

NARRATIVE  
OF THE  
LIFE OF HENRY BOX BROWN

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF



*Introduction by Richard Newman*

*Foreword by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.*

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## Foreword

by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

One of the most curious, and fascinating, genres of literature is that created in America by fugitive black slaves. The very idea that slaves could, or would, escape from bondage, flee mostly on foot to the North, live in peril of slave-catchers in search of the heavy bounties offered for their return, and then, audaciously, write autobiographical narratives of their time in bondage, their escape, and their new lives as free women and men proved endlessly fascinating to the American and British reading public. These slave narratives, as a genre, as many scholars have demonstrated, were hugely popular, especially between 1850—the date of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act—and the end of the Civil War.

Several were best-sellers; most were extremely well reviewed and widely discussed, both for their considerable political value in the abolitionists' struggle against slavery, and for their significance as a novel genre of literature. Names such as William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, Josiah Henson, Linda Brent, and William and Ellen Craft—among dozens of others—were regularly included among the literary

lions of the decade preceding the Civil War. And of these ex-slave authors, none rendered a story more curiously compelling—and incredible—than did Henry “Box” Brown.

As difficult as it may be for us to believe, Henry Box Brown mailed himself from slavery to freedom. Whereas other slaves walked or rode (by horse, carriage, boat, or—in the case of Frederick Douglass—train), Henry Brown somehow decided that he could escape detection from his owner and slavery sympathizers by having himself “nailed inside a wooden crate and shipped via the Adams Express Company from slavery in Richmond, Virginia, to freedom in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,” as Richard Newman notes in the Introduction to this edition of Brown’s extraordinarily rare 1851 narrative. Confined for twenty-seven hours, Brown’s most unusual conduit to freedom consisted of a baize-lined wooden casketlike container, three feet long and two feet wide, held shut with five hickory loops, traversing a distance of 350 miles.

Brown’s mode of escape, *sui generis*, was both ingenious and dangerous. As he puts it in his text, “the idea suddenly flashed upon my mind” that it was possible to shut “myself up” and be delivered to a safe address in “a free state . . . as dry goods.” (How dry Brown may have been after twenty-seven hours of confinement in a wooden box three feet by two feet, no one was apparently willing to say at the time.) Brown’s accomplice, a white man named Samuel A. Smith, would be arrested seven months later for attempting this same scheme with two other slaves, as was a free black man, James Caesar Anthony Smith, who also helped Brown and Samuel Smith to effect Brown’s successful escape in March 1849. Samuel Smith was jailed. James Smith, who admitted having helped slaves escape since 1826, was paradoxically acquitted. (Brown’s container, by the way, had been constructed by a black carpenter named John Mattaner.)

Richard Newman documents Brown’s subsequent career as a successful abolitionist lecturer and author, both in the North and in England, where he fled after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and

where he published the second and third editions of his slave narrative and became increasingly controversial within the abolitionist movement. In fact, no less a stalwart of the abolition movement than Frederick Douglass himself criticized Brown publicly for unveiling his method of escape, implying that Brown had chosen to profit from his own ingenuity rather than share it with other slaves who could have possibly utilized a similar passage to freedom.

Douglass, who considered the anti-slavery movement the moral equivalent of war, declined in his slave narrative of 1845 to disclose his mode of escape, which was to assume the disguise of a sailor and ride a train from slavery in Baltimore to freedom in Philadelphia. It is highly unlikely, however, that other slaves were able to utilize Douglass’s ruse, despite his discretion. Nonetheless, this contretemps between the two slave narrators who fled enslavement by rail is indicative of deep ambivalences within the abolitionist movement about disclosure and discretion and, indeed, about the entire profit-making aspect of the anti-slavery lecture circuit.

Henry Box Brown was a hugely popular lecturer; his story was so unusual, his method of escape so uncannily bold, that listeners and readers devoured his story, overcoming their skepticism about Brown’s veracity by insisting that Brown reenact his escape mechanism, which he did in England.

