



Oregon
Shakespeare
Festival.

2022 Study Guide

Two Black Women Who Spied for the Union During the Civil War.



Harriet Tubman, Photo by Horatio Seymour Squyer, Wikimedia Commons

Playwright Morriseau wanted to address the scarcity of stories about the efforts of enslaved women to secure their own liberation during the Civil War.

Harriet Tubman

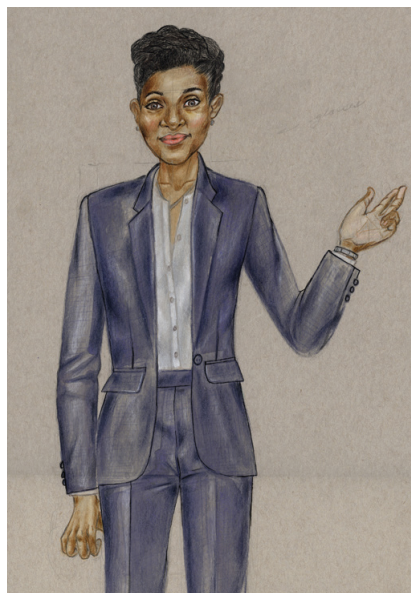
The most famous Union spy was Harriet Tubman, a name she assumed after liberating herself from slavery. Best known for leading more than 300 people to freedom as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, Harriet also served as a Union spy. Initially she volunteered as a cook and a nurse during the Civil War before being recruited by Union officers to establish a spy network among formerly enslaved Blacks in South Carolina.

Harriet became the first woman in the country's history to lead a military expedition when she helped Col. James Montgomery plan a night raid to free enslaved men and women from rice plantations along South Carolina's Combahee River. On June 1, 1863, Montgomery and Tubman, accompanied by several hundred Black soldiers, traveled up the river in gunboats, avoiding mines that had been placed along the waterway. Upon reaching the shore, they destroyed a Confederate supply depot and liberated more than 750 people.

(cont. pg. 4)

Confederates

by Dominique Morriseau



Infertility

Three of the women in *Confederates* refer to themselves as “barren” or infertile. Sandra mentions it as a contributing factor in the dissolution of her marriage. For Sara and Missy Sue this shared condition strengthens their evolving kinship bonds. Historically, infertile women suffered greatly due to familial and societal shaming for their condition. However, prior to the development of modern contraception, infertility could be experienced as liberating for women who did not aspire to motherhood. One of the tasks routinely assigned to enslaved women who worked in the plantation house was breastfeeding or “wet nursing” the master's infant children. Barren women escaped from having to perform this task.



Dominique Morriseau

- Born and raised in Detroit, Dominique is the daughter of an African American mother originally from Mississippi and a Haitian American father.
- Dominique began her performance career as a spoken-word poet. She started writing plays in response to the limited roles available to her.
- Dominique has since completed over nine plays including the three-play *Detroit Cycle*.
- Her book for the jukebox musical *Ain't Too Proud – The Life and Times of the Temptations* garnered her a Tony nomination. She has been honored with numerous awards including two Obie Awards.
- *Confederates* was co-commissioned by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and Penumbra Theatre Company.
- Dominique mentions writing *Confederates* in part out of a desire to see Black women like herself represented in American history.

Before seeing/reading the play

Confederates examines the challenges faced by two formidable Black women in very different time periods. Sara is intent on liberating herself from the harsh conditions of slavery, while Sandra is navigating the impact of race and gender bias in the 21st-century academic world.

1. Research the meaning of the word “confederates”. This and other websites provide information:
https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/confederate_1#:~:text=confederate-,noun,illegal%20or%20secret%20synonym%20accomplice
2. Research real-life experiences and challenges faced by Black women in academia. These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.nylon.com/articles/black-women-in-academia>
<https://www.politico.com/newsletters/women-rule/2021/07/09/nikole-hannah-jones-black-women-academia-493523>
<https://www.bu.edu/articles/2021/pov-where-are-the-tenured-black-female-professors/>
3. Research the institution of slavery in the U.S. These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/applied-and-social-sciences-magazines/house-slaves-overview>



