

# Harriet Tubman was a Union spy, freeing slaves during the Combahee River raid in South Carolina

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Under the cover of night on June 1, 1863, Harriet Tubman led Union troops from the Sea Islands up the black waters of South Carolina's Combahee River, with a plan to destroy bridges, raid Confederate outposts and rice plantations, cutting off supply lines to Confederate troops.

While working as a spy for the Union Army, Tubman had slipped behind Confederate lines, gathering intelligence from enslaved Black people to obtain the coordinates of torpedoes planted along the river by Confederates.

That night, with Tubman leading the expedition, the Union gunboats quietly maneuvered, deftly avoiding each torpedo. The boats — the John Adams and the Harriet A. Weed — held Black soldiers as they moved up the Combahee, overrunning Confederate sentinels in a devastating raid. As the gunboats set anchor, Confederate guards fled. Union soldiers burned bridges, tore up railroads, set blaze to Confederate mansions and rice plantations.

When the Union gunboats turned back down river, hundreds of enslaved Black people fled rice plantations, running as fast as they could for freedom.

“Some had bags on their backs with pigs in them; some had chickens tied by the legs, and so children squalling, chickens squawking and pigs squealing,” Tubman said later. “They all come running to the gunboats through the rice fields. They reminded me of the children of Israel coming out of Egypt.”

With the raid's success, the Union was able to establish a blockade on the river and welcome at least 100 freed Black men to its ranks. And Tubman would go down in history as the first woman to successfully plan and lead a military expedition during the Civil War.

Now, more than 150 years later, Tubman has been inducted into the Military Intelligence Corps Hall of Fame.

Most Americans know Harriet Tubman as the fearless woman who escaped slavery and then helped lead 300 other enslaved people to freedom as part of the Underground Railroad. Last month, the Biden administration announced that it will resume the effort to put Tubman on the \$20 bill as a tribute to her role as an abolitionist. But Tubman wasn't only a hero of the Underground Railroad.

“What most Americans don't know is down in South Carolina, she was part of a small scouting unit that collected intelligence behind enemy lines on the Confederacy,” said Christopher Costa, executive director of the International Spy Museum in Washington. “She was not only involved with spying and scouting, she almost operated like a Special Operations specialist. It is an extraordinary story.”

Tubman was born enslaved around 1821 or 1822 on a farm owned by Anthony Thompson on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in Dorchester County. She was the fifth of nine children. Her parents — Benjamin and Harriet Green Ross — named her Araminta Ross. They called her

“Minty.”

When she was 12 or 13, she was sent to a general store in Bucktown. Inside, a White overseer threw a two-pound lead weight, aiming at a young Black boy attempting to run away. The lead weight missed the boy but hit Minty in the forehead, nearly killing her. She would have seizures — “sleeping spells” — for the rest of her life.

In 1844, Minty married John Tubman, a free Black man. She changed her first name to Harriet — her mother’s name — and took her husband’s last name, Tubman. In 1849, worried that she and others might be sold, Tubman plotted her freedom. Unable to persuade her husband to leave with her, she escaped and made her way to freedom in Philadelphia.

Despite risks of capture and death, Tubman returned to Maryland, often in disguise as a man or elderly woman, sometimes on foot, or by boat, horse or train. Tubman freed more than 70 Black people in Maryland, including her parents. She was so stealthy that enslavers in Maryland put a \$40,000 bounty out for her capture. But she was never caught, later declaring: “I was the conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can’t say — I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger.”

After the Civil War erupted, Tubman traveled to South Carolina, where she worked as a nurse for wounded Black Union soldiers.

“After her almost superhuman efforts in making her own escape from slavery, and then returning to the South nineteen times, and bringing away with her over three hundred fugitives, she was sent by Governor Andrew of Massachusetts to the South at the beginning of the War, to act as spy and scout for our armies, and to be employed as hospital nurse when needed,” according to “The Moses of Her People,” a biography of Tubman, written by Sarah Bradford.

In South Carolina, Tubman was recruited by Union Major General David Hunter to become a spy and scout behind Confederate territory lines.

Tubman would “become a kind of guerrilla operative. The Union Army had barely begun admitting Black men, much less Black women, but Harriet would not be deterred,” according to the National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum. “She explained her sense of urgency by citing the Book of Exodus: ‘The good Lord has come down to deliver my people, and I must go and help Him.’ ”

She could not read, but she memorized information on the lay of the land and the movement of Confederate soldiers.

General Hunter asked Tubman to accompany several “gun-boats up the Combahee River,” Bradford wrote, “the object of the expedition being to take up the torpedoes placed by the rebels in the river, to destroy railroads and bridges, and to cut off supplies from the rebel

troops.”

Tubman said she would go on the expedition only “if Colonel Montgomery was to be appointed commander of the expedition,” Bradford wrote. “Colonel Montgomery was one of John Brown’s men, and was well known to Harriet.”

“She worked with Col. James Montgomery and he was a believer in guerrilla warfare,” Costa said. “It was a mix of espionage, scouting and reconnaissance . . . This was a five-foot woman, but she was tough as nails. Not only were they collecting intelligence, but they raided the Confederacy. They swarmed from the rivers and raided and torched homes and warehouses that were Confederate supply depots.”

The sight of the gunboats had an electrifying effect on the enslaved, who chased after them.

“One woman brought two pigs, a white one and a black one,” Tubman recounted later. “We took them all on board; named the white pig Beauregard, and the black pig Jeff Davis. Sometimes the women would come with twins hanging around their necks; pearls like I never see so many twins in my life — bags on their shoulders, baskets on their heads and young one tagging behind.”

Bradford wrote that the gunboats became so crowded, “the oarsmen would beat them on their hands, but they would not let go; they were afraid the gunboats would go off and leave them, and all wanted to make sure of these arks of refuge. At length colonel Montgomery shouted from the upper deck, above the clamor of appealing ones, ‘Moses, you’ll have to give em a song.’ Then Harriet lifted up her voice and sang.”

This night raid destroyed Confederate control of the Combahee River along with millions of dollars of Confederate property.

Reporting on the raid to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, according to Tubman’s hall of fame biography, a Union general said, “This is the only military command in American history wherein a woman, black or white, led the raid, and under whose inspiration it was originated and conducted.”

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