The perennial appeal of Brown’s tale to his contemporaries and to us, a century and a half later, stems, in part, from the fact that Brown made literal much that was implicit in the symbolism of enslavement. Slavery was a form of “social death,” as the sociologist Orlando Patterson has famously discussed. The slave narratives were “narratives of ascent,” as Robert Stepto has argued, stories of deliverance not only from slavery to freedom and South to North but also, in Patterson’s sense, from social death to social life, even if a less than perfect life of a black person in the North of antebellum America. Brown *names* this symbolic relation between death and life by having himself confined in

a virtual casket. He “descends” in what must have been a hellacious passage of the train ride—sweltering, suffocating, claustrophobic, unsanitary, devoid of light, food, and water—only to be resurrected twenty-seven hours later in the heavenly city of freedom and brotherly love that Philadelphia represented.

Brown, in other words, unwittingly had replicated the symbolic aspect of the crucifixion of Christ. He was the man who had been buried alive, yet lived to tell—and write—about it. Brown represented the potential of all slaves to return from the death-in-life that slavery was for the slave. Moreover, that it was a slave who devised this clever act of illusion—in clear defiance of racist claims that African slaves were pre-rational—only made Brown’s echo of the most important element in the whole of Christian symbolism all the more compelling. Brown was a Christlike figure, an escape artist, and something of an inventor all rolled into one. His text resonated for readers on each of these deeper levels.

That a slave would risk death by suffocation or dehydration to gain his freedom, in defiance of all odds for his own survival, and that he used two symbols of the official power structure—a shipping firm and the railroad—to do so, not only astonished his readers, but calls to mind in our own generation the determination to achieve democracy by oppressed peoples throughout the world. Clearly, for Brown, the will to flight was paramount, just as it continues to be for refugees fleeing totalitarian regimes today, from Bosnia to Burundi, from Cuba to China, from Turkistany to Tibet. Henry Box Brown’s story is just as relevant now as it was 150 years ago.

The scholar Richard Newman has performed a most outstanding and admirable service in restoring this rare and compelling text to a new generation of readers.

## Introduction

by Richard Newman

## The Book

*O*f the hundreds of thousands of African-American slaves who liberated themselves by escaping from human bondage in the South, very few specific names remain with us. Most, in fact, are not even known. Some ex-slaves, however, told or wrote the stories of their lives. These narratives give us much of what we know, not only about the resistance of escape, but about slave life and thought.

One name that has not been forgotten is Henry “Box” Brown. He is stamped indelibly on the popular imagination because of his ingenious method of escape. On March 29, 1849, Brown had himself nailed inside a wooden crate and shipped via the Adams Express Co. from slavery in Richmond, Virginia, to freedom in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In twenty-seven hours, he traveled 350 miles, most of it in discomfort and all of it in danger.

Brown, who immediately took the name “Box” as his own, has retained the public recognition he achieved at the time of his bold flight. A black wax museum in Baltimore features a life-size Brown emerging from his packing crate. The National Park Service recommends that its

site guides relate Brown's unique tale as a way to humanize any discussion of slavery, a subject most tourists apparently resist. Toyota Motors Sales Co. recently ran an advertisement telling Brown's story, picturing a large box, and "recognizing those individuals who overcame great obstacles."

The fugitives we know are remembered primarily through their published narratives. Box Brown also issued an account of his life and escape, but his book is essentially unavailable. The first edition, published in Boston in 1849, the same year as his escape, is also highly flawed. Brown, like most other slaves, was illiterate, so his and their stories were told by sympathetic whites, more or less based on their subjects' verbal accounts. Brown's amanuensis, Charles Stearns, was perhaps the first white man to write a narrative on behalf of a slave. Stearns was such a zealous abolitionist, however, that Brown's story is spoiled by Stearns' turgid style, scolding prose, and even the addition of a polemic essay of his own. It is hardly Box Brown's book.

