



BREAKING THE CHAINS



Harriet Tubman

ESSEX COUNTY

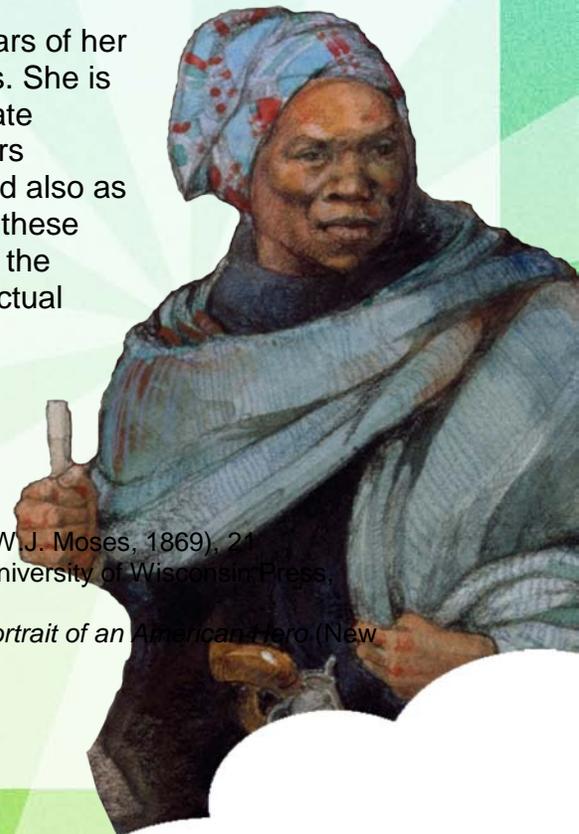
There's two things I've got a right to, and these are, Death or Liberty – one or t'other I mean to have. No one will take me back alive; I shall fight for my liberty, and when the time has come for me to go, the Lord will let them kill me.

Harriet Tubman.¹

Harriet Tubman is perhaps the most celebrated of all the Underground Railroad conductors. Risking her own freedom, she returned again and again to the slave states, and led many people from bondage. She became a legend during her own lifetime. Over the decades, Harriet Tubman's feats have been exaggerated into myth. Recent scholars, like Jean M. Humez² and Kate Clifford Larson,³ have examined original sources to separate fact from fiction, and uncover the truth about Harriet Tubman, a formerly enslaved African American driven by her tenacious belief in social justice, and guided by an unwavering spiritual faith.

Finding the Truth

Harriet herself was unable to read and write, so scholars of her life must rely on the records produced by her contemporaries. She is mentioned in public and government documents, and in private correspondence, diaries and memoirs. Friends and supporters recorded episodes from Harriet's life as she related them, and also as they remembered them decades later. It is important to read these documents critically: what was the purpose of the document, the motivation of the writer, and how close was it in time to the actual event being described?



¹ Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, NY: W.J. Moses, 1869), 21

² Jean M. Humez, *Tubman: the Life and the Life Stories* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003)

³ Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land. Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004)



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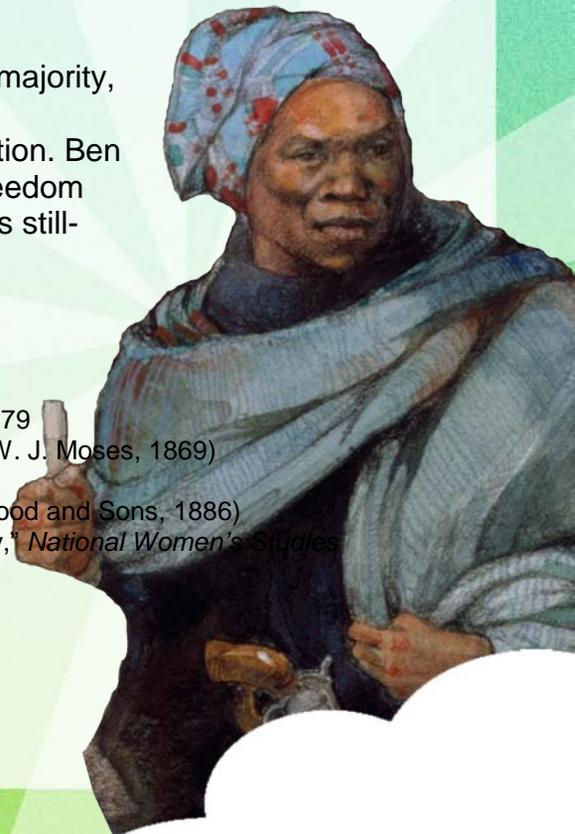
For instance, the brief description of Harriet in an 1849 Maryland newspaper runaway notice said she was “aged about 27 years, is of a chestnut colour, fine looking, and about five feet high”. This is probably accurate, as her owner was anxious for her capture and return and so would have described her as precisely as possible.⁴

