

Harriet Tubman's Raid, Beaufort County, South Carolina, 2012

The ruins of a slave cabin still remain on a former plantation's land along the banks of the Combahee River. During the summer of 1863, fugitive slave, abolitionist, and daring Underground Railroad "conductor" Harriet Tubman returned to the South in the midst of the Civil War. In her boldest raid, she led black Union troops twenty-five miles up the swampy Combahee River, freeing over seven hundred slaves from the surrounding rice plantations, including this one. After the Civil War, black families working the rice fields continued to live in this cabin until the 1970s.





HARRIET TUBMAN'S RAID

Stephen Kantrowitz

Freedom was the first battle.

By the end of May 1863, many people in South Carolina's Combahee River rice district knew—or should have known—that the Union gunboats were coming. The rice planters had been warned, first by insufficiently cryptic reports in Northern newspapers, then by their own government, that a federal raid was imminent. The slaves who toiled in those swampy fields had been alerted as well, almost certainly by the same official warnings but perhaps also by Union scouts and spies. Some slave owners, measuring the risks, drove their slaves inland, away from the river. But most looked at the calendar and thought about the hugely profitable rice crop that would be spoiled or lost. Surely

this was another false alarm. At worst they would face a desultory raid by a few companies of federals, something the detachments assigned to defend them should be able to handle. After all, if they could not continue to reap the profits generated by their human property, what was this rebellion worth?

The reckoning came on the morning of June 2, 1863, when two Union troopships steamed up the Combahee.

In the pilot house of the lead vessel stood escaped slave Harriet Tubman. On a dozen or more dangerous journeys during the 1850s, she had shepherded hundreds of other slaves to freedom from her former home on Maryland's eastern shore. On those missions, she carried a sidearm and her indomitable will as her only weapons. But not today. Over the past months she had laid the groundwork for this raid by interviewing recently escaped slaves about conditions in the Confederate rice country. She had also helped nurse and provision the rapidly growing regiments of soldiers recruited from among those escapees. Now she ventured into the heartland of slavery accompanied by three hundred armed and uniformed men, most of them companies of the 2nd Regiment South Carolina Volunteer Infantry (African descent). Even the pilot who stood beside Tubman, guiding the lead vessel upriver, had recently been a slave.

It might only be June, but today was harvest time. The gunboats deposited soldiers at every landing as they ascended the river. There were a few skirmishes, but soon black soldiers put most of the Confederate defenders to flight. They burned plantation buildings. They broke open the sluice gates, flooding and ruining the rice fields. And as they did, more than seven hundred enslaved rice workers pushed past their owners and overseers, streaming down the banks toward the landing craft that waited to receive them. As Tubman watched men and women run for the landings, their children in their arms, she laughed in joy and exultation—"laughed, an' laughed, an' laughed," she later told her biographer. This was sweet victory indeed.

The black laborers of the rice country won some of the next battles as well. By the time the war ended,

all of South Carolina's slaves were free. Within a few more years, black men—a large majority of the potential voters in the state, and an even larger majority in the rice country—put the party of Lincoln into power. This was Reconstruction. For almost a decade, until 1876, former slaves helped elect the state's highest officials. Their new government made it easier for former slaves and other poor people to buy land, and harder for employers to cheat or coerce them. Crucially, it allowed African Americans to occupy the positions of local authority—juries and judges, militias and sheriffs—that had historically subjugated them. Former slaves and their allies sowed seeds of democracy and equality in the ruins of the slaveholders' citadel.

This remains an American liberation story for our time. Its heroes are black and white, women and men, self-empowered and determined. It tells a story many of us yearn to hear—that people committed to freedom can band together, call upon the best impulses of their countrymen, and win that prize.

It is a true story, and an important one. Those who do not already know it need to learn it, and those who do know it need to tell it.

But freedom is never won once and for all. Our story cannot end only with Harriet Tubman's laugh, or Reconstruction's promise.

Emancipation and Confederate defeat destroyed the former slaveholders' political and economic hegemony. Although their armies withdrew from the field, these men surrendered neither their expectation of superiority nor their willingness to secure it through violence. Slaveholding had trained them to this. Throughout the decade of Reconstruction they waged a continuing war against black people's autonomy and authority, building alliances with hard-pressed whites and fostering divisions among blacks.

They built a mighty Ku Klux Klan to harass, coerce, and kill their opponents, and to force former slaves into low-paid agricultural labor. After the federal government put that rebellion down, the

former slaveholders reorganized as "rifle clubs." Meanwhile, rice workers on the Combahee mounted a strike in the fields, simultaneously demanding higher pay and warning Republican officials that they were not to be taken for granted.

The rice workers lost. In 1876 white supremacist paramilitaries shot and stole their way to political victory, as national Republicans threw up their hands or looked the other way. As soon as white Democrats took control of the state, they set about strangling black political power. By the end of the nineteenth century, most rice workers were politically disempowered tenants or sharecroppers.

The freedom won in the 1860s offered little protection from the hardships and terrors of the new regime, what we call the Jim Crow South. It was not until the world wars created a vast market for labor that the descendants of the rice-field workers could hope for much better. Like their forebears, they fled their cabins for what looked like a better future—not in a boat this time, but in a train or a car. Disenfranchised in South Carolina, they cast votes in Northern states, eventually pushing the Democratic Party to embrace civil rights.

You could say that they won. You could even take a moment, as Harriet Tubman did, to exult in another victory of hope over oppression. And then you could remember that the flight from the tenant cabin led, within a few decades, to the penal gulag—to today's incarceration of African Americans on a scale and in a proportion that may be unique in human history.

Freedom is the first battle. But that battle has to be fought again and again.