Variations on a Theme: Contemporary Memorials to Harriet Tubman

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Variations on a Theme:

Contemporary Memorials to Harriet Tubman

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts of the City College of the City University of New York.
Thesis Advisor: Professor Harriet F. Senie
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Furthermore, this thesis took shape under the patience and guidance of Dr. Senie without whose continuing support it would not have happened. In addition, it seems fitting that the first course and the last course that I attended in the program were taught by Professor Kjaer who has always been generous in her encouragement of my efforts. I thank Professors Senie and Kjaer for enabling me to accomplish my dream.

Conducting the research on these memorials was often difficult due to the paucity of written archives and the need to elicit almost all of the information from knowledgeable and magnanimous individuals. I want to thank the three artists - Fern Cunningham, James L. Gafgen and Jane DeDecker - for their gracious willingness to answer my questions and never make me feel that my interviews with them were an imposition. I am also truly indebted to three individuals without whose abundant generosity of time and effort I would never have gleaned the amount of information reflected in this thesis - Frieda Garcia in Boston, Massachusetts, Louise Davis in Bristol, Pennsylvania and John Kinkade in Loveland, Colorado. Without their willingness to always respond to my inquiries and to provide me with so many details about the memorials, I would not have been able to produce so complete a study. And, last but certainly not least, I thank Professor Kate Clifford Larson—with whom I have not studied and who does not even know me—for communicating with me regularly and sharing with me, from her vast wealth of knowledge, information about Harriet Tubman, slavery, and slave attire. This background material was vital to the thoroughness of my review of the Tubman memorials and I am enormously appreciative. Finally, this manuscript needed the invaluable assistance of Theresa K. Hioki to convert it into acceptable thesis format.

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Introduction

Harriet Tubman (1822 - 1913), self-liberated former slave, conductor on the Underground Railroad prior to the U.S. Civil War, Union Army scout, nurse and cook, and founder of a sanctuary, in Auburn, New York, for indigent, aged and ill former slaves, has become an American icon. The story of her life, compelling enough based solely on the facts, has morphed into a myth about a remarkable woman. In addition to writers who are contributing to an ever-growing body of literature that tells and retells her history and activities, artists have found in Tubman a rich subject for public memorials. Considering the extremely limited number of memorials to African American women in the United States, it is extraordinary that, beginning in 1994, nine full-figure statues of Tubman have been installed in public sites in this country.¹ Six artists are responsible for these nine larger-than-life free-standing sculptures, four of which are castings from the same mold by one artist. Because the depictions of Tubman are so different in iconography, a visual analysis of three representative memorials in conjunction with an identification by Syracuse University Professor Emeritus of African American Studies and History Milton C. Sernett of the three different clusters of activities that characterize Harriet Tubman’s life is the subject of this thesis.²

²See discussion on Sernett, infra., for more details.


**Harriet Tubman Memorials**


While the last-named statue highlights Tubman, it specifically honors the Underground Railroad.

One of the most important factors in determining which statues to study for this thesis was ease of access to information about the artist and commissioning process of the memorial. For the three monuments addressed, the artists, members of the commissioning bodies and additional interested individuals were extraordinarily generous with their time in providing telephone and in-person interviews, multiple follow-up conversations and written archives to assist this writer in the project. The two memorials devoted to Tubman that were not covered were eliminated primarily due to the unavailability of the necessary information to conduct an adequate analysis of the statues. Dr. James Hill’s work is the most recent and most geographically isolated memorial. Designed and executed by Hill, a professor of art history in the Art Department at Salisbury University in Salisbury, Maryland, the memorial has a minimal archive and history to explore. While the archive for Alison Saar’s sculpture is more extensive, much
information was missing from it and, more importantly, neither the artist nor many of the
New York City officials involved in its commission were willing to talk to this writer.
The Michigan memorial was not included because it has the broader subject of the
Underground Railroad and is not primarily about Harriet Tubman.

**Harriet Tubman Biography**

While a detailed chronology of Tubman’s life may be found in appendix 2, it is important to know that the history of Tubman has never been a straightforward recitation of events and activities occurring in a chronological timeline because Tubman was illiterate and never wrote her autobiography. However, early and more recent historians, such as Sarah Bradford and Kate Clifford Larson, referred to later in this paper, acknowledged that she was a superb storyteller who self-edited the recitation of her life to accomplish whatever her goal was at the time of the telling. These writers relied upon the stories to create a Tubman persona and contemporary historians, combining prior works with further research yielding verifiable facts, have produced a credible Tubman biography with certain commonly-accepted dates and events.

Araminta “Minty” Ross (later known as “Harriet Tubman”) was born in Dorchester County, Maryland, on the plantation of Anthony Thompson, probably in late February or early March 1822, the fifth of nine children born to Harriet Green and Ben Ross, both slaves who were owned by different masters. Minty worked as both a house slave and a field hand and, in the course of the latter work, developed great physical strength and knowledge of the land. As a young teen, she suffered a severe blow to her head from an iron weight thrown at her by a plantation overseer; the resulting injury left

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3 Recent biographers such as Catherine Clinton, Kate Clifford Larson, Beverly Lowry and Milton C. Sernett, whose works are referenced later in this paper, agree upon the facts outlined in this chronology.
her with lifelong symptoms similar to epilepsy as well as a devout belief that God spoke directly to her. Sometime in 1844, Minty married a local free black named John Tubman and changed her first name to Harriet, possibly in honor of her mother. In 1849, Harriet’s master, Edward Brodess, died with many debts, which left her at risk of being sold at auction and separated from her family. In late fall of 1849, Tubman became aware of an underground escape organization that was in place on the Eastern Shore. While the exact date of her first trip is unknown, Tubman reported that one night that year, she left her home in Maryland and, following the North Star and instructions from Underground Railroad helpers, she found her way to freedom in Philadelphia. While historians disagree about the number of trips made and number of slaves freed by Tubman, Larson has verified that “over the next eleven years, Tubman returned to the Eastern Shore of Maryland approximately thirteen times to liberate family and friends; in all, she personally brought away about seventy former slaves. She also gave instructions to approximately fifty more slaves who found their way to freedom independently.”

Between 1850 and 1865, Tubman made numerous trips north, especially to Boston, to raise money and promote the abolition of slavery by speaking to groups assembled by her white abolitionist friends and supporters. Among the many people with whom she associated during this time was John Brown, who expected her to join him in his fateful raid at Harpers Ferry. From 1862 to 1865, Tubman served the Union forces...

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4 Kate Clifford Larson, *Harriet Tubman: Bound for the Promised Land* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), xvi-xvii. However, Catherine Clinton, notes: “The number of trips Tubman made and the number of slaves she rescued seem to be a matter of speculation. The totals of ‘nineteen trips’ and ‘more than four hundred slaves’ first appeared in her obituary in Auburn, New York, in March 1913, and an article published in 1912 also offered the number of nineteen trips and ‘over three hundred people.’” Catherine Clinton, “Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad,” in *Passages to Freedom*, ed. David W. Blight, (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2004), 324, footnote 8.

5 Ibid., 175. “Brown commenced his attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry [Virginia] on Sunday night, October 16, 1859. By Tuesday, Brown and his small group of twenty-one men were holed...
as a scout, spy, nurse, cook and laundress operating out of the Hilton Head area of South Carolina. Her most notable martial action was to lead a raid on June 1, 1863, at Combahee Ferry, South Carolina, under the command of Colonel James Montgomery, “to clear torpedoes from the river and destroy the Confederate supply line by taking out bridges and railroad tracks. [The successful raiders] liberate[d] more than seven hundred individuals from [two] plantations.” They also burned buildings, crops and stockpiles of munitions.

Long after the conclusion of the Civil War, when she was in her sixties, Tubman retired to her farm in Auburn, New York, where she was actively involved in the suffragette movement and established a home and hospital for indigent, aged, orphaned and sick African Americans. According to Sernett, in Auburn she received many visitors—authors, journalists, former abolitionist movement colleagues and friends—who were eager to hear her relate the story of her life as a crusader in the battle for freedom and equality in America. Sernett tells that during a visit in 1907 by Frank C. Drake, a reporter for the *New York Herald*, Tubman asked the reporter if he liked apples. When he said he did, she inquired if he ever planted any apple trees. When he said he had not, Tubman replied: “No, but somebody else planted ‘em. I liked apples when I was young and I said, ‘Someday I’ll plant apples myself for other young folks to eat, and I guess I done it.’”

*up inside an engine house, where Robert E. Lee and a party of U.S. Marines had forced them to retreat. The insurgents were captured and the raid was squelched.*

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7 Larson, 279-280. “Tubman’s dream of an institution dedicated to caring for poor and sick African Americans started to become a reality in the spring of 1896. A twenty-five acre lot . . . was put up for auction. . . . Tubman bid on it and, to everyone’s surprise, won. . . . Friends and supporters contributed $250, and she obtained a mortgage of $1000.”

8 Sernett, 168-169.
Harriet Tubman Historiography

While a history of the body of written literature about Tubman is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is relevant to identify its origin. According to historian Milton C. Sernett: “Tubman’s place in the American memory is largely the result of having her story written down by others. . . . Though several dictated letters survive, nothing written by Tubman’s own hand exists.”9 The story began with Tubman’s own oral narrative, which she shaped to create the public persona she desired. But, from the first writing, her voice was mediated by others. The originator of the written history of Tubman’s life and, thus, of the Tubman myth, was Sarah Elizabeth Hopkins Bradford (1818 - 1912).10 Her first book, of about twenty-seven thousand words and entitled *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, was published in Auburn, New York, by printer W. J. Moses, in 1869. In 1886, George R. Lockwood and Son published Bradford’s revised and lengthened version of the first book, now one hundred forty-nine pages long and titled *Harriet, the Moses of her People*. Sernett notes: “Bradford’s [books] served as the principal textual source for information about Harriet Tubman for more than a quarter-century.”11

From 1886 until nearly the second decade of the twenty-first century, the written literature on Tubman for adults was sparse. During that earlier period, Earl Conrad, Tubman’s second major biographer, published *Harriet Tubman* in 1943 under the

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9 Ibid., 105, 107.

10 Ibid., 107-112. “Bradford was the youngest of the seven children of the Honorable Samuel Miles Hopkins, lawyer, and the former Sarah Elizabeth Rogers. . . . [She] moved with her [family] to Geneva in Ontario County in 1832 . . . and married John Melancthon Bradford, a lawyer, on May 15, 1839. . . . At her house were entertained prominent persons who came to Geneva . . . which is thirty-five miles west of Auburn, New York. . . . Tubman moved her aging parents Benjamin Ross and Harriet Green Ross to Auburn in 1859. . . . [T]he Bradford-Tubman connection was made possible because both women had cause to be in Auburn. We lack evidence on when and under what circumstances Bradford and Tubman first met or who first proposed the biographical project that would bring the two women together.”

11 Ibid., 107.
auspices of the Associated Publishers of Washington, D.C., the publishing arm of the 
Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. But Tubman had a stronger 
presence in the juvenile-literature market where, “. . . beginning in the 1960s, [she]
supplanted Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver and Frederick Douglass in 
popularity.” It is this body of literature with which the three artists highlighted in this 
thesis claim they are familiar and which formed their impressions of Tubman, namely 
works that emphasized, for the most part, Tubman as conductor on the Underground 
Railroad.

The latest surge in Tubman literature for adult audiences includes biographies by 
Kate Clifford Larson, Harriet Tubman: Bound for the Promised Land (2004), Catherine 
Clinton, Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom (2004), Beverly Lowry, Harriet 
Tubman: Imagining a Life (2007) and Milton C. Sernett, Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory 
and History (2007). In addition, according to Sernett: “Tubman books, directed at 
younger and younger readers, continue to be published at the rate of two to three per year 
and now total more than one hundred.”

**Thesis Premise**

Historian Milton C. Sernett’s *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History* 
(2007) is both a compilation of historical information about Tubman as well as a review

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12 Ibid., 196. Association for the Study of African American Life and History, accessed 
December 17, 2013, http://www.asalh.org/aboutASALH. “The mission of the Association for the Study of 
African American Life and History (ASALH) is to promote, research, preserve, interpret and disseminate 
information about Black life, history and culture to the global community.”

Scholastic Book Services, 1965), Frances T. Humphreerville, Harriet Tubman: flame of freedom (Boston: 
Houghton Mifflin, 1967), Sam and Beryl Epstein, Harriet Tubman: Guide to Freedom (Champaign, Ill., 
1968, 1975) and Gertrude Hecker Winders, Harriet Tubman, Freedom Girl (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-
Merrill Co., Inc., 1969), to note but a few examples, took the basic threads of the Tubman myth and 
embellished them with illustrations and fictional dialogue.”

14 See Bibliography for complete information.

15 Sernett, 37.
of the history of the full panoply of information about, and memorials to, Tubman that has been produced from her lifetime to the present time. Sernett identifies Tubman as an American icon who has achieved mythic status in our national consciousness. He further identifies three distinct clusters of activities in Tubman’s life, each of which has a moniker for its accompanying myth. It is this theme of Tubman’s separate and distinct identities, corresponding chronologically to stages in her life, that provides the key to the interpretation of the Tubman memorials that are reviewed in this paper.

“Black Moses” was a label provided by Franklin B. Sanborn (1831 - 1917), a white abolitionist and journalist who edited a Boston-based abolitionist newspaper, *Commonwealth*. The term aptly identified Tubman’s most well-known persona as a legendary conductor on the Underground Railroad, making the generally acknowledged number of thirteen trips from southern states to the north between 1850 and 1860 to free seventy former slaves. Sernett argues that while the legend was fostered in slave quarters in the South as well as abolitionist centers in the North, though the telling of dramatic stories about her thrilling exploits on the Underground Railroad, “Tubman herself essentially created the ‘Black Moses’ myth.”

“General Tubman” is the second appellation that Sernett identifies to cover the next phase of Tubman’s life. According to Sernett, white militant abolitionist John Brown (1800 - 1859) was the first person to label Harriet Tubman as “General Tubman” when he introduced her to fellow abolitionists in New England. They met in the spring

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16 Ibid., 42. “During this period, the seeds of the Tubman as Moses legend germinated in the slave quarters as potential escapees waited nervously for the woman who would lead them in the direction of the North Star. Franklin B. Sanborn first introduced Tubman as ‘Moses’ to the American public in a tribute ‘Harriet Tubman’ that appeared in July 1863. ‘By reason of her frequent visits there [the slave South], always carrying away some of the oppressed, she got among her people the name of ‘Moses,’ which it seems she still retains.”

17 Ibid., 52-53.
of 1858 in St. Catharines, Canada, where Tubman lived at the time, when Brown visited her to enlist her aid and to recruit freedom fighters from among the fugitives there. Tubman supported Brown’s plan to raid the Union arsenal at Harpers Ferry and even indicated that she would join the raid; however, for reasons still unknown, she did not join the raiding party. Nevertheless, the title stuck with her abolitionist friends because of her activities between 1862 and 1863 as a Union army scout, spy and military leader of multiple raids in the south to free slaves, particularly the aforementioned raid at Combahee Ferry, South Carolina.

The third representation of Tubman as “Aunt Harriet” or “Mother Tubman” was provided by John P. Jaeckel, president of the Common Council of Auburn, New York, to recognize Tubman’s activities from 1863 until her death in 1913 in caring and advocating for impoverished former slaves, establishing a home for them in Auburn, New York, and continuing to tell the story of her life to succeeding generations. While housing, nursing and being the voice for equal rights, including the right to vote, of the newly freed men and women were certainly important activities to those specific individuals for whom she cared, it was the recounting of her life’s work to receptive audiences, young and old, that catapulted her from simply a champion of freedom’s cause to an iconic, multidimensional symbol of heroic stature, “appealing to a diverse constituency today.

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18 Ibid., 76-78.
19 Ibid., 81-82. “Tubman’s image as ‘General Tubman’ originated because of the abolitionist circles in which she moved, where there was need for a black iconic figure militant enough to be willing to take on the challenge of breaking slavery’s stranglehold on the nation. . . . Today’s symbolic use of [the term] is a composite construction drawing on several aspects of her personal war on slavery and injustice and not simply on her association with the leader of the attack on Harpers Ferry.”
20 Ibid, 179, 180. At Tubman’s funeral service on March 13, 1913, John P. Jaeckel “told of how he had known ‘Aunt Harriet’ since he was a small boy. . . . The pulpit was then given over to Bishop G. L. Blackwell of Philadelphia, president of the Board of Trustees of the Tubman Home, who said: ‘The African Methodist Episcopal Zion church feels honored for having had ‘Aunt Harriet’ as a communicant in its ranks for many years.”
Tubman admirers [even] with contrasting political views and agendas can extract useful inspirational capital by highlighting one or more of the multiple facets of Tubman’s [life].”

The following three chapters of this paper explore all aspects, from conception to reception, of the three selected monuments, including each artist’s expression of what his or her Tubman image represents. However, this thesis posits that, despite the artists’ declarations that all these memorials represent Tubman as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, a visual reading of them in conjunction with Sernett’s recognition of multiple Tubman persona, instead permits a different interpretation. It is credible to view Cunningham’s work as “Black Moses,” Gafgen’s work as “General Tubman,” and DeDecker’s work as “Aunt Harriet.” This thesis proposes that these readings find solid support in a visual analysis.

