

Bridging the Past and the Present: Using Harriet Tubman’s Caregiving Journey to Inspire Historical Research Writing Among Undergraduate Nursing Students

Wendy Post DNP, MSN, RN, FNE-A

Abstract

Historical research provides critical insights into contemporary nursing practice, especially regarding issues of vulnerable populations in maternal and infant healthcare. Harriet Tubman, renowned primarily as an abolitionist, also played a crucial role as a caregiver and midwife during her lifetime. This project utilizes Tubman’s caregiving journey as a dynamic case study to encourage undergraduate nursing students to engage deeply in historical research and scholarly writing. By examining Tubman’s community alliances, collective caregiving strategies, and resilience during the Underground Railroad era, students are prompted to explore broader contexts of healthcare inequities and community-based care. Through assignments focused on primary historical document analysis, reflective journaling, and creative storytelling, students gain critical thinking skills, enhanced empathy, and an increased awareness of historical influences on present-day nursing practice. This intersectional educational approach not only bridges past and present but also inspires nursing students to appreciate their potential roles as advocates and change agents in addressing persistent healthcare incongruency. .

Research Question/Aims

Research Question:How can the exploration of Harriet Tubman’s caregiving journey and community alliances during the Underground Railroad era enhance undergraduate nursing students' skills and engagement in historical research writing?

Aims:

- To evaluate the effectiveness of integrating historical case studies, specifically Harriet Tubman’s caregiving and community networks, in enhancing undergraduate nursing students' historical research and writing skills.
- To explore how engagement with historical narratives influences nursing students' abilities to connect past social injustices to contemporary healthcare incongruencies.
- To assess how historical storytelling and reflective writing activities improve empathy, advocacy awareness, and professional identity among undergraduate nursing students.

Methods

This educational project employed a qualitative historical research approach utilizing Harriet Tubman as a central case study. Undergraduate nursing students participated in guided archival research sessions, exploring primary and secondary historical sources including letters, diaries, narratives, plantation records, and scholarly articles focused on Tubman’s caregiving and community alliances. Students were instructed in analytical methods for interpreting historical texts and encouraged to engage in reflective journaling to connect historical insights with contemporary healthcare practices. Additionally, creative storytelling and narrative assignments allowed students to articulate and contextualize their understanding of historical influences. These pedagogical strategies collectively aimed to enhance students’ historical literacy, critical thinking, writing competencies, and capacity for empathy and advocacy in professional nursing contexts.

Harriet's Underground Railroad Chronology

1822- Born into bondage in Dorchester County, Maryland

1844- Marriage and a Vision of Freedom

1849- “Crossing the Line” to Freedom: Escape from Slavery

1850-1860- Conductor of the Underground Railroad

1850- First Rescue Mission: Saving Family at the Auction Block (Her very first rescue in 1850 saved her niece Kessiah and Kessiah’s two young children from being sold at auction, liberating a young mother and her infants from slavery)

1851- North Star Haven in St. Catharines, Canada West

1854-“Christmas Escape” Guiding Her Brothers to Freedom

1857- “The Old Folks Are Moving”- Rescuing Her Parents by Wagon

1858- Allies in Abolition: “Meeting ”Captain Brown”

1859- Securing a Home in the North (Auburn, New York)

1860- The Last Passengers and a Nation on the Brink

1861-1865- Civil War Scout, Spy and Nurse

1862-From “Moses” to Union Scout: A New Calling

1863- The Combahee River Raid: Striking a Blow for Freedom

1865- War’s End: A Nation Emancipated, A Heroine Emerges

1866-1913- Later Years: Suffragist and Humanitarian

1868- Telling Her Story and Honoring Her Service

1896- “Walking Unto Freedom’s Light”: Suffragist Alliances

1908- Harriet Tubman Home: A Last Gift to Her People

1913- Final Rest: “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”


Her property was deeded to the AME Zion Church





Paregoric is a mixture of opium powder (anhydrous morphine, 0.4 mg/mL) and ethanol.. Other ingredients include benzoic acid, camphor, and anise oil.

To prevent a baby’s cries from revealing their hiding place, Tubman used a tincture of opium poppy (paregoric) as a sedative. She would dose a bit of this tincture on a piece of bread or sugar for the infant to suck, inducing sleep. This was a last resort but often necessary when a crying child might otherwise doom an escape. Several accounts note that she “carried a drug to use on a baby if its crying might put the fugitives in danger,” a strategy that likely involved opium derived from poppies.By gently easing children into sleep, she ensured entire families could move silently by night.



