

Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Monument Scholars' Roundtable Report

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Introduction

There are few figures in the history of American slavery who loom larger in the popular imagination than Harriet Tubman. She is one of the first enslaved people who school children learn about in elementary school; she is a staple of African-American history month observances in the years that follow; and many Americans carry these earliest impressions of Tubman with them well into adulthood. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Tubman has offered a wide swath of the American public their first and most enduring introduction to the history of slavery.

Visitors will therefore know something about Tubman before they arrive at the site, which strikes me as both an opportunity and a challenge for the planning of the national monument. It is an opportunity for obvious reasons: few will need to be convinced of the importance of Tubman and her work with the Underground Railroad (UGRR). But, as evidenced by the appearance of serious, scholarly research into Tubman's life only in the last decade, much of their preconceived knowledge about her will consist of little more than a vague, superficial impressions. They will likely know about Tubman as someone who triumphed over slavery, as someone whose actions took on heroic proportions, as someone larger than life. They will likely know her as someone *exceptional*, as someone different from the vast majority of enslaved people. But they may know little about the complexity of her own life, and certainly, about the lives of the rest of the enslaved population.

Tubman was indeed heroic and she was exceptional. The challenge, then, is not to puncture holes in this particular image, but instead, as I will emphasize in this report, to use Tubman's very exceptional story to widen a visitor's lens on the slave past. In addition to leaving visitors with a deepened understanding of Tubman herself, the site can, and should, seek out as many opportunities as possible to present the broader history of the lives and experiences of the approximately 3.9 million men, women, and children who were enslaved during Tubman's life. Tubman was one of those exceptions, I believe, who can prove the rules. So I would urge the site to embrace Tubman's exceptionalism not as the end point of interpretation but as the means toward presenting more universal themes in the history of American slavery.

Theme I: The Entangled History of Slavery and Freedom

One of the overarching themes that emerges from Harriet Tubman's story is the intertwined history of slavery and freedom. I would encourage the interpretation at the Tubman site to foreground this theme. It is a common assumption, among both scholarly and popular audiences, that "slavery" and "freedom" were two distinct states, and that the history of the United States is marked by gradual replacement of the former with the latter. This sort of linear storytelling is reassuring—it is a story of progress, after all—but it fails to grapple with the more complicated reality of American history: that slavery and freedom were not mutually exclusive states and instead existed in close, paradoxical relationship with one another.

Freedom—the principle and condition likely seen as distinctly “American” by many visitors—was built at the nation’s founding on the foundation laid by slavery. Historian Edmund Morgan argued in his highly influential *American Slavery, American Freedom*, a study of colonial and Revolutionary Virginia, that “republican freedom came to be supported, at least in large part, by its opposite, slavery,” and that “the freedom of the free, the growth of freedom experienced in the American Revolution, depended more than we like to admit on the enslavement of more than 20 percent of us at that time.” His 1975 classic, still in print and assigned in classrooms across the country, sketched out what has become accepted conventional wisdom: that the emergence of “freedom” as an American principle coincided in time with the growth an expansion of slavery, and rather than view these trends as coincidental, Morgan argued for their interdependency. Slavery enabled the nation’s founders to define what American freedom would mean: it would be slavery’s foil, and, with people of African descent safely confined to enslavement, freedom could be openly enjoyed and embraced by white people.¹

Morgan’s take on the relationship between slavery and freedom undoubtedly reflects the pessimism of the post-Vietnam period in which he wrote. Yet at its root is an important theme that runs clearly through Harriet Tubman’s life. She may not have lived at the time of the founding, nor does her story tell us anything more about the founding fathers’ conceptions of freedom, but it does tell us how people of African descent lived and navigated these interdependent spheres of slavery and freedom. She shows, as was true in so many peoples’ lives, that the story of African-American history, like the story of American history writ large, is not a linear story of the progression from slavery to freedom. It is the story, instead, of forward movements accompanied by backward steps, of living as a slave in a world of freedom, and of navigating the many twists and turns along the road to freedom.

