

Harriet Tubman's Unifying Effects on Abolitionism and Feminism

Zoe Bertsch

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Within the explosion of social reform that came with the Second Great Awakening, two of the most controversial and talked-about civil rights movements in modern American history began to make a name for themselves. These consisted of the fight against slavery; the abolitionist movement, which later morphed into the black civil rights movement, as well as the fight for women's civil rights; the feminist movement. In their beginnings, they went mostly unnoticed¹. Leading up to the Civil War, however, the entire country's social, moral, and political beliefs came into question. This meant the popularization, but also the resistance to, abolitionism and feminism. Abolitionism was hated by the South, as it openly disagreed with their entire economic and societal structures, in addition to the North, where moral values were prioritized under financial profit. Sexism was literally ingrained in the American economy, society, and government by this point in time, so resistance was prevalent, but fluctuating, throughout the whole country². Nevertheless, both movements powered on in any way they could. Unfortunately, with the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment after the Civil War, these two radical groups who truly had similar goals of equality, began to maliciously drift apart. The white women of status who had fronted the feminist cause began to resent African Americans for receiving male suffrage before white women did. This shift broke the two apart indefinitely, and in no way helped either cause. However, before the catastrophic separation, there was one historical icon who bridged the gap between feminists and abolitionists. Harriet Tubman, the spy,

¹Delbanco, Andrew, John Stauffer, Manisha Sinha, Darryl Pinckney, and Wilfred M. McClay. *The Abolitionist Imagination*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbv9c>

² Bertsch, Zoe. "Feminism and Female Combat in the American Revolution". Portland High School History Department. January 10th, 2019. Accessed May 23rd, 2019. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1UnNOGgDKBeASdGCqMl4z5Qk-zBVC6Vbtwtlym8Ua6LQ/edit>

scout, nurse, progressive abolitionist, and powerful women's rights activist perhaps was the individual needed to bring these movements together again. Despite the hostility, ignorance, and contempt of the era, Harriet Tubman affected the two movements equally within American economics, politics, and society. Remembering her legacy and her fight for total equality is vital to our understanding of history because it shows that in unity, there is strength.

HARRIET TUBMAN'S MILITARY ACTIVITY

My first area of research was the military career of Harriet Tubman. Although my research is not meant to be revisionary in any way, I will be focusing on this rather than her work in the Underground Railroad. I believe that in order to truly understand how a historical minority figure affected their future, we need to look past the top layer of factual information. (anyways) Perhaps overshadowed by her work in the Underground Railroad, in which she rescued over 300 enslaved African Americans from the South, Tubman's military work during the Civil War is nothing short of heroic³. In addition to working as a nurse, as many women did, Tubman also worked as a spy and scout.⁴ Her work as a nurse, although selfless and brave, sadly did not signify anything revolutionary for the feminist or abolitionist movements. This is because white women had been military nurses since the Revolution, and black women had been since the passing of the Second Confiscation and Militia Act of 1862.⁵ What was revolutionary, however,

³ Chism, Kahlil. "Harriet Tubman: Spy, Veteran, and Widow." *OAH Magazine of History* 19, no. 2 (2005): 47-51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163763>

⁴ "Photograph, Harriet Tubman, 1860s-1870s" National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed May 20, 2019. <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/recorded-rights/exhibit/section2/detail/harriet-tubman.html>

⁵ Photograph, 1.

was that Tubman was also employed in inherently masculine jobs such as a scout and spy, in a time where all women were destined to cook, clean, and serve men.⁶ Within Colonel Montgomery's 2nd Carolina Volunteers, Tubman used her knowledge of local geography to gather valuable information for the Union. She was also amazingly able to sneak behind Confederate lines, by using her race, sex, and five-foot-tall stature.⁷ During Montgomery's campaign through the Lowcountry of South Carolina, Tubman became the first woman in American history to lead a group of soldiers into battle. On the night of June 2nd, 1863, Tubman and her portion of volunteers managed to burn down some of the state's biggest plantations and liberate over 750 slaves.⁸