Harriet Tubman as a midwife, nurse and civil war comforter

Masking Scent from Bloodhounds – Red Pepper & Onions: Tubman cleverly fooled the dogs that slave-catchers used to track freedom seekers. She understood that pungent herbs and spices could confuse or deaden the hounds’ sense of smell. Before crossing areas where patrols might send out dogs, she and her companions would scatter crushed red pepper (cayenne) or wild onion along their path or on their shoes. The strong, irritating odor threw the bloodhounds off the trail. Tubman also led escapees through streams or swampy water when possible to wash away scent. These tricks bought precious time – “red pepper and wild onions were but some of the ingredients used” to cover human scent. In practice, a handful of dried chili or onion could mean the difference between capture and freedom.

Wild onions, in particular, were known to fight infection and were part of her medicine kit. In slave folk medicine, other poultices like chewed plantain leaves or spiderwebs were also used to stop bleeding – knowledge Tubman almost certainly knew. Through these means, she tended sprained ankles, sore feet, and other ailments quietly, without needing conventional supplies. Her attentiveness kept her “passengers” healthy enough to continue the long journey.

During the Civil War, Harriet Tubman put her healing knowledge to use as a Union Army nurse, scout, and spy. Tending to Black soldiers and newly liberated slaves in contraband camps, she faced rampant disease and poor medical care. Tubman applied the traditional remedies she had learned in Maryland to epidemics of smallpox, dysentery, and fevers afflicting the camps. Army doctors, initially skeptical, soon witnessed how effectively her treatments worked. In fact, she became “expert in herbal medicine”, so much so that Union Army surgeons asked for her help curing dysentery and other ailments when their own treatments failed.

Tubman’s herbal practices did not arise in isolation – they were part of a rich 19th-century tradition of Black folk medicine. Enslaved African Americans, denied formal medical care, became their own doctors, drawing on knowledge passed down from Africa and adapted to the New World. Harriet Tubman learned about healing from her mother, Rit Green, who was a talented home healer

Student Reflections and Narratives

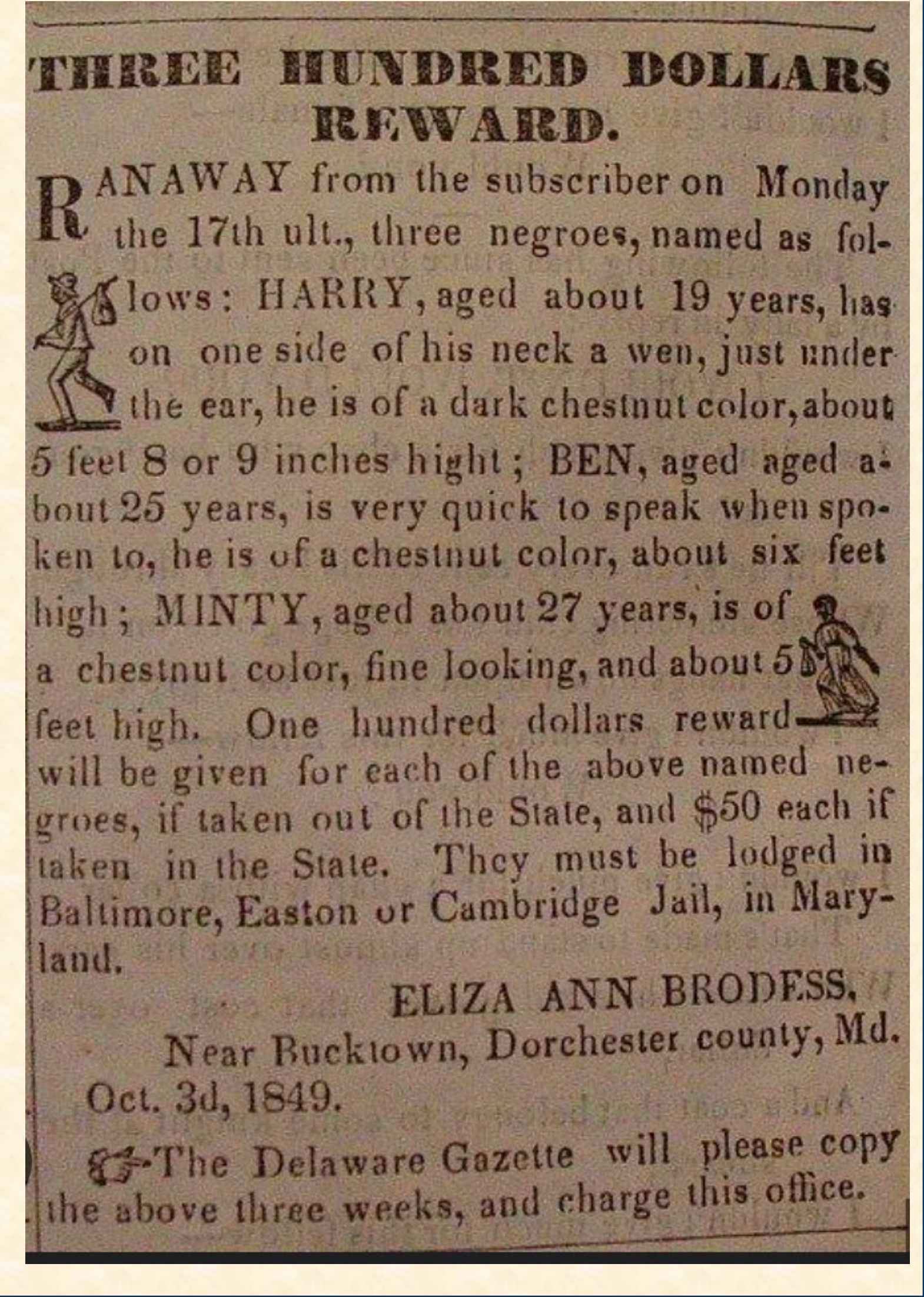
"Learning about Harriet Tubman’s severe brain injury and lifelong disability amazed me. Despite persistent seizures and episodes of narcolepsy, she became a fierce caregiver, advocate, and leader. Her story taught me that disability doesn’t limit someone’s ability to transform society—it can strengthen empathy, deepen resilience, and empower extraordinary achievements."

