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Sent: 2/17/2004 9:24:42 AM
Subject: NYTimes.com Article: First Chapter:Harriet Tubman

This article from NYTimes.com
has been sent to you by truscottfrank@aol.com.

This sounds interesting and mentions Martha Jefferson and Sally Hemings, half sisters living together
as white and slave.

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First Chapter: Harriet Tubman

February 15, 2004
By CATHERINE CLINTON

AT THE TURN of the nineteenth century, the Eastern Shore of Maryland was in many ways a world apart - the rich, rolling fields semicircling Chesapeake Bay, abutting Delaware to the east and grazing Pennsylvania to the north. Fields dappled with sun and lush with grain were crisscrossed by dozens of waterways throughout the peninsula, joining rivers flowing from marshes out to the beckoning salt water. Waterfowl and wildlife were abundant, offering hunters as rich a harvest as that gathered by those who cultivated the land. The Eastern Shore was separated from its sister slave counties by the oyster beds that spread underneath the water to Maryland's other, western, shore, where the bustling ports of Annapolis and Baltimore dominated the regional economy.

Beaver traders originally populated the Eastern Shore, but by the 1660s the pelt trade was depleted and planters began to settle the region. Commercial rather than domestic agriculture flourished, as tobacco farms dominated at first. By the 1750s, fields of tobacco were replaced by fields of corn, as planters found it less labor intensive and more profitable to plant food for export to the West Indies. Philadelphia merchants moved south along Indian trails, scouting for grain, finding eager suppliers along the Choptank River.

In early America, the planters who settled the marshes of the Eastern Shore, the African Americans who struggled within the bonds of slavery there, and the clusters of emancipated blacks who formed pockets of liberty within the countryside created a complex tangle of competing agendas. Black and white, slave and free, acquisitive and hardscrabble crowded together within this narrow strip of Maryland.

This was the world into which Harriet Tubman was born and came of age, a time and place gnarled by slavery's

contradictions. She was born near Bucktown in Dorchester County, Maryland, to parents who named her Araminta and cared for her deeply. Yet because she was born a slave, the exact year of her birth remains unknown, unrecorded in an owner's ledger - lost even to the parents and child themselves.

Most accounts offer her birth year as 1820, 1822, or circa 1820, roughly two hundred years after the first boatload of Africans was sold off a Dutch slave ship in 1619 at Jamestown, Virginia. "Circa" affixed before a birth year is one of the most common legacies of slavery. "Like sources of the Nile," the antebellum black leader Samuel R. Ward confessed, "my ancestry, I am free to admit, is rather difficult of tracing." Harriet believed that she was born in 1825, and testified to this fact on more than one occasion.

When she died, her death certificate indicated her birth year was 1815. Her gravestone listed her year of birth at 1820. Whatever the year affixed, details of the earliest years of Araminta Ross are equally obscure. And so is her place of birth. Educated guesses place her mother at several different locations during the period 1815-1825, but the Brodess plantation near Bucktown, Maryland, is most likely her place of birth and is certainly where she spent her earliest years, with her mother. Family lore claimed she was one of eleven children, but no family Bible with names inscribed survived, and family records present conflicting accounts about the names and the number of Tubman's brothers and sisters.

There is no firm evidence of Araminta's place in the birth order. However, she later recalled that she was left in charge of both a baby and another younger brother while her mother went to cook up in "the Big House." Tubman also indicated that she had older siblings, so clearly she was born somewhere in the middle of a string of children, perhaps nearly a dozen. She might have arrived near the end, as her mother was in her forties when she was born.

Araminta was born to Harriet Green and Benjamin Ross, a slave couple who spent a good deal of their married life in close proximity to one another. They struggled, like most enslaved spouses, to create conditions that would allow them to live together, or at least near each other. They negotiated with their owners - and they had different owners throughout their time in slavery - to create a more stable family life.

With each new child, hope might spring anew for slave parents, and Tubman was no exception. She recalled that her cradle was carved from a gum tree - most likely by her father, who was a skilled woodsman. She remembered being the center of attention when young white women from the Big

House visited the slave cabins. They playfully tossed her in the air when she was just a toddler. These two hazy memories - the cradle and being tossed in the air - are Tubman's only recorded recollections from her youngest years.

Harriet confessed that during her youth she was described as being "one of those Ashantis." While she may have had ancestors from Ghana who were of Asante lineage, there is no evidence for this. Perhaps it was the Asante proverbs that Harriet picked up as a young girl ("Don't test the depth of a river with both feet") that led her to these claims. All her grandparents might have been African born, but we know the origins of only one.

Tubman's mother's mother arrived on a slave ship from Africa, was bought by an Eastern Shore family named Pattison, and was given the name Modesty. She gave birth to a daughter named Harriet, who was called Rit (by her family) and Rittia (in Pattison records) sometime before 1790. In one biographical article published the year before Tubman died, the author alleged that her mother, Rit, was the daughter of a "white man," but there is no mention of this in any other records or in family lore. In 1791 Harriet Green was listed as property in the will of Atthow Pattison: "I give and bequeath to my granddaughter Mary Pattison, one Negro girl named Rittia and her increase until she and they arrive to forty-five years of age." This language was standard in nineteenth-century wills and indicated that Rittia was to be given her freedom at forty-five, as would any of her issue born while she was a slave.

