



1816 Farmington Quaker Meetinghouse

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH: HARRIET TUBMAN IN ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

*A History Spotlight article by Judith Wellman
1816 Farmington Quaker Meetinghouse Museum
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Harriet Tubman
Earliest known photograph, c. 1868
National Portrait Gallery

As we commemorate Women's History Month each year, we view with admiration a large gallery of nationally important women with roots in upstate New York. Among them was Harriet Tubman, whose home in Auburn still stands, maintained by the African American Episcopal Zion Church, to whom she gave her property, with Thompson AME Zion Church, which Tubman attended, as part of Harriet Tubman National Historical Park.

Although we have no evidence that Tubman ever came to the 1816 Meetinghouse, she was strongly associated with Quakers. She may have first come to Auburn as part of an Underground Railroad network dominated by Blacks and Quakers. It stretched from William Still's office in Philadelphia and went all the way to Canada through Auburn, New York, where Lucretia Mott's sister Martha Coffin Wright lived. The earliest known photograph of Harriet Tubman was discovered in 2019 in a scrapbook kept by Quaker Emily Howland in Sherwood, New York. Howland was herself an abolitionist, and she knew Tubman well. (For more on the discovery of this portrait, see Allison Keyes, "A Previously Unknown Portrait of a Young Harriet Tubman Goes on View," *Smithsonian*, March 26, 2019 (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/previously-unknown-portrait-abolitionist-harriet-tubman-young-woman-goes-view-180971796/>)).

Tubman also came often to the Rochester area. Kate Clifford Larson, author of *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero*, documented several cases of Tubman's connection with Rochester. The earliest seems to have been in December 1851, when Tubman helped eleven people escape from slavery in Dorchester County, Maryland. They took a route that became very familiar, from Philadelphia to New York City, then north to Albany and west to Rochester, where they stayed with Frederick Douglass. This seems to have been the same group that Douglass described in his 1881 autobiography *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*:

On one occasion I had eleven fugitives at the same time under my roof, and it was necessary for them to remain with me until I could collect sufficient money to get them on to Canada. It was the largest number I ever had at any one time, and I had some difficulty in providing so many with food and shelter, but, as may well be imagined, they were not very fastidious in either direction, and were well content with very plain food, and a strip of carpet on the floor for a bed, or a place on the straw in the barn-loft.

Douglass and Tubman had both grown up enslaved in nearby counties on the eastern shore of Maryland, but neither suggested that they knew each other before they began work on the Underground Railroad. But, as Tubman described in 1897 to historian Wilbur Siebert, "the fugitive slave, Frederick Douglass, would see that she got on the train [in Rochester] for the Suspension Bridge and St. Catharine's in Canada."

Tubman also received regular help from the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society, which collected money, food, and clothing to send to freedom seekers in Canada. In 1857, Tubman brought her parents Ben and Rit Ross, in 1857 to stay with Maria G. Porter. The Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery society reported that year that Tubman had already rescued "about fifty persons." That same year, Tubman spent a few days after Christmas with the Douglass family.

In 1869, Douglass wrote a letter of support for the publication of Tubman's life story, as told to Sarah Bradford. "You ask for what you do not need when you call upon me for a word of commendation," he began.

I need such words from you far more than you can need them from me, especially where your superior labors and devotion to the cause of the lately enslaved of our land are known as I know them. The difference between us is very marked. Most that I have done and suffered in the service of our cause has been in public, and I have received much encouragement at every step of the way. You on the other hand have labored in a private

way. I have wrought in the day--you in the night. I have had the applause of the crowd and the satisfaction that comes of being approved by the multitude, while the most that you have done has been witnessed by a few trembling, scarred, and foot-sore bondmen and women, whom you have led out of the house of bondage, and whose heartfelt "God bless you" has been your only reward. The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism. Excepting John Brown --of sacred memory--I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you have. Much that you have done would seem improbable to those who do not know you as I know you. It is to me a great pleasure and a great privilege to bear testimony to your character and your works, and to say to those to whom you may come, that I regard you in every way truthful and trustworthy.

In 1896, Susan B. Anthony led Tubman to the podium at a meeting of NYS Woman Suffrage Association in Rochester. Modestly dressed in "her cheap black gown and coat, and big black straw bonnet without adornment," with "a face black, and old and wrinkled," Tubman nevertheless impressed her audience with "an honesty and true benevolence of purpose which commanded respect." It was likely at this convention that Tubman uttered the words so often quoted: "I was the conductor on 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." In the fall of 1905, Tubman spoke once more at a woman suffrage convention in Rochester, sleeping in the train station the night before.

In this Women's History Month, we join people in New York State and across the country to honor Harriet Tubman for her unselfishness, courage, and caring, and modesty, marks of a true leader.

See: Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (NY: Ballantine Books, 2003), 92-94, 144, 154, 287-88; Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, N. Y.: W. J. Moses, 1869), 7-8; Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times*, rev. (Boston, 1892), 329; *Democrat and Chronicle*, November 19, 1896.