Tubman’s residence in Maryland is relevant and important here. Slavery in Maryland may seem like one of the “exceptional” aspects of Tubman’s life: this was a border state and not a cotton plantation region of the deep South, a fact that might lead some visitors to assume that slavery there was somehow less harsh in Dorchester and Carolina counties. Maryland was a middle ground of sorts, residing in the “middle” between the far North and the deep South, and it featured a significant population of African Americans who had already achieved legal freedom. Yet, as the preeminent historian of Maryland slavery, Barbara Fields, has argued convincingly in *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground*, Maryland slavery, while geographically closer to freedom, was in fact no less insidious than the slavery of the deep South:

“During the antebellum years black people in Maryland—slave and free—experienced the agony of slavery’s slow death, but not the deliverance. The middle ground imparted an extra measure of bitterness to enslavement, set close boundaries on the liberty of the ostensibly free, and played havoc with the bonds of love, friendship, and family among slaves and between them and free black people.”

¹ Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975; 2003), p. x.

What Edmund Morgan argued about slavery and freedom in the abstract is what Barbara Fields demonstrates very concretely in Maryland. “It is probably true that, until emancipation, slavery in some sense defined freedom all over the United States,” Fields concluded, “But in Maryland the intermingling of the two was so immediate and concrete as to give a unique flavor to slavery, [and] to freedom.”² In Tubman’s Maryland experience, then, is a unique form—or “unique flavor”—of something very universal and meaningful for American slavery as a whole, with devastating, rather than ameliorating, consequences for those enslaved.

This entanglement of slavery and freedom is evident in many specific ways in Tubman’s life. Her family: Harriet herself, while a slave, was married to a free man and had a father who had himself achieved freedom. Her labor: in various settings where she was hired out, such as in the multiple businesses belonging to John Stewart, enslaved and free worked side-by-side. Her religious life: enslaved and free worshipped side by side in churches and camp meetings along the Eastern Shore. Her neighborhood and community: slave and free were not segregated but instead lived together, sometimes in the same households. This was, as Fields suggests, not a condition of stability but one of insecurity and uncertainty for enslaved and free alike.

This is especially true with regard to another aspect of Tubman’s life in Maryland, and here I want to make a special plea for it. I’m talking about the interstate slave trade. Just as the UGRR helped drain some of Maryland’s enslaved population to freedom in the North, the slave trade simultaneously drained other members of that population to the deep South. There were, in fact, two migrations in Maryland—one to freedom, and the other deeper into slavery—and although Tubman only experienced the former, the latter *was* a part of her life and a part of the insecurity that surrounded her life. Tubman made the decision to seek freedom in the North in order to avoid the rumored threat being sold South; two of her own sisters were, in fact, sold through the slave trade. The enslaved did not view these two migrations as separate or distinct, but instead, as concrete manifestations of the way that slavery and freedom coexisted uneasily in their lives. This made their lives precarious: one could anticipate freedom via the underground railroad one day; and on the next be forced on a boat to a Mississippi cotton plantation.

That sense of insecurity—of all the uncertainties generated by the porous boundary between slavery and freedom—is important to stress, as it is one of the universal themes of enslavement even if it took unique forms in Maryland.

Theme II: Freedom-seeking (Or “Paths Toward Freedom and Resistance”)

The entanglement of slavery and freedom is also evident in Harriet Tubman’s work on the underground railroad. Her pursuit of freedom cannot be easily extracted from—or explained—without understanding her past experience of slavery. And, in this regard, Tubman’s life amplifies a theme that has been running through the historical scholarship as of late: that it is crucial to look back at slavery to understand how African Americans prioritized, pursued, and

² Barbara Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. x, 24

strategized their pursuit of freedom—and how they defined freedom in the first place. (Especially useful in presenting this view are Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; Susan E. O’ Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South*; Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*; and Eric Foner, *Forever Free*.)

In Tubman’s case, the social ties built in slavery among kin and others with whom she worked figured centrally into her ability to organize her escapes. These ties may have helped nurture her desire for freedom, to be sure, but they also offered the social infrastructure necessary for sharing the information and assistance that would be crucial to her UGRR work. Tubman’s labor as a slave, especially her hired-out labor for other men in Dorchester County, was essential too, as it gave her a degree of mobility in the area that, in turn, provided her with the geographical knowledge to plan her flight to freedom. Tubman did not exactly make a clean break from one condition (slavery) to another (freedom) but instead carried the skills and relationships acquired in the former with her into the latter. There were many ways that Tubman could have pursued freedom, but slavery, and her particular experience of it, helps explain at least some of the choices she made.