Tubman's Career and American Economics

Tubman's perseverance, bravery, and leadership broke down ignorant beliefs commonly held about her race and gender. In terms of American economics, she made huge strides for both of her demographics by working in positions that would have often been assigned to less qualified white male officials⁹. Instead of having her vast array of knowledge and skills go to waste as a nurse, Tubman made her abilities known. For not only a woman, but an African American woman, to use her voice and display her skills within an army of men was incredibly progressive. In addition to serving her country in a revolutionary way, Tubman again used her

⁶ Bertsch, 9.

⁷ Chism, 2.

⁸ Chism, 2.

⁹ Bertsch, 9.

bravery to apply for her own pension in 1898.¹⁰ In this time, pension request petitions were usually sent in to claim the pay of a fallen son, husband, father, or occasional white woman, such as Deborah Sampson or Margaret Corbin. With this context, Tubman's voice stuck out, not only as a woman, but a black woman¹¹. Within an economic system with inherently discriminatory beliefs, Tubman's service and received pension were equally amazing for feminism and abolitionism, showing that black and white women can do more than what the economy wants from them¹².

TUBMAN'S FIGHT FOR EQUALITY BEYOND THE BATTLEFIELD

My next area of research focuses primarily on how Tubman equally participated in and affected the two separate social reform movements, and how her presence bridged the gap between the two demographics. After eight years working on the Underground Railroad and making her way through the Civil War, Tubman focused her skills on the more passive, yet still pressing political fight at hand. Attending the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) convention in 1896, Tubman gained a reputation of being a profound story teller.¹³ She told the newly emerged group of black feminists tales from the war, using her legendary status to inspire the new generation. The group's overall goal was to unite a national black feminist movement, in order to

¹⁰ "Claim of Harriet Tubman." National Archives and Records Administration. February 1, 2017. Accessed May 19, 2019.
<https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/claim-of-harriet-tubman>

¹¹ United States Pension Agency. "Civil War Pension for Margaret D. Dillingham, March 9, 1872." Maine Memory Network. March 3, 1872. Accessed May 23, 2019.
<https://www.mainememory.net/artifact/19270>

¹² Bertsch, 1.

¹³ Hobson, Janell. "Harriet Tubman: A Legacy of Resistance." *Meridians* 12, no. 2 (2014)
www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/meridians.12.2.1

combat the recent 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling from months before.¹⁴ After attending the NACW convention in July of 1896, Tubman would go on to attend a women's suffrage meeting that November in upstate New York. At this particular event, one where Tubman would perform her usual speech, story, or religious motivation, she was honorably led on stage by feminist leader Susan B. Anthony.¹⁵ Because of her old age of approximately seventy-six, Tubman's work in these political movements at this point consisted of speeches and storytelling, as opposed to rallies or active protests¹⁶. Nevertheless, Tubman's presence at both of these conventions helped to expedite the political justice work in not only abolition and the black rights movement, but feminism and women's suffrage as well.

Tubman's Effects on Black and White Women's Movements

In her attendance to the NACW convention, Tubman motivated the younger generation of black feminists with her stories. With her heroic tales from the Underground Railroad and the war, Tubman was able to unite and inspire a considerably small movement for the time. Where the feminist movement was dominated by white women, and the abolitionist movement was fronted by both white and black men, the black feminist movement was among the minority of American social reform groups¹⁷. By fitting in to all three of these mostly demographic-based groups, Tubman was easily able to relate to the black feminist movement enough to unite them

¹⁴ Hobson, 4.

¹⁵ Hobson, 5.