**Research Methodology and Review of the Literature**

The written records tracing the histories of these three Tubman memorials are minimal. The commissions for these statues will be covered at greater length in the body of this paper, but, for the most part, information comes from primary sources: interviews, documents and newspaper, magazine and on-line articles; no single file or archive exists for any of them. Multiple conversations with representatives of the private, and in one case government, organizations that commissioned these works produced credible histories of how, in each instance, the idea for a tribute to Harriet Tubman ultimately resulted in memorials. In addition, interviews with the artists as well as historians provided information about the specifics of these works.

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21 Ibid., 104.
In addition to the biographical material about Tubman and the primary source material about the memorials, the literature reviewed for this thesis falls into several other categories: art historical information about public memorials to African Americans, historical information about the Underground Railroad, and cultural information about antebellum clothing.  

The commissioning bodies of these works recognize the relationship that each one of them bears to its site and that connection is addressed in each chapter in this thesis. The three memorials reflect the sense of ownership that the community in each location feels with regard to Tubman. Addressing the placement of a work in a particular place, Professor and Director of the Graduate Art History Program at the City College of the City University of New York Harriet F. Senie defines “[S]ite specific public sculpture [as] work that an artist makes for a particular space. The work of art may be linked to that space through formal references, e.g., shape or color, or by embodying references to the history or nature of the site. . . . Public art will continue to be judged on its appropriateness to its site, even though the artist can do no more than consider the physical characteristics and needs of a site or a community at the time of commission.”

Addressing the meaning of public art in African American communities, Senie states: “Public art challenges and supports values and traditions; public art inspires; public art informs.” In addition, Senie reminds the reader that “[p]atronage, however enlightened, is always an expression of self-interest. Public art, in overt and covert ways, embodies the ideals and aspirations of its patron. . . . The connection between patronage, politics,

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22 A complete bibliography by category is included at the end of this paper.
and public art is most evident in the traditional genre of monuments and memorials. Celebration of individuals is easily associated with the interests of those depicted or their immediate circle, those most like them." For example, in Bristol Park, the African American community solidified its sense of civic identity through its patronage of a memorial to Tubman. In Boston, the Harriet Tubman Park and memorial provide a visible reminder of the impact that Tubman’s presence had on the surrounding community in her day as well as the civic pride her reputation continues to provide to the current community. Three of DeDecker’s Tubman memorials are sited in locations where community leaders desired to acknowledge her national reputation and encourage the ideals of freedom and equality to which she devoted her life.

While the Tubman sculptures reviewed in this paper are in different parts of the U.S. and in different types of sites, the “public” to which each one is directed may not be so different. Tubman was a person of such highly respected stature that the audience for each memorial may be national rather than local in scope and uniform in its admiration for her. Catharine R. Stimpson, in the introduction to Whose Art is it? by Jane Kramer, raises issues of: “Who comprises a public? . . . Must the artist belong to the groups she or he is representing? . . . To whom and/or what is the artist responsible? Only to art that is freely conceived and created . . . or to a community?”

Tubman’s broad-based appeal can be seen not only in the plethora of written tributes to her but also in the public statuary dedicated to her and in the diversity of the sites of these memorials. Professor of American Studies at the University of Notre Dame Erika Doss addresses memorials as a specific category of public art. She terms the

25 Ibid., 101.
flourishing of memorials in America today “*memorial mania:* an obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent desire to express and claim those issues in visibly public contexts.”²⁷ Doss asserts that “[public] memorials . . . understood as acts and gifts that honor particular people and historical events . . . and public art are practically synonymous . . . [and are] central to the construction of shared national ideologies and identities.”²⁸ With regard to the terms “monuments” and “memorials,” Doss says they are used interchangeably in the United States today: “[I]f monuments have traditionally functioned to commemorate great men and moments, memorials . . . have similarly served to remember and honor the subjects they address. Both monuments and memorials are memory aids: materialist modes of privileging particular histories and values. . . . Despite their interchangeability, the word ‘memorial’ is used more often and has greater cachet today than ‘monument.’ Almost all of America’s recent commemorative projects are called memorials, not monuments.”²⁹

Professor and Chair of the Department of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh Kirk Savage has addressed the issue of the shift from portrait statues, “localized ornaments, plopped there without much thought about connecting them to a larger landscape design . . . spatially contained by their pedestals and with fewer people actually looking at them” to “spacial thinking . . . of the public monument as a space to be experienced rather than an object to be revered.”³⁰ While the Tubman memorials reviewed in this thesis can be considered portrait statues, this writer has paid attention to the space which each monument inhabits and its surrounding area. Savage also has

²⁸ Ibid., 7, 34, 38.
²⁹ Ibid., 38.
studied an even more specific category of public memorials—those with figures of African Americans. He traces the evolution of the portrayal of the African American in nineteenth century monuments in the United States. “Before 1860 there are no known images whatsoever of African Americans, slave or free, in marble or bronze . . . [although] portraits did appear in simplified linear form on slate gravestones dating to the eighteenth century.”31 Black slaves did not appear on public monuments until the 1870s and American abolitionists, such as sculptor Henry Kirke Brown (1814 - 1886), believed “[t]he function of the image . . . was to force the slave’s plight into constant view so that it would never be forgotten even where slavery had long since disappeared. . . . [Over time] the focus changed from submission [indicated by] certain conventional signifiers of slavery such as chains, ropes, whips, brands and the liberty cap, to supplication [indicated by] racial markers of ‘color’ such as hair, lips, nose, profile, [and] representing enslavement by encoding alienation within the body’s form and pose, [such as] sitting, bent over on himself, chin on hand, legs crossed, arm wrapped behind his back.”32 However, according to Savage, this stereotypical negative imagery of African Americans, even if seen by some as “sentimentalized slavery did not have a legitimate place in the modern nation’s self-image” and disappeared from public monuments by the last quarter of the nineteenth century.33 This thesis contains an analysis of the Tubman works mindful of this history of the enslavement message in the representation of African Americans in public memorials.

To create a context for the “Black Moses” phase of Tubman’s activities, identified by this author as the Tubman depicted in the Cunningham work, literature on the

32 Ibid., 17, 21, 23, 34, 35, 42.
33 Ibid., 161.
Underground Railroad is especially relevant. An anthology edited by Professor of American History at Yale University David W. Blight explores aspects of the Underground Railroad network to provide the reader with a thorough understanding of slavery and the journey out of it. “Whatever the actual first use of the term, it was common by the mid-1840s to speak and write of the Underground Railroad as a clandestine system for runaway slaves. It was already in part a legend, a construction of historical memory, as much as it was historical, by the time of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. . . . As one of the most exceptional figures associated with the Underground Railroad, Tubman became an icon of the movement.”

Finally, to ensure the historical accuracy of the analysis of the garments on the figures in the monuments, the author interviewed textile and clothing historian Leigh Fellner and Katie Knowles, who is a Ph.D. candidate studying The Clothing of Antebellum Slaves in the U.S. at Rice University, Houston, Texas, and consulted a volume on African American apparel in the antebellum South. Tubman served as both a field and house slave; therefore, while she, like all slaves, had a limited wardrobe, she may have had a more varied selection of clothing than most of her peers. However, there are no photographs of Tubman during the time of her slavery, only some that were taken after her self-emancipation. Photography was invented in 1839 and, therefore, in its infancy during the time that Tubman was engaged in the first two phases of her activities, those that are depicted in the Cunningham and Gafgen sculptures. At that time, it was not possible to take candid photographs of subjects in action; the technology allowed

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34 Blight, 3, 197.
only for posed studio shots. Because Tubman was considered a criminal for her activity as an Underground Railroad conductor and she was, therefore, the subject of a high reward if she were captured, she did not want to be recognized by police, plantation owners or anyone who might report her whereabouts. Also, for her activities with the Union army, anonymity was essential. Thus, posing for studio photographs was out of the question for Tubman. Furthermore, there is no description of her dress during her slavery days by any of her biographers; it is a matter of conjecture by clothing historians, based on their knowledge of attire and textiles of the same period, about what is historically accurate in the depiction of the garments in the memorials. During the last phase of her life, as depicted in the monument by DeDecker, there are posed portraits and candid pictures of Tubman that the three artists claim informed their choices of attire for their sculptures of Tubman (see appendix 3). These images of Tubman were taken after the Civil War and at a time when she considered it safe to be photographed.

**Contributions**

The Harriet Tubman memorials are unusual because they represent an African American and a woman; both groups are under-represented in public art. This thesis offers a visual interpretation of three of the works by applying the ideas of Milton C. Sernett, a respected Tubman biographer, through the analysis of the individual monuments. Despite the stated intentions of the artists as to what they were depicting, which they acknowledge was based on a view of Tubman that was emphasized in the literature and legends available to them, this thesis offers another interpretation. Furthermore, the identification, review and synthesis of original source material

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37 Sernett, 106. Harriet Tubman, studio photograph, Auburn, circa 1865.
documenting the creation and commission of these memorials all represent contributions to the literature on Harriet Tubman memorials.

In the collective consciousness, Tubman assumes many roles and appeals to many sensibilities. As Sernett so succinctly states: “Collectively, the embodiment of these roles in one person is significant, considering how powerfully the Tubman as Moses symbol has become. The symbolic Tubman is Moses the Deliverer, but she is a Moses who, unlike the biblical Moses, makes it to the Promised Land and then returns to spy out the land of the enemy, and when the final battle erupts, she is there to give material and spiritual solace to those in need.” While historians may laud a single individual, the community and the artists who are part of it have grown up with and been exposed to multiple representations of Tubman gleaned from oral tales, told and retold, and a body of written literature directed to children and adults. This thesis argues that, despite what an artist may say, or even truly believe, was the aspect of Tubman that inspired his or her particular rendition of this woman, the collective myth of Tubman, with the varied images associated with it, has no doubt had an effect, perhaps subconsciously, on the thinking that resulted in these memorials to Tubman that are so different in iconography.

**Thesis Format**

Each of the following three chapters is a case study of a different memorial. (In this paper, the terms monument and memorial are used interchangeably.) The format for each chapter is: an explanation of the commissioning process, biographical information about the artist, a physical description of the monument including its site, a critical review of the piece by commentators queried by the author of this paper, and concluding observations. The material in each chapter will demonstrate the hypothesis of this thesis, 38 Ibid., 104.
which is that each sculpture can be visually identified to relate to the appropriate one of Milton C. Sernett’s three clusters of activities, with their corresponding monikers, of Tubman’s life.
Chapter 1: *Step on Board* (1999)

By Fern Cunningham

Boston, Massachusetts

Introduction

Located at Columbus Avenue and Pembroke Street (figure 1), in an area known as the “South End” in Boston, Massachusetts, is a two thousand square foot pocket park named Harriet Tubman Square Park. *Step on Board* (1999), by Fern Cunningham, (figure 2) occupies the west end of the park, while its companion piece, *Emancipation* (1913, cast in 1999), by Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, is sited at the east end. The park, originally called Columbus Square, was renamed Harriet Tubman Square on October 3, 1968 because of its proximity to homes where, in the 1850s, Tubman attended and spoke at abolitionist meetings to raise money to free southern slaves from captivity.  

At these events she met emancipation activists, such as “Franklin B. Sanborn (December 15, 1831 - February 24, 1917), a young white abolitionist and school teacher . . . and . . . Thomas Wentworth Higginson (December 12, 1823 - May 9, 1911), the radical abolitionist and Unitarian clergyman who commanded black troops (the First South Carolina Volunteers) during the Civil War.”  

The park also is near the original Harriet Tubman House (founded 1904, relocated 1976) at 566 Columbus Avenue, which houses the headquarters of the United South End Settlements (“U.S.E.S.”), a 1966 amalgamation of several settlement houses (including the Tubman House) that had been

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39 Frieda Garcia, President of the United South End Settlements, Boston, Mass., email message to Elise Geltzer, March 6, 2012.

40 Sernett, 46, 50.
in the area since the 1890s. This writer proposes that the Cunningham work, the first memorial to be addressed in this paper, is an iconic representation of Tubman in her role as the most noted conductor on the Underground Railroad and visually portrays her as the “Black Moses” heroine who is described by Milton C. Sernett and is discussed in the Introduction to this thesis.

The Commission

In 1994, the George B. Henderson Foundation decided to fund a public sculpture project dedicated to a woman and located outside of downtown Boston. Valerie Burns, administrator for the Foundation, found the Tubman Park during a search for a site. Providing funds for a memorial to Harriet Tubman would be atypical for the Foundation, whose projects have included church building and landscape restorations and the Make Way for Ducklings statue in the Boston Public Garden. In 1996, with the assistance of the late Mary Shannon, a resident of the South End and Director of the Boston Art Commission (“BAC”) who was concerned that there were no statues to women on Boston city property, Burns contacted various neighborhood churches and businesses,

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41 Frieda Garcia, *Harriet Tubman & The Harriet Tubman House of United South End Settlements* (Boston: U.S.E.S. Harriet Tubman Resource Center, 1988), 2, 3. “Early settlement house concerns focused on working with people, and the problems they faced, within their own neighborhoods. . . . For many years, Harriet Tubman’s activities on behalf of Blacks and other people in need earned her a loyal following all over the country. Responding to the discrimination in their own community, six Black women of Boston . . . opened the Harriet Tubman House at 37 Holyoke Street, and in 1906 incorporated their organization according to . . . Massachusetts state law. Harriet Tubman was made Honorary President of the Harriet Tubman House during one of her visits to Boston four years before her death in 1913.”

42 “Public Art Guidelines, Henderson Fund,” Boston Art Commission, accessed February 24, 2012, http://www.publicartboston.com. Funds are granted under the auspices of the Boston Art Commission. “Grants are made by the George B. Henderson Foundation in accordance with the Indenture of Trust by Mr. Henderson dated 21 May 1964. This instrument directs that Foundation funds shall be devoted solely to the enhancement of the physical appearance of the City of Boston including projects concerning parks . . . monuments and . . . sculptural works. Each project shall be visible by the public, preferably from a public way.” Additional information regarding the Foundation’s decision to fund this project is not available at this writing.

43 Local Statue to Make History,” *South End News*, February 20, 1997, p. 12. Prior to the Tubman project, the Foundation had commissioned projects only in the Back Bay area and “began looking to do more important art in the city’s neighborhoods.”
tenant associations and other community groups in the area to enlist their support to create a memorial to Tubman. In 1996, representatives of neighborhood groups came together with members of the Boston arts and education communities and the Boston Parks and Recreation Department (the owner of the Tubman Park) to form an ad hoc committee to address this need. Frieda Garcia, President of U.S.E.S., became the driving force behind the effort. To develop a specific plan for the Tubman memorial, the Harriet Tubman Memorial Committee met on a regular basis from 1996 until 1999, when the Tubman Park was completed. According to Garcia, “the city and museum representatives let the community members run the project and it ran smoothly, especially for a public project.”

The Committee sought and received approval from the Boston Art Commission for the project. It prepared a budget for the Tubman Park project, estimating a total cost for the art component at $260,000, and for the entire project, including renovation of the Park to accommodate the sculptures, at $547,217. In addition to other sources, the

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44 Garcia, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, August 29, 2011. Also, Boston Art Commission, Harriet Tubman Park Memorial archive, Boston Massachusetts. Some of the groups that wrote in support of the project were: Cosmopolitan Neighborhood Association, Women’s Service Club of Boston, Inc., Charlie’s Sandwich Shoppe, Pilot Block Neighborhood Association, Union Church.

45 Ibid. Seeking national awareness of and support for the project, the Harriet Tubman Memorial Committee sent a letter (signed by Frieda Garcia for the Committee) on April 1, 1999 to Katie Couric. No response was received.

46 See appendix 4 for a list of Harriet Tubman Memorial Committee members.

47 Garcia, letter to Elise Geltzer, September 16, 2011.

48 Garcia, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, August 29, 2011.

49 Molly Mandeltort, Boston Art Commission, email message to Elise Geltzer, re: BAC Approval Process, February 29, 2012. “Unfortunately, I do not have anything confirming the date of the approval. Proponents don’t submit physical requests for approval, rather they come to an Art Commission meeting (these occur once a month) and present to the assembled Commissioners. Sometime after the presentation . . . the BAC sends out an official letter saying whether they are endorsing the project or not, but [there is] the lack of [a] paper trail I am finding in our files . . . [so] in the past either they were more reliant on verbal confirmation or they were more lenient in their record keeping. It is also possible that over time papers have been misplaced.”
Committee sought, and received, funds from three public art funding sources: $112,500 from the Edward Ingersoll Browne Fund for a planning grant for the design phase, $136,500 from the George B. Henderson Foundation for funds for the construction of the artwork, and, $196,917 from the Boston Parks and Recreation Department for the installation of the artwork and ornamental fence and maintenance of the Park.50

The Harriet Tubman Memorial Committee’s task to select an artist was made easier by one of its members. Joan Tiffany, who represented the Cosmopolitan Neighborhood Association on the Committee, was the parent of a child attending the Park School, where Fern Cunningham teaches art. Tiffany was familiar with and admired Cunningham’s work and recommended her. Other members of the Committee also knew the artist and her work and, when the Committee offered the commission to Cunningham, she immediately accepted it. There was no request for recommendations from a local arts organization, no competition for the commission nor were any other artists considered.51

With no instructions or restraints from the Committee other than the suggestion that the work include children, Cunningham prepared a sketch. “They wanted me to do this piece and they said, ‘you’re free to design whatever you choose’ and they had all the money they needed to cover pretty much whatever I came up with.”52

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50 “Public Art Guidelines, Browne Fund,” Boston Art Commission, accessed February 27, 2012, www.publicartboston.com. “Edward Ingersoll Browne . . . wrote his will directing that one-third of his estate be set aside, in a special fund, for the improvement of Boston’s public spaces. Grants . . . are often utilized for the design, fabrication and installation of permanent works of public art in Boston.” The Boston Art Commission has representation on this board and assists in determining whether submitted proposals comply with the terms of Mr. Browne’s will; and, “Harriet Tubman Park Project: Harriet Tubman Memorial Total Project Budget, February 13, 1991,” Boston Art Commission, viewed on site, Boston, Massachusetts, August 2, 2011.