Fearful of capture because of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Brown was forced to flee to England soon after his arrival in the North. In England, he, or someone under his direction, edited Stearns' overblown rhetoric out of the narrative, and a new version was issued in Manchester in 1851. The excision of Stearns' words and rhetoric is clear evidence of the kinds of restrictions ex-slaves faced under the control of their best anti-slavery white friends. Unable to read or write and with little access to printers or publishers, Box Brown was not free from saying what other people wanted him to say. Only in England did he experience the freedom to express himself in his own way. The Manchester edition is obviously closer to Brown's own telling of his own story, but it has never been published in the United States—until now.

The differences between the two books are clear from their titles. The American title is *Narrative of Henry Box Brown who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide Written from a Statement of Facts*

*Made by Himself With Remarks upon the Remedy for Slavery. By Charles Stearns.* This book, a reprinting of Brown's Manchester version, is simply entitled *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* and is twenty-three pages shorter. The real difference is that this version is told in Brown's own voice.

In their original published forms, both these books are scarce. Philip McBlain, the leading dealer in rare African-American books, reports that he has never seen a copy of the American edition. The New York book dealer Glen Horowitz did offer one for sale in 1996 at \$5,500. It does exist in major research libraries, however, and there were several reprints in the late 1960s, but now even these have disappeared. A dozen copies of this 1851 Manchester edition are in American libraries.

A second English edition came out in Bilston in 1852, but the stereotyped text is the same as this volume. The Bilston reprint indicates the book's popularity in the United Kingdom, where Brown became a feature on the abolitionist lecture circuit, as he had been in the United States. Currently, there is only one known copy of the 1852 edition in the United States.

### Brown's Story

Box Brown's birthdate, like that of all slaves, is uncertain, but we know he was born on a plantation in Louisa County, Virginia, near the capital city of Richmond, sometime around 1815. The first half of the nineteenth century through which he lived was a momentous period for a nation struggling with the crisis of slavery. The very existence of the United States as a federal union was at stake, first when the moralistic New England abolitionists cried, "No union with slaveholders," then when the white South used states' rights as a rationalization to protect the slave system.

Brown lived through a time of increasing national polarization. In the years before he became a fugitive, the South toughened its position, particularly as it saw the western territories as potential ground for the addition of slave states. In 1816, the American Colonization Society was formed to eliminate the "danger" of free Negroes in a slave society by shipping them to Africa. In the 1830s, black literacy was forbidden by law in many states. In 1836, a gag rule forbade even the introduction of anti-slavery legislation in the U.S. Congress. When pro-slavery Missouri applied for statehood in 1818, Thomas Jefferson perceptively called it "a firebell in the night," an alarm and a warning that an inevitable conflagration lay ahead.

African Americans also strengthened their own resolve during Brown's lifetime. In 1827, the first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, appeared in New York with the statement, "Too long have others spoken for us." Two years later, David Walker published in Boston his radical *Appeal*, calling for slave revolt. In 1831 Nat Turner in Virginia led the slaves' most successful rebellion. The famous *L'Amistad* mutiny was in 1839, and in 1843 Sojourner Truth became an anti-slavery activist. Personal escapes that came to national attention increased: Frederick Douglass in 1838, William and Ellen Craft in 1848, and Harriet Tubman just four months after Box Brown, in 1849.

The whole purpose of Brown's *Narrative* was, and continues to be, the creation of a medium for him to tell his own story. He describes his family and childhood, his work in a tobacco factory, and the heart-breaking account of the sale of his wife and children, which meant their forced separation. It was then that this law-abiding man decided to escape, and "the idea suddenly flashed upon my mind of shutting myself up in a box and getting myself conveyed as dry goods to a free State."

