AWESOME stories

FAMOUS CONDUCTORS

0. FAMOUS CONDUCTORS - Story Preface

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Harriet Tubman, c 1885. The photo, by H. Seymour Squyer, is unusual in that the left side of Ms. Tubman's face is not hidden by a shadow and reveals the injury she suffered when she was young. The original is maintained by the National Portrait Gallery. Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Harriet Tubman, a runaway slave from Maryland who became known as the "Moses" of her people, helped slaves attain freedom in Canada and the northern states. As a young woman, she had experienced the cruelty and inhumanity of slavery firsthand when she refused to help an overseer whip another young slave who had gone to the store without permission.

When the offending slave tried to run away from his punishment, the overseer threw a heavy iron weight at him. It hit Tubman (known then by her birth name “Araminta Ross”), nearly crushing her skull, leaving a deep scar, and causing seizures which she endured for the rest of her life.

Knowing the risk of helping runaways was high, Tubman - it is said - would not allow people to change their minds once she agreed to help. If slaves tried to turn back, she reportedly pointed a gun at them and said:

> *You’ll be free or die a slave.*

Although there were rewards for her capture, she followed her conscience as she did what she could to help slaves escape from states like Maryland and Delaware. It is said she once observed:

> *On my Underground Railroad I* [never] *run my train off* [the] *track* [and] *I never* [lost] *a passenger.*

With the assistance of her friends, William and Frances Seward, she bought a home in Auburn, New York. (At the time, Seward was Senator of New York; later, as Lincoln’s Secretary of State, he was stabbed on the night Lincoln was assassinated).

Harriet lived a long life and, when she died in 1913, was buried with military honors at Ft. Hill Cemetery.

History records others who helped slaves make their way on the Underground Railroad:

- William Still, a free-born African American who has been called “Father of the Underground Railroad,” recorded many first-person accounts of people who escaped from the south. His entire book - more than 800 pages - is available for on-line reading.

- William Jackson and his family, pictured here in 1846, were abolitionists who lived in Newton, Massachusetts. Their home was a station on the underground. Today that house is a museum.

- John Fairfield, son of a slave-holding family, reportedly undertook many daring rescues and devised inventive ways to keep escaping slaves safe.

- Levi Coffin, who reportedly helped many slaves, wrote Reminiscences about his efforts and those of his wife, Catharine Coffin. Some scholars believe his claims of assistance were greatly exaggerated.

Many others assisted slaves who wished to break free from the bondage of American slavery. Much of their work was done in secret; consequently, myths and legends layer actual stories about the Underground Railroad.

Through it all, however, one fact remains unmistakably clear: The yearning to be free is a human response so powerful that people will often risk everything to attain it.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/FAMOUS-CONDUCTORS-Underground-Railroad

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/FAMOUS-CONDUCTORS-Underground-Railroad

Media Stream



Harriet Tubman
Image online, courtesy the U.S. Library of Congress and the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
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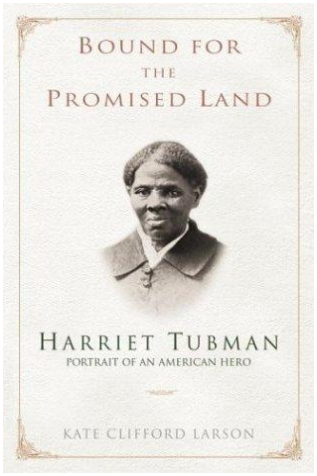

Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman - by Kate C. Larson
This image depicts the book cover of a work by Kate Clifford Larson entitled *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero*.

Ballantine, the publisher of this 2004 work, provides a summary of it:
Harriet Tubman is one of the giants of American history—a fearless visionary who led scores of her fellow slaves to freedom and battled courageously behind enemy lines during the Civil War. And yet in the nine decades since her death, next to nothing has been written about this extraordinary woman aside from juvenile biographies. The truth about Harriet Tubman has become lost inside a legend woven of racial and gender stereotypes. Now at last, in this long-overdue biography, historian Kate Clifford Larson gives Harriet Tubman the powerful, intimate, meticulously detailed life she deserves.

Drawing from a trove of new documents and sources as well extensive genealogical research, Larson reveals Tubman as a complex woman— brilliant, shrewd, deeply religious, and passionate in her pursuit of freedom. The descendant of the vibrant, matrilineal Asanti people of the West African Gold Coast, Tubman was born into slavery on the Eastern Shore of Maryland but refused to spend her life in bondage. While still a young woman she embarked on a perilous journey of self-liberation—and then, having won her own freedom, she returned again and again to liberate family and friends, tapping into the Underground Railroad.

Yet despite her success, her celebrity, her close ties with Northern politicians and abolitionists, Tubman suffered crushing physical pain and emotional setbacks. Stripping away myths and misconceptions, Larson presents stunning new details about Tubman's accomplishments, personal life, and influence, including her relationship with Frederick Douglass, her involvement with John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, and revelations about a young woman who may have been Tubman's daughter. Here too are Tubman's twilight years after the war, when she worked for women's rights and in support of her fellow blacks, and when racist politicians and suffragists marginalized her contribution.