**Background and Oeuvre of the Artist**

Fern Cunningham (b. 1949) (figure 3) was born in New York City. Her father is an art lover and her mother is an artist and an art teacher and, as Cunningham recalls:

“[e]verything she did was art related, so my whole upbringing was geared toward the life I live now. . . . [F]or my parents, traveling anywhere was only to go to the museums . . . . So by the time I was in fifth grade, I had apparently, my mother tells me, announced that I was going to be an art teacher and by the time I was in tenth grade I remember clearly having made the decision to be a sculptor.”\(^{53}\)

Cunningham studied sculpture in Fontainebleau, France, the summer after graduating from high school and continued her sculpture studies at the Boston University School of Fine and Applied Arts, from which she graduated in 1971 with a B.A. in Fine Arts. “I was always very interested in classical art. . . . I wanted to be able to create art in the Michelangelo tradition, in the Rodin tradition . . . . I was enthralled with the famous Greek sculpture ‘Nike’. . . . I wanted to work like that, only I wanted to do it from a black cultural standpoint. So my work and my understanding of my expression has always been a mixture of cultures. I guess that’s natural, because I am a mixture of cultures, but I consider myself to be, first and foremost, a black woman and I seek to create from that point of view.”\(^{54}\)

While Cunningham is happiest creating works of art, financial restraints led her, after graduation from Boston University, to the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts in Boston and then to the Park School in Brookline, Massachusetts, where she has been teaching art since 1983. She also teaches a figurative sculpture course at Pine Manor

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\(^{53}\) Ibid., accessed March 6, 2012.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. In addition to being “. . . able to stay afloat financially] whether in lean years or in full years . . . [a]t the same time, I love teaching art so much that I don’t see myself stopping no matter how many commissions I have. I feel that the two are entwined . . . that being around kids keeps me thinking . . . it keeps me up to date with what’s happening in the world and there’s a great deal of creative energy to be had just from being around young people . . . I have trouble staying in the studio alone for too long.” Cunningham sees her sculpture as educational. “I’ve always taught in my art. For me, if someone looks at what I’ve done and they don’t understand it, I’ve failed.”

Cunningham’s oeuvre consists of a combination of personal sculptures and public monuments. The former category is a result of private commissions from Park School parents who wanted small bronze portraits of their children. “I love doing portraits of children. That’s one of my specialities, so the more the merrier.” In her public monuments, the artist works as a realist who is most comfortable using a figurative, rather than abstract, form and finding beauty in the ordinary rather than the heroic. She thinks it is particularly effective for “people of color [who] have not been represented in public spaces . . . . There’s little visual imagery with which people of color can identify. It’s important to see ourselves in a figurative form, validated as beautiful and significant.” Among her most notable works is The Sentinel (2003), which is part of the permanent collection of the sculpture path at Forest Hills Cemetery in Boston, Massachusetts. Cast in bronze, the female figure is “the wise old woman of Africa; her

55 Ibid.
mission is to observe all that transpires.” Installed in Milford, New Hampshire (2006), there a full-size bronze Harriet Wilson Memorial (1825 - 1900) that commemorates a New Hampshire mulatto woman who, in 1859, published a controversial novel (Our Nig). Rise (2005), consists of several figures who represent the diverse history of the Mattapan area, home to many different ethnic populations, and is placed at the entrance to Mattapan Square in Boston. These works, rendered in a figurative style and representing African Americans, reflect Cunningham’s sensitivity and compassion for her subjects.

However, the public sculpture for which Cunningham is best known, and of which she is most proud, is Step on Board, the “testament to Fern’s will to make the presence of the black experience known throughout the city of Boston.” Creating this monument was an epiphany for Cunningham, who had been “struggling at sculpting for 30 years . . . but knew she had other talents and constantly wrestled with the nagging feeling that she ought to be writing books, or producing plays or acting in films.” Emulating Tubman’s tenacity, Cunningham worked for three years to sculpt the memorial and found “the courage and direction I didn’t even know I had” from Tubman’s example. With this piece, the artist came to the realization that sculpture is her language and that she has achieved her goal of creating socially valuable art.

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64 Ibid.
Description of Step on Board and Its Site

Step on Board is a bronze statue, ten feet tall and seven feet wide, cast by the “lost wax” process.\(^\text{65}\) It depicts Harriet Tubman leading a group of six people north, from captivity to freedom. The figure of Tubman is sculpted in the round while the other figures emerge, in varying degrees of relief, from a wall behind all of them. The wall and the slab upon which all the figures stand are made of Rocky Mountain Rose granite, similar in color to the bricks of the townhouses that surround Harriet Tubman Park and that would have been in existence during Tubman’s visits to Boston.

In the monument, Tubman is in motion with her left leg forward and her left foot suspended as she steps off of the monument’s base. She is wearing a headscarf tied in a knot at the nape of her neck. Another scarf of ample material is draped around the top of her garment, below her neck, and tied in a knot at the front. She is clothed in an outfit that appears to be a voluminous skirt that ends just at the top of her shoes and an equally roomy long-sleeve bodice that is hemmed in a vee shape just below the waist where the top meets the skirt. There are cuffs at the wrists of the full shouldered inset sleeves and twelve visible small buttons between the neck and waist. The sleeves are inset into the bodice and full at the shoulder. Her shoes are sturdy laced brogans with a small heel. Tubman’s right arm enfolds a Bible, her hand clasped at its spine. Her left arm is outstretched, bent slightly at the elbow with the palm out, and spans three of the other

\(^{65}\) “Lost Wax Process,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., accessed May 14, 2014, [http://www.EncyclopaediaBritannica.com/lost-waxprocess](http://www.EncyclopaediaBritannica.com/lost-waxprocess). “Lost wax process, also called cire-perdue, is a method of metal casting in which a molten metal is poured into a mold that has been created by means of a wax model. Once the mold is made, the wax model is melted and drained away. Common on every continent except Australia, the lost wax method dates from the 3\(^{rd}\) millennium BC and has sustained few changes since then.”
figures in the sculpture. Tubman’s head is tilted slightly upward, her eyes directed straight ahead, her mouth unsmiling but her countenance serene.

Of the remaining five figures, Cunningham has explained that some depict specific people and some are representative types.\(^{66}\) Farthest left, and nearly hidden behind Tubman, is a young woman holding an infant, both of whom are meant to represent Tubman’s brother’s wife who went into labor on the night planned for her escape and therefore was left behind with her child.\(^{67}\) Next to them is an older man with short curly hair and a beard and mustache, whose only visible clothing is a stand-up shirt collar. He represents the older people whom Tubman took out of the south, like her parents. Beside him is a young woman with straight hair whose eyes are closed and whose head rests on the shoulder of the male figure beside her. She is symbolic of Sally Hemings, who was purported to be a mixed race woman owned by a white master (Thomas Jefferson) who lived with her and fathered her children although Hemings was, nevertheless, always considered to be a slave.\(^{68}\) This figure wears clothes similar to Tubman’s. The young man supporting the Hemings figure represents Joe Bailey, a strapping black man who carried the largest bounty on him of any slave prior to the Civil War.\(^{69}\) Joe has short, curly hair, no facial hair, a collared shirt that buttons down the front, suspenders, a belt, denim-like pants with a fly front and sturdy shoes. He carries a

\[^{66}\text{Fern Cunningham, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 26, 2011.}\]

\[^{67}\text{Sernett, 57, quotes from Franklin B. Sanborn’s Commonwealth article of 1863 that on Tubman’s “last journey . . . in December 1860, she rescued a party [that included] the infant who had to ‘be drugged with opium to keep it from crying on the way’ and alarming the authorities.” However, Cunningham does not indicate that this reference inspired her design.}\]


\[^{69}\text{Larson, 134. Typical rewards ranged from $300 to $800. Joe Bailey’s owner, William Hughlett, had only recently purchased Joe for about $2000 before he ran away and the extraordinary reward of $1500 probably reflected Joe’s value and skills as well as Hughlett’s anger. “Hughlett may have taken Bailey’s escape as a personal affront and determined to get him back at all costs. Perhaps Hughlett wanted to send a message to the slave quarters.”}\]
sack over his left shoulder. Behind Joe is the remaining figure, a young woman with braided hair, whose head alone is visible and who represents the young people who traveled north.

Inscribed on the reverse side of the granite slab that forms the back of the memorial (figure 4) are some quotations selected by Cunningham and a map of the path Tubman followed to freedom from Maryland to Canada. Cunningham admits that “people were upset that Boston was not on it but Tubman’s escape route went from Delaware to St. Catharines, Canada, and she did not get to Boston until later, and, furthermore, the size and shape of the stone simply did not accommodate Boston.”

The monument rests on a plaza of brick pavers among which are inserted a dozen twelve inch square concrete blocks, upon each of which is depicted a symbolic or readily recognizable item. The blocks appear to be reminiscent of, and informed by, the

70 Step on Board
Harriet Ross Tubman
1820 - 1913
Go Down Moses, Way Down in Egypt’s Land
Tell Old Pharoah - Let My People Go
There are two things I’ve got a right to
and these are death or liberty. One or the other
I mean to have. No one will take me back alive. Harriet Tubman
The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the
witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism. Frederick Douglass
Tell my brothers to be always watching unto prayer,
and when the good old ship of Zion comes along
to be ready to step on board. Harriet Tubman
She expected deliverance when she prayed
unless the Lord had ordered otherwise. Sarah Bradford
Canada — Rochester — Syracuse — Albany — New York City — Philadelphia —
Delaware — Maryland

71 Cunningham, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 26, 2011.
controversial “quilt code” legend of recent vintage. However, according to historian Kate Clifford Larson and Garcia “they are newer additions from local school children who were selected from among those who attend programs offered by the United South End Settlements.” The representations on the pavers are household (eating utensils) or machinery (farm equipment) items as envisioned by the students and are not necessarily quilt oriented or self-contained narratives.

**Artist’s Explanation**

Cunningham spent months studying Tubman’s legacy, reading everything she could find and looking at whatever photographs were available. The artist initially conceived the figure of Tubman as seated because the extant photographs of her are all from after the Civil War and, thus, show her as an older woman, often posed in a chair. But, after doing her research, Cunningham decided that she wished to portray the heroine as young “because people are known for what they do when they are young.” To capture Tubman’s “tenacity and emboldened spirit… I thought she should be standing

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73 In 1998, Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard published *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), in which they posit a theory that African American slaves may have used a code to navigate the Underground Railroad (1780 - 1860) through quilts with patterns that contained secret messages that helped direct slaves to freedom. “The theory has met with controversy since its publication.”

74 Larson, email message to Elise Geltzer, August 24, 2011. "Most (actually all) professional scholars of the field [Kate Clifford Larson and Catherine Clinton, for example] are troubled by the quilt code."

75 Larson, email message to Elise Geltzer, August 24, 2011.

76 Cunningham, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 26, 2011. Specific book titles and photographs to which the artist referred are unavailable at this writing.

77 In the mid 1990s, there was little documentation of Tubman’s history. For the most part, her story was found in Bradford’s biography and in children’s books referred to in the Introduction to this thesis. The photographs of Tubman that Cunningham consulted are in the collections of the Tubman Museum in Auburn, New York, and the New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Bronx, New York.

78 Ibid.
and in motion. She should be pulling people along. I wanted to convey the emotion and tension of her moving people along.”

Cunningham wanted the memorial to have an urban rather than rural feeling and, therefore, created a backdrop of a wall instead of trees. Occasional public and press comments have likened it to a gravestone, which Cunningham regrets: “that was not meant to happen, it just did.” The image of the wall is symbolic and carries part of the monument’s message: “[it is] everything they had to come out of, the wall of slavery, the wall of bondage. They come out at low relief at first, and become more full, until Harriet is the only one in full relief away from the wall.” Thus, Harriet Tubman, sculpted in full, has symbolically achieved her freedom while her companions, still en route north for the first time, are gradually emerging from bondage.

Cunningham’s review of images of Tubman and other slaves gave her inspiration for the figures’ faces. Tubman’s face is a blended likeness of the representations of her in period photographs and drawings. “[E]very photograph of Harriet Tubman is intensely different. Her face seemed to change radically from photograph to photograph . . . heavier in one, thin, kind of gaunt in another, very elderly in another, middle aged in one . . . so my task became: how can I give the feeling of her and blend all these images of her into one so that people will look at her and feel that’s Harriet. . . . I tried to make her youthful.” The artist also wanted to show Tubman as the very short woman that she was but also as a monumental figure.

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77 Cunningham, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 26, 2011.
78 McQuaid, Glue, 5.
As for Tubman’s body and clothes, Cunningham found clothes in the theater department of the Park School, where she teaches, dressed a model in them and then began to sculpt. Since her research indicated that Tubman always dressed to blend in with her surroundings, Cunningham clothed her in a stylish dress and shawl that would be appropriate for an urban setting.\(^\text{80}\)

Cunningham’s Tubman carries a Bible under her arm. It indicates her belief that “she had the ‘charm’—her devout faith in God’s design and power through her gave her the strength and courage to carry on when all seemed lost.”\(^\text{81}\) It also is a reference to her reputation and nickname among the enslaved community as the Moses of her people.\(^\text{82}\) “Her trips back and forth into slave territory inspired tremendous respect and awe from many people, white and black . . . ‘the whites can’t catch Moses’”\(^\text{83}\) Faith in Tubman and the success of her missions may be why “the men and women behind her appear calm and assured. Perhaps their journey is coming to an end, or perhaps their expressions are not literal but symbolic, illustrating the spirit of courage and devotion that drove Tubman on” as well as those who entrusted their lives to her and traveled with her.\(^\text{84}\) Historians agree that Tubman carried a pistol.\(^\text{85}\) However, Cunningham “put the Bible in her hand instead of the gun.”\(^\text{86}\) It is generally believed, although not known for certain, that Tubman never used the firearm. But the artist, a mother of four children and a teacher

\(^{80}\) Cunningham, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 26, 2011. No specific references regarding the clothing are available at this writing.

\(^{81}\) Larson, 137.

\(^{82}\) Larson, 136.

\(^{83}\) Ibid.