What did the slaves themselves, particularly the vast majority who were the plantation field hands, say was the worst aspect of bondage? It was not the whippings, the labor of sixteen-hour workdays, the food minimized to survival levels, the special clothing woven from mill-floor scraps. Their deepest anxiety and greatest suffering came from

the arbitrary breaking up of their families, husbands from wives, parents from children, children from each other. This severance and sundering created an emotional death that left scars deeper than the lash marks on their backs.

Brown's five-foot, eight-inch, 200-pound body was fitted into a baize-lined container sealed by five hickory loops, marked "THIS SIDE UP WITH CARE," and mailed to William H. Johnson, an abolitionist sympathizer on Philadelphia's Arch Street. The city's Anti-Slavery Committee sent for the box, and it was brought to their office at 107 N. 5th Street on March 30, 1849. Nervous abolitionists opened the box, Henry Brown calmly emerged, said, "How do you do, gentlemen?" and promptly fainted.

After a glass of water, a disheveled Brown regained his aplomb and proceeded to sing the Fortieth Psalm. Provided with money and clothes, Brown stayed with abolitionists James and Lucretia Mott, and then was sent to Boston and New Bedford. Brown's imaginative escape immediately caught public attention. He became an instant celebrity, a status he discovered he liked and learned to exploit. He went on the abolitionist lecture circuit, singing his songs and telling his story.

Sentiment against slavery was rising in the North, largely because a national government dominated by pro-slavery southerners was pushing its agenda. Brown, and others, found increasingly sympathetic audiences.<sup>8</sup> Northern whites were particularly attracted to fugitive slaves who could describe from their own experiences what slavery was really like. They were fascinated by Brown, in part, of course, because of his successful but dangerous escape. He stayed on tour until the early fall of 1850.

## The Smiths

Back in Virginia, meanwhile, the seriousness of Brown's escape was dramatized by the arrest of Samuel A. Smith, the white man who facilitated



Brown's flight by packing him into his famous box. Smith was convicted in October 1849 for boxing up two more potential escapees, Alfred and Sawney, who were discovered and captured. Smith was refused witnesses, and spent five summer months chained in a cell five feet by eight feet, not unlike the restrained enclosure of his friend Brown. In prison, Smith survived five stab wounds, reportedly inflicted by a hired assassin. Like St. Paul, however, Smith converted his jailer—who petitioned the governor of Virginia for Smith's release. The governor refused, and Smith was not set free until June 18, 1856.

James Caesar Anthony Smith, the free black who helped Samuel Smith ship Brown to Philadelphia, was also arrested and tried. He allegedly introduced Alfred and Sawney to Samuel Smith, and he was therefore charged as an accomplice in the conspiracy to assist their escape. J. C. A. Smith also allegedly outfitted escape trunks that had been constructed by John Mattauer, a black carpenter. Smith admitted having helped slaves escape since 1826. Interestingly, while the white Samuel Smith was convicted, the black J. C. A. Smith was released, perhaps because a lawyer who charged \$500 argued his case.

Immediately following his release, Samuel A. Smith left the South for Philadelphia, the same destination as Brown. Well aware of his role in Brown's escape as well as Smith's own personal suffering, Philadelphia's African-American community held a mass meeting on his behalf at the Israel Church on July 1, 1856. After hearing Smith quietly recount his experience in prison, the meeting passed this resolution:

We the colored citizens of Philadelphia, have among us Samuel A. Smith, who was incarcerated over seven years in Richmond Penitentiary, for doing an act that was honorable to his feelings and his sense of justice and humanity, therefore.

Resolved, That we welcome him to this city as a martyr to the cause of Freedom.

Resolved, That we heartily tender him our gratitude for the good he has done to our suffering race.

