

Walk in her Footsteps - Ep1

[00:00:00] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** She was courageous. Of course she was committed. She was determined. She was very strategic, extremely generous. I think she was radical. And, uh, she was committed to her people, no matter what, that was her first priority is to get our people to a safe place and to make sure they had what they needed to survive.

[00:00:29] **Beonca Louis:** Most are familiar with Harriet Tubman's legacy and know her as a conductor of the renowned underground railroad. While this title is honorable, there were many other components that made up her identity; a cook, hunter, lumberjack, field worker, nurse, armed scout, and spy were just some of the hats she wore throughout her life.

[00:00:58] **Beonca Louis:** Born into slavery in the [00:01:00] 1800s, Harriet Tubman survived a traumatic and tumultuous childhood before ultimately escaping and gaining her own freedom. She embarked on a life mission of liberation, freeing enslaved people, shepherding them north of the Mason Dixon Line. But her story doesn't end after the civil war.

[00:01:24] **Beonca Louis:** What was her life like when she settled in her chosen hometown of Auburn, New York? This is the story of her life in Cayuga County, New York.

[00:01:38] **Beonca Louis:** Welcome to Walk in her Footsteps, Harriet Tubman's life in Auburn, New York, a four part series exploring Harriet Tubman's life after slavery in her chosen home in the North. I'm Beonca Lewis, an entrepreneur and brand ambassador for Cayuga tourism here in [00:02:00] Auburn. In this episode, we'll explore how the city was founded and why Harriet Tubman chose to settle her and her loved ones here.

[00:02:12] **Beonca Louis:** Located at the north end of Owasco Lake, one of the finger lakes in central New York, the region surrounding Auburn had been Iroquois territory for centuries before contact with European settlers. Founded in 1793 by John Hardenberg, an officer in the American revolution and his slaves, Kate and Harry Freeman,

[00:02:36] **Beonca Louis:** on the site of a Cayuga native village called Wasco. It was first known as Hardenberg corners. The settlement was later renamed Auburn in 1805.

[00:02:49] **Venus Amadi:** When Auburn was founded, they give the credit to John Hardenberg and they considered the people who came with enslaved, but there's still a lot of research left to be done in terms of actually understanding whether they were [00:03:00] enslaved or not.

[00:03:01] **Beonca Louis:** You're listening to Venus Amadi, a historian and law student who's done extensive research on Harriet Tubman. I'd love to hear more about what some of your studies revealed, especially with Harriet Tubman in black womanhood. Were you able to find out what it was like in terms of collaborating for Harriet Tubman?

[00:03:19] **Venus Amadi:** Especially in the recent books that I've seen, a lot of people write about the underground railroad, which is absolutely true. And she had a lot of connections

with the underground railroad specifically coming from Maryland, going to New Jersey and then heading into Philly. But essentially when it comes to mapping out that story, it definitely depends on a lot of the black community, the black freedom fighters within the underground railroad. So even William Still looking at his records of the underground railroad and other black people who were working with her, her father was actually a renowned. He worked in woodworks, I believe, but he was renowned for his knowledge or his vast knowledge about the outdoors, especially in Maryland, especially on the ships as well.

[00:03:59] **Venus Amadi:** So knowing [00:04:00] her background with her family and the relevance of her father's role in aiding her freedom, looking at those networks in terms of ship building and the woodworks that was going into Maryland, looking at the black participators in those movements, I think that's key to understanding the collaboration networks that helped or assisting Harriet Tubman to go north.

[00:04:19] **Beonca Louis:** And there is another population that is often left out of the conversation when it comes to American history.

[00:04:26] **Venus Amadi:** There's also another branch of historians who've been kind of looking at how native Americans might have assisted her on this journey. And like I said, but when it comes to just mapping out the journey from Maryland, all the way to Philadelphia and then New York, we know that there was collaboration during those journeys.

[00:04:44] **Venus Amadi:** It has a lot to do with the black community aiding within the underground railroad. And then when it comes to just kind of looking more nuanced into the kind of trails that she would've been able to take, we have to look at the different parts of society that are marginalized from historical [00:05:00] records, but could have, and there's a high probability that they actually played a role in aiding her forward.

[00:05:06] **Venus Amadi:** Like I said, there's still a lot of research that has to be done, but definitely just sort of shifting gears from not just looking at the famous parts of the underground railroad, but more the obscure parts that were along that trail.

[00:05:21] **Beonca Louis:** Absolutely. I'm curious about what you learned when visiting Auburn and why it plays such an important role in Harriet Tubman's journey on the underground railroad.

