CHRISTIAN HISTORY

June 18, 2019
The following article is located at: https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2019/june/josiah-henson-uncle-tom-slavery-underground-railroad-faith.html

***Christian History*, June 2019**

Before 'Uncle Tom' Was a Bestseller, He Was Josiah Henson

Born into slavery, this preacher and Underground Railroad conductor served as the inspiration for a history-making book.

JARED BROCK | POSTED JUNE 10, 2019

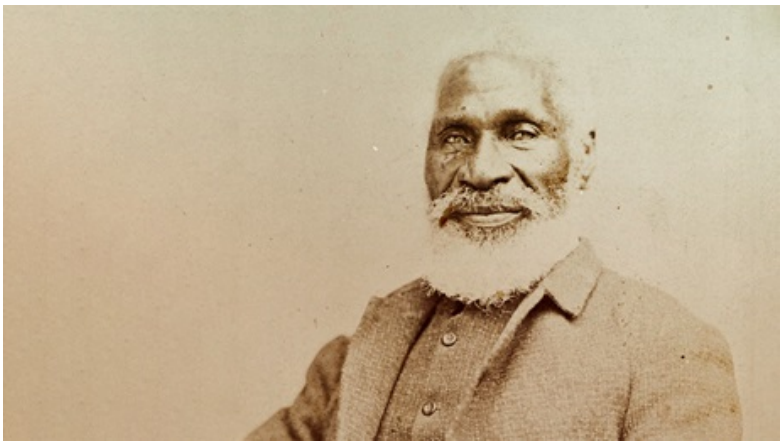

Image: Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

Portrait of Josiah Henson, June 17, 1876.

"*Mr. Josiah Henson, a fugitive slave & the original of Mrs. B. Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. He is now in his 88th year, & his sufferings, energy, patient endurance, & his anxiety for the good of his suffering brethren, are admirable… this most remarkable old man… who was during 41 years a slave, enduring great sufferings & cruelty & endowed with wonderful courage, energy & patience. He said he had had a very suffering tried life, but had, thanks to me, been able to reach a free country & live there.*" —Queen Victoria's diary, March 1877

Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a smashing success. The gripping exposé of slavery sold 3,000 copies on its first day in print, and Frederick Douglass reported that 5,000 copies—the entire first print run—were purchased within four days. Within six weeks, *The Boston Morning Post* declared that "everybody has read it, is reading, or is about to read it." According to reports at the time, it took 17 printing presses running around the clock to keep up with demand. By the end of its first year in print, the book had sold over 300,000 copies in the United States alone, going on to become the best-selling book of the 19th century aside from the Bible.

The plot of Stowe's bestseller centers around an indebted farmer and his favorite slave, a kind and humble middle-aged Christian man named Uncle Tom. The farmer is eventually forced to sell Tom south, where he is eventually killed when he refuses to disclose the whereabouts of two escapees. The backlash against the novel was immediate and fierce. Critics insisted that slavery was sanctioned in the Bible and that Stowe had fabricated an unrealistic, one-dimensional picture of slavery in the South. She was slammed as a socialist, anti-Christian, and ugly.

In response to the allegations, Stowe released *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. A giant annotated bibliography of her sources, the book pointed to hundreds of documented cases of real-life incidents that were similar or identical to those portrayed in her story. "The character of Uncle Tom has been objected to as improbable; and yet the writer has received more confirmations of that character, and from a great variety of sources, than of any other in the book," wrote Stowe.

Who was the man who inspired Stowe's Uncle Tom? "The venerable Josiah Henson," wrote Stowe. "Now pastor of the missionary settlement at Dawn, in Canada." Within days, Henson, a former enslaved laborer, now aging Methodist minister, catapulted to international fame.

Born a Slave

Josiah Henson was born near Port Tobacco, Maryland, around 1789. His first memories were witnessing his father's punishment; he was whipped, his ear cut off, and he was sold south—all as punishment for striking a white man who had attempted to rape his wife. Henson never saw his father again.

Henson was soon separated from his mother and sold to a child trafficker but quickly fell deathly ill. The slave trader offered the boy to Henson's mother's owner, an alcoholic gambler named Isaac Riley, for a bargain: free of charge if the young Henson died, a barter of some horseshoeing work if he survived.

But he did recover, and Henson and his mother, Celia, became the property of Riley, who lived about 12 miles from Washington, DC. On the plantation, he endured countless beatings as a child—especially after an ill-fated attempt to learn to read.

Henson had great physical strength and leadership ability and eventually became Riley's market man in the nation's capital. As the person in charge of selling all his master's farm produce, he rubbed shoulders with eminent lawyers and entrepreneurs and learned the skills of running a business.

Faith Found

John McKenny lived in Georgetown, just a few miles from Isaac Riley's plantation. A baker by trade, McKenny detested slavery and refused to hire slave labor from any of the hundreds of renters in the state. He worked with his own hands, along with whatever hired free labor he could afford.