## Resistance

Although history has long recognized white abolitionists, it has largely ignored the anti-slavery struggle of African Americans, even though it was the blacks themselves who were the real abolitionists. The people who were against slavery were, after all, the slaves. There were 3,204,313 slaves in the United States in 1850, owned by 347,725 white families. Slave resistance to bondage started at the plantation itself: slowed-down work, theft, broken tools, stable doors left open, crops damaged, dissembling, feigned illnesses. There was a second level: burned barns and poisoned soup. And a third: armed rebellion. At least 250 slave revolts in the United States have been documented, and recent research on the Atlantic slave trade documents another 250 aboard ship.

In the North, free blacks supported their brothers and sisters in chains. Most opposed the American Colonization Society, and strengthened their resolve to achieve black freedom in this country. African Americans organized themselves against slavery, petitioned, founded newspapers, held mass meetings, and even urged slave rebellion. There were over fifty black anti-slavery societies by 1830, all before William Lloyd Garrison formed the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. Garrison's famous *Liberator* newspaper was subsidized and subscribed to by people of color.

The major resistance to slavery, however, was escape, what Frederick Douglass called "praying with your feet." With his unique variation, this was the means Box Brown chose to free himself. Running away was by definition a secret and dangerous undertaking, not only illegal, but with high prices to pay by those who were captured. As a result, many aspects and elements of the process are not now fully known.

Many runaways followed the North Star to the free states and Canada, but a large number, almost entirely undocumented, escaped to Mexico, where they disappeared into the population. The estimate

is that several thousand slaves became fugitives from the South's "peculiar institution" each year during the first half of the nineteenth century.

It was not death, but life, not heaven, but Canada that was the encoded message of the slave song:

No more auction block for me,  
No more, no more.  
No more auction block for me,  
Many thousand gone.

While many fugitives made their way on their own, others followed the Underground Railroad, a loose network of clandestine escape routes. There were signals, disguises, passwords, safe houses, and guides or "conductors." With a price on her head, Harriet Tubman made repeated trips below the Mason-Dixon line to bring out men, women, and children. Fugitives traveled by boat and wagon, but mostly by foot, often walking at night and hiding during the day, but always heading North. Since slaves were legally defined as property, escape was actually a curious form of the slaves' stealing themselves.

We are just now discovering some of the hidden aspects of escape. African-American-made quilts, for example, innocently airing in a cabin window, were sometimes disguised maps, and could contain coded messages about dangers and directions. It is now well-known that the slave songs or Negro Spirituals are full of allusions to escape as well as ways of communicating within the black community without white people understanding what was being said. In these songs, for example, Canaan is Canada; the Jordan is the Ohio River (the dividing line between the slave and free states); and the many references to travel (shoes, wheels, chariots, trains) are all about running away.

## Slave Narratives

In 1849, the year of Brown's escape, Ephriam Peabody, the minister of Boston's King's Chapel, commented that America had contributed a new genre to world literature—the slave narrative. Nineteenth-century America was a land dominated by slavery in economics, politics, and social relationships, and where nearly every African American was in bondage. It is not until we hear the voices of these slaves themselves, therefore, that we can begin to understand who the vast number of African Americans were and what their lives, thoughts, and experiences were all about.

It is not known how many ex-slaves told their stories in published form, but there were many hundreds—in books, pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, every medium of the day. It is generally held that *A Narrative of the Unknown Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* issued in 1760 was the first, and that this distinctive category of American literature concludes with Booker T. Washington's 1901 autobiographical classic *Up from Slavery*. Slave narratives in fact constitute the basis of the African-American literary tradition. Early writers like Phillis Wheatley largely reflect European style and content.

Box Brown's *Narrative* shares several characteristics typical of the genre. It follows the usual outline of events. It serves as an anti-slavery tract. It is a way to make money, the purpose of which was often to help ex-slaves buy their wives and children still in bondage. Brown's narrative advertises his abolitionist lectures and is a memento to be sold afterwards. Brown took very easily to his new role as author and lecturer, and the income provided his livelihood.