"Learning how Tubman cared for others under such impossible circumstances taught me to view resilience and empathy as essential nursing skills, just as important as technical competence."

"Before this research, I never considered Harriet Tubman as someone who practiced trauma-informed care. She understood emotional and psychological wounds, not just physical ones. Her methods teach me that nursing must always consider the hidden scars patients carry."

"Tubman’s deep knowledge of herbal medicine and her reliance on nature surprised me. It reminded me that healthcare extends beyond hospitals, rooted in cultural knowledge passed down through generations, which still matters today."

"Initially, I felt uneasy about Harriet Tubman's use of paregoric to keep babies quiet during escapes. But studying her actions more deeply made me realize she was performing emergency nursing under impossible conditions. It challenged me to rethink ethical decisions in nursing—sometimes compassionate care means choosing the lesser harm to protect a patient's life."





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Biography

Dr. Wendy Post is an Assistant Professor of Nursing at Bowie State University, where she passionately advances education in maternal-child health and champions equity, advocacy, and social justice within nursing curricula. Concurrently, she is a PhD student at the George Washington University School of Nursing, undertaking groundbreaking research to illuminate the profound yet understudied phenomenon of maternal mortality through the lens of eyewitness narratives. Her research uniquely leverages interpretive phenomenology, critical realism, and social and verbal autopsy frameworks to expose systemic failures, clinical mismanagement, and ethical gaps in maternal care, particularly affecting marginalized populations.

With over 24 years of clinical and leadership experience as a nurse specializing in high-risk obstetrics, Dr. Post has long been dedicated to improving maternal health outcomes and addressing health disparities. Her academic work powerfully intersects clinical expertise with rigorous scholarship, aiming to amplify voices frequently unheard within scientific literature and policy discourse.

Dr. Post's extensive contributions include developing innovative curricula and mentorship programs that address social determinants of learning, fostering environments that empower underrepresented nursing students. As a certified Forensic Nurse Examiner (FNE-A), she integrates trauma-informed care principles into her teaching, research, and advocacy efforts, reinforcing her commitment to holistic patient safety and equity.

In recognition of her transformative research and dedication to equity, Dr. Post has earned numerous accolades and fellowships, including selection for the prestigious AACN Diversity and Inclusion Institute. Her leadership extends beyond academia into influential roles in maternal health policy and community advocacy, where she actively contributes to conversations reshaping clinical practice and healthcare delivery systems.

Dr. Post's current research critically explores eyewitness accounts of maternal death, delving into pre-event, intra-event, and post-event phases to uncover hidden mechanisms perpetuating maternal mortality. This innovative work not only informs clinical guidelines and policy reform but also advances social justice by giving voice to affected families and communities. Her forthcoming dissertation, rooted deeply in hermeneutic phenomenology and critical realism, promises to significantly enhance the understanding of maternal health crises in the United States and foster meaningful systemic change.

At Bowie State University, Dr. Post tirelessly mentors future nurse leaders, preparing them to navigate and transform complex healthcare landscapes. Her influential role as an educator, researcher, and

advocate underscores her unwavering commitment to improving maternal health outcomes and achieving equity and justice in healthcare for generations to come.

Contact Information



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