

“The Rev. Josiah Henson—the original of ‘Uncle Tom’” New York Public Library Digital Collections. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47db-c55f-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

BACKGROUND: In 1789, Josiah Henson was born in Charles County, Maryland. When he was a young child, Francis Newman, the man who originally enslaved him, sold him to Isaac Riley. Henson was exceptionally intelligent, and Riley gave him a lot of responsibility. He also allowed him some unusual privileges. For example, Henson became a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

When he was twenty-two years old, Henson married an enslaved woman (her name remains unknown). Together, they had twelve children, eight of whom were born after they self-emancipated.

When Riley fell on financial hard times, he sent Henson and eighteen enslaved people, including Henson’s family to Kentucky, to work for his brother Amos Riley. Although tempted to flee while traveling through the free state of Ohio, Henson refuses to break his word to Riley by running away. Determined to purchase his own freedom, Henson gets permission to travel back to Maryland to negotiate with Riley. On the way there, he earned a sizable amount of money preaching. He and Riley negotiated a price for manumission—they agreed upon \$450. Henson then paid Riley \$350 as a down payment. Riley told Henson he would send his manumission papers to his brother Amos, and although he sent the

papers, in the letter he raised the price from \$450 to \$1000. Then, in an underhanded turn, Riley decided to send Henson to New Orleans and sell him.

In 1830, fearing separation through sale, Henson, his wife, and four children fled Kentucky. They passed through Ohio and New York before eventually settling in Ontario, Canada. In Canada, Henson became a preacher and community leader. He learned to read and write and became an active abolitionist, returning to the United States several time to help enslaved people escape bondage.

Although the autobiography was first published in 1849, it was later reprinted in 1858 and 1879 with a foreword written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. At the time, it was commonly believed that Stowe based her most famous character, Uncle Tom, on Henson. Although Stowe did not attribute her inspiration for Uncle Tom to any one person, she did identify Henson’s narrative as proof that fictional individuals like Uncle Tom really did exist.

The following excerpts come directly from Henson’s autobiography first published in 1849.

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After this brief period of comparative comfort, however, the death of Dr. McP. brought about a revolution in our condition, which, common as such things are in slave countries, can never be imagined by those not subject to them, nor recollected by those who have been, without emotions of grief and indignation deep and ineffaceable. The doctor was riding from one of his scenes of riotous excess, when, falling from his horse, in crossing a little run, not a foot deep, he was unable to save himself from drowning.

In consequence of his decease, it became necessary to sell the estate and the slaves, in order to divide the property among the heirs; and we were all put up at auction and sold to the highest bidder, and

scattered over various parts of the country. My brothers and sisters were bid off one by one, while my mother, holding my hand, looked on in an agony of grief, the cause of which

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I but ill understood at first, but which dawned on my mind, with dreadful clearness, as the sale proceeded. My mother was then separated from me, and put up in her turn. She was bought by a man named Isaac R., residing in Montgomery county, and then I was offered to the assembled purchasers. My mother, half distracted with the parting forever from all her children, pushed through the crowd, while the bidding for me was going on, to the spot where R. was standing. She fell at his feet, and clung to his knees, entreating him in tones that a mother only could command, to buy her baby as well as herself, and spare to her one of her little ones at least. Will it, can it be believed that this man, thus appealed to, was capable not merely of turning a deaf ear to her supplication, but of disengaging himself from her with such violent blows and kicks, as to reduce her to the necessity of creeping out of his reach, and mingling the groan of bodily suffering with the sob of a breaking heart? Yet this was one of my earliest observations of men; an experience which has been common to me with thousands of my race, the bitterness of which its frequency cannot diminish to any individual who suffers it, while it is dark enough to overshadow the whole after-life with something blacker than a funeral pall.—I was bought by a stranger.—Almost immediately, however, whether my childish strength, at five or six years of age, was overmastered by such scenes and experiences,