To understand this even more deeply, one must turn to gender and consider Tubman’s experience as a *female* slave. (This aspect of Tubman’s life is easy to take for granted, and perhaps for that reason, our scholars’ roundtable did not spend much time talking about her as a woman.) But, of course, the enslaved were not without gender and gender was meaningful in defining the boundaries of slavery, and thus, the promise of freedom. Gendered assumptions shaped masters’ decisions about labor practices, assigning men to more physically demanding work and women to domestic work, and it also, profoundly, affected the way that the enslaved organized their own lives in families. (See more on Family in Theme III)

Scholars have for quite some time connected this gendered nature of slavery with the gendered nature of freedom-seeking. There is an assumption in the secondary literature, for example, that running away was a masculine enterprise. There’s good reason for this: studies of runaways have found that men significantly outnumbered women as runaways. This is then explained by the particular experience of men and women in slavery. While slavery was, at its foundation, a system of confinement, scholars like Stephanie Camp, in *Closer to Freedom*, argue that women tended to be *more* confined to the farm or plantation, as they were generally not assigned the work tasks that involved travel from property to property, as men were; they were not hired out as often to other plantations as men; and they faced unique demands of pregnancy and childbirth that kept women closer to the slave quarters. Women were thus more confined and less mobile than men (whose confinement Camp has dubbed “elastic”), and for that reason, did not tend to acquire the social and geographical knowledge necessary to plot an escape from slavery.³

Clearly this line of interpretation does not fit Tubman’s life. She did get hired out, she did have opportunities to acquire geographical knowledge in Dorchester County, and, as a result, she was

³ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 28-33.

less “confined” and more mobile, and therefore highly successful in running away. She experienced the degree of mobility that scholars normally associated with enslaved men, not women. I don’t intend to argue here that her experience should be equated with that of men, or that she should be viewed as more of a “man,” or less as a “woman,” which John Brown was more inclined to do.⁴ Instead, I believe gender offers one of those opportunities to explore Tubman’s exceptionalism and use it to explore the more universal experience of enslaved women. By pointing out what made Tubman’s experience different—by acknowledging how her life contrasted with women throughout the plantation South—one can simultaneously explain what made Tubman different while imparting an understanding of what so many other enslaved women experienced. In other words, explaining Tubman’s exception can go a long way toward presenting the “rules” of gender in southern slavery.

Yet there is something about Tubman’s experience as a woman that was more typical of enslaved women too: her effort to liberate her *body*. Enslaved women, as historian Marie Jenkins Schwartz, for example, has argued in *Birthing a Slave*, often struggled to resist slavery by asserting their control over their bodies. Their bodies were dually exploited by enslavement: they were not just expected to produce harvests in the fields, as men were, but also to produce children (i.e. future generations of slaves). So, then, a single act of hiding a pregnancy, or avoiding pregnancy altogether could be in itself, Schwartz argues, an act of resistance against the master’s control over their bodies. So too could dancing in the slave quarters mark a form of liberating one’s body from the master’s control, argues Stephanie Camp in *Closer to Freedom*, as it turned their bodies into sites of pleasure and not just control. And there are other ways one can see this pattern. Tubman’s life may not have been marked by these particular forms of bodily resistance, but one could easily see her form of resistance—running away—as the ultimate act of asserting control over one’s body. She got her body out of slavery. Thus, in this sense, Tubman’s life highlights a more universal, and central, theme in the history of women in slavery.⁵

All of this emphasis on how the particularities of slavery affected the course of freedom-seeking is important for another reason too: it highlights the *struggle* to achieve freedom as much as the *achievement* of freedom. It reminds us – and can remind visitors – of the enormous obstacles that surrounded the enslaved at all times. This is something that scholars are currently placing more emphasis on in their works: after a generation of studies highlighting slave resistance and agency, some scholars have questioned whether the experience of the enslaved has become romanticized in our historical literature, with the enslaved too often depicted as more powerful than they really were. Walter Johnson, in a widely cited article entitled, “On Agency,” articulates this most succinctly while calling on historians to remember the overarching power structure—the oppression—in which the

⁴ Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Random House, 2004), pp. 157-158.