\(^{85}\) Larson, 101.

who is concerned about inner city violence and the attraction to weapons, refused to "glorify arms and the gun was not the reason they followed her; rather, they loved her."®

Cunningham asserts that this monument—in fact, any public sculpture that she creates—has multiple messages. In addition to memorializing Tubman, it "should lift up people and bring them out of the muck they are in, educate the public, create a feeling of dignity, pride, elevation, and all people should relate to it. It definitely promotes 'racial uplift.' In addition, the work is geared to improving the world as opposed to improving ourselves. The message is: think more, be more sensitive, help others and the world."®

While Step on Board was commissioned for Harriet Tubman Square Park and to co-exist with its companion piece, Emancipation by Fuller, Cunningham believes it could work as well somewhere else. However, she concedes that it could be considered "site-specific" in terms of the area because of Tubman’s frequent visits to friends and to enlist aid from supporters in this community and because the Park and the settlement house have been named in her honor, as well as the fact that Boston was a stop on the Underground Railroad.® Thus, as with other memorials addressed in this paper, "the site frames, if not defines, its content."® The monument serves as a backdrop for community events such as a women’s walk, Tubman Park clean-up activities, performances and

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® Cunningham, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 26, 2011.
® Ibid. At this writing, there is no documented or anecdotal information about audience response to the memorial or its message except for one visitor interview conducted by this writer at the site. At the conclusion of an explanation of Tubman’s history and the intended message of the monument given by this writer, the foreign visitor expressed the opinion that the message was conveyed as intended and the sculpture was impressive.
® Ibid.
programs sponsored by the Boys and Girls Clubs. Cunningham herself has spoken about Tubman to children at the Park.\footnote{Cunningham, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 26, 2011. However, at this writing, there is no additional information about specific activities that have been or are scheduled to be held at the memorial site or information about attendance at previous events.}

Cunningham chose the title “Step on Board” for her memorial because the traditional African-American spiritual “The Gospel Train,” first sung on April 26, 1863, was meaningful to Tubman’s brother.\footnote{Ibid. Cunningham believes the gospel song was being sung when Tubman’s brother met his wife. Although the artist cannot verify the source of that information, she accepted its veracity when she entitled the monument; thus it is significant in the artistic history of the piece.} The song contains the phrase “get on board.” The title also references Tubman’s pose in the statue—she is stepping off onto something.\footnote{Ibid.}

Analysis

The features of Step on Board that deserve analysis are the same ones highlighted in the other monuments reviewed in this paper, starting with the clothing. While this work portrays six individuals, the clothing of only two figures is fully visible, along with a small segment of the apparel on a third figure. Once again, period-appropriate inaccuracies in the clothing have drawn the attention of historians. Tubman’s sculpted attire bears a striking resemblance to clothing she wears in a photograph of her circa 1887.\footnote{Sernett, 146. Photograph of Harriet Tubman and seven dependents, circa 1887. Florence Woolsey Hazzard Papers, 1819 - 1976. Collection number 2516. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, 2B Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.} In fact, Cunningham, who viewed every Tubman photograph and image that she could find, acknowledges seeing this picture and being influenced by it when she selected the Park School Theater Department’s costume for her sculpture.\footnote{Cunningham, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 26, 2011.} However, it is important to reiterate that the monument depicts Tubman in the 1860s while the
photograph is dated 1887 and there is no information available as to when the dress
Tubman wears in it was made. Nevertheless, regarding specific elements of this outfit,
historians Clinton, Larson and Fellner all opine that the length of the skirt on Tubman
(and on the other female figure in the monument)—slightly below the ankle and meeting
the top of the shoe—is historically accurate for the 1860s as well as reflecting the skirt in
the circa 1887 photograph.96

However, the fullness of the outfit elicited some criticism. Fellner comments that
“Tubman appears to be wearing a circa 1890 bodice that is several sizes too large for
her.”97 This opinion is elaborated upon by clothing and textile expert Katie Knowles,
who points out several historical inaccuracies in the clothing.98 Tubman, a working
woman in the 1860s, would not have worn an outfit with so much fabric—the fullness of
the sleeves, skirt and neck scarf and the bodice piping are reflective of a post-Civil War
style of high fashion, although the skirt length is appropriate. In addition, the bodice
would have ended straight across and not in a vee shape. While a smaller neck scarf
would be common attire, this one nearly reaches the shoulders and is more like a shawl.
The headscarf on Cunningham’s Tubman is tied in an unusual gypsy-like manner. Field
hands, such as Tubman, wore headscarves to keep their hair and heads clean while they
were working. However, it would have been more accurate if it were tied in a bun in the
back with the ends tucked into the scarf.99 While Knowles approves of the soled shoes

96 Catherine Clinton, in person interview by Elise Geltzer, New York City, August 22, 2011; Larson,
email message to Elise Geltzer, September 29, 2011; Larson, email message to Elise Geltzer, quoting
Leigh Fellner, October 15, 2011.
97 Ibid, Larson email message, quoting Fellner.
98 Katie Knowles, in person interview by Elise Geltzer, New York City, December 18, 2011.
99 Ibid.
with heels, Fellner believes the sculpted Tubman may be shod in wood-soled brogans, which would be historically inaccurate.\textsuperscript{100}

Larson also takes issue with the Bible that Cunningham’s Tubman carries in the crook of her right arm. In nineteenth century artwork, inclusion of specific articles on or near the subject of the image signified a certain status—in this case, holding a book would indicate literacy. However, Larson comments that “. . . the book is confusing in that Tubman was not literate, but literacy for her family was extremely important. Faith, if it is a Bible, is key to Tubman’s life, but I think you can somehow convey that without featuring a Bible that she could never read.”\textsuperscript{101} Cunningham asserts her inclusion of the Bible was to show Tubman’s faith in God, and that Tubman had memorized the Bible although, admittedly, she could not read it.\textsuperscript{102}

As for Tubman’s face in the Boston memorial, Feller considers it “poignant” and Larson thinks “her facial features are the nicest of all the statues—it bothers me a lot that most do not show Tubman as a beautiful woman. There is too much masculinity to her face in the other statues. She was, according to her owner, ‘fine looking’!”\textsuperscript{103}

Turning to the clothing on the other fully visible figure—the frontmost male figure who represents Joe Reilly—historians, again, take issue with some items. Fellner notices that “the men are wearing twentieth century style shirts and their trousers have a center fly rather than being broadfalls (where the whole front flaps down and is held in place with buttons on either side.)”\textsuperscript{104} Larson comments “The belt and pants on the man to the right are all wrong. Who wears a belt and suspenders, by the way? And men did not wear

\textsuperscript{100} Larson email message to Elise Geltzer, quoting Leigh Fellner, October 15, 2011.
\textsuperscript{101} Larson email message to Elise Geltzer, September 24, 2011.
\textsuperscript{102} Cunningham telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 26, 2011.
\textsuperscript{103} Larson email messages to Elise Geltzer: October 15, 2011 and September 24, 2011.
\textsuperscript{104} Larson email message to Elise Geltzer, October 15, 2011.
pants with zip-fly fronts until the twentieth century.”

Knowles points out several historical inaccuracies in the clothing on the male figures. With regard to the pants, the legs should be cut straighter, the pants should sit higher on the waist and not be fitted in the crotch, the fly should be a button front instead of what appears to conceal a zipper and there should be no belt. However, the length of the pants is appropriate for a working man and the pants material appears to be denim, which would have been possible at that time. With regard to the shirts on both of the male figures, the style reflects too much of the twentieth century; they should not button down the front or have a cuffed collar or set-in sleeves at the shoulders, nor should the sleeves have so much material. Rather, a shirt should appear more like a shift with an open round neck that slips over the head and just a hem—not a finished cuff—at the neck and wrists. According to Knowles, the satchel is historically accurate with its shoulder strap and rounded shape, which could either be open at the top or have a flap, and the shoes appear to be field or work boots, laced high and with wooden bottoms, a metal toe and made of coarse leather, which would also be appropriate. The clothing inaccuracies that are included seem to indicate to this writer that, as long as the garments presented a valid impression of replicating those of the slavery era, Cunningham was less concerned with historical details than she was with the emotional appeal that this tableau and these figures would have for the viewer.

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105 Larson email message to Elise Geltzer, October 15, 2011, and “World Patent Marketing,” Desa Industries, Inc., accessed June 28, 2011, http://www.inventors.about.com/zipper. While Elias Howe received a patent in 1851 for an “Automatic, Continuous Clothing Closure,” he did not market it. In 1917, Gideon Sundback, was issued a patent for a “Separable Fastener” and within the first year of operation, a few hundred feet of fastener were being produced per day.

Conclusion

*Step on Board* and its surrounding pavers should be considered as a single entity that engages the viewer at the west end of Harriet Tubman Square Park. While the figures are about ten feet tall and therefore, larger than life size, the monument stands on a low (six inch) base at ground level that makes it very accessible. A visitor can touch the figures, stand next to them, even amongst them, and feel part of the group. The monument gives the viewer a sense of intimacy with the individuals depicted and the activity in which they are engaged. Cunningham has shown Tubman in a manner that emphasizes the goal that Tubman holds most dear—freedom—and the way she spent her life achieving it, “steadfastly, courageously, defiantly . . . [t]hat makes her a role model not only for those who shared h[er] values, but for all those who aspire to difficult goals.”

Indeed, Cunningham admits that Tubman inspired her as she worked on the difficult task of creating this monument. Since “[h]olding one’s palm upward usually means one is begging for something,” Tubman’s outstretched left arm with her palm up, read in conjunction with the Bible held in her right arm, suggested she is seeking divine help in her work. With her left leg extended, Tubman is depicted in motion and, therefore, in a pose that is characteristic of that for which she is best known, leading slaves north as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Therefore, the proposition proffered at the beginning of this chapter—that *Step on Board* is an easily recognizable representation of Tubman as “Black Moses”—is amply borne out by the above discussion. Furthermore, as Sernett, discussing this particular memorial in his book, so succinctly

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108 Durante, 176. “Christopher Columbus (1894) by Jeronimo Sunol.”
109 Durante, 161. “Jose Marti (1865) by Anna Hyatt Huntington.”
puts it: “Cunningham . . . accepted the commission to do the Tubman sculpture, conscious of how this choice to use public space critiqued the tradition to honor, in the main, white male historical figures. By fashioning the bronze tribute to Tubman, Cunningham wanted to raise a question at the heart of the American dilemma: ‘Who is a hero?’”\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{110} Sernett, 245.

By James L. Gafgen

Bristol, Pennsylvania

Introduction

In Lions Park, on the bank of the Delaware River in Bristol (figure 5), Pennsylvania, a memorial to Harriet Ross Tubman (figure 6) joins monuments sponsored by the Italian, Irish and Hispanic communities of the area. The Tubman sculpture was commissioned by the African American Historical and Cultural Society of Bucks County (“AAHCS” or “Society”).

The iconography of this memorial is strikingly different from that of Cunningham’s Step on Board which is discussed in the prior chapter, and DeDecker’s Harriet Tubman which is discussed hereinafter. This iteration can be read as the portrayal of a military figure who appears posed to charge ahead and to lead her unseen followers, perhaps into battle. This writer proposes that the sculpture is a recognizable representation of Harriet Tubman as the “General Tubman” persona envisioned by Milton C. Sernett and described in the Introduction to this paper.

The Commission

In 1998, the Society adopted the specific goal of “erecting a Cultural Monument dedicated to African American participation in Bucks County at Lions Park on the Delaware River in Bristol.” Sometime in 2004, the leaders of the Society attended a lecture by Dr. Charles Blockson, curator of The Charles L. Blockson Afro-American

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111 African American Historical and Cultural Society of Bucks County Information Pamphlet. (Publication date unavailable at this writing.) Incorporated in 1993, the AAHCS is dedicated to researching, sharing and documenting “historical information that declares African American participation in respective Bucks County communities.”

112 Ibid.
Collection, a part of the Special Collections Department of the Temple University Libraries in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. TheBethel AME Church in Bristol, Dr. Blockson stated: “If you ever consider putting up a monument, it should be a monument to Harriet Tubman.” According to Louise Davis, an AAHCS officer and Tubman descendent, Dr. Blockson was friendly with a Tubman niece who had given him some artifacts from and information about Tubman which he shared with the Society. That information, combined with the scope of Tubman’s activities before, during and after the Civil War, solidified the Society’s sense that she was the ideal subject.

In response to a petition from the AAHCS, the Bristol Borough Council voted, on March 10, 2003, to “support[s] the construction of a monument at Bristol Lions Park in the likeness of Harriet Ross Tubman. This memorial will recognize the efforts of all people to strive for individual freedom and against repression.” With the Council supportive of and imposing no restraints upon its project, the AAHCS began the task of raising money and selecting an artist. A major portion of the funding for the memorial was contributed by Pennsylvania State Representatives Dwight Evans, Democrat, Member 203rd District, and Thomas C. Corrigan, Sr., Democrat, Member 140th District.

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115 AAHCS officers: Louise Davis, Sidney L. Taylor and Deal Wright, in person interview by Elise Geltzer, Bristol Park Public Library, Bristol Park, Pennsylvania, May 14, 2011. According to Davis, in a conversation between Blockman and AAHCS officers after his lecture, Blockman explained that, as a result of learning more about Tubman through his friendship with her niece, he believed that Tubman’s personal qualities—small stature, female, slave, African American—and the range of her activities—Underground Railroad conductor, abolitionist activist, spy and commander during the Civil War—made her someone who should be commemorated and around whom many people would rally, and that so honoring her would send a good message to others.
117 Davis, S. Taylor and Wright, in person interview by Elise Geltzer, Bristol Park, Pennsylvania, May 14, 2011; and AAHCS Harriet Tubman Archives.
District. Each official arranged for a $50,000 grant for the monument. Additionally, a letter writing campaign sponsored by the Society produced funds from “[s]ociety members, concerned Black citizens” and other individuals but “disappointingly . . . not from small or large companies.”

Because the AAHCS had instigated and championed the drive for a memorial to honor Tubman, it assumed responsibility for identifying and commissioning an artist. It offered the task to local, highly respected artist William Smith, who prepared the initial two-dimensional drawing of the proposed memorial. However, illness prevented Smith from continuing with the project and AAHCS officers turned to another local artist, James L. Gafgen (figure 7), who had been recommended by Representative Corrigan and with whose work they were familiar and impressed. The Society contractually agreed to turn the project and Smith’s drawing over to Gafgen, the only provisos being that there were to be no figures other than Tubman in the monument, that Tubman had to have a raised outstretched arm with her finger pointing and that the figure had to be positioned heading north (figure 8). The height was also specified at six feet. The remaining elements were to be determined by Gafgen.

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118 Dwight Evans, an African American who has a strong interest in African American history, is responsive to and encourages commemorating activities within his community. Thomas Corrigan, who is also interested in history and supportive of the African American Community, knew sculptor James Gafgen and recommended him to the Society. Davis, telephone interview by E. Geltzer, March 2, 2012.
120 AAHCS Harriet Tubman Archives.
121 AAHCS members who served on the memorial committee were: Louise Davis, Dr. Keith Jones, Sidney L. Taylor and Deal Wright.
122 Davis, Taylor and Wright in person interview by Elise Geltzer, May 14, 2011. Smith, a resident of Bristol, an artist and a member of the AAHCS, was friendly with the Society’s members. When the decision was made to honor Tubman, Davis and Taylor, who are also artists, and Smith offered preliminary sketches for the proposed statue. The above-mentioned AAHCS committee members felt Smith’s drawing made the strongest statement and selected it to be used for the memorial. No further information is available at this writing regarding Smith’s background.
123 Ibid.
Upon awarding the commission for the memorial to Gafgen, the AAHCS conveyed to him their vision for Tubman–that she appear “grounded and determined, a force of energy moving forward, both physically and symbolically, into the future, and that she was prepared– thus, the gun.”124 Sidney L. Taylor, President of the Society, wanted this memorial to convey that “although Tubman was a small African American woman with a reward posted for her capture, she had great determination and did great things and, with that kind of determination, especially if one is African American, anyone can do great things.”125 Deal Wright, Vice President of the Society, envisioned a universal message of struggle and deliverance that ended with moving ahead that would appeal to people of other cultures as well as African Americans and show an understanding that many people have struggled; a message of respect that would give hope. Louise Davis, Secretary and Treasurer of the Society, embraced the message of cooperation that the memorial symbolized–just as Tubman did not accomplish her work by herself, it was fitting that Gafgen, a Caucasian artist, would work with the AAHCS to produce this monument that symbolized overcoming great odds to reach success.126

**Background and Oeuvre of the Artist**

James L. Gafgen (b. 1941), a native of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, has been sculpting since he was in the seventh grade. A perceptive art teacher, Marvin Levitt at Marshall High School in Morrisville, Pennsylvania, recognized that Gafgen’s artistic talent worked better in three dimensional mode and the artist has been working in the sculpture medium ever since. After a thirty-one year career as a welder at US Steel,
Gafgen served a two year internship at the Johnson Atelier Technical Institute for Sculpture in Mercerville, New Jersey, “learning every facet of what is necessary to be a sculptor” and ten years as the Deputy Director of the Modeling and Enlarging Department at Johnson. Retired since 2005, Gafgen now works exclusively on his personal commissions in his private studio. In addition to the Tubman memorial, other public life-size bronze monuments by Gafgen include, in Trenton, New Jersey (1999), *Samuel Plumeri* (? - 1988), father of Joe Plumeri who is the co-owner of the Trenton Thunder baseball team; in Bristol, Pennsylvania (2001), *Private Michael Dougherty* (1844 - 1930), Civil War Hero; in Patterson, New Jersey (2002), *Larry Doby* (1923 - 2003), Cleveland Indians centerfielder; and in Morrisville, Pennsylvania (2003), *Robert Morris* (1734 - 1806), American Revolution Financier.

Gafgen wants his work “besides showing a representational three-dimensional form. . . to capture the fourth dimension, which is the person. . . . [Y]ou are constantly involved with not only the structure of a piece, but also the character of people. The pursuit of character, something Jim refers to as ‘the entertainment package’ or ‘theatre feeder program,’ involves research, study and lots of thought.” In his pursuit of an accurate “package,” Gafgen “tries to answer questions about . . . appearance . . . background . . . anecdotal incidents and how [the individual] handled people.”

