

HARRIET TUBMAN

 harriettubman.com/cwood.html

The Negro History Bulletin

THE CHARLES P. WOOD MANUSCRIPTS OF HARRIET TUBMAN

By Earl Conrad

When Harriet Tubman, the Negro liberator returned to her home in Auburn, New York, in the year 1865, after she had served the Government for three years as a soldier, nurse and spy, she was tired to the point of illness, and she was a penniless woman of about fifty years who looked seventy. She settled down on the outskirts of that town in a small square wooden house which she had purchased a few years earlier from Secretary of State William H. Seward, and she was prepared to spend the rest of her days in quiet. She believed that her period of fighting was over and that she had earned a few years of peace.

But it was a time of great upheaval in the land. The Negroes were striving for readjustment; and soon the aged, the maimed and the impoverished of her color came to her door in need, and she welcomed them inside, feeding and housing the derelict and nursing the sick. Her black countrymen had by now almost deified her; they had long since called her "Moses" or had taken up the name that John Brown had given to her, *General*, and the distressed believed that she was the one who could always help them. Her old parents, Benjamin and Harriet Ross, lived here too, and were wholly dependent upon their daughter. Harriet could not have been resting for longer than a few months when these varied responsibilities settled upon her shoulders. But she had always been a woman of remarkable strength even though she was chronically ill from blows received in slavery, and she quickly mounted to the new tasks. She cultivated a large garden and the earth yielded produce with which to feed her charges; and she went among her rich Republican friends, still flushed with victory and the knowledge that their party had delivered the black man from his chattel bonds, and these, unable to resist her philanthropic spirit, gave generously of money, food and clothing to solace the weary ones under her shelter. She did not cease there; once that her full energies were actually regenerated, she raised funds for the maintenance of two schools for freedmen in the South. Before long she was the sole support of these schools. If the abolitionist could no longer conspire with John Brown, if the soldier could no longer

accompany Colonel James Montgomery on his raids, the dawning matriarch could throw herself into reconstruction, and that she did with such a hearty accord as if she were still a young woman.

This went on until the year 1868 when Harriet's need for money became urgent, the burdens increasingly heavier, and her people needier. What was to be done? In Auburn two movements were initiated: one to secure a pension for her, the task of the Honorable William H. Seward; and the other, the recording of her life story, this to be written by a Geneva woman named Sarah Hopkins Bradford. It was intended that the proceeds resulting from the sale of the story be placed with Harriet, and that thus she could continue her work.

Late in the year 1868 Mrs. Bradford put together her book, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*. The printing of it was financed by Gerrit Smith, Wendell Phillips, William H. Seward, Jr., and a dozen other friends and former anti-slavery associates of the colored woman. The book sold widely, for Harriet was extensively known, and she obtained the funds to tide her over the troublesome period.

It was one of the briefest biographies ever written. Certainly it was excessively short for such a comprehensive life as was Harriet's. It was noticeably incomplete insofar as it dealt with her war service, probably her most important contribution. The author declared that this portion of her story was to be especially written by Mr. Charles P. Wood of Auburn, and that the Wood manuscript was to be contained in this book. ¹ But when the volume appeared, nowhere within it was the article referred to.

Something had happened to the Wood contribution, and it was not available for the book. Where was the script written by the Auburn man?

It was decided to put the Wood article to better use! Whose decision this was cannot now be known, but the paper became the chief evidence used by the Honorable Seward in his appeal to Congress for pension relief for Harriet. It may have been planned originally that the record be contained in the Bradford biography, but it ended up as a document intended to be used as evidence in an appeal for Federal relief. From that time forward the record of Harriet's war services remained in Government hands in a House of Representatives file.²

Charles P. Wood, a banker, had been prominent in war work in Auburn during the Rebellion. He had aided in the recruiting of soldiers for the service, and in the disbursement of war fiancés locally. In one instance, when the first local company was recruited the soldiers received very poor uniforms, and Mr. Wood was at the head of a committee which corrected this situation. He also led in the work of providing relief to local families who had been burdened by loss of kin in the war. Thus his interest in Harriet was in line with his general service, and doubtless his personal knowledge and admiration of her impelled him to special effort.