[00:05:31] **Venus Amadi:** There's a descendant of the Freeman who wrote a book called God's Freeman, and he wrote that they were non enslaved and they were actually indentured servants. But essentially in terms of their journey in coming to Auburn, there's a lot of relevance with the underground railroads specifically. A descendant of the Freemans, Luke,

[00:05:51] **Venus Amadi:** was a known affiliate and, um, contributed to the underground railroad. And so he was part of a big group of people who were aiding that movement of [00:06:00] self emancipated, black people coming up north. That history was really big in terms of outlining the relevance of Auburn in the underground railroad. And just answering that larger question that I think a lot of historians are asking today, which is what made Auburn, the community that Harriet Tubman came to.

[00:06:17] **Venus Amadi:** What made this community something that she was able to be a part of and out of all the underground railroad stations, this one was the one she decided to settle in. So just sort of understanding the environment a bit more, trying to understand the context in order to answer some of those questions.

[00:06:36] **Beonca Louis:** Many historians believe that Harry and Kate Freeman's role in building what we now call Auburn, played an integral role in establishing one of the first communities of formerly enslaved peoples. Venus wants their story to be shared.

[00:06:51] **Venus Amadi:** When it comes to Freeman, I believe that if they were the people that we know for a fact objectively built the first infrastructures here in Auburn as [00:07:00] maybe enslaved people or even indentured servants, no matter what the status in America said they were, they were human beings and their labor went into building this community.

[00:07:09] **Venus Amadi:** So instead of saying John Hardenberg was the man who built Auburn before it was even the city Auburn, I think it's important to talk about the people who did the labor, the people whose sweat and blood went into what we know as Auburn today. And then from there, I think there's a lot of historical points there as it relates to Harriet Tubman, the revolutions and self emancipation in general.

[00:07:30] **Beonca Louis:** So why is it important to have black historians at the forefront of this research?

[00:07:35] **Venus Amadi:** When it comes to our collaborators, our fellow researchers doing this work, that's only gonna make this field richer and provide more information about the life that Harriet Tubman had lived. And I think at the end of the day, seeing more black people or more people of color in a space where telling our stories and preaching on our histories, it's very powerful because when it comes to a subjective form of history, [00:08:00] that's a concept that came at a time when there was only a certain type of person who was the authority of history or authority of a lot of these fields.

[00:08:08] **Venus Amadi:** So being able to push back against that idea and actually being able to assert our understanding or our perspectives into this history is always gonna make this space constantly evolving. She's not one person in a separate era, right? Like she's part of this long history and long tradition, and we're all collaborators in this.

[00:08:31] **Venus Amadi:** And as long as you're interested in equality and justice, in that sense, you're asserting yourself as part of that long tradition. So that to me was one of the most powerful things I gained from understanding and researching the story of Harriet Tubman and her connections with the community.

[00:08:47] **Beonca Louis:** Harriet herself was so deeply committed to self emancipation and aiding others in their quest for freedom.

[00:08:56] **Beonca Louis:** There are various honorable qualities that made up this [00:09:00] extraordinary woman. To understand the imprint she made on American history, it's important to understand the multifaceted Harriet that is not often taught in school.

[00:09:12] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** She was courageous, of course. She was committed. She was determined. She was very strategic,

[00:09:19] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** extremely generous. I think she was radical. And, uh, she was committed to her people, no matter what. That was her first priority, is to get her people to a safe place and to make sure they had what they needed to survive.

[00:09:35] **Beonca Louis:** That's the voice of Dr. Ednita Wright. Or as many call her Dr. Nina. She is a retired professor and clinical social worker and author

[00:09:46] **Beonca Louis:** based in Syracuse, New York. During her career, Dr. Nina took a year long sabbatical to dive into Harriet's life to discover how exactly she settled in Auburn and ensured that [00:10:00] those in her community who came from such painful circumstances were set up for a better life than what she was born into.

[00:10:08] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** When people got free, she would teach folks what they needed to do, get them some sort of job or something that they could do

[00:10:18] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** that would be good for them, but also would provide the supplies they needed to live. And she was very good at that. She created three or four schools for children to learn how to read and write, even though she did not know how to read or write.

[00:10:32] **Beonca Louis:** So why did Harriet decide that Auburn was the ideal town for her as a newly free woman?

[00:10:39] **Beonca Louis:** At the time, there had been a pre-established community of abolitionists, progressive politicians, and women's suffrage figures.

[00:10:49] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** Auburn had two things going for it. One, it had many abolitionists that were black and white that believed in freedom and also were some [00:11:00] major stations for the underground railroad.

