

A Moment in Black History

Sources: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Josiah-Henson>



Josiah Henson (June 15, 1789 - May 5, 1883) was an American labourer and clergyman who escaped slavery in 1830 to Canada, where he became the brain behind the Dawn Settlement, a model community for former slaves.

Josiah Henson was born into slavery in Charles County, Maryland, on a farm owned by Francis Newman and he was later sold to Isaac Riley. Mr. Henson witnessed some brutalities against the slaves and the most notable one was when Josiah's father tried to defend his mother from an overseer. His father was punished with over 50 lashes, had an ear cut off, and was sold to another slaveowner farther south. Henson never saw or heard of his father again

At early age, Josiah Henson was appointed to superintendent of the farm by his slave master due to his unusual strength and intelligence. Mr. Henson's unflinching loyalty to his slave master earned him an exceptional responsibility to become a preacher in the Methodist Episcopal Church. He was also tasked with transporting slaves to the Kentucky plantation of Riley's brother. Mr. Henson had opportunities to escape while transporting other slaves but did not.

In about 1829 Isaac Riley agreed to grant Henson's freedom in exchange for \$450. Henson had already raised most of the money by preaching, but Riley later dramatically increased the fee and planned to sell him. Soon after, Henson found out the plans to sell and separate him from his wife and children, he then escaped to Canada. Once established in Canada, he occasionally returned to the United States, where he eventually led over 120 runaway slaves on the long perilous trek to freedom along the Underground Railroad. Mr. Henson became a leader among the growing number of fugitive slaves and later rose to international recognition as a leader and abolitionist. He became the driving force behind the establishment of the Dawn Settlement in Dresden, Ontario. Its goal was to employ and educate former slaves.

In 1849 Boston publisher printed the self-narrated story of the life of Josiah Henson. That story was the inspiration for the world-famous character Uncle Tom, of Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe, published in 1852. After the publication of his first narrative, there were subsequent editions of his life story published in 1858 and 1876 before his death in 1883.

References:

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1. Josiah Henson, 1789-1883; *The Life of Josiah Henson, formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself* Boston: A. D. Phelps, 1849:
<https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/henson49/summary.html>
2. Josiah Henson American labourer and clergyman:
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