Mr. Wood conferred with Harriet when he wrote his account. He worked hastily and he glossed over many important points. In the main he was interested in establishing the authenticity of her labors with various officers in the Department of the South.

If the banker, Mr. Seward, or anyone else counted upon convincing Congress that Harriet was entitled to a pension, theirs was a short-lived hope. Even the illustrious Mr. Seward, offering the Wood report through the Gettysburg general, Clinton MacDougall, then Congressman, was unable to win the relief. It was Reconstruction, when thousands of bills went before Congress. There was a mad rush; there was debate upon fundamental questions like Negro rights, woman's rights. State's rights, pensions for white men. What chance did a black woman, even the famous Harriet Tubman, in a wordy rush like that?

The years passed. Repeated attempts to secure an allowance failed. The Southern Congressmen, sitting with the Northerners on the pension committees, regarded as quixotic the war claims of a black woman. But Harriet never ceased working toward a pension. In 1874, in 1876, there were new attempts. Always the Charles P. Wood evidence; and now, petitions crowded with the illustrious names of abolitionists—Garrison, Seward, Osbourne, Cheney, Choate—went to Congress, and as quickly were repudiated.

1 Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, p. 47

2 Pension Certificate No. 415, 288, filed under the name of Nelson Davis, the husband of Harriet.

In 1887 Harriet appealed to New England friends to aid her in getting the pittance that would help her so much. She was old now and she looked far older. Even yet she was active, talking on the same platform with Susan B. Anthony, lending her name and influence to questions of Negro advancement. Still the old fighter lived on, kept her eye on public matters, and “went to all important meetings.” Seward died. Frederick Douglass, Gerrit Smith and Wendell Phillips passed away. Old Harriet lived on, chronically ill, but finding streaks of energy in which she rushed off to Boston and visited Frank Sanborn and Colonel Thomas W. Higginson, who was still dominating the latest flourishes of New England culture.

It was as late as December 1897 when the movement to take care of Harriet caught fire with enough vigor to succeed. Sereno Payne was Auburn's Congressman, and although he had presented the Wood script and the usual petitions to Congress in vain ten years before, he was willing to try again. It took a year for the bill to pass, for the President to sign a measure granting Harriet twenty dollars a month for the remainder of her life. To the very end the Southern Congressmen opposed relief for Harriet, and they whittled five dollars off a twenty-five dollar request.

The Wood document had finally done its deed. The Senate Report on Harriet's bill, basing itself upon the claims set forth by the banker, admitted that she "was sent to the front by Governor Andrew and acted as a nurse, cook in hospital and spy during nearly the whole period of the war...This woman has a double claim on the Government. She went into the field and hospitals and cared for the sick and wounded. She saved lives. In her old age and poverty a pension of \$25 is none too much."³ *General Tubman* had been recognized officially, but late.

Naturally, when Mr. Wood wrote of Harriet's war work he could not refer to her ante-bellum labors as a slave-abductress, nor as a conspirator with John Brown, she having been "the woman" in that historic matter. His record was confined to only one phase of her long and varied career, and even here it was documentary rather than biographical. He made only a casual mention of the Combahee River engagement, the war contribution for which Harriet was most famous. In this affair Harriet piloted Colonel James Montgomery and a company of Negro soldiers up the Combahee River, in South Carolina, lifted torpedoes, struck fear into the heart of rebeldom by various terrorist acts, and captured eight hundred "contraband," or slaves all without the loss of a single Union Soldier. It was Harriet who "led the raid and under whose inspiration it was originated and conducted," according to the *Boston Commonwealth*.⁴ This is the only military engagement ever led by an American woman.

Mr. Wood mentioned Harriet's command over several scouts and pilots without indicating what this meant. It signified actually that she was in charge of the intelligence service of the Department of the South.

