

This Month in the not so distant past

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Looking back at historical moments that happened in July,
John Davis highlights **The Underground Railroad**.

The Underground Railroad was a network of secret routes and safe houses used by enslaved African Americans to escape to freedom in the northern part of the United States and Canada.

As a name it is a misnomer since it was neither underground or a railroad but rather a metaphor for the covert and often highly dangerous system of helping people flee slavery.

More of The Underground Railroad later but first the crucial role played in the concept by two Harriets, Beecher Stowe and Tubman. The first was an abolitionist and the writer of the seminal anti-slavery novel that became known as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the second a 'conductor' on the railroad itself who assisted 'passengers' as they fled north.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, who died at the age of eighty-five in July 1896, came from the state of Connecticut in the United States. She was the sixth of eleven children in the family, her father being a hardline and outspoken Calvinist preacher.

She worked as a teacher for some time before moving to Cincinnati where her husband encouraged to pen articles for a women's magazine. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was partly inspired by the loss of her son from cholera and the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 which legally forced those living in the north of the USA to return runaway slaves.

The novel, first published in serial form in *The National Era* magazine, was an instant success and, once published in book form, sold over 300,000 copies in the first year. Its strong anti-slavery stance had an enormous impact on public opinion. Beecher Stowe's intention was to acquaint those living in the north about the conditions faced by slaves in the south and to attempt to make slave-owners there more empathetic. It was immediately banned in the southern states and, reputedly, also in Imperial Russia, where parallels were made between slavery and serfdom.

Critics of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* produced rival versions to counteract the themes expressed in the book but later Beecher Stowe wrote her own *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* which included primary source historical documents to back up her depiction of life for slaves

in the southern states. Harriet spent much of the later part of her life speaking nationally and internationally, giving donations and raising money to help boost the anti-slavery movement. When she met Abraham Lincoln, he is supposed to have told her, "So you are the little woman who wrote the book that started that great war (the American Civil War)." The quote though is unsubstantiated and is probably an example of journalistic licence gone mad.

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In more recent times certain high school libraries removed the book from their shelves largely because of its 'inappropriate language' and 'stereotypical stock characters'. Since, though, common sense has prevailed and the novel is now viewed as a literary work which should be considered in the context of the time in which it was written and for an intended purpose and audience.

There is a Harriet Beecher Stowe Center (sic) in Hartford, Connecticut which is open to the public and each year an HBS Literary Award is made to a writer espousing the civil rights cause. The winner this year is Percival Everett for his novel *James*, a re-imagining of the Mark Twain tale *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* but told from the perspective of Huckleberry's friend James, who is an escaped slave.

If Harriett Beecher Stowe led the literary charge towards the abolition of slavery, it was her namesake Harriet Tubman who was to become one of the hands-on protagonists who propelled the movement forward.



Uncle Tom's Cabin is an anti-slavery novel by American author Harriet Beecher Stowe

Tubman's maternal grandmother is believed to have arrived in the USA on a slave ship from Africa and Tubman was brought up as a slave in Maryland. As a youngster she was hit in the head when a slaveowner threw a heavy metal object at someone close to her and all her life suffered from dizziness, pain and some aspects of narcolepsy, especially experiencing dreams and visions.

In 1849 Tubman escaped to Philadelphia but she missed the support and social interaction of her family and friends despite the harsh conditions in which they had all been forced to live. In close cooperation with others, she helped to set up The Underground Railroad, a system of waterways, secret trails and safe-houses along which slaves passed until they reached safety in the northern states or in some cases Canada. Once her family and friends had been liberated, Tubman focused on other slaves who wanted emancipation. Escaping slaves were called 'passengers' while those leading them were termed as 'conductors'. Tubman used the codename 'Moses' and, discounting exaggerated claims by some biographers later, is known to have made thirteen trips to the south and 'conducted' some eighty people to safety.

During the Civil War (1861-1865) Tubman worked for the Union Army first as a cook and nurse but later as a scout and spy. She was heavily involved in planning and executing a number of military raids carried out by the Union Army specifically

aimed at releasing large numbers of slaves like that at Combahee Ferry. She is believed to be the only woman closely connected with such raids and was posthumously awarded the honorary rank of Brigadier-General after her death.

At the end of the war, she moved to live in property she owned in Auburn, New York where she looked after her parents and other family members. She married for a second time and adopted a daughter. Harriet became increasingly associated with the cause of women's suffrage in later life and was thought to be ninety when she died. No accurate figure could be given as the date of her birth had never been officially recorded.

Footnote: In addition to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, further information can be obtained through the book *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead and from the film *Harriet* currently streaming on Netflix.

Semi-retired and living in Lyme Regis, John Davis started working life as a newspaper journalist before moving on to teach in schools, colleges and as a private tutor. He is a history graduate with Bachelors and Masters degrees from Bristol University with a particular interest in the History of Education and Twentieth Century European History.