

HARRIET TUBMAN  
and her  
UNDERGROUND RAILROAD.

It's the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of slavery this year and a perfect opportunity to tell you about the amazing story of a young slave girl.

I have always tried to make quilts that tell a story, often about my family and friends. When I heard that there was a story about a quilt that had a coded secret I was hooked like many of the quilting population, and when Elena Burns published a book depicting the coded quilt I rushed out to get it.

It was an intriguing read but alarm bells rang and with an open eye and lots of research, especially Barbara Brackmans new book Facts and Fabrications Unravelling the Truth about Quilts and Slavery, I came to the conclusion that it was a story that had got out of hand, been fabricated, and was most probably not true, more like a fairy tale.

The existence of the Underground Railroad (much like the French Resistance) with its secret hiding places and groups of people who were opposed to slavery and who helped and campaigned for slaves and their freedom was in no question, but coded quilts, sorry very unlikely.

All was not lost because in my research, I came across this most remarkable character. She had a far bigger story to tell, one that I have incorporated into the blocks of a quilt. There is no record of Harriet making a quilt; this is my interpretation of the story using the names of quilt blocks to convey the story.

You only have to go into 'google', tap in Harriet Tubman and you will be inundated with stories about her life.

Harriet was born in Buckland, Maryland, U.S.A in about 1820 -21. Slaves were not deemed important enough to record their birth dates. Her parents Ben and Rit, along with all their children were the property of Mr Brodas the estate owner.

There was a lot of unrest amongst the slaves and slave owners at this time because, since the abolition of slavery in the Commonwealth and the declaration of some free states within America, slave owners were losing their valuable assets, the slaves, and, for the first time, the slaves were experiencing freedom. Many were escaping to the Northern States, Mexico, Canada and the Caribbean islands.

The plantation owners refused to let their slaves travel or mix with neighbouring slaves and property and banned them from attending church in fear of inciting escape.

The only slaves who had permission to travel were the itinerant workers, slaves whose skills were so valuable that they were shared amongst owners. These itinerant workers would have included blacksmiths, also known as MONKEY WRENCH'S. A very infamous blacksmith was a free black known as Frederick Douglas. He taught himself to read and write secretly, for it was forbidden to teach anyone or be seen to teach yourself. He was an abolitionist and helped by providing means of escape to many a slave. He later became a great friend of Harriet. Other itinerant workers would have included seam mistresses, which is why we have a COTTON REEL block.

Although banned from talking whilst at work, so they could not convey messages, the slaves sang and would convey thoughts and feelings through song: spirituals. Lots of songs we sing in choirs today have their roots hidden in slavery: John Browns Body, Sing low sweet Charity, Steal Away, (one of Harriet's signature tunes.)

The Big and Little Dipper; we know it as The Plough, **THE NORTH STAR**. The North Star leads you to freedom, Canada, also known then as Canaan.

By now the injustices of slavery were sweeping through the country and most towns had some form of secret organisation or hide out that would help and harbour escaped slaves. Passengers would be directed to **CROSSROADS** in the next town. The people who helped were known as 'conductors' and the slaves were known as 'passengers'. The towns were known as 'stations'. Some towns had coded names. There was no train or railroad. **THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD** was just a pseudonym for an organisation of dedicated people who fought for justice. People who helped were also known as **SHOO FLY**. If you look this up in the dictionary it means undercover detective!

Harriet, from a very young age had heard these stories of freedom and witnessed her brothers and sisters being torn away from her parents and sold to slavery. The worst scenario would have been for them to be sold south to work on the huge cotton, tobacco, and sugar plantations. The huge plantations needed slaves as a labour force, and the slaves were used as political pawns in a huge game. The **COTTON BLOCK** represents this injustice.

Harriet's parents wanted her to work 'in service' a much better life!

At the age of seven she was sent, by Mr Brodas, to work for Miss Susan looking after her new baby, Harriet's job was to make sure the baby did not cry, especially at night. She had to lie on the floor outside the baby's room and, if Miss Susan was woken, Harriet would be whipped!!! Harriet was caught pinching a sugar cube and, in fear of the beating she would receive she ran away. She had no where to go, so stayed for five days in a pig pen living off the scraps the pigs were fed. She had various other jobs. She set Muskrat traps, in the freezing cold water of the creeks, but contracted measles. She worked with a weaver, but became allergic to the lint of the cotton and again became poorly.

Young Harriet soon realised that if she rebelled and was not a good worker she would be sent home to her mother. But her mother knew that if Harriet got a bad reputation she would be sent to the Deep South to work!

One day whilst tending to some crops in a field, Harriet noticed a young black boy behaving suspiciously. He walked to the edge of the field and then starting running. The overseer saw him and chased him, eventually catching up with him in a store. Harriet followed. The overseer shouted at Harriet to block the boy's path, but she did not move. The overseer threw a heavy weight at the boy, which missed and caught Harriet on the head. She suffered a very serious head injury. She was brought home to her mother, who nursed her. It took months for Harriet to recover...

Harriet's story of defying the overseers spread and she gained an awful lot of respect in her community.

Rit was a very religious woman and would read passages of the bible to Harriet to aid her recovery. It was at this time that Harriet said she had dreams and premonitions of escaping and flying to freedom and helping other slaves.

Harriet's recovery was slow and she was considered 'damaged goods'. She now suffered from narcolepsy, sleeping sickness, and would almost certainly be sent to the Deep South to work. Ben, Harriet's father, a well-respected and valuable slave, a carpenter/woodsman (**CARPENTERS WHEEL**), took Harriet to work with him. He taught her everything he knew about the land around, how to fell trees, read the weather, hunt and track animals, swim, imitate bird calls. She had a reputation for being able to stalk an animal unheard, gather plants and use them for medicinal purposes, and read the stars (**NORTH STAR**). She was described as being as strong as an ox, and became so skilled that she too became too valuable to sell.