In spite of these and other short comings the Wood manuscript is a weighty thing, and if this was the only evidence of Harriet Tubman's energies it would still be the record—a Government record—of an outstanding woman.

3 Report No. 1619, Harriet Tubman Davis, 55th Congress, Third Session.
4 The Boston Commonwealth, July 10, 1863, p. 1.

THE CHARLES P. WOOD

MANUSCRIPT

Harriet Tubman was sent to Hilton Head—she says—in May 1862, at the suggestion of Gov. Andrew, with the idea that she would be a valuable person to operate within the enemies' lines—in procuring information & scouts. She was forwarded by Col. Frank Howe—the Mass. State agent in New York, by the Gov't transport Atlantic—was sent up to Beaufort, attached to the HQrs of Gen'l Stevens—and rendered much, and very valuable service acting as a spy within the enemies lines—and obtaining the services of the most valued Scouts and Pilots in the Gov't employ in that Department.

Among the original papers in Harriet's possession—is a list of the names of the Scouts and Pilots "Issac Hayward, "Gabriel Cahern, "Geo Chisholm", "Peter Burns", "Mott Blake", "Sandy Sellus", "Solomon Gregory". Pilots who know the channels of the River in this vicinity, and who acted as such for Col. Montgomery up the Combahee River: "Chas Simmons" "Saml Hayward"

Endorsed

R. Saxton, Brig. Gen'l"

Unconscious of the great value of the official documents she had from the several officers at different times, Harriet has lost some of them—and the first documentary proof we have of her service in the Department of the south is a pass issued by Gen'l Hunter—a copy of which is hereto appended:

FROM GENERAL HUNTER

Headq'rs Dept't of the South, Hilton Head, Port Royal, S.C.

Feb. 19, 1863

Pass the bearer, Harriet Tubman, to Beaufort, and back to this place, and wherever she wishes to go, and give her passage at all times on all Government transports. Harriet was sent to me from Boston, by Gov. Andrew, of Mass., and is a valuable woman. She has permission, as a warrant of the Government, to purchase such provisions from the commissary as she may need.

D. HUNTER"

Maj. Gen. Com'g.

H.Q. Dep't of the South

July 1, 1863.

Continued in force.

Q.A.GILLMORE,

Brig. Gen'l Com'g.

On July 6, 1863 Col. Montgomery wrote as follows.

"HdQrs Col. Brigade

St. Helena Island

July 6, 1863

"Brig Genl Gillmore

Com'd'g Dept of the South

General:

I wish to commend to your attention Mrs. Harriet Tubman, a most remarkable woman, and valuable as a scout. I have been acquainted with her character and actions for several years. Walter D. Plowden is a man of tried courage and can be made highly useful.

I am General

Your most abt servt”

Signed “James Montgomery

“Col Com’d’g Beaufort

On the back is endorsed

I approve of Col. Montgomery’s estimate of the value of Harriet Tubman’s service.”

Signed R. Saxton

Brig Genl.”

From the annexed of an original paper in Harriet’s possession we find that she was still rendering valuable services at Beaufort, where she remained until the month of January or Feb’y 1865.

FROM SURGEON DURRANT

I certify that I have been acquainted with Harriet Tubman for nearly two years, and my position as Medical officer in charge of “contrabands” in this town, and in hospitals, has given me frequent and ample opportunity to observe her general deportment, particularly her kindness and attention to the sick and suffering of her own race.

I take much pleasure in testifying hereby to the esteem in which she is generally held.

HENRY R. DURRANT,

ACT. Ass’t Surgeon U.S.A.

In charge “Contraband” Hosp’l

Dated at Beaufort, S.C.

This 3d day of May, 1864.

I concur fully in the above.