In examining these narratives, credibility is often in question. Ulrich B. Phillips, whose right-wing views dominated the historiography of slavery virtually until the modern Civil Rights Movement, insisted that

slave narratives were unreliable. A few are, in fact, novels or novelized. There is considerable external evidence, it should be said, to confirm completely Box Brown's account of his life.

Some slave autobiographies were careful, reluctant, or even silent with some facts because it would have been dangerous to expose names and places involved in their escapes. In his later autobiographies, Frederick Douglass not only reveals more information about his own flight, he admonishes Brown for "drawing attention to the manner of his escape," and bluntly claims that, if he had not, "we might have had a thousand Box Browns per annum."

But something far more important is going on here. The literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out that "the act of writing for the slave constituted an act of creating a public, historical self." That is, those who were defined by law and custom as less than human literally wrote themselves into human existence as men and women. Denied both a meaningful history and a status within humanity, slave autobiographies, even when composed by others, made it possible for African Americans to become the sources of their own history and the authenticators of their own existence.

The self-creation of autobiography obviously follows the self-liberation of escape. Gates suggests that white people usually write their biographies at the conclusion of their careers, while blacks tend to begin their careers with autobiographies—in order to establish and confirm themselves at the outset as real and visible selves in America's racist society. They may now be unknown or forgotten, but, as Vijayalakshmi Teelock points out, every slave had a face and a name, a story to relate, a past and a future. To see that name in print goes beyond validation to a kind of human triumph.

Slave narratives constitute, therefore, a literature of resistance and a means of subversion at the same time that they are personal memoirs and historical documents. These are themes that continue in African-

American literature in such autobiographies as those of Malcolm X, Anne Moody, and the series of memoirs by Maya Angelou. The motifs even spill over into fiction, in such biographical-type novels as Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

### Charles Stearns

Who was the man who first wrote and published Box Brown's narrative? He was obviously personally inspired by Brown, and, even more so, saw the propaganda uses to which Brown's story could be put. Charles B. Stearns (1818-1899) was a doctrinaire pacifist, a militant Garrisonian abolitionist, and an activist participant during Reconstruction in schemes to reform southern plantation agriculture. Born in Greenfield, Massachusetts, Stearns may have inherited his radicalism from his mother's brother, George Ripley, the founder of the utopian colony Brook Farm.

Oberlin College reports Stearns' attending their preparatory school in 1841-1842. Influenced by the evangelist Charles Finney, he intended to study for the ministry. Early on, Stearns became an argumentative ideologue who embraced pacifism and vehemently denounced all physical force. In 1845, he instigated the curious "Rights of God" controversy in the pages of Garrison's *Liberator*. He legalistically argued that the biblical God who takes human life and punishes sinners runs contrary to God's own self-imposed limitations, and so even God himself has no right to kill.

In the 1850s, the struggle over the admission of Kansas into the union as a free or slave state inspired many white New England abolitionists to migrate, especially to the city of Lawrence, the center of free state agitation. Stearns opened a store there while he served as a



correspondent for the *Liberator* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. On May 1, 1856, pro-slavery forces from Missouri attacked Lawrence. Stearns' store was sacked and burned, his clerk was murdered, and he barely escaped with his life.

The violence of pro-slavery "Border Ruffians" in Bleeding Kansas utterly demolished Stearns' doctrinaire pacifism, and, perhaps because he was a natural extremist, pushed him to the totally opposite end of the spectrum. "When I live with men made in God's image, I will never shoot them," Stearns wrote to the *Milford [MA] Practical Christian* in 1856, "but these pro-slavery Missourians are demons from the bottomless pit and may be shot with impunity." Pacifist and abolitionist Abby Kelly Foster admitted, somewhat more mildly, that "Kansas was the great argument against us."

Following the Civil War, Stearns and his wife bought a plantation in Columbia County, Georgia, apparently to participate in land reform during Reconstruction. Stearns was involved with the Laborers' Homestead and Southern Emancipation Society of which his fellow Garrisonian James Buffum was director. In 1869, Stearns sold the plantation and moved to Boston. Here his trail runs cold, but this acerbic and difficult man deserves a biography, if for no other reason than that he gave us Brown's.