If Harriet Green had been the daughter of a white man - even of Pattison himself - this would explain why she was given this special dispensation. It was not an uncommon practice among Chesapeake planters to make a provision for the emancipation of illegitimate, mixed-race offspring. Mary Pattison inherited Rittia in 1797 and three years later she married planter Joseph Brodess. It was also not uncommon for the father of an illegitimate, mixed-race daughter to "give" the slave daughter to his legitimate white daughter - much as Sally Hemings was brought to the Thomas Jefferson household by his new wife, Martha, as part of her dowry. Half sisters commonly lived under the same roof as mistress and slave.

Whatever their relationship, Rit accompanied her mistress to a new household after Mary wed Joseph Brodess, on March 19, 1800. Brodess and his brothers inherited a 400-acre plot of land only six miles east of Chesapeake Bay, known as "Eccleston's Regulation Rectified." This land had come to their father to settle a debt in 1792. The nearest settlement was Bucktown.

countryside, opportunities for both emancipation and free blacks diminished. Whites assumed the innate inferiority of those with darker skin and imposed their prejudices through custom and law.

For example, Maryland slave law took a dramatic turn in 1712, when the colonial legislators adopted a new measure: the status of a child would follow the status of its mother, *partus sequitur ventrem*. This statute over-turned centuries of patriarchal tradition and law. This radical shift was in response to sex across the color line, most especially white males coupling with slave women.

As the number of persons of color with white ancestry began to grow, the exponential growth of a mixed-race population presented a threat to the white hierarchy. The 1712 law allowed white men to pursue their appetites and maintain the status quo, while white women were hemmed in by increasingly rigid prohibitions and restrictions on their behavior. A white man who fathered a slave child could mask his illicit sexual connection.

A white woman risked not just ostracism, but exile or worse if she was discovered in any sexual connection with a black. By law, any child born to her would be born free. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who was born in 1818 on a plantation on Maryland's Eastern Shore, near present-day Easton - less than thirty miles from Harriet Tubman's own place of birth - never knew the name of his father. Speculation points to a white slaveholder, perhaps his mother's master, but the details of his lineage remain unconfirmed.

By the close of the eighteenth century, the invention of the cotton gin (1793) fueled a stampede of slaveholders further south and west. Fortunes could be made planting cotton once an easier, inexpensive way of processing the crop was developed. Settlers began pouring into the new states of Kentucky and Tennessee, where Revolutionary War veterans cashed in on land grants. Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and eventually Louisiana lured thousands onto their rich soils with a promise of extravagant fortunes, all to be made in the wake of slavery's widening sphere.

By 1808 the external slave trade was prohibited due to constitutional mandate. After almost two hundred years of imports, cutting off the supply of slaves from Africa and the Caribbean had a profound impact on slavery in the United States - with especially drastic results for slaves in the upper South, where Tubman and her family lived.

The domestic slave trade became crucial to slaveholders eager to settle the southwestern frontier. Suddenly, enslaved African American women, already expected to perform harsh and exacting physical labor, became the sole

legal source of slave labor. Deep South politicians were in a frenzy to see their plantation economy thrive and to keep slavery booming. Cotton was not a cash crop in Maryland, but its plantations produced one of the most invaluable crops for the southern antebellum market: slaves. The children of slaves quickly became a vital commodity and source of income for cash-poor planters of the Chesapeake, and of increasing significance to the prosperity of the lower South.

When the international slave trade ended, the enslaved population in America was not quite 2 million. Less than fifty years later, with the outbreak of the Civil War, slaves in the American South numbered nearly 3.5 million. This was an astonishing growth rate, given the high mortality among slaves, especially infant mortality. Slave babies commonly succumbed to any number of childhood diseases that plagued all newborns in the South but that visited the slave cabins with depressing regularity. The mortality rate for black children in the Chesapeake during the first half of the nineteenth century was double that of white infants. While enslaved mothers were in the plantation fields picking throughout September and October, infant mortality spiked. Further, many slave mothers had to contend with their own ill health during the winter season, when congestive diseases might fell both mother and child. These illnesses proved more often fatal for infants and young children.

The southern climate also meant that blacks, and especially slave children, endured exposure to malaria, cholera, smallpox, and a range of fevers, including the deadly "yellow jacket" (yellow fever). In the antebellum South any outbreak or epidemic (with the exception of malaria) hit African Americans in much higher numbers than whites. Despite these health and medical statistics, the increase in the slave population was explosive. By comparison, while the black female birth rate skyrocketed during the half century leading up to the Civil War, the white female birth rate in the country was declining, and reduced by half by century's end. During this same period approximately 10 percent of adolescent slaves in the upper South were sold by owners; another 10 percent were sold off in their twenties.

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