Biographies, on the other hand, vary in reliability, even when written by the same author. When Harriet was living in Auburn, New York, after the Civil War, two versions of her biography were published by Sarah Bradford, a white Sunday School teacher who admired Harriet very much. In 1869, Harriet was short of money, and Mrs. Bradford believed that an account of Underground Railroad exploits would sell. She interviewed Harriet, and quickly published *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*.⁵ The book has spirited descriptions of Harriet’s activities, although Bradford seems to have exaggerated the number of trips Harriet made to the South.⁶ Sales netted \$1200, and paid the mortgage on Harriet’s house. Seventeen years later, Bradford publishing an expanded version, called *Harriet, the Moses of Her People*.⁷ This later book portrays a more genteel Harriet, better suited to the sensibilities of late 19th century middle-class women.⁸

Maryland

Harriet Tubman was born into slavery in Dorchester County, Maryland, about 1822. She was named Araminta Ross. Her father, Ben Ross, was enslaved by Anthony Thompson. Her mother, Rit (Harriet) Green, Minty (as young Harriet was known) and her older siblings Linah, Mary, Soph, and Robert were also on the Thompson plantation at the time of Minty’s birth, but only temporarily. Rit and her children were held in trust by Anthony Thompson until their owner, Edward Brodess (Thompson’s stepson and ward) came of age.⁹ In later years, Ben and Rit would add Benjamin, Rachel, Henry and Moses to their family.¹⁰

In 1823 or 1824, Edward Brodess reached the age of majority, and took his inheritance, including Rit and her children, to his Bucktown estate, ten miles away from his stepfather’s plantation. Ben Ross remained with Thompson. In 1840, Ben received his freedom under the terms of Thompson’s will, and could reunite with his still-enslaved family.¹¹



⁴ *Cambridge Democrat*, Cambridge, Maryland, 3 Oct 1849, in Larson, 78-79

⁵ Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, NY: W. J. Moses, 1869)

⁶ Larson, xvii

⁷ Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet, the Moses of Her People* (New York: Lockwood and Sons, 1886)

⁸ Jean M. Humez, “In Search of Harriet Tubman’s Spiritual Autobiography,” *National Women’s Studies Association Journal*, 5: 2 (Summer, 1993), 162-182

⁹ Larson, xvi

¹⁰ Larson, 296-299

¹¹ Larson, xvi, 27



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Minty was very young when she was “hired out.” It was common for slaveholders to make additional income from slaves by selling their services to others. Minty was employed in several households. Her tasks included checking muskrat traps, weaving, cleaning house and caring for a baby. When the untrained, homesick and exhausted child did not meet her employers’ standards, she was beaten. Eventually, having proved unsatisfactory as a household servant, Minty was hired out as a field hand.¹²

In her early teens, Minty was in a store when a runaway slave ran in. The pursuing overseer ordered Minty to stop him, but she refused. The overseer picked up a weight from the counter and threw it, missing the runaway, but hitting Minty, fracturing her skull. Unable to work, she was returned to Brodess (and her family’s care). For the rest of her life, she suffered from headaches and sudden sleeping attacks caused by this injury.¹³

About 1844, Minty married John Tubman, a free Black man. This was when she took the first name of Harriet. Her status did not change with her marriage: she was still enslaved. Under the laws of the time, if she and John had children, they would have also been enslaved, just as their mother was. John Tubman would have had no parental rights to them.¹⁴