⁵ Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 3, chapter 4, 5; Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), chapter 3.

enslaved operated.⁶ Along these lines, it strikes me that the Harriet Tubman site, too, should guard against leaving visitors with any impression that Tubman was so exceptional that her freedom was inevitable, or that she was so skilled and so strong and so intelligent that achieving freedom was somehow natural and preordained. She was all those things, yes, but seeking freedom was still a struggle for her too, and close attention to the connections between her enslavement and her pursuit of freedom can make this clear.

Theme III: Family and Community (Or, “Building Communities”)

As noted above, family (and kinship) is a crucially important theme to emphasize, given how centrally it figured in both Tubman’s life and the lives of all the enslaved. Yet, as decades of scholarship have demonstrated, a number of overly-simplistic images of the African-American family in slavery persist: some want to see the existence of idealized nuclear families in the lives of the enslaved, while others swing in the other direction and emphasize, as abolitionists did in the 19th century, the way in which slavery’s near-destruction of family life was the institution’s most insidious form of oppression.

It’s time to get past these two poles of thought, in part because that’s what the current scholarly literature is doing. More recently historians have argued that families existed in slavery but in multiple forms that reflected a great deal of adaptation undertaken in order to survive slavery. The slave family was important and strong—but it did not necessarily conform to the cozy image of a nuclear family gathered around a hearth. I would urge the Tubman site to follow in that spirit, and to go beyond describing the existence of the family to emphasize its specific meaning and function too:

First, the meaning of family in Tubman’s life: clearly her family was an emotional institution but it was also a political one too. As Steven Hahn as persuasively argued in *A Nation Under Our Feet*, the very existence of family was, in itself, a political assertion, since by nature slavery (and masters) exerted control by undermining any kind of solidarities formed among the enslaved. “Consequently,” Hahn writes, “the slaves’ struggle to form relations among themselves and to give those relations customary standing in the eyes of masters and slaves alike was both the most basic and the most profound of political acts in which they engaged.”⁷ The existence of family thus undermined the basic logic of slavery; it also sustained a set of loyalties among the enslaved that competed with their supposed loyalty to their masters. The family thus undermined slavery by its very existence but also by its composition: in Tubman’s life, for example, family and kinship ties offered a network of assistance that enabled her resistance but also defined its scope and parameters (by determining how many times she would return to Maryland, for example).

Second, I would encourage the site’s interpretation to view her family from multiple angles. There is what I would call the “vertical” view of her family, or the focus on the intergenerational relationships between Tubman, her husband, and her parents. This earned a great deal of

⁶ Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37 (Fall 2003): 113-124.

⁷ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 17

discussion in our roundtable and deserves attention in the site interpretation. But that is not the only view of her family. There is also what I could call the “horizontal” angle on her family life that was equally significant in explaining her pursuit of freedom. That is, the way in which her family members fanned out across space, extending north from Maryland to New York to Canada. This aspect of her family is important but also offers the opportunity to explore a more universal theme in the larger history of enslaved family life. Enslaved people did find their family members scattered across the nation, in large part because of the slave trade and its sale of family members throughout slaveholding regions, but also because of the UGRR. Freedom for many of them, then, would necessitate the reunion of family members scattered across space, a process that proved difficult and time-consuming but always central to the pursuit of freedom. That work to reunite family scattered across space is detailed in Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery*. And although Tubman’s experience may have been unique in details, certainly the general coupling of freedom-seeking with family reunion is similar, and thus, here is another opportunity for her story to tell a much larger story of all enslaved people.

Theme IV: Communication Networks, Sharing Information (Or, “Sharing Knowledge”)

There is a great deal of interest in Harriet Tubman’s illiteracy, and in the role that it did or did not play in her acquisition of information along the underground railroad. I believe this subject was very sensitively discussed at the scholars’ roundtable and will leave it at that (although I am sympathetic with the belief that literacy was important, even to Tubman, since someone like her could still benefit indirectly from the literacy of others).