¹⁶ Clinton, Catherine. "On the road to Harriet Tubman: she has become one of the most famous of all American women, but to the biographer she is a tantalizingly elusive quarry." *American Heritage*, June-July 2004, 44+. *US History Collection*. Accessed April 21, 2019. <https://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A118183552/PPUS?u=maine&sid=PPUS&xid=8be04364>

¹⁷ Deblanco, 104.

in their fight against the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling.¹⁸ In what may have seemed like any other women's suffrage meeting, Tubman's presence gave it new meaning. In what could have been a simple, polite, and honoring gesture from Susan B. Anthony, in which she assisted Tubman on stage to give her speech, may have accidentally reconnected the black rights and feminist movements. At the convention, the majority of attendees could have been white women, possibly those disgruntled over the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment. Even the African American women who attended may have been politically inexperienced in comparison, due to their very recent emancipation and debut to normal life. In a group of women, who, in reality, truly wanted similar things, but had grown apart because of misprojected frustration in American government, Tubman was able to bridge that gap with her storytelling by relating to both demographics.

In her paper outlining Tubman's connection to both social movements, Janell Hobson explains: (quote)

In crafting a narrative emphasizing her role as an Underground Railroad conductor, Tubman validated the struggle for women's rights. Moreover, Tubman's story reminded women that if *she*, a woman, could transgress the raced and gendered limitations that forbade women from navigating the world and freely crossing the borders between North and South, Canada and the United States—and to do so without a man's help—if *she*, a woman, could lead a successful battle during the Civil War, then surely women deserved the right to vote and the rights to full citizenship. Such a complex history seamlessly weaves women's rights and the rights of African Americans.¹⁹ (end quotes)

As described by a historical author, Tubman's simple act of existing with such a heroic backstory helped to bridge the gap between the once broken and segregated feminist movement. In her article, Hobson uniformly describes those inspired by Tubman as "women", as opposed to "white women" or "black women". Although her political actions were not active or of national

¹⁸ Hobson, 5.

¹⁹ Hobson, 5.

discussion, Tubman's work in politics equally benefited and inspired the black rights and feminist movements, unifying all women in rebellion.

TUBMAN AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

My final area of research focused on Tubman's social life, where instead of rebelling against laws or governmental restrictions, she really rebelled against all of American society. So instead of questioning concrete legislation, she questioned the personal bias of American people. Her work and career thus far had by all means affected America as a whole, but her presence as a black feminist legend helped societal and large-scale emotional changes push forward as well. In addition to changing the economic and political stages of America, she also changed the landscape of what it meant to be an abolitionist and a woman. In her career choice, family life, and presence as a role model, Tubman worked to change the ever-present stereotypes in American culture.

Tubman's Economic Impact on Society

In her work as an underground conductor and military spy in the Civil War era, Tubman had already made huge steps for women's progression. Although Tubman's effect on American economics has been stressed, her career in the context of American society is additionally important. At this point in American history, women were still strongly advised to drift towards careers in family, humanities, and simple medicine, rather than politics, science, business, etc. This social structure was mostly based on personal ideas and opinion, rather than strict and condescending laws, although there were a few.²⁰ For an African American woman to have

²⁰ Bertsch, 9.

recently escaped the torment of slavery, therefore breaking down a socioeconomic barrier for black women, but then continuing to rebel into careers given to those with a more masculine demeanor, (and I say demeanor in reference and in honor of Deborah Sampson) Tubman broke down American social beliefs for all women²¹. Tubman not only rebelled in the face of American government and law, but also in front of the racists and sexists plaguing American society with their biased ideas of what a woman can or cannot do. Even following her career's end, Tubman continued to impact society. Following the death of her husband in 1888, Tubman petitioned to claim her own pension for her own services a decade later in 1898.²² As there were no explicit laws forbidding a woman for applying for a pension, whoever's it may be, the impact of her actions leans more towards the social aspect, rather than legal. It was common practice for women to claim the pension of a deceased male family member²³, and in some rare occurrences, women had applied for their own pension for their own military service.²⁴ What made Tubman's petition so revolutionary was her race. The small number of women who had received military pensions in the past had been white; this including Deborah Sampson and Margaret Corbin.²⁵ In demanding her pay as a black women, from a government that recently left a war battled over race issues, Tubman achieved an obvious victory for her race. However, in gaining this

²¹ "Harriet Tubman, a new look." *Civil War Times*, June 2017, 8. *US History Collection*. Accessed April 21, 2019.
<https://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A490722317/PPUS?u=maine&sid=PPUS&xid=6e9de255>

²² Claim, 1.