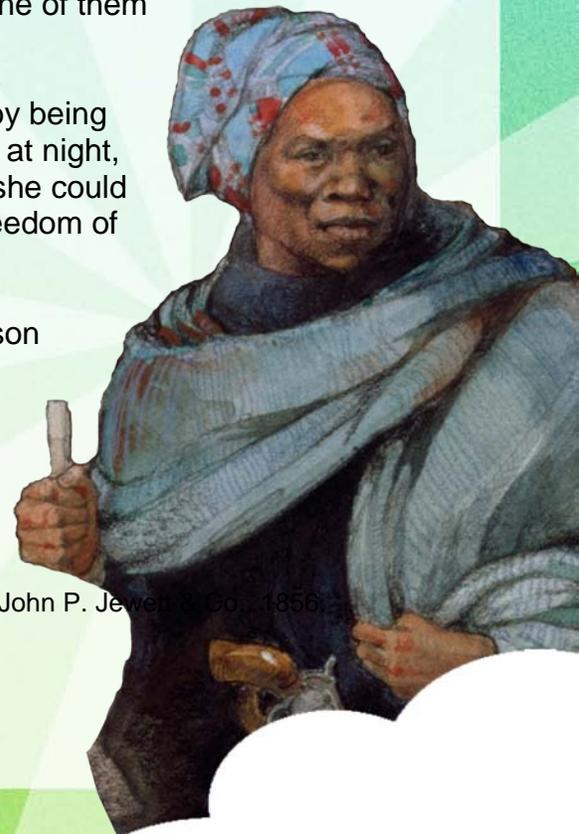
Freedom

Edward Brodess died in 1849, leaving his widow with debts. The settling of an estate was an anxious time for those enslaved, as they knew they were seen as mere assets, to be kept, redistributed to heirs, or sold. Years later, Harriet told an abolitionist:

Every time I saw a white man I was afraid of being carried away... I had two sisters carried away in a chain-gang, - one of them left two children. We were always uneasy.¹⁵

Fearing that she would be separated from her family by being sold, Harriet determined to escape to freedom. She travelled at night, guided by the stars, and found both Black and white people she could trust to direct her on her way.¹⁶ When Harriet reached the freedom of Pennsylvania, she is quoted as having said:

I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now I was free. There was such a glory over everything, the sun came like gold through the



¹² Larson, 36-41

¹³ Larson, 42-43

¹⁴ Larson, 62-63

¹⁵ Benjamin Drew, *The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada*. Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1856 (Toronto: Coles Publishing Co., 1981), 30

¹⁶ Larson, xvii



trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven.¹⁷

In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, she found many people who had escaped from slavery in Maryland. Even so, she felt that she was “a stranger in a strange land,” and decided to bring the people she loved to freedom. She did domestic work in private homes and hotels to support herself, and to raise the money to travel back to Dorchester County.¹⁸

When Harriet heard that her niece Kessiah and her two little children were to be sold, she determined to save them. With the help of Kessiah’s husband, John Bowley, she rescued the family and took them to Philadelphia. Shortly after this, Harriet returned to Maryland to lead her brother, Moses, to liberty.¹⁹ Her trips South were incredibly dangerous as she was still considered enslaved herself and would without a doubt have been punished very severely for having escaped, and very likely sold away to the Cotton Kingdom of the Deep South, which is what happened often to enslaved men and women who had fled and were recaptured.

Fugitive Slave Law, 1850

In 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law was passed by the United States Congress. This law enforced the rights of slaveowners, and made it mandatory for even magistrates, constables and other officers of the law in the Northern states to assist in the recapture of runaway slaves. Penalties for not complying were stiff. It was now dangerous for “fugitives from slavery” to remain anywhere in the United States. Philadelphia was no longer safe. Harriet gathered her family and friends, and headed further north. “I wouldn’t trust Uncle Sam with my people no longer,” she said, “But I brought ‘em all clear off to Canada.”²⁰ Harriet and her family members went to St. Catharines, Canada West (Ontario), in 1851. This was located about 20 km from the Niagara River and the American border. Harriet’s house on North Street in St. Catharines became the safe “terminus” at the end of her secret Underground Railroad.²¹