What I do want to emphasize is the need to take a more expansive view of how Tubman acquired information and built the communication networks necessary for her work on the UGRR. This view involves thinking about Tubman’s relationship to the landscape around her, and thus, I think, is in line with the National Park Service’s commitment to place-based interpretation.

Recently several scholars of slavery have begun exploring the relationship of the enslaved to the landscape and have written compellingly about the “rival geography,” “alternative geography,” or the “off the grid landscape” created by the enslaved.⁸ As Stephanie Camp explains in *Closer to Freedom*, there was the master’s geography, with its neatly drawn boundaries around plantations, its buildings and fields clearly demarcated and organized in rows, and the effort of masters to fix enslaved people in particular places by age, gender, and work. Yet the enslaved devised, Camp argues, “alternative ways of knowing and using plantation and southern space that conflicted with planters’ ideals and demands.” Their geography was less a “settled spatial formation” than one characterized by motion, and by “the movement of bodies, objects, and information within and around plantation space.” Sometimes this involved movement into surrounding woods and swamps beyond the surveillance of masters, and as a result, the turning of these areas into spaces for both recreation as well as “alternative communication” among

⁸ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, p. 7; Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 229-230

the enslaved.⁹

Walter Johnson, in his recent *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton South*, goes even further to describe how the enslaved gathered and transmitted knowledge in these alternative geographies. And he raises some important points—and points very relevant to Tubman—about the use of the senses. “If the geography of slaveholding power was characterized by its visuality,” Johnson writes, with masters and overseers preoccupied with controlling the enslaved by watching their every move, “that of resistance and escape was characterized by aurality—by the precedence of the ear over the eye.” The enslaved listened as they eavesdropped on slaveholders to learn about an upcoming sale on the slave trade, for example, or they listened from the woods surrounding a plantation for the sound of patrols on horseback. Their alternative geography allowed the enslaved to go “off the grid, in the woods and swamps where they were no longer so easily fixed in a slaveholders’ gaze, where they could lay up and listen as slaveholders came after them, where they could plot their pursuers’ course in advancing sounds.” Sound, in fact, could be as useful as, or even more useful than, sight in collecting information and communicating it across space.¹⁰

This entire notion of a “rival geography” empowering senses beyond sight (and thus, skills beyond literacy) raises some interesting questions about Harriet Tubman’s story. How did her interaction with the landscape of Dorchester and Caroline counties empower her sense of sound, or perhaps smell, or even touch—in addition to sight? Or how did her work to get beyond the visual power of her master compromise a crucial part of her resistance? Thinking about the senses in these more expansive ways is important, I believe, for moving beyond the more narrow question of literacy and conveying instead the wide-ranging and multifaceted ways in which Tubman gathered and transmitted information along the UGRR.

Other Themes and Research Questions

Religion

As I am not an expert on the religion of the enslaved, and since there are other scholars involved in this project who can provide that expertise, I am going to skip this subject and defer to them.

The Civil War

There is a good opportunity here to explore what connections existed between the antebellum work of the UGRR and the Civil War-era flight of nearly half a million enslaved people across the wartime South. These connections are not well known or understood in the scholarly literature, so they will require some research and investigation. But to explore them, I think, will not only help connect Tubman to the larger story of slavery’s collapse in the Civil War – but can also help connect this site thematically to the National Park Service’s Civil War sites.

It is difficult to estimate how many enslaved people ran away from slavery in Maryland and into Union lines during the Civil War, although there is plenty of evidence in military records that this

⁹ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, p. 7

¹⁰ Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, pp. 232-234.

began happening as early as the first month of the war. Union General Benjamin Butler, who later famously began accepting runaway slaves into Union lines at Fort Monroe, routinely turned back slaves to their masters in Maryland, where he was stationed in the war's first month. Then, by November 1861, military records report that at least 100 enslaved people had taken refuge in Union lines at Point Lookout, Maryland, on the tip of the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay. Point Lookout, in fact, would become a "contraband camp" and records of the New York Yearly Meeting of Friends indicate that northern missionaries arrived there to assist the newly freed slaves. These are just fragments of evidence suggesting that slave flight was significant in Maryland during the Civil War. But where did those running away come from? The Eastern Shore? Can some of this slave flight be seen as extension of what Harriet Tubman had accomplished before the war? Perhaps some of the flight benefitted from the social networks—and communication networks—forged before the war? Is it possible to say that Harriet Tubman helped create an infrastructure of slave flight that then enabled the wartime slave flight that is largely credited with bringing about emancipation?

