

A HISTORIC HOME FOUND

The discovery of Harriet Tubman's long-lost homesite gives us clues about her life.



Watch a VIDEO Learn more about the Underground Railroad.

Archaeologist Julie Schablitsky was frustrated. She and her team had spent two weeks digging in Peter's Neck, Maryland, last November. They were searching for the site of a home where abolitionist Harriet Tubman once lived. Records showed they were in the right spot. But after digging more than 1,000 test pits, they were still empty-handed.

Schablitsky grabbed a metal detector and walked down an abandoned road. Suddenly, the machine beeped, letting her know she'd found something. As she dug the object out of the ground, Schablitsky couldn't believe it. It was a coin from 1808—the year that Harriet Tubman's parents were married.

That's when she knew she was on the path to uncovering an important piece of history.

Returning Home

Experts say the coin was found less than a mile from where the home of Harriet Tubman's father, Ben Ross, once stood. Growing up, Tubman didn't always live in the cabin. She wasn't always allowed to.

Like nearly 4 million other Black people in the U.S. at the time, Tubman's family was enslaved. They had no freedoms or rights. They were forced to do backbreaking work without pay. They were treated like property and could be bought and sold. Many enslaved families were separated.

For more than a decade, Tubman, her mother, and her

siblings were forced to live and work on their enslaver's farm. Her father lived in the cabin, 10 miles away. But the family remained close.

"Her parents played a huge role in her life, even though she couldn't always be with them," says historian and Tubman biographer Kate Clifford Larson.

WORDS TO KNOW

abolitionist *noun*. a person who fought to end slavery

artifacts *noun, plural*. objects made by people long ago

In 1836, Ross's enslaver died. He left the land where the cabin was located to Ross, who was freed four years later. Though still enslaved, Tubman lived in the cabin when she was a teenager, from about 1839 to 1844. Like other enslaved people, Tubman was determined to be free. Her time living in the cabin would help her achieve that goal.



Archaeologist Julie Schablitsky found this Lady Liberty 50-cent coin near the site of Harriet Tubman's former home.



Learning the Way

Ross was a skilled carpenter and lumberjack. In the marshy forests around his cabin, he taught Tubman how to find her way in the woods. He showed her where to find food, how to protect herself, and how to make medicine using plants.

"What she learned there made her the most successful Underground Railroad agent," Larson says.

The Underground Railroad wasn't a train. It was a secret network of people, routes,

and safe hiding places. It enabled thousands of enslaved people to escape to freedom. In 1849, Tubman escaped from slavery on the Underground Railroad.

Escape was risky. Those who were caught were punished or killed. Still, Tubman became a conductor on the Underground Railroad. She led dozens of other people, including some of her family, to freedom.

A Big Find

In March, Schablitsky's team returned to the site of Tubman's home and found more artifacts. They uncovered bricks, pottery,

glass, and buttons. The items date from the 1820s to the 1840s. The team is still digging, hoping to discover more clues.

Larson hopes these artifacts will teach us more about how Tubman's everyday life led her to the important work she did on the Underground Railroad.

"She's one of the greatest freedom fighters in our history," Larson says. "She reminds us that even the most ordinary person can do extraordinary things."

—by Alicia Green

MAP IT OUT

In 1860, some states allowed people to enslave others. In other states, slavery was against the law. Harriet Tubman returned to the Underground Railroad about 13 times to help others. This map shows some of the main routes of the Underground Railroad.

Tubman escaped from Maryland (MD) to Pennsylvania (PA) in 1849. Why do you think she went to that state?