St. Catharines

There was already a community of freedom-seekers in St. Catharines. At the heart of the Black community were the churches. They provided physical and social assistance to newcomers, as well as spiritual support. They were also

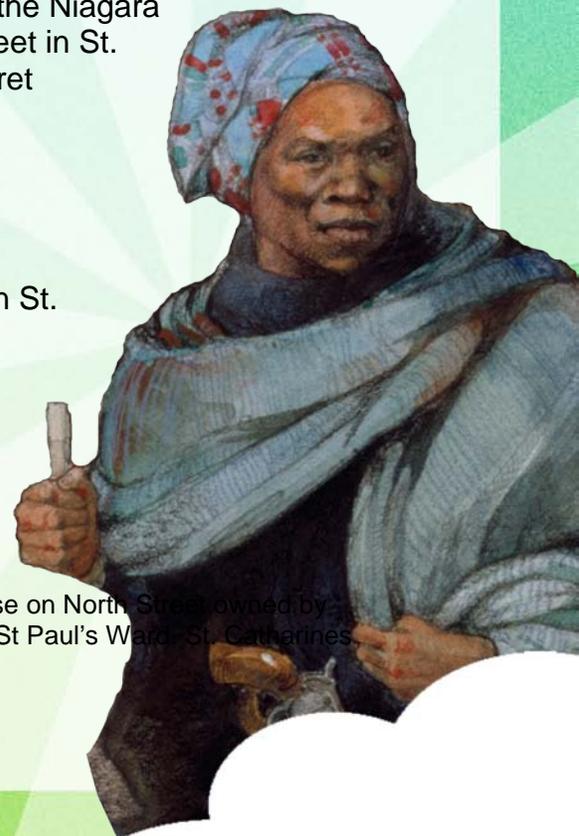
¹⁷ Bradford, *Scenes*, 19

¹⁸ Bradford, *Scenes*, 20

¹⁹ Larson, 90

²⁰ Bradford, *Scenes*, 19

²¹ In 1858, a woman with the name “Harriet Tubman” [*sic*] rented a house on North Street owned by Joseph Robinson. *Town of St. Catharines Tax Assessment Rolls, 1858, St Paul’s Ward, St. Catharines, Museum Collections.*





centres of abolitionist and anti-slavery activity. Near Harriet's house was the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. As the Black population of St. Catharines grew, so did the congregation. In 1855, the small log structure was replaced by the current building. In 1856, most AME churches in Canada separated from the American conference, and reconvened as a Canadian entity under the name British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church, led by Bishop Willis Nazrey.²² The AME Church in St. Catharines became known as the "Salem Chapel BME".

All Harriet's actions were driven by her deep faith. When asked where she found her courage, she is recorded as having replied:

Twasn't me, 'twas the Lord! I always told him, 'I trust to you. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I expect you to lead me,' and he always did.²³

Harriet is listed as one of the first members of the St. Catharines *Refugee Slaves Friends Society*, founded in 1852. Rev. Hiram Wilson reported in the May 6th, 1852, issue of the Black abolitionist newspaper, *The Voice of the Fugitive*:

I am happy to announce the formation of a Refugee Slaves Friends Society in St. Catharines which already numbers over seventy members and includes some of the most influential men in the place...

The object of the society is to bear testimony against slavery by extending sympathy and friendly aid to refugees from slavery who from time to time are taking shelter in this section of Canada and by promoting the education of their children."²⁴

For many summers, Harriet worked at the seaside resort of Cape May, in the free state of New Jersey, close to Maryland. By the fall of 1851, she had earned enough money to bring her husband, John, north. When she traveled secretly to Maryland, she was devastated to discover that he had remarried, and had no interest in joining her. She forced aside her personal feelings, and used the opportunity to take others out of bondage.²⁵

Harriet developed her own routes and networks from Maryland. One regular route was through Wilmington, Delaware (a slave state) to Philadelphia. In Wilmington, she travelled through the busy "station" of Thomas Garrett, a white Quaker



²² James A. Handy, *Scraps of African Methodist Episcopal History* (Philadelphia: AME Book Concern, 1902), *American South* <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/handy/handy.html> <accessed March 10, 2012>