²³ United, 1.

²⁴ Bertsch, 4.

²⁵ Bertsch, 4.

governmental victory for black women, Tubman advanced social standards for all women.²⁶ By showing that she, an escaped ex-slave in the Gilded Age, could file and receive her pension, she broke down social barriers of what women “should” have been in that time. Instead of being complacent and content with the discrimination around her, Tubman proved that women of the era did could in fact fight for what they wanted and deserved. Although at first glance it may not seem so, Tubman’s actions definitely advanced the rights of all women. Consequently, the black and female civil rights movements were influenced equally.

Tubman’s Life as a Woman and Role Model

Within her work at the NACW convention, Tubman’s story telling would build up her legendary reputation. She was such a loved heroic figure, that at later conventions, Tubman would be greeted with standing ovations, and even paid for her attendance.²⁷ For such a new, and slightly unstable social group to give Tubman such generous donations, shows her effect on those around her. Tubman’s influence and inspiration over this black feminist movement, something so crucial to America’s fight for total equality, shows that her actions and stories would spread through the country, inspiring a demographic who may have never felt inspired before. Tubman gave young and old black feminists alike something they had never had before in modern history-- a role model.²⁸ In addition, Tubman’s work in the abolitionist movement was just as progressive. Although it may seem standard for African Americans to be involved in their own civil rights movements, “abolitionists were generally thought of as white” up until the

²⁶ Hobson, 4.

²⁷ Hobson, 5.

²⁸ Harriet, 1.

1960s.²⁹ Even the African Americans who did participate in the abolitionist movement were in most cases men, as a political presence was not really something for a woman to have at the time.³⁰ In her work with the Underground Railroad and political abolitionist movement, Tubman challenged what the standard abolitionist could be. By changing one of the most influential civil rights movements in American history, Tubman consequently affected America as a whole. In what may be the least talked about aspect of her life, her home life, Tubman still continued to break down barriers as a woman in social politics. Being a married woman in the 19th century, Tubman was expected to have children. But instead of putting America's social ideals at her first priority, Tubman prioritized her career and never had children.³¹ Women of this time period were pushed by society to be family oriented, their only focus being on the children they have or could have in the future.³² By inspiring a greenhorn social group, challenging the very movement she fought for, and disproving stereotypes about women and family, Tubman made strides for all women, therefore affecting both of the movements in which she fought equally.

CONCLUSION

In analyzing her career and prestige, it can be said that Harriet Tubman affected the abolitionist and feminist movements equivalently in terms of American economics, politics, and society. By changing the most influential social movements of the era, Tubman transformed America as a

²⁹ Delbanco, 104.

³⁰ Bertsch, 1.

³¹ Bradford, Sarah Hopkins. "Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman". Echo Library, 2018. Accessed May 21st, 2019. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bradford/menu.html>, assisted and printed by William J. Moses

³² Bertsch, 5.

whole. Unfortunately, sources that retell her stories in the form of biography or article tend to focus on only half of Tubman's work. Instead of seeing her as both an abolitionist and feminist, historians depict her as just one or the other. This issue may stem from the authors themselves, as it is simply easier for a person to write about struggles that affect them personally. Essentially, white female historians focus on Tubman's work in the feminist movement because they cannot truly understand the struggles and historical complications a black historian may feel, and vice versa. Despite this ignorant, but hopefully benevolent bias, Tubman still made an impact unachieved by anyone else of the time period. Because her work transcended the contempt between the two social groups, its impact is infinitely heightened. Remembered through research, literature, education, and media, Tubman was an amazing progressor of minority rights, a diplomat within a broken social movement, and a perfect example of achieving strength in unity.³³

³³ Clinton, 4.

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