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Harriet takes the \$20: Black Bodies, Historical Precedence, and Political Implications

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Abstract

If you have been watching the news at all lately, you've probably seen that Harriet Tubman will be placed on the front of the \$20 bill, while former President Andrew Jackson will be moved to the back of the bill. Immediately there emerged an outpouring of support for the proposition. However, in the week that has followed, others have questioned the meaning that will arise out of an African American woman and former slave being placed on American currency. Some have argued that it is not a fitting legacy for a woman who fought against oppression and the system, which American currency represents, while others have suggested that this change is long overdue. A few politicians have argued that this change is no more than an attempt at political correctness. I disagree. There are a number of very good reasons why Harriet Tubman deserves this honor which has been reserved largely for white men up to this point. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Harriet Tubman, Andrew Jackson, \$20 bill, Slavery, African American History, American Currency

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Harriet takes the \$20: Black Bodies, Historical Precedence, and Political Implications

April 29, 2016

By Megan McNish '16

If you have been watching the news at all lately, you've probably seen that Harriet Tubman will be placed on the front of the \$20 bill, while former President Andrew Jackson will be moved to the back of the bill. Immediately there emerged an outpouring of support for the proposition. However, in the week that has followed, others have questioned the meaning that will arise out of an African American woman and former slave being placed on American currency. Some have argued that it is not a fitting legacy for a woman who fought against oppression and the system, which American currency represents, while others have suggested that this change is long overdue. A few politicians have argued that this change is no more than an attempt at political correctness. I disagree. There are a number of very good reasons why Harriet Tubman deserves this honor which has been reserved largely for white men up to this point.



Photograph by H. B. Lindsley ca. 1860-1875. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Harriet Tubman was born Araminta Harriet Ross and was enslaved on the eastern shore of Maryland. Tubman suffered a traumatic head injury as a child, a result of a blow to the head she received from an overseer. For the rest of her life, Tubman suffered from epileptic seizures. Not one to be put down by her circumstances, she escaped from slavery in 1849, but returned to the South numerous times to free others who were enslaved. In addition to her work with the Underground Railroad, Tubman became a militant abolitionist. She was supposed to be at John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry, but was ill and could not participate. During the Civil War, Tubman served as a nurse and spy. She helped orchestrate and execute a raid on South Carolina plantations known as the Combahee River Raid. Throughout her life she worked towards equality for women and African Americans. She spent much of the later part of her life fighting for a pension for her service to the United States Army. In 1897, she was rewarded *twenty dollars* per month.

Harriet Tubman was clearly a formidable woman. She fought for her freedom and the freedom of others. She overcame a physical disability and became a prominent figure in a world that had little place for women, let alone African American women. Our paper currency acknowledges President Abraham Lincoln, a man who is known as the "Great Emancipator." Alexander Hamilton is also represented on American paper money. Unlike Lincoln, Hamilton never served as president, although he was the Secretary of the Treasury and a member of George Washington's cabinet. American coins have acknowledged women in the past. Sacagawea and Susan B. Anthony have both been on the one-dollar coin.

So why not put Harriet Tubman on the twenty dollar bill? Some historians and social activists have argued that this is just another example, in a long line, of the commodification of the black body, in particular the black female body. In other words, placing an African American woman on currency reduces her to something that can be bought and sold. Historically, enslaved individuals were placed on some Confederate currency, although whether or not these bills were ever circulated is debatable. The African Americans on these bills were, however, entirely anonymous. Others have argued that putting Tubman on the twenty dollar bill won't change the very real problem American women, and in particular American women of color, face on a daily basis. It won't change wage discrimination or race discrimination. While this is certainly the case, I would argue that putting Harriet Tubman on American currency is a step in the right direction. Regarding commodification, as historian Daina Ramey Berry has argued, placing Tubman "on contemporary currency [is] wildly different from the anonymous enslaved bodies found on Confederate currency. The images on Confederate bills celebrated the institution of slavery; Tubman's...[bill] celebrate[s] individuals who fought against it (slavery)."

In many ways, placing Harriet Tubman on the twenty dollar bill not only acknowledges a woman who helped shape American history, it also acknowledges a scar on American history. While this

will not fix American problems, such as difficult race relations or the wage gap, it not only acknowledges the issues at hand, but also is a step in the right direction. As Tubman biographer Kate Larson said, “we have to look at this as [Tubman] sitting on top of this guy, and she’s got him at the back of the bus for a change.”

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