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129 Ibid.
131 Ibid., 112.
Description of *Harriet Ross Tubman* and Its Site

Unveiled on June 24, 2006, the statue of Harriet Ross Tubman is six feet five inches tall and made of highly polished, smooth surfaced bronze. It stands upon a three-inch-high bronze plinth that was cast as part of the sculpture, a five-foot-high prairie green granite pedestal that is twenty-four inches wide at the top and thirty inches wide at the bottom, all of which is atop an eight-inch-high round granite base. The entire monument is centered atop a round pavement that is twenty-four feet in diameter and composed of red brick-size pavers. The pavement is encircled with ten granite pillars that are thirty-six inches high by fourteen inches wide by twelve inches deep, alternating with ten granite slabs that are twelve inches high by eighteen inches wide by twelve inches deep. Inscribed on each pillar is a quotation, the name of its author and the name of the contributor of that pillar. The shorter granite slabs are tributes to old African American families of Bristol and in recognition of individuals who assisted in the Tubman project (figure 9). The imbedded ground-level pavers contain donors’ names, memories and comments. A bronze inscribed plaque is affixed to the front of the pedestal (figure 10).132

The figure of Harriet Tubman stands as if in mid-stride, her right foot flat on the ground and the left on the ball of the foot. Her left arm is bent at the elbow and the hand

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132 HARRIET ROSS TUBMAN
ABOLITIONIST - AMERICAN HERO
CIRCA 1820 - 1913
HARRIET TUBMAN ESCAPED FROM SLAVERY IN 1849. SHE FLED TO PHILADELPHIA WHERE, AS A CONDUCTOR ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD, SHE MADE 19 SORTIES INTO THE SOUTH, LIBERATING OVER 300 SLAVES. MS. TUBMAN ALSO SERVED AS A SPY AND NURSE FOR THE UNION ARMY DURING THE CIVIL WAR. HARRIET TUBMAN - AUTHENTIC AMERICAN HERO.
holds her jacket lapel; the right arm is extended, bent slightly at the elbow and raised to
the level of her head, with the forefinger extended. A scarf is wrapped around Tubman’s
head, covering her hair; she is clothed in a one-piece dress that reaches slightly below
mid-calf but above her ankles and the tops of her ankle-height shoes. The dress and
jacket move to the viewer’s right, away from her body, emphasizing, in their sway, that
Tubman and the clothes are still in motion. There is a patch sewn onto the left side of the
dress at knee-level. Tubman wears an unbuttoned below-hip length jacket with a collar
and long sleeves. A gun is tucked into a belt that encircles her waist. On her right
shoulder hangs a satchel and on her feet are laced leather shoes. Her head is turned
slightly to her left and her mouth is open. “Harriet Ross Tubman” is engraved on the
narrow bronze plinth upon which the monument stands.

The Tubman memorial is the southernmost of the four monuments in Lions Park
and is positioned with its back facing the confluence of the Delaware River and the
Delaware Canal, about a dozen yards away. The site is significant because this area of
Pennsylvania was home to many abolitionists and, because of the river and the adjacent
Delaware canal, it was an active passageway on the Underground Railroad.133 Both
waterways were important means of transportation for fleeing slaves who would hide in
mule-drawn canal barges that carried goods from Easton, Pennsylvania to Bristol,
Pennsylvania, and then would cross the Delaware River to New Jersey. While there is no
evidence that Harriet Tubman ever visited or stayed in Bristol, it is known that she spent
a good deal of time in Philadelphia, which is about twenty-three miles to the southwest.
Bucks County, in which Bristol is located, had many safe houses to protect slaves on
their journey north, and Bristol, in particular, was home to many Quakers, who were

133 Davis, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, March 2, 2012.
generally sympathetic to abolition.\footnote{Ibid. and Larson, 114-115; 81; 80. “Quakers were among the most important members of an increasingly organized network to freedom for runaway slaves. Though some Quakers denounced the owning of slaves from the earliest colonial times, many Quakers continued to own, buy, and sell slaves until the mid-1700s, when . . . New Jersey Quaker John Woolman’s influential tracts denounc[ing] slavery as incompatible with Christianity . . . forced many Quakers to reexamine their positions. By 1770, many Quaker meetings were expelling members for purchasing slaves, and manumissions by deed and will were becoming commonplace. By 1790, [Maryland] Eastern Shore Quaker meetings were free of all slave owners . . . and ‘it was Quakers who then gave escaping’ slaves the most aid.”} Furthermore, the rural nature of the town with its large wooded areas provided good cover for escaping slaves. Nevertheless, the question of whether the Tubman memorial is site-specific elicited a difference of opinion among several AAHCS members.

Sidney L. Taylor and Deal Wright believe that the only aspect of the memorial that is site-specific is its physical position from which Tubman points to the North Star and appears to move in a northerly direction. Otherwise, the sculpture would work well in any location. Louise Davis and Joyce Taylor, another AAHCS member, believe the memorial is site-specific because of its precise location at the juncture of the canal and the river, both waterways so critical to northern escape routes on the Underground Railroad. Davis believes that having Tubman stand among trees on a riverbank was part of the iconographic intent of the memorial. Therefore, while the monument was commissioned and designed for this site, perhaps, more accurately, “the site frames, if not defines, its content.”\footnote{Senie, lecture, November 15, 2011.}

The Tubman memorial in Lions Park serves as a physical location for school classes on African American history, for meetings of church groups and for visitors from Bristol and beyond to see a local point of interest. Because Bristol is a melting pot of
diverse cultures, the statue also serves symbolically as a testament to the local African American community and its contributions to the success of the town.¹³６

**Artist’s Explanation**

Gafgen wanted to keep the sculpture simple, believing that people would appreciate it more if there were nothing mysterious about it. He is telling the viewer that Tubman is traveling north, as evidenced by her pointing to the North Star as her body moves in that direction. Working from Smith’s original drawing, Gafgen adapted the figure’s pose to be anatomically correct in three dimensions and to be appropriately proportioned. He changed Smith’s plan for both the right thumb and right forefinger to be extended to just the forefinger, and he bent the figure’s right arm, fully extended in the original drawing, slightly at the elbow and reduced the width of her stance, both changes serving to make the sculpture more structurally sound.¹³⁷

Gafgen admitted that he knew little about Tubman—including what she looked like—when he began the project. In preparation for his work, the artist “. . . got together as much information as he could find . . . [including] books, drawings, photos about her and the tumultuous times in which she lived.”¹³⁸ He also researched in both texts and photographs for information about living and working conditions on southern plantations and slave clothing from the Civil War period.¹³⁹ He then applied his artistic license to the documented information, particularly about the clothing, to adapt more generic slave attire to the message he wished to convey about Tubman. Gafgen did not “want to box himself in by being too analytic with the clothing.” According to the artist, he concerns

¹³⁶ Davis, in person interview by Elise Geltzer, May 14, 2011.
¹³⁷ Gafgen, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, June 15, 2011.
¹³⁸ Waite, p. 111.
¹³⁹ Gafgen, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, June 15, 2011. The artist was not able to remember or locate the sources for his research on Tubman’s clothing at this writing.
himself with the smallest detail only with military statues where there is a greater risk of being called to task for a mistake, which would be obvious to military personnel. With Tubman, he felt that he had more latitude.\textsuperscript{140}

According to Gafgen, he made a “traveling babushka” for Tubman, a headwrap that showed dignity and “made her look dressed up—it was what she would have worn when traveling.”\textsuperscript{141} While toiling in the hot fields, she, like other slaves, would have saturated a handkerchief with water and draped it over her head. Her cotton dress would have slipped over her head and “must be pretty disheveled as she goes through woods and wires” so Gafgen added a patch on the left side to indicate that her clothing was well-worn.\textsuperscript{142} The satchel over her shoulder contained her belongings, and Gafgen believes that the bag she carried was very similar to the one he sculpted. He also feels that Tubman would have worn shoes on her travels north and that “they would have been men’s work boots given to her from a male relative because, since she did a man’s work on the Maryland plantation in the winter, she would have needed warm foot support.”\textsuperscript{143} The short man’s coat is “the old-fashioned kind worn in the 1800s.”\textsuperscript{144} The belt served as a holster for the gun that Tubman did, in fact, carry. While the threat of the gun served both to protect her and to keep any unruly traveling companions quiet and moving, it is believed by historians that she never used it.\textsuperscript{145} The original drawing by William Smith depicted Tubman with a sidearm and the Society wanted it to remain in Gafgen’s

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.  

\textsuperscript{143} Larson, 101. “Tubman carried a pistol, not only as protection from pursuers but as added encouragement to weary and frightened runaways who wanted to turn back. A dead fugitive could not inform on those who helped him or her. Whether Tubman would have actually used the pistol in such a case we cannot know.”
version. Finally, Gafgen sculpted Tubman’s face also on the move—with her mouth open as if she were talking—or, according to Gafgen, “hollering”—to her wards to hurry on.

Gafgen spent eight months working on the statue using the “lost wax process.” He selected bronze as the medium because of its “classy” look that is reminiscent of works from the Renaissance. He appreciates the luster of bronze and that “. . . it takes a great patina which changes over time with oxidation, it can stand bad weather, it is more responsive to manipulating tools in to create detail, and it is easier to repair than marble or granite if broken.”

In collaboration with the AAHCS, Gafgen selected prairie green granite for the pedestal and base because “it looks rich when light plays with it and when bronze is next to it, it enhances the metal, even when it changes color with oxidation.”

The message that Gafgen sought to convey through his work is that of “strength, conviction and tenacity—that Tubman did what she had to do and was a role model for these qualities.” He wanted to give her dignity. Gafgen feels the memorial is a good teaching tool for young children who are seeing Tubman for the first time. If he could do it again, he would not have done anything different other than have worked from his own drawing from the beginning.

**Analysis**

A review of the iconography and design of this relatively straightforward memorial by Gafgen must focus on Tubman’s stance and clothing. The AAHCS specified that the memorial should have only one figure—Tubman herself. Gafgen, by his
own admission, prefers to keep things simple and, as with his other sculptures, has the subject of the monument accompanied only by one or two iconic items. Tubman biographer and Civil War historian Catherine Clinton asserts that “Harriet Tubman was a Black Freedom Fighter. . . and the Black Panthers claim her as the first Black advocate of violence.” Clinton dubs Tubman the “queen of mass escapes” and, as such, a “visible symbol of how much the mass exodus of fugitive slaves would cost the south. . . she was helping the South’s property to escape. . . . Furthermore, her success would lead to more imitators.” Tubman was a small woman but this large six-and-a-half-foot-tall sculpture depicting Tubman surging forward in a symbolic position of leadership, frozen for time in the activity for which she was best known—leading slaves from captivity to freedom or, perhaps, in the next phase of her life leading a Union Army raid on Confederate troops and supply depots—does not bother Clinton. What does offend Clinton is Tubman’s clothing. In particular, Clinton objects to the length and width of the dress, the cut of the jacket and the modern style of the satchel.

Echoing Clinton’s criticism of Gafgen’s rendition of Tubman’s clothing is Tubman biographer and Civil War historian Kate Clifford Larson. According to Larson, “[t]he clothing, as Catherine Clinton pointed out, is all wrong. The bag is way too big and modern, the dress way too short and narrow, the jacket not a 19th century female or male design.” Larson continues: “it is really bothersome how bad the clothing is on this statue. Really bad. It’s like stuff from a 1920s man’s pea coat through 1950s house

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150 Monuments: “Private Michael Dougherty” (Civil War hero) in Bristol, Pennsylvania, carries a rifle; “Robert Morris” (signer of the Declaration of Independence) in Morrisville, Pennsylvania, holds a quill pen; “Larry Doby” (first African American baseball player in the American League) in Patterson, New Jersey, holds a baseball bat.

151 Clinton, in person interview by Elise Geltzer, August 22, 2011.

152 Ibid.

153 Larson, email message to Elise Geltzer, September 24, 2011.
dress, with a briefcase, work boots, and that belt!!”\textsuperscript{154} Finally, Larson suggests that if Gafgen had done real research “he NEVER would have given Tubman heavy work boots because slaves hardly had shoes at all, never mind work boots on a female field slave. He is confusing $20^{\text{th}}$ century footwear with pre-Civil War footwear. Even the boots that the soldiers wore looked nothing like what she has on.”\textsuperscript{155} Larson continues: “They would have been simple, maybe to the ankle, lace-up brown leather shoes. Not fancy or coarse, and in those days there was little differentiation between left and right feet.”\textsuperscript{156}

Textile historian and Civil War clothing expert Leigh Fellner opines that “Tubman looks like she’s wearing a 1930s feedsack dress and carrying a Coach shoulder bag from the 1990s . . . the dress silhouette . . . is horribly wrong. About the only thing I like . . . is the footwear.”\textsuperscript{157} While the three above-cited historians are united in their objection to the figure’s clothing, there is a difference of opinion between two of them about the footwear.

Gafgen’s statue of Tubman wears one item of clothing that elicited no comment from the historians. The head covering is an invention of the artist’s but is considered to be within the realm of the possible for head wrapping styles of the antebellum period. Clothing historian Helen Bradley Foster writes: “Depending on the function, the headwrap worn during the period of slavery could be a simple rag or bandana or handkerchief; or, it could be quite elaborate, made from 8 to 10 yards of fabric. . . . [While] a dress code legally required African American women . . . to wear some form of headwrap [they] took advantage of this supposed badge of degradation and transformed it

\textsuperscript{154} Larson, email message to Elise Geltzer, August 25, 2011.
\textsuperscript{155} Larson, email message to Elise Geltzer, October 19, 2011.
\textsuperscript{156} Larson, email message to Elise Geltzer, quoting Leigh Fellner, October 20, 2011.
\textsuperscript{157} Larson, email message to Elise Geltzer, quoting Leigh Fellner, October 15, 2011.
into something else. . . [and wore] it in particularly innovative ways and always tied up and away from the face.”\textsuperscript{158} Gafgen’s Tubman wears a wrap that covers her hair, exposes her forehead and is intricately tied on the right side of her head, a variation from the more standard form of closure by “tucking the ends of the fabric into the wrap or by tying the ends into knots close to the skull.”\textsuperscript{159}

The artist’s admitted careful attention to detail in his military sculptures but looser attention to accuracy in the Tubman statue is more than just a source of great annoyance to historians. This display of artistic license compromises the authenticity of the depiction of Tubman and reduces the impact of the historical value of the memorial. While it is still a bold statement that Tubman should be considered a powerful inspiration to younger generations, the confusing vision of an historical figure in inappropriate clothing dilutes the impact of the message. However, the memorial’s sponsors are proud of the statue and probably as unaware of the discrepancy as is the average visitor.

At a total height of over twelve feet, this is the tallest of the three memorials analyzed in this paper. When evaluating the Tubman memorial in Bristol, some criteria enunciated by Dianne L. Durante in her guide to outdoor monuments in Manhattan, can be considered. Tubman enjoys a commanding presence although she is less accessible to the public. At this scale, her pose can be seen from a distance and her influence can reach a broader audience than if she were smaller and closer to the ground.\textsuperscript{160}

**Conclusion**

The sculpture of Tubman is essentially a portrait of the woman. As such, it “must convey a strong physical resemblance, but must also show the sitter in a characteristic

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 272.
\textsuperscript{160} Durante, 11. “Statue of Liberty (1886) by Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi.”
attitude, one that evokes the sitter’s personality and accomplishments.”\textsuperscript{161} While Gafgen’s rendition of Tubman’s facial features may not truly replicate her visage, his depiction of her erect posture and steely gaze emphasize her physical and mental strength, her intelligence and her self control. Despite the artist’s assertion that his work memorializes Tubman as the Underground Railroad conductor, the iconography and message of this piece speak otherwise. There is no question that, among the many roles Tubman played during her life, the period of her life between 1862 and 1863 in which she served as Union army scout, spy and military leader, and which led Sernett to recognize her label as “General Tubman,” were an important part of both her history and the history of the Civil War. This portrait of Tubman, which depicts her armed, poised for movement, imbued with determination and energy, body and head turned back mid-stride, mouth opened in mid-speech, gaze directed at other people and hand pointed ahead, emphasizes the heroine in a role less well-known to the public but no less iconic to her than her other two persona identified by Sernett.

Thus portrayed, Gafgen’s Tubman captures the essence of the defiant heroine and serves as a “model. . . for all those who aspire to difficult goals,” which is one of the messages that the AAHCS wanted this memorial to convey.\textsuperscript{162} Despite historical inaccuracies in clothing, this memorial serves “a prime function of art: to remind us of important values in an easy-to-grasp, visual form.”\textsuperscript{163}

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 16. “John Ericsson (1903) by Jonathan Scott Hartley.”
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 45. “Nathan Hale (1890) by Frederick MacMonnies.”
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 120. “William Earl Dodge (1885) by John Quincy Adams Ward.”
Chapter 3: Harriet Tubman

by Jane DeDecker

Mesa, Arizona (1995)
Gainesville, Georgia (1997)
Ypsilanti, Michigan (2006)

Introduction

While four castings of the same model of *Harriet Tubman* by Jane DeDecker can be found in four disparate states in the north, south and west of the United States, three of the works are sited near libraries while the fourth is on a sculpture walk at a residential community. The commissions and acquisitions of the four are also very different from each other and from the Gafgen and Cunningham works. This writer suggests that DeDecker’s figure captures the gentle caring manner and generosity for which Tubman was so well-known during the final years of her life when she was protector, teacher and friend to former slaves in Auburn, New York, and this memorial personifies her “Aunt Harriet” persona, as identified by Milton C. Sernett.