[00:11:02] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** She also knew Seward and Seward's wife, Francis Seward.

[00:11:08] **Beonca Louis:** Not only was she trying to save people, get them to a safe place, she was also taking the time to educate them so that they can continue to grow in this new community.

[00:11:18] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** If you think about it, you're a slave, right? You've been on a plantation for your entire life.

[00:11:24] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** You don't even know the roads that are near you, cuz you've never been off the plantation, except for when somebody says, I want you to go here or there. So then you're set free. What do you do? Because you're black, nobody's gonna give you a

job. You can't do what you were doing, which was working for land because you don't have land.

[00:11:44] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** So. It's like be left in a purgatory so that you don't know what to do in order to sustain yourself. Also, you know, I visited when I first, uh, started reading Earl Conrad, I went and visited Harriet Tubman's home and wow. [00:12:00] That was really something and it spirited me on again. So that's really how I, I came to it.

[00:12:06] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** And the other thing is that I really came from Earl Conrad's piece with wanting to know how did this woman gain this strength to keep doing things that was even strange or not normal for a woman and most assuredly, a black woman. She owned land. She worked in the civil war. She brought people again and again from the south to the north, whether it was, uh, other places, Auburn, Rochester, or whether it was St Catherine's in Canada.

[00:12:39] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** And that just amazed me. It amazed me that she kept going back. That's what amazed me.

[00:12:44] **Beonca Louis:** Yess. She amazes me too. We're captivated by her strength and resilience to just keep going back. I love how you mention Earl Conrad's book and how he made it really personable. What about it really stood out and how was it different from the other books?[00:13:00]

[00:13:00] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** Yeah, that was one of the things I learned was I got closer to what he saw and he was able to go to Auburn. He was from Auburn, so he was able to talk to people that knew her, um, they were older people, but they knew her. So he got more of a hands on, if you will ability to say, okay, this is Harriet. This is who she was.

[00:13:23] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** He called her the Joan of arc, uh, for the United States, which I have to agree with, but it helped me understand. That really nobody's been able to fix. What is that piece? She was courageous. Of course she was committed. She was determined. She was very strategic, extremely generous. I think she was radical. And, uh, she was committed to her people, no matter what that was her first priority is to get her people to a safe place and to make sure they had what they needed to survive.[00:14:00]

[00:14:00] **Beonca Louis:** William H Seward was a New York state Senator, the governor of New York, a U.S. Senator, and even a presidential candidate who lived in Auburn up until his death in 1872. He and his wife Francis were deeply committed to the abolition of slavery and were even friends with Harriet before she chose to start her life there.

[00:14:27] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** She knew they lived there. The other thing is Seward was willing to provide her land at a cost that she could pay off little by little, which was great. And think about that. A black woman owning land is illegal. But Seward was such a prominent person. He was Lincoln's secretary of state. So he's very prominent.

[00:14:48] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** So I guess nobody would come up and say, you can't do that. But the other reason that I think she came, that's just coming to the fore now is, there was a,

what [00:15:00] they called a colored community that was called new Guinea and new Guinea was on the outlet of Owasco which was off the Owasco lake. There are many lakes around Auburn, and I think that was one of the stops that she made

[00:15:14] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** sometimes when she was taking people up straight to Canada. She would stop there because it was a growing black community. People had little houses. People had community, people helped each other out and people knew each other. Even some of the freedom seekers that she brought, decided to stay in new Guinea and new Guinea only has one reference that it even existed, a 1937, uh, map that was made of Auburn

[00:15:44] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** has it on the map. That's the only thing that you would know new Guinea exist at all.

[00:15:50] **Beonca Louis:** How has that journey been for you? How do you embody some of the values harriet Tubman has taught us?

[00:15:56] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** The thing that I wrote out was about women being [00:16:00] clear about using their voice and that their voice was important. And that even though it's scary, and even though it's scary putting your voice out there, because people will criticize or whatever, we have to do it, we have to be visible

[00:16:15] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** to folks. So that other folks can learn that you can have the strength doesn't mean you won't fear something every once in a while, but it means that if you get in touch with the love that you want to share with people that will give you the strength, because that's one thing that I believe Harriet has shown us is what I would call revolutionary

[00:16:37] **Dr. Ednita Wright:** love. Love that doesn't die just because someone's not there. Love that carries you through.

[00:16:46] **Beonca Louis:** Harriet's arrival in Auburn was during an interesting point of transition for the city. Throughout her 50 plus years of life there, she witnessed significant growth in the city's population. [00:17:00] This is Kirsten Gosch.