Harriet Tubman, her life and her work, remain an inspiration to all who value freedom. Now, thanks to Larson's breathtaking biography, we can finally appreciate Tubman as a complete human being—an American hero, yes, but also a woman who loved, suffered, and sacrificed. Bound for the Promised Land is a magnificent work of biography, history, and truth telling.
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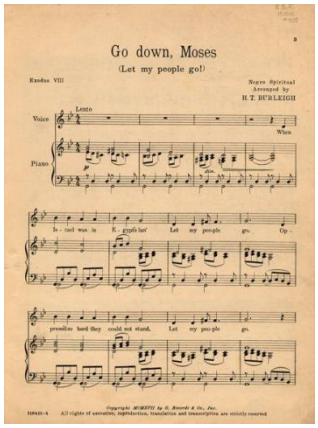

Go Down, Moses

Image of sheet music online, courtesy Library of Congress.
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Harriet Tubman - Deep Scar

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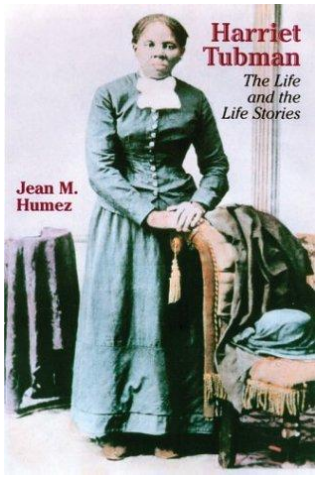

Harriet Tubman: The Life and The Life Stories - by Jean M. Humez

Book-cover image, online via Amazon.
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William Seward

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Frances Seward

Frances Adeline Miller Seward, the wife of President Lincoln's Secretary of State, William Seward, was respected in her own right.



Among other things, she was an abolitionist and a friend of Harriet Tubman. Seward and her husband helped Tubman to buy a home in Auburn, New York.

This portrait of Frances Seward, by Henry Inman, depicts how she appeared in 1844.

On the night of April 14, 1865, Seward's husband, two sons (Frederick and Augustus) and daughter (Fanny) were injured during an assassination attempt by Lewis Powell (a/k/a Lewis Paine or Payne).

A friend and co-conspirator of John Wilkes Booth, assassin of President Lincoln, Powell (Payne) was arrested, tried, convicted and executed for his crimes.

Although her family members survived the attack, Frances thought that her son Frederick would die. Greatly in fear for her family, thereafter, Frances herself died of a heart attack on 21 June 1865, two months after the attempted murders.

Click on the image for a better view.
Image of Frances Seward online via the Seward House Museum.
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Harriet Tubman - Photo

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.
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Harriet Tubman - Grave Site

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William Still - Photo

Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.
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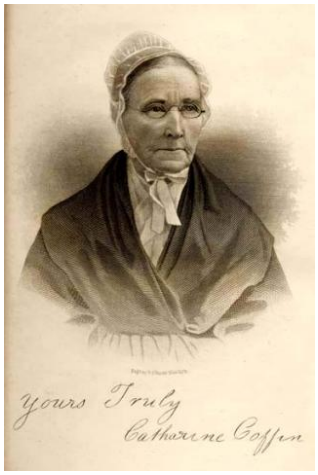

Catharine Coffin

Image online, courtesy Documenting the American South, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
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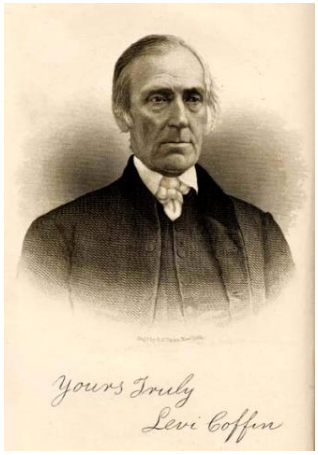

Levi Coffin

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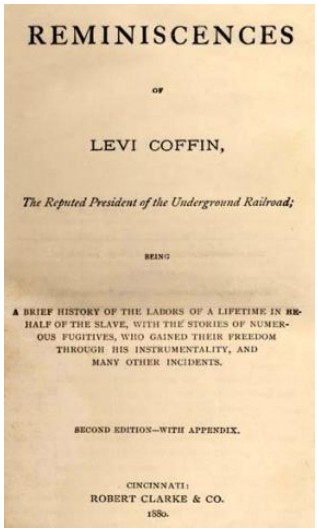
REMINISCENCES

OF

LEVI COFFIN,

The Reputed President of the Underground Railroad;

BEING

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LABORS OF A LIFETIME IN BEHALF OF THE SLAVE, WITH THE STORIES OF NUMEROUS FUGITIVES, WHO GAINED THEIR FREEDOM THROUGH HIS INSTRUMENTALITY, AND MANY OTHER INCIDENTS.

SECOND EDITION—WITH APPENDIX.

CINCINNATI:
ROBERT CLARKE & CO.
1880.

Reminiscences of Levi Coffin

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William Jackson - Family Photo

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