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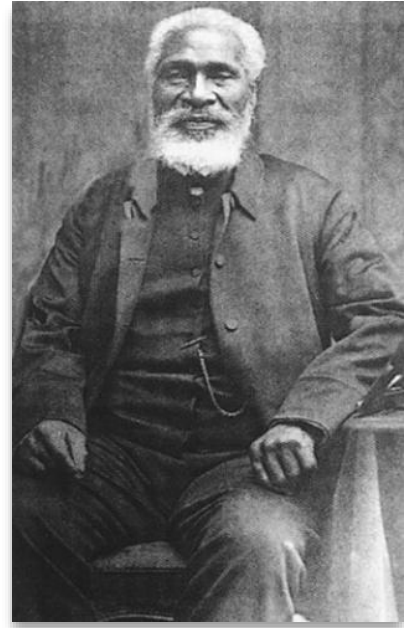
or from some accidental cause, I fell sick, and seemed to my new master so little likely to recover, that he proposed to R., the purchaser of my mother, to take me too at such a trifling rate that it could not be refused. I was thus providentially restored to my mother; and under her care, destitute as she was of the proper means of nursing me, I recovered my health, and grew up to be an uncommonly vigorous and healthy boy and man.

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My earliest employments were, to carry buckets of water to the men at work, to hold a horse-plough, used for weeding between the rows of corn, and as I grew older and taller, to take care of master's saddle-horse. Then a hoe was put into my hands, and I was soon required to do the day's work of a man; and it was not long before I could do it, at least as well as my associates in misery.

The every-day life of a slave on one of our southern plantations, however frequently it may have been described, is generally little known at the North; and must be mentioned as a necessary illustration of the character and habits of the slave and the slave-holder, created and perpetuated by their relative position. The principal food of those upon my master's plantation consisted of corn meal, and salt herrings; to which was added in summer a little buttermilk, and the few vegetables which each might raise for himself and his family, on the little piece of ground which was assigned to him for the purpose, called a truck patch. The meals were two, daily. The first, or breakfast, was taken at 12 o'clock, after laboring from daylight; and the other when the work of the remainder of the day was over. The only dress was of tow cloth, which for the young, and often even for those who had passed the period of childhood, consisted of a single garment, something like a shirt, but longer, reaching to the ancles [sic]; and for



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the older, a pair of pantaloons, or a gown, according to the sex; while some kind of round jacket, or overcoat, might be added in winter, a wool hat once in two or three years, for the males, and a pair of coarse shoes once a year. Our lodging was in log huts, of a single small room, with no other floor than the trodden earth, in which ten or a dozen persons—men, women, and children—might sleep, but which could not protect them from dampness and cold, nor permit the existence of the common decencies of life. There were neither beds, nor furniture of any description—a blanket being the only addition to the dress of the day for protection from the chillness of the air or the earth. In these hovels were we penned at night, and fed by day; here were the children born, and the sick—neglected. Such were the provisions for the daily toil of the slave.

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After a time, however, continual dissipation was more than a match for domestic saving. My master fell into difficulty, and from difficulty into a lawsuit with a brother-in-law, who charged him with dishonest mismanagement of property confided to him in trust. The lawsuit was protracted enough to cause his ruin, of itself. He used every resource to stave off the inevitable result, but at length saw no means of relief but removal to another State. He often came to my cabin to pass the evening in lamentations over his misfortune, in cursing his brother-in-law, and in asking my advice and assistance. The first time he ever intimated to me his ultimate project, he said he was ruined, that every thing was gone, that there was but one resource, and that depended upon me. "How can that be, master?" said I, in astonishment. Before he would explain himself, however, he begged me to promise to do what he should propose, well knowing, from his past experience of my character, that I should hold myself bound by such promise to do all that it

implied, if it were within the limits of possibility. Solicited in this way, with urgency and tears, by the man whom I had so zealously served for twenty years, and who now seemed absolutely dependent upon his slave,—impelled, too, by the fear which he skilfully awakened, that the sheriff would seize every one who belonged to him, and that all would be separated, or perhaps sold to go to Georgia, or Louisiana—an object of