One day in 1807, Henson's mother learned that McKenny was set to officiate the Sunday service at a church less than four miles from Isaac's plantation. Celia wanted her 18-year-old son to have a relationship with God, but he'd shown little interest in faith. Undeterred, she encouraged him to see McKenny preach.

After getting permission from Isaac Riley, Henson walked the forest path to the meeting at Newport Mill. But when Henson approached the door, he was turned away for being black. He circled the building, then stood in

the doorway and listened, transfixed; Henson had never heard a sermon before. McKenny preached passionately about the character of Jesus, asking the congregation to consider what kind of man dies for his enemies or sacrifices himself for others? The baker insisted that Christ died "for every man," repeating the phrase throughout his sermon.

McKenny opened his Bible and thumbed toward the New Testament as he spoke, landing at Hebrews 2:9. He raised his hands and looked toward the ceiling. "Jesus Christ, the Son of God, tasted death for every man; for the high, for the low, for the rich, for the poor, the bond, the free, the negro in his chains, the man in gold and diamonds." *Every man*. It was the first Bible verse Henson had ever heard and he later wrote that in that moment he had been "transported with delicious joy." Indeed, Henson's conversion to Christ would change the trajectory of his life and the course of history.

A Preacher Rises

Little is known about the immediate aftermath of his conversion but by the age 20, Henson had become a respected preacher in his local slave community. But he had chosen a path that would prove difficult and fraught with conflict. The Christianity of enslaved people was both visible and invisible, organized formally and arising spontaneously. Sunday worship in a local church building—during which slaves were often lectured about obeying authority and not stealing—was sometimes followed by informal, and sometimes illicit, prayer meetings in the slave cabins or in the woods.

While some masters allowed or even encouraged their slaves to preach, others were vehemently against it. Preaching at secret meetings could result in flogging or worse. Sometimes owners applied brine to a victim's bleeding back, a practice known as being "pickled."

In situations where attendance was forbidden, enslaved Christians who wanted to worship did their best to avoid getting caught. They met in forests, thickets, or ravines, which came to be called "hush harbors." One slave preacher, Kalvin Woods, recalled how they would hang up wet quilts around them like a "little room," "to keep the sound of their voices from penetrating the air."

Religious services—whether permitted by owners or conducted in secret—provided slaves with a welcome respite from incessant labor. They offered companionship and some measure of hope. The slaves could, for a fleeting moment, forget their misery. Faith helped them overcome the weakness they felt as individuals, as they felt stronger and safer as a group protected under the eyes of God.

At times, Christianity undoubtedly acted as an opiate, keeping slaves content with the hope of a higher power and a better future. But it also provided slaves with a bedrock strength against the hardships of their unavoidable reality.

As Henson began to preach, he struggled with the possibility that he was perhaps complicit in perpetuating the institution of slavery. Black preachers were often trained by white pastors who actively supported slavery and were deeply suspicious of insurrection. They often were forced to preach a careful, censored gospel and omit mention of freedom or the humanity of all humankind. Under the supervision of the white ruling class, many black preachers joined their masters in urging slaves to be obedient and submissive, telling them to wait patiently for their reward in heaven.

Henson was not formally trained in theology, of course, but he was an incredibly compelling preacher. Despite the fact that he could neither read nor write, he memorized verses as quickly as he heard them shared by others. Like many other slave preachers, he relied on his natural wit and eloquence to make up for his lack of theological training. He spoke passionately of his own sinfulness and imperfection, and as he labored to improve himself, he inspired those around him to do the same.

After three years of observation, practice, prayer, and quiet mentorship by a white preacher, Henson was admitted as a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

A Slave Unto Death

In the summer of 1828, a white Methodist preacher-abolitionist visited the county and took an interest in Henson. The preacher-abolitionist convinced Henson to secretly raise money to purchase his own freedom. While traveling between the Riley family's farms, the minister found Quaker and Methodist churches who would host and pay Henson and through these appointments he raised $350 toward his emancipation.

But ultimately the plan failed. Riley took advantage of Henson's illiteracy, stole his money, and decided to sell Henson south to New Orleans before he tried to run away. As he headed down the Mississippi River under the supervision of Riley's son, Henson stewed. After all he had done for Riley, the repayment was only abuse.

Before they had left, his overseer's brother had shattered Henson's shoulders with a six-foot fence post, an injury that would never allow him to raise his hands above his head again. Now he was being sold down the river like a cow or a bushel of corn. The further they traveled down the river, the more Henson got worked up. By the time they neared the slave markets of New Orleans, Henson was consumed with an almost uncontrollable fury.

Henson's faith in Christ, which had long been his firm foundation, gave way. He envisioned the emaciated frames of his enslaved brothers. In them, he saw "the sure, swift, loving intervention of the one unfailing friend of the wretched—death," as he later wrote in his autobiography.