²³ Bradford, *Scenes*, 35

²⁴ *Voice of the Fugitive*, May 6, 1852

²⁵ F.B. Sanborn in the *Boston Commonwealth*, 1863, reprinted in Bradford, *Harriet*, 77



abolitionist. From there, she would go to William Still, a free African American who was Secretary of the Pennsylvania Antislavery Society. Several of Harriet's trips were mentioned by Garrett in correspondence, and by Still in the notes he kept about people who passed through his "station." Many years later William Still would publish a very important book recounting the experiences of the refugees who were helped by his organization. It is the only very complete account of an UGRR that survives.²⁶

At the end of December, 1854, Thomas Garrett wrote:

We made arrangements last night, and sent away Harriet Tubman, with six men and one woman to Allen Agnew's, to be forwarded across the country to the city. Harriet, and one of the men had worn their shoes off their feet, and I gave them two dollars to help fit them out, and directed a carriage to be hired at my expense...²⁷

Those men included three of Harriet's brothers, and her brother Ben's fiancée, Jane. When they reached Philadelphia on December 29, 1854, Still noted that with Harriet were "Benj. Ross (now Jas. Stewart) Henry Ross (now Levin Stewart) Jane Kane²⁸ (now Catherine K) Robert Ross."²⁹ In his 1872 book, he called this chapter "Moses Arrives with Six Passengers."³⁰ The Philadelphia Vigilance Committee's account book shows that on December 31, 1854, Catherine Kane and James Stewart were each given \$3, and Harriet was given \$4, to help them on their way to St. Catharines.³¹

The following year, Harriet rescued her brother William Henry's wife and son.³² One of Harriet's dreams was taking shape: many of her family and friends from Maryland now lived in her neighbourhood in St. Catharines. Her house was always full, and she would give shelter to anyone who needed it. She even took in homeless children from the streets of St. Catharines.³³

²⁶ Transcriptions and digitized images of William Still's notebooks can be seen on the website of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania: *Journal C of Station No. 2 of the Underground Railroad, Agent William Still, 1852-1857*

Vigilance Committee of Philadelphia, Accounts, 1854-1857, <http://hsp.org/> <accessed March 11, 2012> In 1872, Still published some of this information in: William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia: W. Still, 1872. Reprinted Salem, NH: Ayer Co., Publishers, Inc. 1992)

²⁷ Still, *Underground*, 296

²⁸ Jane Kane aka Mrs. James Seward [sic] told Boston abolitionist Benjamin Drew that she had escaped dressed as a man. Drew, 43

²⁹ Henry Ross would eventually take the name William Henry Stewart, and Robert was known as John Stewart.

³⁰ Still, 296

³¹ *Vigilance Committee of Philadelphia, Accounts, 1854-1857*, 377 <http://hsp.org/> <accessed March 11, 2012>

³² Larson, 124

³³ Dec 20, 1858, petition from Harriet Tubman for municipal child support; 30 Dec 1858 request granted: \$1 a week for four weeks. D290 St. Catharines, Lincoln Co., *Minutes of Council 1855-7*, Archives of Ontario microfilm GS 2023





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In 1857, Harriet decided to rescue her parents. Her father had come under suspicion for his involvement in slave rescues, and his situation had become dangerous. The aged Ben and Rit were reluctant to go on a long journey. To make things easier for her parents, Harriet made a cart from discarded items – a pair of wheels and some boards. Then she acquired an old horse to pull the makeshift vehicle. The elderly couple was reunited with their family in St. Catharines.³⁴