4. This audio version of the first chapter of Michelle Alexander’s acclaimed book *The New Jim Crow* contains an insightful and succinct history of slavery and the evolution of America’s race-based caste system.
<https://archive.org/details/TheNewJimCrowChapterOneCPart1>
5. The 1619 Project, chronicling American history through the lens of slavery, was published in *The New York Times* and awarded the Pulitzer Prize for journalism. Despite its critical acclaim, this publication led to the project’s creator, Professor Nikole Hannah-Jones, initially being denied tenure at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. There was an unprecedented struggle with the Board of Trustees after conservative groups exerted pressure against her appointment while students and colleagues rallied around her. The 1619 Project comprises a comprehensive collection of essays authored by highly accomplished writers.
https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full_issue_of_the_1619_project.pdf
<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/aug/15/400-years-since-slavery-timeline>
6. What is tenure? This and other websites provide information:
<https://www.interfolio.com/resources/blog/every-thing-about-academic-tenure/>
7. What was the meaning of “contraband” during the Civil War? These and other websites provide information:
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contraband_\(American_Civil_War\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contraband_(American_Civil_War))
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/living-contraband-former-slaves-in-the-nation-s-capital-during-the-civil-war.htm>
8. Define chattel slavery. How does it differ from other forms of slavery? This and other websites provide information:
<https://freedomcenter.org/learn/modern-day-abolition/>
9. Research bias: unconscious bias, racial bias, and gender bias. This and other websites provide information:
<https://builtin.com/diversity-inclusion/gender-bias-in-the-workplace>
10. Research Sojourner Truth. This and other websites provide information:
<https://www.inheritage.org/almanack/sojourner-truth-quite-a-woman/>
11. Listen to this interview with playwright Dominique Morisseau and Nataka Garrett, director of OSF’s production of *Confederates*:
<https://literary-artsorg/archive/osf-confederates/>



After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on the meaning of the word “confederate.” What is the meaning of the play’s title, *Confederates*? Who are the confederates in the two stories?
 2. Refer to your research on the experience of slavery in America. What is Sandra’s strong need or motivation at the beginning of the play? Why is she compelled to detail her knowledge of the history of the enslavement of people of African ancestry at the beginning of the play? Why is the picture left on her door disturbing for Sandra?
- “It is very hard to be a woman in academia. A Black woman, even harder.”**

Sandra
3. What freedoms is Sara seeking at the beginning of the play? What makes her feel “the power of freedom” when she is with Abner? What are the obstacles to freedom?
 4. Compare and contrast the journeys of Sandra and of Sara. In what ways are the two women similar? In what ways are they different? What are the institutions that they must navigate? How do they navigate the inequities of the time they live in? What insights are gained by watching them both navigate the institutions in which they work in the play?
 5. The characters of Abner and Malik are played by the same actor. Compare and contrast their journeys in the play. In what ways does this double casting give information about both characters? What wars are they both fighting?
 6. Refer to your research on bias. How does Malik feel that Sandra is biased about him? What is Sandra’s defense? What is Malik’s bias toward Sandra? How do their roles of student and teacher contribute to the feelings of bias? In what ways does Malik have power over Sandra? In what ways does Sandra have power over Malik? How do their different powers put them on equal footing? In what ways is the academic institution responsible for both of their biases?
 7. Refer to the sidebar on infertility. In what ways does female infertility or “being barren” impact Sara, Missy Sue, and Sandra in the play? In what ways is it disempowering and for which characters? In what ways is it empowering and for which characters? How has barrenness broadened the world for all of the women?
 8. What kind of power does Missy Sue have over Sara? What power does Sara have over Missy Sue? Compare their relationship to that of Sandra and Malik. Compare their relationship to that of Sandra and Jade and Sara and LuAnne.

9. The characters of Missy Sue and Candice are played by the same actor. Compare and contrast their journeys in the play. What privileges do both characters share? In what ways does this double casting give information about both characters?
10. The characters of LuAnne and Jade are played by the same actor. Compare and contrast their journeys in the play. In what ways does this double casting give information about both characters? How does LuAnne navigate the plantation? How does Jade navigate the university?
11. What does kinship mean within the context of plantation life? Why is LuAnne pushing for kinship with Sara? Why is Sara reluctant for this kinship? What is shared and what is not shared between these two women? How is this kinship fulfilled in the play?
12. Why is Jade pushing for connection with Sandra? In what ways is Sandra reluctant for this connection? What is shared and not shared between Sandra and Jade? Which college experience of Jade’s informs her interpretation of Sandra’s behavior? How does Jade’s professional background differ from Sandra’s and how does this difference inform their relationship? How is a connection ultimately made between the two women?
13. Sandra says, “It is very hard to be a woman in academia. A Black woman, even harder.” What other characters are struggling with the inequities of being Black in the academic world and what are the expectations of others? What is the personal cost of being successful and Black in academia?
14. Why is Sandra wearing the Black Lives Matter t-shirt controversial? For Malik? Candice? Jade? What does it mean to Sandra?
15. Refer to your research on bias. How does racial and gender bias impact Sara and Sandra? Malik/Abner? Candice/Missy Sue? Jade/LuAnne?
16. Why does the playwright juxtapose slavery with academia in this play? How are they similar? In what ways are they different? What is learned from experiencing the two worlds side by side? What parallels, if any, can be drawn?
17. What are the different freedoms desired in the play? What sets Sandra free? Sara?
18. What is the connection between Sara and Sandra at the end of the play? What liberates the other characters, if anything?

Two Black Women Who Spied for the Union During the Civil War

(cont. from pg. 1)

After the war, Harriet tried unsuccessfully to collect \$1,800 for her service. A victim of governmental gender bias, she was subsequently awarded a widow's pension of \$8 per month. The government eventually authorized a payment of \$20 per month to Harriet beginning in January 1899, which she received until her death in 1913.