[00:17:02] **Beonca Louis:** She is the executive director of the Cayuga Museum of History and Art. She paints a picture of what Auburn was like when Harriet was there.

[00:17:13] **Kirsten Gosch:** She came to Auburn, you know, in 1859, which was, um, it was a really interesting period of growth in Auburn's history. We didn't see kind of the explosion in the industry and manufacturing until really the 1870s, but between the 1830s and 1850s, there was definitely a lot of smaller growth happening.

[00:17:33] **Kirsten Gosch:** As far as the landscape goes, um, you know, we didn't have the trolley system or even railroads until 20 years after she moved here. So she was definitely getting around by, you know, carriage and just walking and even, you know, south street where it's now beautiful houses and she's pretty far down south street where she was, I mean, it was a dirt road, you know, it wasn't even paved yet when she first came here.

[00:17:59] **Kirsten Gosch:** From [00:18:00] the time she was here until the time she passed away in 1913, the population grew from about 11,000 to 35,000. Which if you think about, I mean, today we're at what? Maybe 20, was it 25-26,000 at the last census. So by the time that she passed, it was really like the height of, of Auburn.

[00:18:20] **Beonca Louis:** So when did you first hear about Harriet Tubman and how has your knowledge grown throughout the years?

[00:18:26] **Kirsten Gosch:** I'm originally from Pennsylvania, kind of a smaller town in Southern PA, which is really close to Maryland. And I was trying to think about it. And assuming that I learned about Harriet Tubman as a, as a child kind of in elementary school, but beyond that, I did not understand the impact in her legacy really until I came up to upstate New York, which I kind of feel like is a shame because I was so close regionally to where she was originally, but I think it was just kind of this standard,

[00:18:54] **Kirsten Gosch:** here's what we did in the history book, Harriet Tubman, she helped freedom seekers and the underground [00:19:00] railroad and kind of the general thing. It's been really exciting to, um, be in Auburn and have the opportunity to learn really so much more about her, because she's so much more than just what is in a little paragraph in a history book.

[00:19:14] **Beonca Louis:** Harriet preserved relationships with those who shared similar goals regarding basic human rights. What do you think made it possible for her to lay down her roots here in Auburn during that time?

[00:19:27] **Kirsten Gosch:** I think the most important part is the relationships that she had with people here. I mean, specifically William Seward and really, I mean, I, I talk about that all the time that I think just building relationships with people on a personal professional level, I think that that is really the key to success for everyone.

[00:19:43] **Kirsten Gosch:** And I think that that really was helpful for her. But I think it was also, you know, with some of the other things that were happening here, like the anti-slavery sentiment and the abolition, the underground railroad, there was a lot here just happening already. So I think it was really a natural fit for her.

[00:19:59] **Kirsten Gosch:** And I think [00:20:00] with her interest in farming and things like that, having her land and having the opportunity to actually have something, it was just a perfect fit for her.

[00:20:08] **Beonca Louis:** And what are some of the differences between over there in Maryland and here in Auburn?

[00:20:14] **Kirsten Gosch:** I think as far as the difference between Maryland and Auburn, um, I mean, I think one of the greatest things that we have, I mean, we have her she's here.

[00:20:23] **Kirsten Gosch:** We will always be able to do that. And I think it's amazing what they have in Maryland, where she came from and just having all of the land, like knowing

where she went with the freedom seekers and seeing the landscape and things like that. But I think just the knowledge that she did choose here to live. I mean, for a really long time too.

[00:20:42] **Kirsten Gosch:** I mean, that's, you know, the majority of her life she really spent here. And I think that it's just really amazing that we have that just when you go around town, I mean, you can just see her, you can see the path that she walked in. To me, I just think that is really special. And I think it's just a benefit that there is literally nowhere [00:21:00] else.

[00:21:00] **Beonca Louis:** Through photographs currently on display at the Cayuga Museum of History and Art, the exhibit gives visitors a glimpse into Harriet's life in Auburn.

[00:21:12] **Kirsten Gosch:** So for this year in particular for the bicentennial, we chose to, to utilize our photography collection, to give visitors a literal representation of where Harriet Tubman was and showed the changes in the city of Auburn

[00:21:24] **Kirsten Gosch:** from the time she came here to the time that she died. And it was really, really fun to put that together. Cause again, it's something that we talk about all the time. We have these stories and we know, but actually seeing a black and white photo of south street, the dirt road that she walked down. And so really, I mean, that's been really neat.

[00:21:46] **Beonca Louis:** The city holds such strong ties to Harriet and abolition. Many of the buildings that still stand today hold so much historical significance. Some locals are unfamiliar with what [00:22:00] occurred in the structures they walk by every day, never realizing the stories and impacts they had on the city.