R. SAXTON, Brig. Gen.

When she came North on leave of absence to see her aged parents residing in this City—she was taken sick and so failed to return to New York City within the time specified in her leave, and for that reason was refused return transportation to Hilton Head. To remedy this difficulty she went to Washington and on representing her case at the War Dep’t she was promptly furnished with the following:

“Pass Mrs. Harriet Tubman (colored) to Hilton Head and Charleston, S.C. with free transportation on a Gov’t transport.

By order of Sec't War
Signed Louise H. Pelonge
Asst. Agt. Gen'l
To Bvt. Brig. General Van Viet, U.S.Q.M., N.Y.”

Dated Washington, March 20, 1865.

Returning with the intention of embarking at New York—she was intercepted in Philadelphia by some members of the Sanitary Commission who persuaded her to go instead to the James River Hospitals—where there was pressing need of such service as she could give in the Gov't Hospitals. And relinquishing her plan of returning to the Dept. of the South—without a thought as to the unfortunate pecuniary result of this irregular proceeding she went to the Hospitals of the James River, and at Fortress Monroe or Hampton—where she remained until July 1865. In that month she went to Washington again to advise the Gov't of some dreadful abuses existing in one or more of the Hospitals there. And so great was the confidence of some officers of the Gov't in her that Surgeon Gen'l Barnes directed that she be appointed “Nurse or Matron” as appears by the following copy of an original paper in her possession.

“I have the honor to inform you that the Medical Director Dept. of Virginia, has been instructed to appoint Harriet Tubman Nurse or Matron at the Colored Hospital, Fort Monroe, Va.

Very Resp'y
Signed Your obt. Servant
V.K. Barnes
Surgeon General”

To Hon. W.H. Seward

Sec. Of State
Washington

and with the following pass she returned to Fortress Monroe:

“No. 663 War Department
Washington, D.C.

July 22, 1865

Permit Harriet Tubman to proceed to Fortress Monroe, Va. On Government transport free of cost.

By order of the Secretary of War
Signed L.H. Pelonge
Asst. Adj. Gen.”

It does not appear that she rec'd the appointment above indicated and soon after this date she returned to Washington—and thence home—to devote herself since the country's need had ceased to her aged Father & Mother who still survive at a very advanced age entirely dependent on her.

During the service of more than three years. Harriet states that she received from the Gov't only two hundred dollars (\$200) of pay. This was paid her at or near Beaufort, and with characteristics indifference to self—she immediately devoted that sum to the erection of a wash-house, in which she spent a portion of her time in teaching the freed women to do washing—to aid in supporting themselves instead of depending wholly on Gov't aid. During her absence with an important expedition in Florida this washhouse was destroyed or appropriated by a Reg't of troops fresh from the north to make shelter for themselves but without any compensation whatever to Harriet. When she first went to Beaufort she was allowed to draw rations as an officer or soldier, but the freed people becoming jealous of this privilege accorded her—she voluntarily relinquished this right and thereafter supplied her personal wants by selling pies and root beer—which she made during the evenings and nights—when not engaged in important service for the Gov't.

The value and extent of Harriet's services to the Government seems to be sufficiently attested by the papers—copies of which are herewith, and originals now in her possession. But General Saxton certifies more explicitly under later date as follows:

“Dear Madam:

I have just rec'd your letter in regard to Harriet Tubman. I can bear witness to the value of her services rendered in the Union Army during the late war in South Carolina and Florida. She was employed in the Hospitals and as a spy. She made many a raid inside the enemy's lines displaying remarkable courage, zeal and fidelity.

She was employed by Gen'l Hunter and I think by Generals Stevens and Sherman — and is as deserving of a pension from the Government for her services as any other of its faithful servants.

Very truly yours,
Signed Rufus Saxton
Bvt. Brig. General

To Mrs. Mary Derby
Auburn, N.Y.

When in Washington in July 1865 Harriet was in need of money, and applied to Mr. Sec. Seward to present her claim to the proper Department. General Hunter being then in Washington, Mr. Seward referred the matter to him in a note, of which the annexed is a copy:

“Letter from Sec'y Seward

Washington, July 25, 1865

Major Gen'l Hunter—My Dear Sir:

Harriet Tubman, a colored woman, has been nursing our soldiers during nearly all the war. She believes she has claims for faithful services to the command in South Carolina, with which you are connected, and she thinks that you would be disposed to see her claim justly settled.