These have to remain questions for now. Deeper research into wartime slave flight in Maryland, though, might uncover such connections. Some of the sources I would suggest beginning with are:

The Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland – This longstanding documentary editing project has collected a great deal of material in the National Archives' military records related to Maryland. One should start by looking at the published volumes under the title, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*, but it would also be helpful to contact the FSSP staff (especially Leslie Rowland) for their assistance. They have files on-site at the University of Maryland and welcome researchers to review them.

Barbara Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground*, chapter 5

Third Report of a Committee of the Representatives of the New York Yearly Meeting of Friends Upon the Condition and Wants of Colored Refugees (1864) – describes runaways at Point Lookout; should be available via interlibrary loan.

Maryland newspapers from the Civil War – The University of Maryland, College Park, has an excellent collection, and newspapers across the nation often covered the comings and goings of the enslaved population during the war.

Annotated Bibliography:
Works Discussed in this Report

Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) – An excellent study of the difference that gender made in slave resistance, focusing on women and their everyday forms of resistance on southern plantations. Camp relies on James Scott's notion of the "hidden transcript" of resistance, a concept discussed at length in the scholars' roundtable. If that concept continues to be of use to the National Park Service in its interpretation, then Camp's book might be helpful in seeing the way it has been applied to slave women's experiences.

Barbara Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) – A classic, and the place to start when examining the history of slavery and freedom in Maryland in the 19th century. Includes important data that could be of use to the NPS.

Eric Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York: Vintage, 2006) – A sweeping overview of the collapse of slavery in the United States. To some degree it is an abridgement of Foner's classic, *Reconstruction*, and is written for a popular audience. It is highly successful in synthesizing this large and complicated history, and for the purposes of this essay, it offers a clear case for examining the interconnection of slavery and freedom (stated explicitly on p. xxx).

Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge University Press, 2008) – A study of the relations between white and black women on plantations that begins with the period of slavery and extends into the post-emancipation period. Most relevant here for what it has to say about enslaved women's pursuit of freedom (and Glymph is one of the leaders on this subject today).

Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) – A Pulitzer-prizewinning study of black politics across the nineteenth century that elaborates on the general theme of slavery and freedom's relationship. The book is built on the assumption that African Americans constructed the foundation for their politics during slavery, with the institutions like the family, and therefore their pursuit of freedom was always conditioned by their enslavement.

Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013) – A study of the Mississippi Valley that pays more direct attention to the landscape and the environmental history of slavery than most books published before it. Especially useful for thinking about the "alternate geography" created by the enslaved, as well as the sensory experience of the enslaved.

Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37 (Fall 2003): 113-124. – An important article problematizing the historian's interest in "giving slaves back their agency" and arguing

that the oppressive power structure surrounding the lives of the enslaved cannot be forgotten.

Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Random House, 2004). The go-to biography on Harriet Tubman's life. Need I say more?

Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975; 2003) – Classic study of the early history of slavery in Virginia that makes the most bold and profound argument about the entanglement of slavery and freedom.

Susan E. O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) – Although set in Georgia, this book offers another example of how historians have profitably connected the history of slavery and freedom (or, in this case, have examined how the experience of slavery conditioned the specific ways the enslaved pursued freedom).

Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) – A good example of a work that focuses on the body in the lives of enslaved women, and in particular, the position of the body as a site of a master's control—and of a slave's liberation. Helpful in thinking about the particular experience of enslaved *women*.

Heather Williams, *Help Me Find My People: The African American Search For Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012) – The only book out there that focuses specifically ex-slaves' efforts to reunite their families in freedom. Although it deals primarily with the post-Civil War period, it would be useful for exploring some of the thematic similarities with Tubman's efforts to reunite her family in freedom.