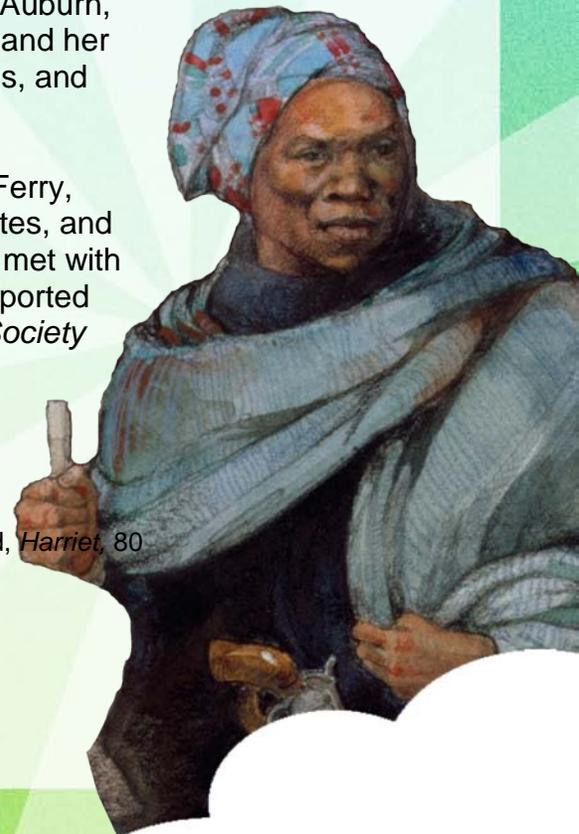
Harriet met the fiery abolitionist John Brown in 1858. Brown always called Harriet “General Tubman.” To others, she was “Moses,” the biblical character who led his people from slavery in Egypt. Brown had a grand plan to end slavery by leading an uprising of freed slaves. He asked Harriet for advice, as she had detailed knowledge of the terrain along the escape routes she used. Harriet held a meeting at her North Street house in St. Catharines to introduce John Brown to others who would support his radical ideas.³⁵

Although Harriet had carefully maintained a low profile for her clandestine missions, she now agreed to publicise the anti-slavery cause by giving public presentations. She was a beautiful singer, and a wonderful story teller. She captivated her audiences with her humour and exciting stories of rescues. Then she shocked them with tales of the horrors of life in slavery. Harriet Tubman was a powerful speaker, and a very successful fundraiser.

New York

Harriet’s parents were not happy in Canada, and the two winters they had experienced here were particularly severe. She said, herself, “We would rather stay in our native land, if we could be as free there as we are here.”³⁶ When Senator William H. Seward offered her property with a house on the outskirts of Auburn, New York, “on favourable terms,” Harriet moved her parents and her brother John there.³⁷ It was about 250 km from St. Catharines, and freedom seekers from Maryland had already settled there.

A few months later, John Brown’s attack on Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, failed. Great efforts were made to arrest his associates, and the US became a very dangerous place for anyone who had met with him. Quickly, Harriet returned to St. Catharines. In 1861, supported by her brother William Henry, she founded the *Fugitive Aid Society of St. Catharines*.³⁸



³⁴ Thomas Garrett, Wilmington, June 1868 to Sarah Bradford, in Bradford, *Harriet*, 80

³⁵ Larson, 156-161

³⁶ Drew, 30

³⁷ Larson, 163

³⁸ *Liberator*, Boston, Dec. 20, 1861



Civil War

At the outbreak of the US Civil War, Harriet offered her services to the Northern forces. As she always had, she did whatever was needed, and worked as a cook, laundress, nurse, guide and spy. She even led Union troops on campaigns, the only woman to do so officially. Officers were astonished by her courage.

After the war, Harriet returned to her house in Auburn, New York, and continued to fight for social justice, and both African American and women's rights. She was so generous with what little money she earned that she regularly found herself in financial difficulties. It was on one of these occasions that Sarah Bradford suggested collecting Harriet's stories for a fundraising book. Harriet's Auburn home was always full of people in need. Eventually, she established a small hospital and home for elderly African Americans. Harriet died in the *Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged* on March 10, 1913.

Regardless of the actual number of missions Harriet Tubman made into the slave states, and the number of people she personally shepherded North, her wisdom, shrewdness, advice and encouragement touched thousands of people. She rightly deserves the accolade "the greatest heroine of the age."³⁹



³⁹ T.M. Higginson to his mother, Worcester, Mass., June 17, 1859. In Mary Thacher Higginson, ed., *Letters and Journals of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1846-1906*, (1921), 81. Accessed through Godfrey Memorial Library Collection online.
http://www.worldvitalrecords.com/SingleIndexIndView.aspx?ix=godfrey_lettersandjournalsofthomaswentworthhigginson&hpp=1&rf=*,z*&qt=i&zpage=80&highlight=Higginson <accessed March 6, 2011>