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perpetual dread to the slave of the more northern States—I consented, and promised faithfully to do all I could to save him from the fate impending over him. He then told me I must take his slaves to his brother, in Kentucky. In vain I represented to him that I had never travelled a day's journey from his plantation, and knew nothing of the way, or the means of getting to Kentucky. He insisted that such a smart fellow as I could travel anywhere, he promised to give me all necessary instructions, and urged that this was the only course by which he could be saved. The result was, that I agreed to undertake the enterprise—certainly no light one for me, as it could scarcely be considered for even an experienced manager. There were eighteen negroes, besides my wife, two children, and myself, to transport nearly a thousand miles, through a country I knew nothing about, and in winter time, for we started in the month of February, 1825. My master proposed to follow me in a few months, and establish himself in Kentucky. He furnished me with a small sum of money, and some provisions; and I bought a one-horse wagon, to carry them, and to give the women and children a lift now and then, and the rest of us were to trudge on foot. Fortunately for the success of the undertaking, these people had been long under my direction, and were devotedly attached to me for the many alleviations I had afforded to their miserable condition, the comforts I had procured

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them, and the consideration which I had always manifested for them.

Under these circumstances no difficulty arose from want of submission to my authority, and none of any sort, except that which I necessarily encountered from my ignorance of the country, and my inexperience in such business. On arriving at Wheeling, I sold the horse and wagon, and purchased a boat of sufficient size, and floated down the river without further trouble or fatigue, stopping every night to encamp.

I said I had no further trouble, but there was one source of anxiety which I was compelled to encounter, and a temptation I had to resist, the strength of which others can appreciate as well as myself. In passing along the State of Ohio, we were frequently told that we were free, if we chose to be so. At Cincinnati, especially, the colored people gathered round us, and urged us with much importunity to remain with them; told us it was folly to go on; and in short used all the arguments now so familiar to induce slaves to quit their masters. My companions probably had little perception of the nature of the boon that was offered to them, and were willing to do just as I told them, without a wish to judge for themselves. Not so with me. From my earliest recollection, freedom had been the object of my ambition, a constant motive to exertion, an ever-present stimulus to gain and to save. No other means of obtaining it, however, had occurred to

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me, but purchasing myself of my master. The idea of running away was not one that I had ever indulged. I had a sentiment of honor on the subject, or what I thought such, which I would not have violated even for freedom; and every cent which I had ever felt entitled to call my own, had been treasured up for this great purpose, till I had accumulated between thirty and forty dollars. Now was offered to me an opportunity I

had not anticipated. I might liberate my family, my companions, and myself, without the smallest risk, and without injustice to any individual, except one whom we had none of us any reason to love, who had been guilty of cruelty and oppression to us all for many years, and who had never shown the smallest symptom of sympathy with us, or with any one in our condition. But I need not make the exception. There would have been no injustice to R. himself—it would have been a retribution which might be called righteous—if I had availed myself of the opportunity thus thrust suddenly upon me.

But it was a punishment which it was not for me to inflict. I had promised that man to take his property to Kentucky, and deposit it with his brother; and this, and this only, I resolved to do. I left Cincinnati before night, though I had intended to remain there, and encamped with my entire party a few miles below the city. What advantages I may have lost, by thus throwing away an opportunity of obtaining freedom, I

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know not; but the perception of my own strength of character, the feeling of integrity, the sentiment of high honor, I have experienced,—these advantages I do know, and prize; and would not lose them, nor the recollection of having attained them, for all that I can imagine to have resulted from an earlier release from bondage. I have often had painful doubts as to the propriety of my carrying so many other individuals into slavery again, and my consoling reflection has been, that I acted as I thought at the time was best.