Harriet Tubman was buried with military honors at Fort Hill Cemetery in Auburn, New York.



Mary Elizabeth Bowser, Wikimedia Commons

Mary Elizabeth Bowser

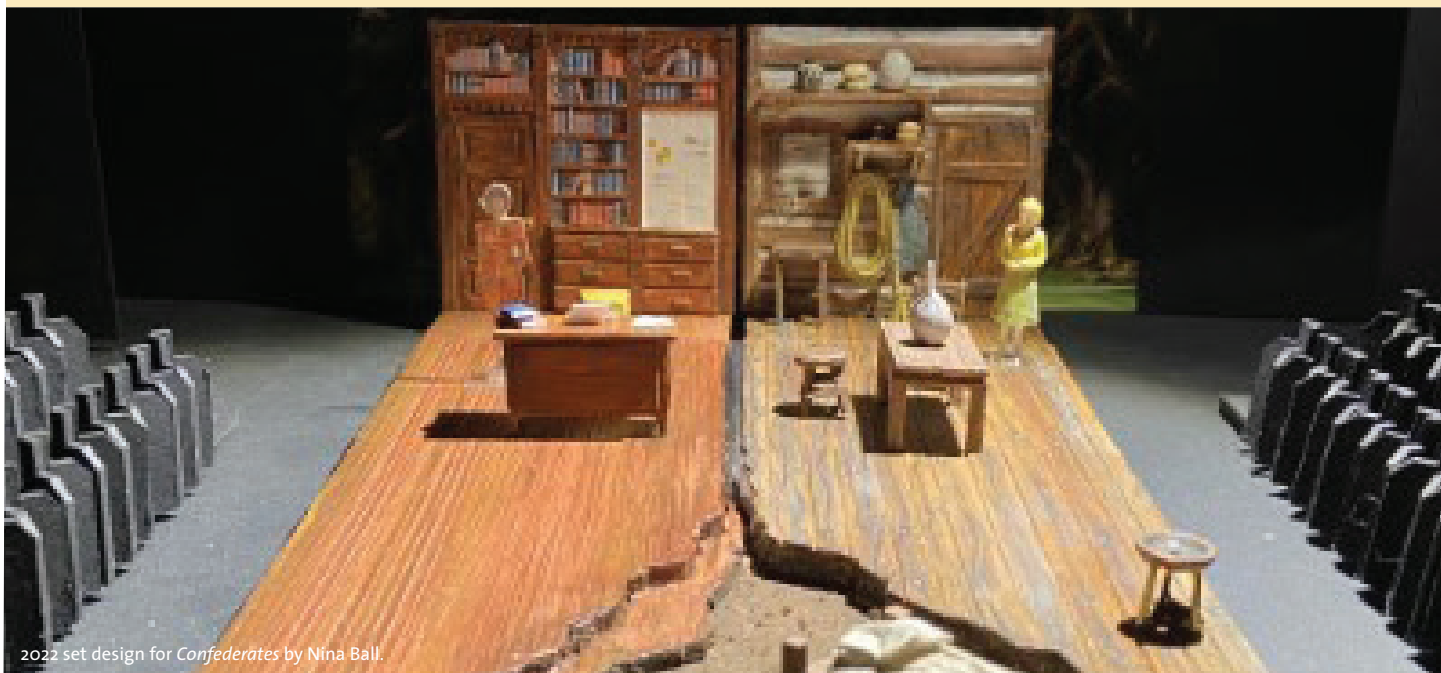
Was likely born Mary Jane Richards in Richmond, Virginia, where she was bound in service to the family of John Van Lew. Van Lew's wife Eliza and daughter Elizabeth were both opponents of slavery. When Van Lew died in September 1843, his will stipulated that Eliza could not sell or free any of the family's slaves. Existing evidence indicates that Eliza and Elizabeth secretly granted freedom to their enslaved workers, including Mary Jane Richards.

When the Civil War broke out, the two Van Lew women brought food, medicine, and books to Union soldiers at nearby Libby Prison. Elizabeth conveyed messages between the prisoners and Union officials and helped prisoners escape. To do this, she relied on an informal network of women and men, Black and white, all drawn from Richmond's clandestine Unionist community, to help her. The most noteworthy of these individuals was Mary Elizabeth Bowser, who by then had married a free Black man named Wilson Bowser in 1861 and taken his surname.

In the fall of 1865, Mary Elizabeth Bowser gave an address in Brooklyn alluding to her infiltration of the Confederate White House during the war. Though her story has been difficult to document, Bowser's willingness to risk her life as part of the Richmond underground is certain. Harriet Tubman's story indicates that there were many other African American women who served as spies during the war but whose stories remain undocumented and untold.



2022 costume designs for *Confederates* by Ricky German



2022 set design for *Confederates* by Nina Ball.

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