

Harriet Tubman: Navigator  
by Vicki S. Davey, M.Ed.

Even growing up as a slave, Harriet Tubman was able to enjoy a few privileges. One of these privileges was that she was able to hunt and fish with her father on the land surrounding the plantation where she lived and worked. During this “quality time” when she was out of the direct reach of her harsh Overseers, Harriet often pretended she was a free person.

Harriet became adept at catching food enough for her parents and all eleven children in her family. Food was necessary, but Harriet went out most often with her father because she especially loved being in the outdoors. As well as being able to sneak up on her prey, Harriet’s father also taught her all about the rivers and how to catch fish while standing amongst them, and how to retrieve muskrats from their traps. Harriet learned the woods surrounding her home very well, and her father taught her how to use the constellations of the night sky as her guide (the most important being the North Star) so well that Harriet never got lost.

Once Harriet had become involved with helping slaves escape via the Underground Railroad, she depended on those early life-lessons from her father. Because of safety Harriet preferred to travel by night, and the North Star became her guiding light so she could be on the move while her pursuers slept. While on the run with her “passengers”, Harriet used the North Star to guide her away from slavery and on to freedom in the North. You may be wondering what would happen on cloudy nights when the North Star wasn’t visible. Well, Harriet’s father taught her that moss grows on the northern side of tree trunks, so on those pitch black nights Harriet would find her way north by feeling her way from tree to tree -- feeling for the mossy side of the trunk to navigate the way to freedom for her precious cargo. Harriet's cargo was those travelers on the Underground Railroad, and Harriet was known and proud to say that she never once lost a passenger.

Harriet Tubman was also a navigator for the Union army, which earned her the nickname of General. Watch for that information in an upcoming story about Harriet.