



Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman was a great slave emancipator, best known for her work as an activist on the Underground Railroad. She freed herself from slavery in 1849, and in subsequent years returned to the South nineteen times to lead other enslaved black people into freedom. Tubman undoubtedly encountered great risks as she ventured back into slave territory. But she was willing to take these risks, for she valued freedom and worked from the fundamental belief that all humans should have the right to live peaceably and free of harm. For these reasons, she was often called “the Moses of her People.”¹⁹

Harriet was born in Dorchester, Maryland. Some accounts say that she was born in 1820, while other accounts indicate 1822. However, Harriet herself testified on more than one occasion that she was born in 1825.²⁰ Her parents, Harriet Green (a strong-willed woman who likely inspired Harriet’s own bravery) and Benjamin Ross (a skilled woodsman), named her Araminta Ross at birth. Harriet’s

mother and father were both enslaved, as were her grandparents, who were likely brought to the United States on a slave ship from Africa.²¹ Although Harriet’s parents lived and worked for different plantation owners, they struggled—like numerous other enslaved couples—to stay within close proximity of each other and to create the most stable family life possible for their children. As a result, it seems that Harriet spent a significant portion of her young life with her siblings, which was not always possible for young slave children.

Harriet’s parents loved her and her brothers and sisters dearly. But even their parental love could not always protect their children from the brutality of slavery. Sadly, Harriet lost at least two of her siblings to the slave trade. And she herself endured backbreaking work as a domestic during her early years. By age twelve, Harriet, who was quite strong despite her wiry frame and “sickly nature,” was sent to work in the fields. The physical toil was great, but the young girl grew to prefer physical exertion, learned to love the outdoors, and took note of the seasonal changes: skunk cabbage would bloom in the spring, as early as February; whippoorwills (a highly-camouflaged bird commonly found in the Eastern United States where Harriet lived) sang loudly on summer evenings; Canadian geese squawked as they migrated south in the fall; and winter brought a stillness as flowers and wildlife settled into hibernation.²² And a few months later, Harriet noted, the whole cycle would start all over again.

Harriet’s love of the outdoors and her familiarity with nature—especially the night sky—would prove to be invaluable as she led enslaved black people to freedom years later. Her hard work on the Underground Railroad landed her on “Most Wanted” lists in the South and at one time, a reward of \$40,000 was offered for her capture. She was, however, never caught, and successfully led approximately three hundred slaves into free territory in the northern United States and even across the border to Canada. Her struggle to free enslaved black people continued when the Civil War broke out. During the war, she worked as a cook and natural healer, nursed Union soldiers, led rescue missions, and worked closely with the military as an organizer for scouts and spies.²³ After the war, she returned to her Northern home in Auburn, New York, where she continued her freedom work. She opened her home as an informal shelter for newly freed black people. Her dedication to social justice, freedom, and helping others was recognized when, with the help of her local church and supporters, she established “The Harriet Tubman Home,” a charity institution, in 1908.

This recipe was taken from *The Historical Cookbook of the American Negro*, a cookbook that was first published by the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) in 1958. Mrs. Vivian Carter Mason, an honorary president of NCNW, submitted this recipe for “Cornbread Harriet Tubman.” As a girl, Mrs. Mason spent time with the renowned abolitionist, who was fondly known as “Aunt Harriet.” Mrs. Mason remembers how Aunt Harriet would “tell hair-raising stories of her escape from slavery and subsequent returns to the plantation” to bring hundreds of enslaved women, men, and children to freedom.²⁴ Mrs. Mason insists that Aunt Harriet loved this recipe.

Cornbread Harriet Tubman²⁵

6 slices lean salt pork
1 cup plain white flour
3 cups yellow cornmeal
1 heaping tablespoon baking powder
Pinch baking soda
Enough sour milk to moisten ingredients
4 eggs
1 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons brown sugar

Parboil salt pork, drain and fry to a crisp saving the grease for seasoning. Mix white flour and cornmeal, add other ingredients until proper consistency to bake. Cut up pork into small pieces and add to the cornmeal mixture, along with the drippings derived from the pork. Pour mixture into well greased pan and bake in oven at 350 degrees until done or bread shrinks from the sides and is a golden brown. Turn out on hot platter, split open and butter generously. Cut into squares and serve immediately. Serves 6.

Note: Cornbread Harriet Tubman calls for two ingredients that are commonly used in traditional southern cooking: “sour milk” and “salt pork.”

Simply stated, sour milk is old milk. It might sound odd to use old milk in this bread recipe, but the sour milk acts like buttermilk, which produces a moist and flavorful cornbread. In fact, you can simply use buttermilk if you have it on hand. If you have neither sour milk nor buttermilk, you can also use fresh “sweet milk” (the dairy milk that you would typically buy). Simply place one tablespoon of white vinegar or lemon juice in a liquid measuring cup, then fill with sweet milk to the one-cup line. Let it stand for five minutes and voila! —you have an alternative to sour milk that will produce excellent results. Proceed with the recipe as written.

Whereas “Cornbread Harriet Tubman” requires a moistening agent like sour milk, the salt pork ingredient is especially important as a seasoning agent. Pork (as opposed to beef) was and is still commonly served in American homes since it is a relatively inexpensive meat option and readily available to both rural and urban dwellers. Salt pork is a special cut of salt-cured pork that was and continues to be used in traditional American cuisine, especially in the American Southeast. Because salt pork tends to be inexpensively priced and adds a rich, distinct flavor to dishes, it is not surprising to see it listed as a main ingredient in the “Cornbread Harriet Tubman” recipe.

As an alternative to using salt pork, ECO Girls recommends seasoning the cornbread with crisp fried free-range smoked turkey bacon. Because turkey bacon does not render much fat, we suggest adding between one and two tablespoons of oil into the cornmeal mixture before pouring it into a greased pan. If your family observes a vegetarian diet, simply eliminate the meat all together and add one to two tablespoons of olive oil to the cornmeal mixture before pouring into a greased pan. In either case, proceed with baking as directed.