Ypsilanti, Michigan Commission and the Site of the Memorial

According to Jill Morey, Ypsilanti District Library (“YDL”) Director: “I first saw one of DeDecker’s works at the Highland Township Library in Michigan. While Director of the Milford Township Library in Michigan, I purchased a small DeDecker sculpture for that library. When the time came for the Ypsilanti District Library Board of Directors to add a statue to their park plaza renovation project, DeDecker’s sculpture of

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164 Brenau University Library, Gainesville, Georgia; William J. Clinton Presidential Center Sculpture Walk, Little Rock, Arkansas; Ypsilanti Downtown Branch Library, Ypsilanti, Michigan; Las Sendas Park Sculpture Walk at Las Sendas Community, Mesa, Arizona. The Arizona statue is not reviewed in this chapter because information about its commission is not available at this writing.
Tubman–life-sized and playful–was considered to be perfect.” A “pocket park” that is adjacent to the downtown branch of the YDL and that was once a cut-through between a parking lot and a major thoroughfare became the site of a development project initiated by the Board in 2002 (figure 11). The goal was “to create an attractive urban plaza with public art featuring a redesigned existing fountain and a bronze sculpture . . . and to engage the community in a creative artistic project, to provide leisure reading and storytelling areas, and to enhance people’s image of downtown Ypsilanti.”

Morey indicated that the library’s mission is to serve as a gathering place–a destination spot–and to promote diversity, and that the park is a natural extension of the library. Not only is it a pleasant place for people to sit, but there is also a lot of community pride connected with the park. For the theme of the renovated park, the Board chose “individuals who make a difference,” and felt a statue to Harriet Tubman would honor all individuals who work hard for the things in which they believe. “The renovated Ypsilanti park . . . honors heroes. . . . [T]he renovators moved a historical marker honoring Elijah McCoy, the Ypsilanti inventor whose design for a lubricating cup for railroad engines sparked the coining of the phrase ‘the real McCoy,’ to a more prominent location in the park. A statue of Harriet Tubman was brought in to recognize

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167 Ypsilanti District Library Fountain Park Factsheet (Fountain Park Facts, 2004).

168 Morey, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 16, 2012.
her role in history and Ypsilanti’s role in the Underground Railroad to combat slavery in the United States, Morey said.**169**

Morey’s enthusiasm for the work of Jane DeDecker led her to the artist’s representative, John Kinka, Executive Director of the National Sculptors’ Guild at Columbine Gallery in Loveland, Colorado.**170** With Kinkade’s assistance, Morey and the Board reviewed “. . . a small catalog of possible sculptures, all by DeDecker. When we saw Harriet Tubman, there was immediate consensus that this was a perfect pick for our community since Ypsilanti was a stop on the Underground Railroad.”**171** The library’s mission to encourage children to work hard to be the best that they can melded perfectly with the depiction of Tubman interacting with a child (figure 12) coupled with a brass plaque attached to the sculpture’s base with the Tubman quotation: “Children if you’re tired, keep going. If you’re hungry, keep going. If you’re scared, keep going. If you want a taste of freedom, keep going.”**172** In the park, blue concrete suggestive of a “river” flows from the fountain to the garden area where the sculpture has been installed on a low concrete slab, covered with garden plantings.**173** Funds for the sculpture were raised

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**170** “40 Prominent People,” *Southwest Art*, 40, No. 12 (May 2011):111. “John Kinkade founded the National Sculptors’ Guild [in 1991] and promotes public art across the United States. . . . [T]he guild now has 25 members and has participated in over 300 public art placements throughout the United States.”

**171** Morey, email message to Elise Geltzer, March 11, 2013.

**172** Morey, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 16, 2012.

**173** Morey, email message to Elise Geltzer, March 11, 2013. “The Library did a Request for Proposals which attracted proposals from several private landscaping companies. After interviews, the Board selected a local firm—“Greenscape Design”—to design the park and landscaping. That company is no longer in business.”
privately by local direct mail solicitations.\textsuperscript{174} Public funds budgeted by the Ypsilanti District Library Board were used only to install the sculpture.\textsuperscript{175} The park, with benches, book-shaped seats and chessboard-topped tables as well as its Tubman statue, is used for library programs, concerts and story-telling events for children. On the day of its dedication, May 21, 2006, actress Leslie McCurdy (figure 13) presented a performance entitled “The Spirit of Harriet Tubman.”\textsuperscript{176} Since DeDecker’s sculpture is sited in four locations and the artist plans for three additional castings, it cannot be considered site-specific. However, as with the other monuments discussed herein, art historian Harriet F. Senie’s observation that “the site frames, if not defines, its content” is again applicable.\textsuperscript{177} Because Ypsilanti was a stop on the Underground Railroad, a memorial to Tubman here is “site-appropriate.”

**Gainesville, Georgia Commission and the Site of the Memorial**

Brenau University in Gainesville, Georgia, forty-five minutes northeast of Atlanta, was founded in 1878 as a “private institution for the education of women.”\textsuperscript{178} While the school now offers undergraduate and graduate programs for men and women and the total student enrollment for 2011/2012 is 2,789, “Brenau Women’s College remains the cornerstone of the university. . . offering a unique single-gender undergraduate experience.”\textsuperscript{179} The mission of the university is to “produce intellectually adept, compassionate, professionally expert leaders steeped in the liberal arts to address

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\textsuperscript{174} The purchase price is not available at this writing.
\textsuperscript{175} DeButts, email message to Elise Geltzer, August 29, 2012.
\textsuperscript{177} Senie, lecture, November 15, 2011.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid.
commercial and social needs of a diverse world . . . and to prepare them for a lifetime of intellectual accomplishment and appreciation of artistic expression.”

John S. Burd (Ph.D. from Indiana State University in Education with an emphasis on Instructional Theory, M.S.M. in Sacred Music) served as the President of Brenau University from 1985 until 2004. When Burd took office, the university owned no works of art. It was his wish to establish a fine art collection that would be displayed throughout the campus, both inside university buildings and out of doors. To that end, he put an advertisement in *The New York Times* that an exclusive women’s college was developing a fine art collection and any offers would be accepted. According to Burd, “unbelievable offers” were made. He met with American art dealer Leo Castelli (1907 - 1999) who offered to connect him with artists and to secure art for the university. In a tribute to Burd in the U.S. House of Representatives on April 21, 2004, on the occasion of his retirement from the presidency of the university, the Honorable Nathan Deal of Georgia stated: “Under Jack Burd’s leadership, the arts assumed center stage at Brenau. The permanent art collection, now one of the fastest growing collections of any college in the United States, boasts more than 1,200 (now closer to 2,000 according to Burd) pieces with such names as Renoir and Lichtenstein. Nationally and internationally acclaimed artists exhibit regularly at Brenau with works seldom seen outside New York or Los Angeles.” Burd is proud of the fact that many of these artists became friends of the school and helped him when he visited New York seeking to acquire more works of art. Burd also emphasized (confirmed by Brenau University Gallery Director Melissa

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180 Ibid.
181 According to Dr. Burd and Brenau University Gallery Director Melissa Morgan, the date and a copy of *The New York Times* advertisement are unavailable at this writing.
Morgan) that he has not worked with a committee on this on-going project but that he alone has made the decisions regarding art acquisitions and he alone has raised whatever funds have been necessary.\footnote{Dr. John Burd, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 18, 2012.}

Sometime in 1995 or 1996, Dr. Burd visited the Nedra Matteucci Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he saw DeDecker’s \textit{Harriet Tubman} sculpture.\footnote{Dr. Burd does not recall the exact date.} “It haunted me—a successful woman who chose what she wanted to do with her life and Brenau is a woman’s college whose mission is to educate and graduate women who will make a difference in the world. Tubman was the perfect example.”\footnote{Burd, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 18, 2012.} Burd called DeDecker and told her that not only was the statue, in his opinion, great art but its message was just perfect for the school. He indicated that he intended to place it in a protected location facing Academy Street at the entrance to the Brenau Trustee Library (figure 14) so that members of the public, who have access to public events held at the Library, could enjoy it, too.\footnote{Ibid.} Furthermore, as in Ypsilanti, the sculpture is deliberately placed on a concrete slab at ground level on the site, the figures atop a low bronze base and the entire monument resting on concrete paving chips surrounded by grass and plantings. Burd explained further that a bench that allows a viewer to contemplate the role Tubman played in the South is placed nearby (figure 15).\footnote{Ibid.} By consensus opinion, the Brenau Art Department faculty recommended this installation so that a viewer would not have to look up at Tubman—she would be approachable rather than inaccessible—and Burd believes Tubman herself would have wanted it that way.\footnote{Ibid.} According to Morgan, the
statue was a gift from the artist while the university provided resources for shipping, insurance and its dedication in September 1997. A metal tablet on the ground near the base of the sculpture (figure 16) reads: “Harriet Tubman and Child, Artist: Jane DeDecker, A gift from the artist to the Brenau University Community, September 1997.” According to Sernett: “This was the first instance of an institution, public or private, in the part of the United States once known as the Old South to honor Tubman in so visible a fashion.”

Burd believes that the university community is proud of the monument; he has never heard it criticized and, in fact, the overall reaction, based on students’ comments and anecdotal evidence, has been positive. The sculpture serves as the artistic centerpiece for the area of the campus that contains the library and residence halls. It has become the focal point where public school classes about the Civil War and slavery are held, serving to connect students visually with the history they are learning. While there is no connection between Harriet Tubman or the Underground Railroad and Brenau University, this site for the memorial has, according to Burd, symbolic relevance because both Tubman and an education at the university are representations of success by women.

**Little Rock, Arkansas Commission and the Site of the Memorial**

In Little Rock, Arkansas, the presence of DeDecker’s Tubman is also, to a large extent, the result of the vision and work of a single individual. Dean Kumpuris was Little Rock City Director in 2003, at the time that construction was nearing completion on the William J. Clinton Presidential Center and Park. Located next to the Arkansas River and Interstate 30 (figure 17), the Center is situated on twenty-six acres of land that the city

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189 Sernett, 245.
190 Burd, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 18, 2012.
owned and ceded to the Clinton Foundation. Adjoining that property is an area known as the River Market District, a piece of city-owned land that was in a derelict neighborhood of former warehouses and railroad tracks. According to Kumpuris, as both a city official and a Little Rock citizen, he was distressed that such blighted property would abut the Presidential Center. “I wanted to dress up the entrance from the existing city property to the presidential park.”

For several years in the early 2000s, at the urging of Kumpuris, Little Rock officials struggled to secure public funding to finance the restoration of the Little Rock River Market District land and the purchase of public art for the area near the presidential library. After three failed attempts, a public bond issue to purchase the land eventually passed, but it did not include funds for art purchases. The plan had been to commission new works of art, but with no public money available and time now short, Kumpuris realized that existing works would have to be purchased if the project was to be completed by the date of the library dedication, planned for November 18, 2004.

Sometime in the 1990s, Kumpuris met John Kinkade when he purchased, for his personal collection, a work of art from the National Sculpture Guild. He visited the Guild’s gallery in Loveland frequently and became friendly with Kinkade. Aware that the Guild had placed its member artists’ works in many public venues, Kumpuris turned to Kinkade for help on the Little Rock project. While there was no formal commitment from the city nor any official documentation authorizing the subsequent purchases, there

191 Dean Kumpuris, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 22, 2012.
192 Date unavailable as of this writing.
193 Ibid.
was no opposition, formal or informal, to Kumpuris’ urban renewal project.\textsuperscript{195} In early 2004, Kinkade prepared a proposal with “. . . two objectives: to visually enhance the approaches to the Clinton Library and to visually lead people to the library.”\textsuperscript{196} Drawing on President Clinton’s reference to a “bridge to the 21\textsuperscript{st} century” in his acceptance speech, on August 30, 1996, at the Democratic National Convention, the proposal presents a design for a pedestrian walkway with a sculpture garden on the portion of the River Market Park (now named River Front Park) land that leads to the Presidential Center (figure 18).\textsuperscript{197} Kinkade would also identify existing pieces created by Guild members that were available immediately and from which the five final choices could be selected.

To further describe the space, the proposal established for the pedestrian walkway an overall theme of “. . . bridges, as structures enabling one to pass from one side of something to the other” and suggested that the art works represent “transition and passage” and “Arkansas’s quality of life” which was also referred to in Clinton’s speech.\textsuperscript{198} “The walkway provides a path where one may be able to pause and refresh quietly in a more natural situation. Small public squares in the shape of ellipses approximately 60 feet by 40 feet punctuate the path every 200 to 300 feet. These squares become public rooms . . . with sculptures placed in the middle of each ellipse [figure 19].

\textsuperscript{195} Kumpuris, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 22, 2012.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid. “. . . we need to build a bridge to the future, and that is what I commit to you to do. So tonight let us resolve to build that bridge to the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, to meet our challenges and protect our values. Let us build a bridge to help our parents raise their children, to help young people and adults to get the education and training they need, to make our streets safer, to help Americans succeed at home and at work, to break the cycle of poverty and dependence, to protect our environment for generations to come, and to maintain our world leadership for peace and freedom. Let us resolve to build that bridge.” William Jefferson Clinton, Democratic National Convention, United Center, Chicago, Illinois, August 30, 1996.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
The sculptures give the square a strong and steady pulse thereby drawing people. The squares will have outdoor seating in shaded locations. The themes for the sculptures in the plazas are the environment, education, diversity and celebration."\(^{199}\)

With public money unavailable, Kumpuris developed an alternative funding plan. He gathered a group of prominent Little Rock citizens at a luncheon and requested contributions.\(^{200}\) "‘The five sculptures cost about $275,000, which was donated by about twenty people,’ Kumpuris said."\(^{201}\) Haskell Dickinson’s donation was specifically for the purchase of DeDecker’s *Harriet Tubman* and the sculpture is identified with a plaque (figure 20) that reads: “A gift of Haskell and Peggy Dickinson to the City of Little Rock.”\(^{202}\) Dickinson, President of the McGeorge Contracting Company in Sweet Home, Arkansas, and a native of Little Rock, explained: “The sculpture garden was Kumpuris’ inspiration and, when he asked me if I wanted to help make it happen and beautify Little Rock, there was no answer but yes. Kumpuris has many friends who would accommodate him to get the project done."\(^{203}\) As to why he chose to donate the Tubman piece, Dickinson indicated that of all the choices, this one was the most compelling. “It is a strong piece that also expresses the tenderness of a woman and child as well as the resoluteness of a person who is on a mission and willing to sacrifice everything for it. Tubman is an American hero and the sculpture is a beautiful, historical and timely

\(^{199}\) Ibid., p. 2.
\(^{200}\) The names of only three of these individuals were available at the time of this writing: Haskell Dickinson, William Clark, Dorsey Jackson
\(^{202}\) The National Sculptors’ Guild’s First Proposal indicates that DeDecker’s *Harriet Tubman*, one from an edition of seven, is priced at $47,000, p. 6.
\(^{203}\) Haskell Dickinson, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, August 27, 2012.
contribution that enhances the city and the library.” Dickinson had no conversations with DeDecker about the iconography or message of the piece; he simply feels that “the artist did a splendid job of portraying Tubman.”

In Little Rock, Harriet Tubman sits on an oval concrete base that measures three feet high, six feet, five inches long and four feet, five inches wide. The sculpture faces north and is sited between two bridges, Interstate 30 which is approximately twenty-one feet to its west and the pedestrian “Bridge to the 21st Century” which is about one half mile to its east at the entrance to the Clinton Library (figure 21).

**Background and Oeuvre of the Artist**

Originally from Marengo, Iowa, Jane DeDecker (b. 1961) (figure 22) moved, with her parents and nine siblings, to Loveland, Colorado, when she was about ten years old. She credits her mother, Barbara, for her career as an artist. Not only did she inherit her mother’s artistic talent, but also DeDecker grew up in an environment that encouraged artistic activity. “My mother . . . would let me draw on my bedroom wall and just paint me a new blank canvas when required.”

