

Harriet Tubman's Amazing Grace

A hymnal owned by the brave leader of the Underground Railroad brings new insights into the life of the American heroine

By Owen Edwards

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An 8- by 5-inch 19th-century hymnal, bound in faded paperboard and cloth, bears its owner's name handwritten on the inside cover. The well-worn book of hymns belonged to one of American history's most legendary heroines: Harriet Tubman.

Historian Charles Blockson recently donated the hymnal—along with other Tubman memorabilia—to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. It represents, says NMAAHC director Lonnie Bunch, an opportunity “to renew our awareness of Harriet Tubman as a human—to make her less of a myth and more of a girl and a woman with astonishing determination.”

Historians continue to investigate the inscription on the inside cover—“Harriet Tubman Davis Book.” (Tubman married Nelson Davis, a Civil War veteran, in 1869.) Denied education as a slave, Tubman, according to historical evidence, never learned to read or write. “We have more study to do,” says Bunch.

Born in 1822 in Maryland, Tubman suffered a serious head injury as a girl, when an overseer hurled a scale counterweight at another slave, hitting Tubman. The injury caused lifelong seizures and hallucinations that the young woman would interpret as religious visions.

In 1849, she fled Maryland to Philadelphia. Soon after, Tubman began her exploits—acts of bravery that would make her a legend. She returned secretly to Maryland to begin escorting other slaves to freedom. She often traveled at night to avoid capture by reward-seeking trackers. During the course of 13 such missions, she led nearly 70 slaves out of bondage. Even after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 required free states to return runaway slaves, Tubman continued to guide her charges along the Underground Railroad north to Canada, earning the nom de guerre “Moses.” She would later recall with pride that she “never lost a passenger.”

“She believed in freedom when she shouldn't have had a chance to believe in freedom,” says Bunch. Just as important, he adds, was that her increasingly famous acts of daring “belied the Southern contention that slaves actually liked their lives.”

During the Civil War, Tubman served with the Union Army as a rifle-toting scout and spy. In June 1863, she helped lead a gunboat raid on plantations along the Combahee River near Beaufort, South Carolina, an action that freed more than 700 slaves. As Union gunboats took on those who fled, Tubman calmed fears with a familiar abolitionist anthem:

*Of all the whole creation in the east
or in the west
The glorious Yankee nation is the
greatest and the best
Come along! Come along!
don't be alarmed.*