Harriet was safe. She met and fell in love with John Tubman and, with the permission of her owner, she married him in 1844.

John was a free slave; he was also a carpenter (**CARPENTERS WHEEL**) He was able to buy himself his freedom, but this did not make Harriet free.

In 1837, a group of ladies in Boston got together and made produce to sell in aid of abolition. This money was sent to help the 'conductors' provide food and shelter for escaping slaves. At this very first Quilt fair, there were many to follow. A cot quilt was made and sold with this inscription:

Mother! When around your child you clasp your arms in love,  
And when with grateful joy you raise your eyes to god above,  
Think of the poor Negro mother  
When her child is torn away,  
Oh then!  
For that poor mother pray.

This poem gets me every time!

Harriet had been talking of escaping for a long time. However, as her husband was free, he saw no point and threatened Harriet to stop her silly talk or he would inform on her. Harriet had heard rumours that she was to be sold south; it was time to make preparations. She had befriended a Quaker woman who had indicated she would help Harriet if she ever needed. Quakers were infamous abolitionists, having been persecuted for their religious beliefs in their homelands. They often provided shelter food and clothing. A slave was dressed as slave with coarse homespun clothing, known as Osnaburg!! Yes, the stuff on which we embroider! If you wanted to look like a free slave, you needed to dress appropriately and 'conductors' would provide clothing that would do just that. A nice shawl, white gloves, and a hat. For the men a BOW TIE perhaps!

Thomas Garrett, as a Quaker, ran a station in Wilmington, Delaware. He later became a good friend of Harriet

It was 1849 when Harriet made her escape. She told no one of her intention. She travelled by night, using the constellations and her tracking skills to guide her. The Quaker woman gave her a name of a woman who would assist her. She would have been given directions to another house or barn, where she would have found shelter and food. She would have slept all-day and continued on her journey at night. She eventually reached Pennsylvania but said...

*I was free but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom, I was a stranger in a free land.*

With help from other escaped slaves and the abolitionist society she made friends and found work in a kitchen and saved her money. Her home and family and friends were in Maryland and one day she would go and get them.

Harriet returned nineteen times and helped free over 300 hundred other slaves. This included all of her family. She became known as the Moses of her People. Harriet used all her skills her father taught her to trek through the country side. She was armed with a pistol on many of her trips and was not frightened to use it. She was known to hold at gunpoint any passenger who thought the journey ahead was too arduous and wished to return. One of her quotes was 'never wound a snake, kill it'. She helped many families with children, and would 'drug' the children so their crying would not give them away. She had a sixth sense about danger and would often hide her passengers and go up ahead to look out for ambushes. She would return singing 'steal away', so all knew it was safe. On one of her later trips she returned to fetch her aged parents, who by now had worked out their slavery and were free. She was

shocked at how frail they had become and so had to fashion a wagon from things she found in a barn to drive them to the first 'station', hence the block **WAGON WHEEL**.

"I never lost one passenger"

In an attempt to appease the civil unrest throughout the States, the government made a new law. The Fugitive Slave Law Act of 1850 said that any escaped slaves could be found in the Free states and taken back to their owner, often for prize. This gave rise to the bounty hunters. Some I must say were free blacks themselves. This was bad news for all those escaped slaves. Many were found, taken back, punished and sent to the Deep South. This was a very dangerous time for those who had escaped, especially Harriet who was said to have a bounty of 10,000 to 40,000 dollars on her head.

Free slaves once again had to make another journey, to Canada, which was a slave free country, also known as the Promised Land.

When the Civil War started, Harriet decided to help the UNION ARMY (star blocks).

It was a hard decision as she looked after her elderly parents who lived with her.

She worked as a cook and a nurse, a scout and a spy. Some of the homemade recipes from plants and herbs helped ease the suffering and fever of the soldiers. She made ginger bread cookies and root beer and sold them to the soldiers to fund her work because she did not get a salary from the Union Army!!

In 1863 she led a group of 100 soldiers up the Combahee River in South Carolina. They destroyed Federal crops and supplies and freed about eight hundred slaves.

When Harriet returned, exhausted from the war, the house she shared with her parents was under threat of being repossessed by the bank because she had not earned any money whilst working for the Union Army, so a friend, Sarah Bradford, offered to write a biography about Harriet's life. The proceeds from this book helped pay Harriet's debts. Harriet met a former slave and soldier, Nelson and married him. She continued to give speeches and raise funds for schooling, women's rights and equality. In 1896 Harriet used her small savings to buy a care home for elderly African Americans!!

This remarkable woman's story is one that should not be forgotten. By making this quilt and telling and sharing her story with your family it should mean that this will never happen again! Make slavery history!!!!!!

HARRIET TUBMAN DIED IN 1913; THE YEAR ROSA PARKS WAS BORN. ROSA WAS THE LADY WHO REFUSED TO GIVE UP HER SEAT SO THAT THE BLACK MAN COULD STAND UP FOR HIS RIGHTS.

Have a look at; [theundergroundrailroad@nationalgeographic.com](http://theundergroundrailroad@nationalgeographic.com), where there is a great interactive site. It is designed for children, but will give you a feel of what life was like for a runaway slave.

Mandy Shaw

[www.dandeliondesigns.co.uk](http://www.dandeliondesigns.co.uk)