was able, however, she headed south and was in New York when word reached her that the raid had gone forward without her and that Brown had been captured. After his execution, Tubman was deeply aggrieved. She told friends, "He did more in dying than 100 men would in living."

Brown expressed a similar sentiment at trial, that he would accomplish more for his cause in dying than in living. Indeed, the attack on the arsenal by armed men both black and white, and logistically supported by hundreds of others, galvanized the anti-slavery movement, which until that time had tactically relied on "moral suasion"—convincing slaveowners and other whites

that slavery was wrong. Following the raid, abolitionists directly addressed the four million black men and women held in slavery, asserting their right to resist. On the other side, Brown's raid and particularly the specter of armed black men that it raised, terrified slaveowners, who pressed more strenuously for secession. Thus the raid was a key precipitating event to the Civil War, which ultimately dealt the death blow to institutional slavery. The War once again brought together black and white on the Union side, whose troops marched under the song, "John Brown's Body."

Nor did the failure of the raid dampen Tubman's own militancy. She continued her work as a conductor, and during the Civil War she supported the Union first as a cook and nurse, then as a scout and spy; she was the first woman to lead an armed raid. Her example, and Brown's, and their mutual support for one another, offer models today for the strength of action that cuts across race and sex. After the war, Tubman continued her work aiding the women's suffrage movement and lived out the rest of her life at her family home in Auburn, NY, where she died March 10, 1913.