[00:22:07] **Kirsten Gosch:** We do have a couple of images of different churches in town because of course, church and religion, it was really important to people living in Auburn since the founding. And you know, one of the stories about one of the Presbyterian churches downtown about how it was founded when one of the churches had to break off from a different one because the Reverend, his sermons were too heavy in abolition and some people weren't really ready for that yet.

[00:22:33] **Kirsten Gosch:** So a group of anti-slavery members, they followed this and they established their own church. And that's actually right, is where Harriet Tubman, she married her second husband Nelson Davis in the basement. And we have records that Frederick Douglas, he actually gave a lecture in that space as well, which is really neat. But the stories of how the churches got founded, that's something that a lot of the locals, they didn't really realize. So they kind of just appreciated seeing the way that the landscape and [00:23:00] religion changed in that time period.

[00:23:02] **Beonca Louis:** Yes. How do you see Harriet Tubman's life and legacy influence present day life in Auburn.

[00:23:09] **Kirsten Gosch:** I've been thinking about this. And I think that really in the past couple of years, since we have been collectively taking a larger focus on Harriet Tubman, I feel like I'm seeing a larger focus on acts of service, like in different community groups.

[00:23:22] **Kirsten Gosch:** And I think that is something that is really welcome and really necessary definitely today. I think people are kind of just looking at the different areas of her life and they're really just trying to make a connection with people more. And I think that might be the thing that I see as the biggest legacy with her.

[00:23:39] **Beonca Louis:** Kirsten hopes that the exhibit will offer visitors with additional perspective into who Harriet was as a person outside of her work.

[00:23:49] **Kirsten Gosch:** I want people to know that she's, she's not one dimensional. I think that that's really important. I think sometimes when you're, you're talking about someone like her, you just look at her work with the underground railroad and things like that

[00:23:59] **Kirsten Gosch:** and you think there was a [00:24:00] singular focus to her. There was just so much more. So I think just that people have the opportunity to actually learn about her work with women's suffrage and all of these other really important movements. That's definitely something that I've been grateful to have the opportunity to do and I think other people should do that as well.

[00:24:15] **Beonca Louis:** You can visit the exhibit in person at the Cayuga Museum of History and Art on display now through September 2022. To view pieces of the collection online head to CayugaMuseum.org.

[00:24:31] **Senator Cory Booker:** Harriet Tubman is one of my heroes because the more I read about this person, the more, I mean, she was viciously beaten, her whole life

[00:24:44] **Senator Cory Booker:** she used to fall into spells, cracked skull. She faced starvation, chased by dogs. And when she got to freedom, what did she do? Did she rest? No. She went back. Again, and [00:25:00] again and again. The star was, the sky was full of stars, but she found one that was a harbinger of hope for better days, not just for her and those people that were enslaved, but a, a harbinger of hope for this country. And she never gave up on America.

[00:25:20] **Beonca Louis:** That was Senator Corey Booker at Supreme court justice, Ketanji brown Jackson's confirmation hearing on March 23rd, 2022.

[00:25:34] **Beonca Louis:** On the next Walk in her Footsteps, we'll explore the people and places that shaped Harriet's life in Auburn. Until then I'm Beonca Louis and thank you for listening. I would like to thank my guests, Venus Amadi, historian and law student, Kirsten Gosch, executive director of the Cayuga Museum of History and Art and Dr. Ednita Wright, retired professor, clinical social worker and [00:26:00] author. Walk in her Footsteps is produced by Whetstone Media in partnership with Tour Cayuga.

[00:26:07] **Beonca Louis:** Thank you to the "Walk in Her Footsteps" team, lead producer Tonina Saputo, managing producer Marvin Yueh, audio editor, Martinho Cardoso and associate producer, Danya AbdelHameid. Tour Cayuga would like to thank the Auburn community who carries on Harriet Tubman's legacy. For more information on Harriet Tubman's life in New York state, visit TourCayuga.com.

[00:26:33] **Beonca Louis:** I'd also like to thank Whetstone founder, Stephen Satterfield, Whetstone Radio Collective head of podcasts, Celine Glasier, sound engineer, Max Kotelchuck, music director, Catherine Yang, associate producer, Quentin Lebeau, production coordinator, Shabnam Ferdowsi, and sound intern, Simon lavender. Cover art created by Whetstone art director, Alexandra Bowman.

[00:26:59] **Beonca Louis:** You can learn [00:27:00] more about all things happening at Whetstone at WhetstoneMagazine.com. I'm Beonca Louis and thank you for listening.