
Henson, Josiah

(15 June 1789–5 May 1883),

Elizabeth Zoe Vicary

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.34450>

Published in print: 15 March 2013

Published online: 31 May 2013

A version of this article originally appeared in *African American National Biography*.

escaped slave and preacher, was born in Charles County, Maryland, on a farm owned by Francis Newman. As a child Henson frequently saw his parents abused and severely beaten. On one occasion, as a punishment for defending his wife, Henson's father was sentenced to a physical mutilation that left him permanently scarred. Although he was raised without religion, Henson was immediately converted to Christianity after his first exposure to it at a revivalist camp meeting. As a young boy, he was sold to Isaac Riley.

Because of his unusual strength and intelligence, Henson was made superintendent of the farm at a young age. He managed the plantation well, doubling the annual crop production. One day during an argument at a neighboring farm, Henson defended his master in an argument with the other plantation's overseer. In revenge, the overseer and three of his slaves waylaid Henson one evening soon afterward, beating him and shattering his shoulder blade. For the rest of his life, he could not raise his arms above shoulder level. At age twenty-two Henson married another slave (name unknown); they had twelve children.

Isaac Riley, the master of Henson's plantation, went bankrupt in 1825 and was forced to sell his farm and to transfer his twenty slaves to his brother's farm in Kentucky. After making Henson swear to their safe passage, Riley entrusted him with the care of the slaves. The route to Kentucky took the party through Ohio, a free state, where many implored Henson to allow them their freedom, but Henson kept his word and brought them intact to their new owner. In 1828 Henson became a preacher for the Methodist Episcopal Church. He then attempted to buy his freedom from his owner. A price of four hundred dollars was settled on, but at the last minute the owner reneged on his agreement, deciding instead to sell Henson to a new owner in New Orleans. Journeying south with his master's son, who had instructions to transact some business and then to sell Henson before the return voyage, Henson's trepidation grew as he saw the terrible conditions in which slaves in the Deep South lived. Midway through the journey, the master's son developed a serious fever, rendering him weak and helpless, and he begged Henson to bring him home safely. Though he could easily have deserted his young master and made a bid for freedom, Henson remained to escort the son back to his father. His loyalty met with neither reward nor gratitude. Henson's growing desire for freedom, augmented by outrage at this ingratitude, propelled him to escape with his wife and four young children in the summer of 1830. In two weeks he had reached Cincinnati; from there he sailed to Buffalo, New York; and, in October, he crossed the U.S. border into Canada.

Henson settled in Dresden, Ontario, near Lake St. Clair and south of the Sydenham River, and he became a preacher. His oldest son, then in school, taught him to read. Quickly establishing himself as a leader in the Afro-Canadian community, Henson made several trips back to the United States and

across the Mason-Dixon line to help other slaves escape. During the Canadian Rebellions of 1837-1838 Henson served the British as a captain in a troop of Afro-Canadian volunteers. With the support of sponsors from England and America, Henson began laying the foundations for an Afro-Canadian community and industrial school. The British American Institute, begun in 1842, encompassing two hundred acres of wooded land, was intended as a refuge for escaped slaves. However, the community never grew large or self-sufficient enough to survive, and by the end of the Civil War almost all of the colony's remaining members had returned to the United States. In 1849 Henson published his autobiography, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself*. Reprinted in 1858, its name was changed to *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life*, and the next edition was titled "*Truth Is Stranger than Fiction*": *An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson* (1879). Both later editions contain a foreword by Harriet Beecher Stowe.

On three journeys to England, in 1849, 1851, and 1876, Henson received much attention from members of high society there, including the archbishop of Canterbury. He was honored at a private party given in 1851 by Prime Minister Lord John Russell and invited by Lord Grey to travel to India to supervise cotton plantations. Soon after his return from England, Henson met Stowe. After *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in 1852, the public began to believe that Henson's life story was the basis for the character of Uncle Tom in the novel. Following the death of his first wife, Henson married a Boston widow. His final trip to England, a preaching and lecturing tour in 1876, was highlighted by Queen Victoria's personal gift of her photograph encased in a gold frame. Henson died in Dresden, Ontario.

Henson's life story is that of a daring early leader of slaves and escaped slaves, a man of high moral principles who endured great suffering. Although the British American Institute was small and unsuccessful, Henson's work as an ambassador to England for African Americans did much for their perception overseas. His greatest achievement was the example he offered of a man born into slavery, illiterate and handicapped by vicious physical abuse, who gained his freedom, learned to read, and became a preacher and a leader of a community of escaped slaves.

Further Reading

Pease, William, and Jane Pease. *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America* (1963).

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853).

Winks, Robin. *Blacks in Canada: A History* (1971)

Obituary:

New York Tribune, 6 May 1883.