But why should he be the one to die? Why shouldn't he shorten his master's life instead? The captain and crew were asleep below deck, and they had no reason to suspect him. The idea began to take shape. Blinded by

passion, Henson decided he would kill his master's son and the crew, take their money, sink the boat, and escape north.

Creeping down noiselessly, he took hold of a heavy ax, wiping the sweat from his hands to get a firmer grip. He entered the cabin and approached the first sleeping man. He squinted in the lantern light. His eyes fell on his master's son. Henson's hand slid along the ax handle. He raised the blade to strike the fatal blow, when he heard a voice, as he recalled in a later work about his life. "What! Commit murder! and you a Christian?" Before this, Henson had considered the murders self-defense, but, as he later wrote in his autobiography:

> Now, all at once, the truth burst upon me that it was a crime. I was going to kill a young man, who had done nothing to injure me, but obey commands which he could not resist; I was about to lose the fruit of all my efforts at self-improvement, the character I had acquired, and the peace of mind which had never deserted me. All this came upon me instantly, and with a distinctness which made me almost think I heard it whispered in my ear; and I believe I even turned my head to listen. I shrunk back, laid down the axe, crept up on deck again, and thanked God, as I have done every day since, that I had not committed murder.

A Life Redeemed

Shortly after Henson decided not to kill his captors, his life took another turn. The young man tasked with selling Henson contracted malaria. Rather than letting his master's son die, Henson loaded him on a steamship and returned north to Kentucky.

Upon his return to the plantation, Henson hatched a plan to escape to Canada with his wife, Charlotte, and four sons. He traveled 600 miles—with the youngest two in a knapsack on his shattered shoulders—several years before the Underground Railroad was even established.

Henson's family joined a freeman settlement called Dawn, (now the site of Dresden, Ontario), near the location of a long-running series of riverside Christian camp meetings. But rather than settle into life as a free man, Henson returned to America again and again and rescued 118 slaves as a conductor on the Underground Railroad.

As part of his fight for the freedom of others, Henson spoke and traveled extensively in an effort to raise funds and attention for the abolitionist cause and the work at Dawn. He traveled to the first World's Fair at the Crystal Palace in London, where he won a bronze medal for the community's high-quality black walnut lumber.

Through his new British Christian friends, he was given an audience with the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace. Henson's handlers told him to expect no more than 15 minutes with the second-highest-

ranking man in the empire. After more than half an hour, the Archbishop asked, "At what university, sir, did you graduate?" Henson's answer? "I graduated, your grace, at the university of adversity."

Back in Canada, Henson became a Methodist elder with a 300-mile territory in southwestern Ontario. He traveled, preached, and fundraised constantly throughout New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maine. After the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Henson leveraged his newfound fame to spread the message of social justice and the gospel.

Free at Last

The character of Uncle Tom was inspired in part by the Christlike character and faith of Henson. He had dictated his story to a former mayor of Boston in 1849, and the little memoir had garnered some attention in the Boston abolitionist reading room. His autobiography, along with dozens of books, hundreds of newspaper articles, and personal firsthand experience formed the basis for Stowe's giant bibliography.

Among all the readers of Stowe's work, there was one whose influence could not be overstated. According to the Library of Congress's circulation records, President Abraham Lincoln borrowed *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* on June 16, 1862, and returned it 43 days later, on July 29. The dates correspond exactly to the time during which he drafted the Emancipation Proclamation.

We may never know the degree to which Harriet Beecher Stowe influenced Abraham Lincoln himself. But it is clear that the Northern writer used her celebrity platform to powerfully sway public opinion toward emancipation. And during the critical time when Lincoln was crafting the Emancipation Proclamation, he had Stowe's Key—and Josiah Henson's story—at hand.

For his part, Henson used the publication of Stowe's books to agitate for change in the United States. He republished his memoir and used the funds to purchase his brother's freedom. He supported black families whose husbands and fathers and brothers went off to fight in the Civil War. He ran businesses in Canada to employ black refugees.

In 1876, at age 87, Henson did a 100-plus city speaking tour of the United Kingdom to relieve himself of debts shouldered on behalf of the work at Dawn. He preached at Charles Spurgeon's Tabernacle, spoke at John Wesley's Chapel, and was invited to meet Queen Victoria and her family at Windsor Castle before traveling to Washington to meet Rutherford B. Hayes at the White House. After his travels, he returned to Canada, where he continued to preach and fundraise until the *New York Times* reported his death in 1883 at age 93.

One eulogy summarized his life well: "We seem again to hear his strong advocacy … and we are proud to state as our firm belief, that he was a Christian in the full sense of the term. A minister properly endowed, and a thorough gentleman by nature. … He is not lost! He is only gone before."

Jared Brock is the author of The Road to Dawn *and the director of* Redeeming Uncle Tom .