She attended the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley (1979 - 1982), where she changed her course of study from painting to sculpture when she realized she preferred working with shapes and volumes. In 1983, she left the University to spend a year of study at the Gobelins School of Tapestry in Paris. Upon her return to Loveland, she apprenticed for five years at the Lundeen Studios with sculptor George Lundeen, from whom she learned all aspects of the production

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204 Ibid.
205 Ibid.
process and achieved the position of master craftsman. From 1988 to the present, DeDecker has had her own sculpting practice in Loveland.\textsuperscript{207}

With such a large family (two parents, nine siblings, twelve nephews, two nieces, a husband and four children), it is easy to understand why “from beginning to end, [DeDecker’s artwork] is about . . . children and family.”\textsuperscript{208} As DeDecker explains: “My work is a cumulative process made of my life experiences and my desire to sculpt the human form. . . . I select a moment to which all of us can relate on a personal level. These moments span all generations, depicting a universally recognized scene . . . [and are] a timeless expression of the human experience, causing us to reflect and evaluate the importance of love, relationships, and achievement.”\textsuperscript{209} The artist prefers to sculpt the human figure in its various positions and wants that figure to “represent any one of us individually as well as all of us collectively.”\textsuperscript{210} DeDecker’s sculptures have also been described as “captivating, amusing and thought-provoking. . . evoking fond childhood memories and sending out messages of strength, love, confidence, curiosity, patience, tenderness and determination.”\textsuperscript{211} But the artist hopes they leave room for interpretation. “The finished piece isn’t the end. I want viewers to see themselves and their lives in my sculptures.”\textsuperscript{212}

The surface of DeDecker’s sculpture is rough and unfinished. She feels this gives her work more energy and makes her figures more spontaneous and vital. “[Her] gestural

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{210} \textit{Jane DeDecker}, (Greenwich, Connecticut: Cavalier Galleries, 2006), 3.
\textsuperscript{212} Piburn, no page number available.
artwork is trying to freeze one frame of an action scene without losing its immediacy.”\textsuperscript{213} Her impressionistic style has been called “fresh-frozen . . . when I feel a piece says what I want it to, I’m done. I don’t like to go in and put in all those little details. The important thing to me is the feeling, not all the detail. I like to keep it fresh.”\textsuperscript{214} Her many family members also provide an endless supply of poses. “I don’t really have children pose for me, because I like the pieces to be more candid, so I take snapshots in my mind. I try to catch them on the sly.”\textsuperscript{215} When the stored mental images offer her a workable figure or theme, she captures it in a clay sketch rather than using pencil and paper. “I strive to capture the same energy and excitement the image has in my mind, so I work quickly, aggressively. . . . I intentionally avoid removing all imperfections and traces of working with the clay or smoothing surfaces to an extreme.”\textsuperscript{216} DeDecker works in a fourteen hundred-square-foot studio with “lots of windows opening up into gardens. I like to get the sense of the outdoors because most of the pieces [which are bronze] are going outdoors.”\textsuperscript{217} When asked, “What would the definitive sculpture portraying Jane DeDecker look like, she [answered]: ‘I wouldn’t be alone–there would be other figures alongside of me.’”\textsuperscript{218}

DeDecker is a prolific artist who has created designs of over six hundred different subjects, many of which have been cast in multiple editions.\textsuperscript{219} Her pieces are included

\textsuperscript{213} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{214} Stavig, no page number available.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{218} Piburn, no page number available.
\textsuperscript{219} Kinkade, email message to Elise Geltzer, October 23, 2012.
in private collections as well as public places in thirty-two states.\(^{220}\) Her works range from twelve inches high to life-size or larger. All are made of bronze and cast by the “lost wax” method. Most consist of more than one human figure, and, occasionally, an animal, such as a dog or a horse, is included, or a tree branch, bench or other item. However, the focus of each work is on the movement and perceived thoughts of the figures. “[T]he most important aspect of the figure is the meaning of the subject matter and the experiences communicated by the gestures. DeDecker believes that the ability to capture the true portrait of an individual lies within the emotions . . . and psychological characteristics of the individual . . . conveyed through bodily gestures.”\(^{221}\)

**Description of Harriet Tubman**

Because of its high profile placement at the Clinton Presidential Center, *Harriet Tubman* is DeDecker’s best known work and, according to the artist, “one of the most important sculptures I’ve ever done.”\(^{222}\) This sculpture is five feet, seven inches high, six feet wide and four feet deep. Tubman is depicted walking with her weight on her left foot. The ball of her right foot is on the ground with the heel raised. In her right hand she holds a tree branch which is taller than she and which she uses as a walking stick. Her left hand grasps the hand of a small boy who does not quite reach her shoulder and looks to his right and upward to her. Tubman’s head is turned left and downward as she looks at the boy. Her clothing is very similar to the outfit she wears in the Cunningham work with a full skirt that ends just above her ankles and fabric that shows

\(^{220}\) Kyle Dallabetta, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 30, 2012. According to DeDecker’s husband, Kyle Dallabetta, at the beginning of her career DeDecker’s normal run for a piece of sculpture was thirty-one pieces. As she became more successful, the run became smaller; for *Harriet Tubman*, there will be seven editions. The price per piece would be too high if she produced only one. DeDecker likes odd numbers.


\(^{222}\) Jane DeDecker, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 1, 2011.
the movement of her steps, an overblouse with inset shoulders that buttons down the front and ends in a straight hem just above her hips, a large scarf tied around her neck with the knot in front and sturdy work boots. Sitting squarely atop her head is a flat hat with a wide brim.

The boy is walking in step with Tubman, his right foot forward, next to and slightly behind her left leg, and his left leg behind him with the sole of his foot on the ground and the heel raised. He is wearing a long sleeve, v-neck overshirt that buttons down the front and ends at his hips, and pants that are sculpted to show the movement of the fabric and that reach the top of his sturdy boots. His hatless head reveals short curly hair. His left arm swings behind his body, with his palm facing inward and his fingers extended.

**Artist’s Explanation**

DeDecker’s intent was to create a portrait of Tubman and considers her work to be a piece of sculpture and not a memorial. “A sculpture is a memorial if it is created as such—this is just a portrait of Harriet Tubman—so I portrayed her in a more naturalistic and less stoic posture than I would have done if the work were meant to be a memorial.” However, DeDecker also believes that context and placement can change a work of sculpture into a memorial so that the edition sited at the Clinton Presidential Center serves as a memorial for the Little Rock community with its history in the Civil Rights movement. In this location, “the design does not matter and its acceptance by the community as a memorial brings it additional value.” With this history as a reference, the artist’s admission that the work is not site-specific and the fact that the sculpture is

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223 Ibid.
224 Ibid.
placed in four very different locations, validate, once again, Professor Harriet F. Senie’s keen observation about site-relevance.\textsuperscript{225}

The artist remembers learning about Tubman from children’s books when she was in second grade. To prepare for her design, DeDecker “did a lot of reading, mostly children’s books, again.”\textsuperscript{226} “I wanted to show [Tubman’s] gentleness as she looked back at the boy and that she never stopped moving—to portray her compassion and unwavering mission. I found the quote before I created the sculpture and it became a mantra—it inspired me to move forward just as she did for those people and humanity and history.”\textsuperscript{227} While the quote may have inspired DeDecker, according to Tubman historian Kate Clifford Larson: “… the quote is not a real Tubman quote—I think that it first appears in the 1950s, possibly later.”\textsuperscript{228}

\textbf{Analysis}

DeDecker acknowledges that the circa 1887 photograph of Tubman posed with seven other individuals [the same photograph that influenced Fern Cunningham] was “her inspiration and her reference for the clothing for both figures. Her goal was to create a sculpture that conveyed Harriet’s character and, although she wanted it to be authentic, she did not spend a lot of time referencing the details of the clothing of the period.”\textsuperscript{229} Clothing and textile expert Katie Knowles considers this sculpture to be a three-dimensional replica of the above-mentioned photograph and feels that “in this innocent portrayal, the artist’s personal connection to Tubman is more evident here than

\textsuperscript{225} Senie, lecture, November 15, 2011.
\textsuperscript{226} DeDecker, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 1, 2011. Specific titles are unavailable at this writing.
\textsuperscript{227} DeDecker, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 1, 2011. “Children if you are tired keep going. If you are hungry keep going. If you are scared keep going. If you want a taste of freedom keep going.” Attributed to Harriet Tubman.
\textsuperscript{228} Larson, email message to Elise Geltzer, September 24, 2011.
\textsuperscript{229} Kinkade, email message to Elise Geltzer, January 25, 2012.
in the other two works [covered in this paper]. It’s a twentieth century persona informed by the childhood books she remembered and re-read.”

In an analysis of the clothing on DeDecker’s figures, Larson observes that for Tubman “the clothing is a little off—I am not sure where that hat comes from; the dress, again, is too short, and the jacket seems too casual.” Clothing historian Leigh Fellner says “I don’t know if the hat is remotely accurate historically but it’s not offensive; the skirt length and fullness are right but the bodice/jacket are confused. The tucked-in shawl’s a nice touch and her feet look like she’s wearing wood-soled brogans.” Knowles assumes that this Tubman is being depicted before 1870 so the set-in sleeve is acceptable.

Larson also is critical of the “little boy who seems to be modeled after late nineteenth and early twentieth century newsboys, certainly not a slave boy. Is this statue supposed to be Tubman later in life telling a young boy about her adventures?” Fellner also complains that “the boy looks to be wearing high-laced shoes circa 1920 (actually his whole outfit has a 20s look about it)—he’d either be wearing brogans or nothing at all, and the latter’s more likely given his age. His sleeves are too narrow and his pants too long. How old is this kid supposed to be? It’s hard to tell.” Knowles is skeptical about the presence of the child as well as his clothing. She finds this sculpture to be an historically inaccurate pairing—few slave children ran away and, if they did, it was with their family. As for the boy’s clothing, Knowles echoes Fellner’s observation that few slave children had shoes, none had good clothing and most had no pants until age twelve.

230 Knowles, in person interview by Elise Geltzer, December 18, 2011.
231 Larson, email message to Elise Geltzer, September 24, 2011.
232 Larson quoting Fellner, email message to Elise Geltzer, October 15, 2011.
233 Knowles, in person interview by Elise Geltzer, December 18, 2011.
234 Larson, email message to Elise Geltzer, September 24, 2011.
235 Larson quoting Fellner, email message to Elise Geltzer, October 15, 2011.
236 Knowles, in person interview by Elise Geltzer, December 18, 2012.
or thirteen. The shirt would have been a long shift that slipped over the head with a shirt
tail—with a wide neck opening or buttons on the shoulder but not buttoned down the front
nor with set-in sleeves or cuffs—just a hem at the sleeve end. If a child were planning to
run away, the slave community found pants or extra fabric to make them for him. The
pants would have stick legs and a drawstring waist. The pants on this boy are too nice
and well-fitted.237 While a boy’s shirt would have a tail and a girl’s shirt would not,
Knowles speculates that if the figure had no pants or wore a one-piece pantaloon that
buttoned up the front or back with no feet in it, the gender ambiguity might confuse the
viewer.238

DeDecker admits that she may not be historically accurate. She sculpted “my
interpretation of Tubman’s face as well as the cobbled boots I envisioned for both
figures.”239 The artist’s sister, Jo DeDecker, who studied art history and assists Jane by
providing historical and contextual information, agreed that while the referenced
“photograph influenced her, Jane depicted generic southern Civil War era clothing.”240
The artist also said that a nineteenth century drawing of Tubman wearing a Civil War
scout’s uniform and holding a rifle influenced her use of the long tree branch that her
Tubman holds; it was meant to represent a “leadership staff” similar to that held by
Moses, which was her nickname.241 Knowles comments that the staff makes Tubman

237 Ibid.
238 Ibid.
239 DeDecker, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 1, 2011.
241 DeDecker, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 1, 2011. See Sernett, 103. Woodcut likeness
by J.C. Darby, Auburn, New York. Frontispiece to Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*
(Auburn, N.Y.: W.J. Moses, 1869).
“seem older and wiser than her real age.” DeDecker, a mother like Cunningham, opted not to include a gun in her sculpture.

With regard to Tubman’s pose, DeDecker wanted to show her in motion, not static, and, thus, depicts her walking and turning to the boy. “The boy, a metaphor for youth and the future, looks up at Tubman with trust in his face. I wanted Tubman to be reassuring so that the sculpture’s message would be inspirational—the child represents anyone behind her—all people and not just the African American community—as she leads the way to future liberty.” Nevertheless, Larson comments that “I like the movement and sweetness of it; however, it is unrealistic in that Tubman wasn’t out for a stroll while leading freedom seekers away from bondage!”

Fellner also remarks that “Tubman looks like an eighteenth century shepherdess from England’s West Country.”

DeDecker intends to cast the remaining three pieces in the run when they are ordered. She does not want them sited too close together, and, while she does not care if they are in private or public settings, she does like for the public to see them and react.

Conclusion

While the public at large generally identifies Harriet Tubman as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, DeDecker has portrayed her in a pose more consistent with Milton C. Sernett’s image of “Aunt Harriet,” the gentle, aging mentor and protector, as she walks determinedly toward freedom with a young person, who represents the future, in tow. Considering the critics’ comments noted above, this writer reads in Tubman’s relaxed posture and more leisurely gait as well as her conversation with a young boy.

242 Knowles, in person interview by Elise Geltzer, December 18, 2011.
243 DeDecker, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, July 1, 2011.
244 Larson, email message to Elise Geltzer, September 24, 2011.
245 Larson quoting Fellner, email message to Elise Geltzer, October 15, 2011.
246 Ibid.
unaccompanied by his parents, the maternal persona of the last third of Tubman’s life. To Dianne Durante, this portrayal is highly effective because it allows the viewer to understand “the character as well as the physical appearance of the subject . . . [and to serve as] a model not only for those who share [her] values, but for all those who aspire to difficult goals.” Whether at ground level in Ypsilanti and Gainesville or on a three-foot-high pedestal in Little Rock, DeDecker’s Tubman conveys confidence, compassion and a commanding presence. In her easy-to-read pose, the freedom-fighter turned caregiver inspires affection and admiration and serves as a “propaganda piece” for the idea of moving forward to achieve great goals.

247 Durante, 40, 45. “Horace Greely (1890) by John Quincy Adams Ward,” and “Nathan Hale (1890) by Frederick MacMonnies.”
248 Ibid., 11. “Statue of Liberty (1886) by Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi.”
Harriet Tubman, an uneducated former slave who has been deceased for a century, still resonates strongly in our culture today. As Harriet F. Senie notes in an essay published in 2007, there are few public depictions, at least in New York City, of African American women and, in fact, of women at all. Senie reveals that a 2006 “look at the women represented in New York City’s public art reveals that they are few in number, the largest category by far representing symbolic virtues or goddesses, with a few merry maidens, fictional characters, and abstracted fragments.”249 The two full figure statues in existence in New York City in 2006, those of Joan of Arc and Eleanor Roosevelt, were joined in 2008 by a monument to Harriet Tubman by Alison Saar. Therefore, the nine memorials to Tubman not only increase the number of public art representations of women and, particularly, African American women, in this country but also change the manner in which African Americans have been portrayed in public memorials in the not-so-distant past.250

There is reason to believe that the cause for the plethora of memorials to Tubman may lie in the legacy of Tubman as viewed through the lens of Milton C. Sernett’s vision of her three personae. The artists interviewed for this paper stated that they have depicted her in a “Moses” persona. But this analysis has shown that the memorials depict other faces of this iconic individual. Furthermore, given Tubman’s history of varied activities,

250 See, for example, Kirk Savage, Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves, for a review of nineteenth century public memorials in America with figures of African Americans.
there is historic evidence that supports different interpretations of her. Sernett’s various constructions of Tubman serve as guideposts to this author’s interpretation of the memorials analyzed in this paper.

The visual interpretation of Tubman in the role of “the Moses of her People” as she leads them out of slavery and into the promised land of the North is clearly validated in Cunningham’s *Step on Board*. Tubman stands at the front of a group of followers whose attire, demeanor and facial expressions evoke in the mind of the viewer those of slaves. Exuding confidence, control and faith in God—as symbolized by the bible under her arm—Tubman is the recognized leader of a group of people who appear willing to put their lives in her hands. The role for which Tubman is most often cited by historians and known by biography-readers is ably captured by Cunningham who offers an easily-interpreted image of the best known conductor on the Underground Railroad.

While Senie notes “the role of actual women in war has yet [2007] to be commemorated in New York,” Gafgen’s *Harriet Ross Tubman*, in Bristol Park, Pennsylvania, is a credible depiction of Tubman as “General Tubman” during her military service to the North in the Civil War.\(^{251}\) Despite Gafgen’s claim that he created the “Moses” persona, this sculptor of other military figures has rendered a military representation of Tubman. Her solid stance with arm extended, her mouth open to issue orders, her sensible clothing, which is more utilitarian than what adorns the Cunningham and DeDecker figures, and, importantly, her gun and a shoulder bag that could hold ammunition all evoke the image of a military leader. A viewer familiar with this phase of Tubman’s life should have no trouble seeing a formidable “General” standing atop the pedestal.

\(^{251}\) Senie, in *Blaze*, 154
Finally, an “Aunt Harriet” figure caring for and telling her story to the next generation is depicted in DeDecker’s *Harriet Tubman*. The artist, known for her many works of appealing children, here presents Tubman as a nurturing woman who is leisurely strolling with the aid of a walking stick as she talks to an attentive youngster. Despite DeDecker’s explanation that stories of Tubman as “Moses” informed her design, the viewer can see “Aunt Harriet” in this work more easily than “Moses.”

While initially these various interpretations of Tubman may seem puzzling, they make sense when one relates them to her history and the literature explaining and interpreting it. Given the breadth of Tubman’s activities, different memorials recognize distinct phases in her life. Furthermore, the legacy of Harriet Tubman continues to be recognized and honored. While a complete list of all celebratory sites and activities is impossible to compile and beyond the scope of this section, some things are worth noting. In 2000, Congress enacted legislation that directs the Secretary of the Interior to study how to establish national sites to commemorate Tubman.\(^{252}\) Seven Tubman-associated sites in Auburn, New York, and Dorchester County, Maryland, as well as other relevant areas were to be evaluated to determine if they would be appropriate for designation as a national park system unit.\(^{253}\) The study prompted a proclamation, issued by President Barak Obama on March 25, 2013, for the establishment of the Harriet Tubman

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\(^{252}\) *Public Law 106-516*, signed November 13, 2000, entitled Harriet Tubman Special Resource Study Act, directs the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a special resource study concerning the preservation and public use of sites associated with Harriet Tubman located in Auburn, New York, and for other purposes.