I have known her long as a noble, high spirit. as true as seldom dwells in the human form. I commend her therefore to your kind attention.

Faithfully your friend,
WM. H. Seward

Major Gen. Hunter

But no pay whatever was obtained---and another attempt has been made since—I believe with the same result.

This letter of Mr. Seward shows the estimate of Harriet Tubman by all who know her—she is known throughout this State and New England as an honest, earnest and most self-sacrificing woman. The substance of this statement has been obtained from her lips and in making it up I have before me the original papers in her possession which are copied.

That Harriet is entitled to several thousands of dollars pay—there can be no shadow of doubt—the only difficulty seems to be in the facts that she held no commission, and had not in the regular way and at the proper times and places, made proof and application of and for, her just compensation. On such certificates as she holds she should have it without further delay.

Charles P. Wood
Auburn, June 1st 1868

The letters of General Hunter, Secretary Seward and Surgeon Durrant were printed and attached to the Wood manuscript. Apparently the banker had clipped these letters from some newspaper account or other published record of Harriet's war work, and affixed them to his article. Attached to his manuscript were copies of the Seward, Hunter, Montgomery, Durrant and Barnes letters mentioned in his account. There was also a fragment of the original General Saxton letters, the latter half of his certificate, including his signature.

From Mr. P.M. Hamer, Chief of the Division of Reference of the National Archives it has been learned that "There are records which substantiate the fact that passes were issued permitting her to go to Hilton Head and Fortress Monroe, and the letter book of the Surgeon General contains the letter dated July 14, 1865, from that office to Secretary of State Seward, which was also signed by the latter. In addition, we have located the letter written by the Surgeon General to Surgeon J. Simons, Medical Director, Department of Virginia, containing the instructions mentioned in his letter to Seward of July 14, 1865..." 5

This again verifies Harriet's two stages of service, her period in South Carolina, and her later work in the hospitals of the Washington region. Only the Seward original to Major General Hunter and the Colonel Montgomery original to Brigadier General Gilmore have not yet come to light.

On January 1st, 1898, Harriet appeared before an Auburn notary public. Mr. Orin McCarty, and made out an affidavit concerning the truth of the Charles P. Wood document. She said: "I am **about 75 years of age**. I was born and reared in Dorchester County, Md. My maiden name was Araminta Ross. Sometimes prior to the late War of the Rebellion I married John Tubman who died in the State of Maryland on the 30th day of September, 1867. I married Nelson Davis, a soldier of the late war, on the 18th day of March, 1869, at Auburn, N.Y.

"I furnished the original papers in my claim to one Charles P. Wood, then of Auburn, N.Y., who died several years ago. Said Wood made copies of said original papers which are herewith annexed. I was informed by said Wood that he sent said original papers to one to one James Barrett, an attorney on 4 1/2 Street, Washington, D.C., and I was told by the wife of said Barrett that she handed the original papers to the Hon. C.D. MacDougall, then a member of the House of Representatives.

"My claim against the U.S. is for three years' service as nurse and cook in hospitals, and as commander of several men (eight or nine) as scouts during the late War of the Rebellion, under directions and orders of Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War, and of several Generals.

"I claim for my services above named the sum of eighteen hundred dollars. The annexed copies have recently been read over to me and are true to the best of my knowledge, information and belief."

It took more than a generation after Harriet fought on the battlefields of the deep South for the Government to recognize the fact. It has taken another long, long generation for that act of recognition to receive its full hearing. All of which would verify the words of Harriet's great Negro comrade, the fighter and philosopher, Frederick Douglass, who said, "Whatever else in this world may be partial, unjust and uncertain, time is impartial, just and certain in its action."

5. Correspondence with the author on August 16, 1939