\(^{253}\) *National Park Service Harriet Tubman, Special Resource Study*, prepared by the United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2002. The seven sites named in the law are: in Dorchester County, Maryland: Brodess Farm and Bazel Church; in Auburn, New York: Tubman Home for the Aged, Tubman residence, Thompson Memorial AME Zion Church, Tubman gravesite and Seward House [home of President Lincoln’s Secretary of State, William H. Seward.]
Underground Railroad National Monument.  It is interesting to note that in addition to acknowledging Tubman as an American hero, President Obama recognizes her work in the same three areas identified by Sernett and imaged in the memorials addressed in this thesis: liberating enslaved African Americans, fighting for the Union cause and caring for African Americans in need. The proclamation establishes a national monument in Dorchester County on a seventeen-acre parcel at the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge to commemorate Tubman and the Underground Railroad. According to Amanda Fenstermaker, Director of Tourism for Dorchester County, Maryland, a Visitor Center with exhibits about Tubman and the Underground Railroad is scheduled to open in late 2015.

For the past thirty to forty years, a group of Dorchester county residents has been trying to keep the Tubman story alive in her birthplace, according to Fenstermaker. Believing the Tubman legacy should be promoted and that it could also serve to increase tourism in Dorchester and Caroline counties, the tourism offices of those two counties jointly published a map and brochure entitled “Finding a way to freedom: Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad” coinciding with the one hundredth

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255 Ibid. “Harriet Tubman is an American hero. She was born enslaved, liberated herself, and returned to the area of her birth many times to lead family, friends and other enslaved African Americans north to freedom. Harriet Tubman fought tirelessly for the Union cause, for the rights of enslaved people, for the rights of women and for the rights of all. . . . After the war, she established the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged, which institutionalized a pattern of her life - caring for African Americans in need. . . . Much of the landscape in Dorchester Country that is Harriet Tubman’s homeland . . . is now part of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. . . . The State of Maryland and the Federal Government will work closely together in managing these special places within their respective jurisdictions to preserve this critically important era in American history. . . . Although Harriet Tubman is known widely, no Federal commemorative site has heretofore been established in her honor despite the magnitude of her contributions and her national and international stature.”

256 Amanda Fenstermaker, telephone interview by Elise Geltzer, February 26, 2014.
anniversary of Tubman’s death on March 10, 1913. This publication describes a one hundred twenty five-mile driving tour that follows the path of “places, sites, and scenes of Harriet Tubman’s life and the region’s nineteenth century Underground Railroad history . . . including exhibits, homes and home sites, churches and meeting houses, mills and court houses that illustrate the story of slavery and the daring pursuit of freedom through the Underground Railroad.” Over ten thousand maps were distributed to local visitors’ centers and tourist-related facilities, and the local media promoted it. While Fenstermaker does not have evaluations of visitors’ reactions to the Tubman tour or any numerical data, she believes that the information campaign resulted in an “uptick” in visitors who explored the Tubman by-way. The tourism office has plans to develop more information packages and train individuals as guides at specific sites.

On February 12, 2012, a wax statue of Harriet Tubman was unveiled at The President’s Gallery at Madame Tussauds in Washington D.C. Artists on staff at the museum created the lifelike figure, relying on photographs, historical accounts and paintings. In attendance at the event were Tubman’s oldest living descendant, great-great niece Valery Ross Manokey, age seventy-six, of Cambridge, Maryland, and Tubman’s great-great-great nephew Charles E. T. Ross, along with eight other direct descendants and family members as well as children from Washington D.C.’s Harriet Tubman Elementary School.

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257 Ibid.
258 Finding a Way to Freedom: Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad (Cambridge, Maryland: Dorchester and Caroline Counties, Maryland, Tourism Offices, March 2013.)
American Opera Projects (AOP), an organization headquartered in Brooklyn, New York, whose mission is to develop innovative works of music theater that engage audiences in a transformative theatrical experience, received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to commission a piece to commemorate Harriet Tubman on the one hundredth anniversary of her death.²⁶⁰ AOP awarded the $15,000 grant to Nkeiru Okoye, an assistant professor of music at Hofstra University, to develop her opera “Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed that Line to Freedom.”²⁶¹ Okoye remembers her mother telling her about Tubman when she was a child and she realized “there are many tall tales about Tubman’s life. When I started . . . [I planned to write] a highly fictionalized account of her but was inspired to dig into the true story . . . and spent three years researching Tubman’s world to create a ‘folk opera’ that is true to Tubman’s life.”²⁶² The two-act theatrical work focuses on Tubman’s youth as a slave and her trips north to take her family to freedom as the Underground Railroad conductor. It took Okoye eight years to complete the opera that was first performed in December 2013 in Brooklyn’s Fort Greene, the location of an actual Underground Railroad station.²⁶³

The one hundredth anniversary of Harriet Tubman’s death (March 10, 1913) was officially celebrated at only one of the memorials dedicated to her—in Boston. According to Frieda Garcia, a snowstorm two days prior caused the cancellation of the planned March 10, 2013 celebratory activities which were to include a luncheon at the Harriet Tubman House, a visit by the Mayor of Boston to Tubman Park and the placing

²⁶² Ibid.
²⁶³ Ibid.
of flowers at the memorial. However, on the planned date, clearer weather allowed for the reading by State Representative Byron Rushing of a proclamation adopted by the Massachusetts House of Representatives recognizing the one hundredth anniversary of the death of Harriet Tubman, brief statements offered by Garcia and the ministers of two neighborhood churches, the placing of flowers and the singing of the hymn “Lift Every Voice” at the site of the Tubman memorial. About fifty people attended the event.264

Finally, the March 1, 2014 edition of The Washington Post carried an article on the front page about “. . . Janice Curtis Greene, sixty-six, a professional storyteller and embodiment of African American historical figures . . . meld[ing] history with performance.”265 She is particularly busy during Black History Month and offers her performances to a variety of groups, especially schoolchildren. In her thirty-five-minute program, she portrays the three aspects of Tubman’s life covered by this thesis. She concludes her performance with the words: “Tubman was a black female born enslaved, with a disability, and she was one of the bravest people born in this country—black, white or anything. Think about that. There isn’t anything that can hold you back. If you take nothing else away from this, take that.”266

Since these monuments to the historical Tubman reflect a broader range of this iconic woman’s life’s work than the Tubman who remained in the minds of the artists, based on stories they learned of her in their youth, each community now has a memorial that serves its needs. In Boston, the government envisioned a universally appealing image of an American icon. In Bristol Park, an ethnically diverse community situated

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264 Garcia, email to Elise Geltzer, March 22, 2013.
266 Ibid., p. A2.
along the Underground Railroad route, the AAHCS commissioned a work that portrays a strong leader, ready to go battle. In Ypsilanti, Gainesville and Little Rock, the depiction of a kind, giving person is sited near institutions of learning. As a group, these memorials represent a major change in the way an African American is portrayed in public monuments in the twenty-first century from the enslaved or freed-but-still-subservient message contained in memorials of the prior century, as noted by Kirk Savage and referenced in the Introduction to this thesis. Furthermore, these memorials may reflect each community’s individual memory of Tubman while at the same time portraying a collective memory of a true national hero—Harriet Tubman.
Figure 1
Figure 2
Fern Cunningham, *Step on Board* (1999), Boston, Massachusetts. Photograph by Gregory Mathews.
Figure 3
Franklin B. Tucker, “Fern Cunningham with her work *Step on Board.*”
Image Source: “Moses has Come Home,” *South End News,* (June 17, 1999), p. 3.
Figure 4
Fern Cunningham, *Step on Board* (reverse view).
Photograph by Deborah Noyes.
Image Source: Boston Art Commission, accessed February 1, 2015,
Figure 5
Figure 6
Figure 7
James L. Gafgen with *Harriet Ross Tubman*.
Photograph by Paul Wesley.
Figure 8
Figure 9
Figure 10
Figure 11
Map: “Final Concept Plan: Downtown Plaza: Ypsilanti District Library.”
Location of Jane DeDecker’s Harriet Tubman (2006), Ypsilanti, Michigan.
Figure 12
Figure 13
Figure 14
Map: “Brenau University: Gainesville Campus.”
Location of Jane DeDecker’s *Harriet Tubman* (1997), Gainesville, Georgia.
Image Source: Brenau University, accessed January 30, 2015,
http://www.brenau.edu/about/campus/gainesville-campus-map/.
Figure 15
Figure 16
Jane DeDecker, Harriet Tubman (detail of the monument plaque).
Photograph by Robert Lz.
Image source: “Robert Lz’s Photostream,” Flickr.com, accessed January 30, 2015,
Figure 17
Map: “Little Rock: Downtown Attractions.”
Location of Jane DeDecker’s *Harriet Tubman* (2004), Little Rock, Arkansas.
Image Source: Little Rock Convention & Visitor Bureau, accessed January 30, 2015,
Figure 18
(view of monument with William J. Clinton Presidential Center in background).
Figure 19
Jane DeDecker, *Harriet Tubman*
(view of monument on sculpture promenade to the River Market).
Figure 20
Figure 21
Jane DeDecker, *Harriet Tubman*
(view of monument between Interstate 30 and the pedestrian “Bridge to the 21st Century”).
Figure 22
Jane DeDecker, studio portrait of the artist.
Appendix

1. Memorials to Harriet Tubman not Reviewed in this Thesis


2. Chronology of Harriet Tubman’s Life.


*Harriet Tubman  
CHRONOLOGY*

1785–1790  
Harriet Tubman’s parents, Ben Ross and Harriet “Rit” Green, are born in Dorchester County, Maryland. Both are enslaved, but by different masters. Ben is owned by Anthony Thompson; Rit is enslaved by Athow Pattison.

1797  
Athow Pattison dies and leaves Rit to his granddaughter, Mary Pattison.

1800  
Mary Pattison marries Joseph Brodess of Bucktown, Maryland.

1801  
Edward Brodess is born to Mary and Joseph Brodess.

1802  
Joseph Brodess probably dies this year.

1803  
Mary Pattison Brodess marries widower Anthony Thompson of Church Creek, bringing Rit and Ben into the same slave community.

1808  
Ben and Rit marry about this time.

1810  
Mary Pattison Brodess Thompson probably dies during this year, leaving young Edward under the guardianship of his stepfather, Anthony Thompson.
1822 Araminta "Minty" Ross, later known as Harriet Tubman, is born, probably in February or early March on Anthony Thompson's plantation in the Peters Neck district, south of Tobacco Stick (now known as Madison), near the Blackwater River.

1823–1824 Edward Brodell moves to his ancestral property on Greenbriar Road in Bucktown. He marries Eliza Ann Keene in March 1824. They have eight children over the next twenty years.

1828–1835 Young Araminta is hired out by Brodell to various other masters, some cruel and negligent.

1834–1836 Araminta is struck on the head by an iron weight, which nearly kills her. She suffers from serious side effects from this injury for the rest of her life.

1835 Anthony Thompson dies.

1835–1842 Tubman is hired out to John T. Stewart of Tobacco Stick [Madison].

1840 Ben Ross is given his freedom through a provision in Anthony Thompson's will.

1844 Araminta probably marries freeman John Tubman in this year. She took the name Harriet at this time.

1847–1849 Harriet Tubman hires herself out to Dr. Anthony C. Thompson, Anthony Thompson's son.

1849 Edward Brodell dies in March, leaving his widow Eliza encumbered with debt. Harriet Tubman runs away from slavery sometime during the late fall after hearing she might be sold.

1850 The Fugitive Slave Act is passed. Tubman conducts her first rescue mission by helping her niece, Kessiah, and Kessiah's two children escape.
1851-1852 Tubman assists several other individuals escape enslavement on the Eastern Shore, including her brother Moses. When she returns to Dorchester County in the fall of 1851 to bring her husband, John, to Philadelphia with her, he refuses to go. He has remarried and moved on with his life.

1854 Tubman finally succeeds in rescuing her three other brothers on Christmas Day, bringing them to freedom in Philadelphia and then St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. By now Harriet has attracted the attention of abolitionists and Underground Railroad operators Thomas Garrett, William Still, Lucretia Mott, and others.

1855-1860 Tubman makes several more trips to the Eastern Shore of Maryland, trying to bring away her sister and her sister’s children. Though she was unsuccessful, she did bring away other friends and relatives, many of whom settled in Canada. Altogether, Tubman brought to freedom about seventy individuals in approximately thirteen trips.

1857 Tubman brings away her aged parents from Caroline County, Maryland, when she learns her father was at risk of arrest for aiding slaves to run away.

1858 Harriet Tubman meets John Brown at her home on North Street in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada.

1859 John Brown’s Virginia raid ends in failure in October. Tubman purchases a home and seven acres of land from William H. Seward, President Lincoln’s future secretary of state, in Fleming, New York, in May. It is during this year that Tubman becomes more publicly active, particularly in Boston where she gives many lectures as a heroic Underground Railroad operator.

1860 Tubman is involved in the dramatic rescue of fugitive slave Charles Nalle in Troy, New York, freeing him from the custody of U.S. marshals charged with returning him to his Virginia enslaver under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.
1861 The Civil War starts with the firing on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, in April.

1862–1865 Tubman begins her work as a cook, nurse, laundress, teacher, scout, and spy for the Union forces stationed in the Hilton Head district of South Carolina.

1863 Under the command of Colonel James Montgomery, Tubman becomes the first woman to lead an armed raid. On June 2, she leads Montgomery’s forces up the Combahee River, where they rout rebel forces, free over 700 slaves, and burn buildings, crops, and stockpiles of munitions and food.

1865 The Civil War ends, and President Lincoln is assassinated in April. Tubman is hired to provide nursing service to wounded soldiers at Fortress Monroe in Hampton, Virginia. On her way home to New York, she is violently thrown from a passenger train by a racist conductor, and is severely injured.

1867 John Tubman dies.

1869 Sarah Bradford publishes her first biography called, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*. Tubman marries Nelson Davis at Central Presbyterian Church in Auburn.

1871 Ben Ross, Tubman’s father, probably dies this year.

1873 Tubman is involved in a mysterious “Gold Swindle.”

1880 Rit dies. Tubman continues to farm her seven-acre property and run a small brick-making business with Davis.

1886 Sarah Bradford publishes her second biography of Tubman, *Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People*.

1888 Nelson Davis dies of tuberculosis.

1890s Tubman becomes more actively involved in the suffrage movement, attending both black and white suffrage conventions.
1896 Tubman purchases the twenty-five-acre parcel next to her property to establish a home and hospital for indigent, aged, and sick African Americans.

1903 Tubman transfers ownership of the twenty-five-acre property to the AME Zion Church.

1908 The Harriet Tubman Home is opened by the AME Zion Church.

1913 Tubman dies on March 10 and is buried next to her brother at Fort Hill Cemetery in Auburn, New York.
3. Images of Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman and seven dependents, photograph circa 1887.
4. Harriet Tubman Park Committee Members, Boston, Massachusetts.

HARRIET TUBMAN PARK COMMITTEE 1996

Ma. Valerie J. Burns, Director
Boston Natural Areas Fund, Inc.

Rev. Theodore L. Lockhart
Union United Methodist Church

Ms. Clara Batchelor
CBA Landscape Architects

Ms. Margaret Willis, Director
Women’s Service Club

Ms. Fern Cunningham
Mr. Jonathan Fairbanks
American Decorative Arts
Museum of Fine Arts

Mr. E. Barry Gaither, Director
Museum of the National Center
of Afro-American Artists

Ms. Frieda Garcia, President
United South End Settlements

Ms. Martha Gilles
Director of Special Curriculum
Boston Public Schools

Ms. Polly Harrell
Ms. Betsy Johnson
S.E./L.R. Open Space Land Trust

Ms. Guadulesa, Cultural Coordinator
United South End Settlements

Ms. Pollyanne Melton
Boston Parks and Recreation
Mrs. Sandra Furey-Gaither
International House of Blues Foundation

Rev. Coneley Hughes, Pastor
Concord Baptist Church

Ms. Sylvia Watts-McKinney, Director
Museum of Afro-American History

Rev. Michael Ellis, Pastor
Columbus Avenue A.M.E. Zion Church

Ms. Sarah Ann Shaw, President
League of Women for Community Services

Ms. Joan Tiffany
Cosmopolitan Neighborhood Association

Mr. Norm Boyer
Pilot Block Association

Mr. John Neale
S.E. Historical Society

Mr. John Beretta
State Street Bank

Mr. Adrian DuCille
Methunion Tenants Association

Ms. Pollyanne Melton
Boston Parks and Recreation

Ms. Cynthia Steil, President
Pilot Block Association

Mrs. Sandra Furey-Gaither
International House of Blues Foundation
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<th>Title</th>
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<td>Primary Source</td>
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<td>Ms. Anne Roelofs</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Primary Source</td>
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<td>Ms. Jane Skeleton</td>
<td>Director of Special Curriculum</td>
<td>Boston Public Schools</td>
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<td>Ms. Stephanie Warburg</td>
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<td>Boston Public Schools</td>
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