## Deliverance

As Henry Brown emerged from the packing crate, his first act as a liberated man was to sing the Fortieth Psalm. This was obviously an intentional and carefully planned performance on Brown's part to which he must have given much thought. The psalm continued to be important enough to Brown for him to include the text in both the American and British versions of his autobiography. It also became part of his stage presentations in this country and abroad.

In biblically literate Protestant America, especially the evangelical South, Brown would have been intimately familiar with the Psalter. The words he chose are strikingly appropriate to him and his situation. Psalm 40 actually consists of two separate songs: verses 1-11 and verses 13-17. Brown sings, in anthem form, the first song. It is a public pronouncement of righteousness; it is "the glad news of deliverance," as the Revised Standard Version translates it. The singer praises God: "I waited patiently for the Lord; and . . . he heard my cry." God has brought the singer up "out of a horrible pit" and "out of the miry clay," synonyms for hell, and "set my feet upon a rock."

This long-awaited and miraculous deliverance calls for "a new song" that "many shall see," and, as a consequence, "trust in the Lord." Brown fulfills this prophecy by his performance in the Anti-Slavery Office and on stage. Brown's new song stands in fulfillment, also, of a newspaper report at the time of Brown's escape explaining what and why he had done: "After his wife and children were stolen, his heart was broken. He had learned to sing, to lighten the tedium of his labor, and for the gratification of his fellow captives, but now he could not sing."

The psalm perfectly describes Brown's own personal experience. He can affirm, "Thou art my help and my deliverer," or, in the New World Translation, "You are my assistance and the provider of escape for me." For Brown the evangelical Christian, this is all not a matter of locating relevant verses about deliverance and escape, nor even of believing that the Bible somehow engages him personally, but, rather, of understanding that the Bible at its deepest level tells his own existential story.

## Uncle Ned

Having discovered the pleasures and power of performance, Brown adapted the lyrics of a popular song of the day into another medium for him to tell his story. The song was "Uncle Ned," sometimes called

"Old Uncle Ned," composed by Stephen Foster (1826–1864), and Brown made the rewritten version part of his own repertoire. Foster's original "Uncle Ned" was one of the earliest songs by the man who would become "America's Troubadour," the composer of some of the country's most familiar and popular ballads, from "Oh Susanna" and "Camptown Races" to "Way Down upon the Suwanee River." Foster wrote "Uncle Ned" in 1848, the year before Brown's escape:

Dere was an old Nigga, dey called him Uncle Ned—  
 He's dead long ago, long ago!  
 He had no wool on de top ob his head—  
 De place whar de wool ought to grow.

*Chorus*

Den lay down de shubble and de hoe,  
 Hang up de fiddle and de bow;  
 No more hard work for poor Old Ned—  
 He is gone whar de good Niggas go.

His fingers were long like de cane in de brake,  
 He had no eyes for to see,  
 He had no teeth for to eat de corn cake  
 So he had to let de corn cake be.

When Old Ned die, Massa take it mighty bad,  
 De tears run down like de rain,  
 Old Missus turn pale and she get berry sad,  
 Cayse she nebber see Old Ned again.

The racism of "Uncle Ned" is obvious, with its dialect, "Niggas," and old Massa and pale Missus' tears at the demise of their human

property. Foster's defenders, however, claim that the song compassionately sympathizes with the dead slave, however romantic and sentimentalized the depiction of the mythical South. There is undoubtedly, it must be said, an element of black folk balladry in all of Foster's songs. The African-American philosopher Alain Locke even suggests that Foster shares the same relation to Negro folk songs as Joel Chandler Harris does to Negro folktales. That is, a tradition is preserved and distorted at the same time, perhaps a necessary condition for that tradition to enter mainstream (i.e., white) culture.

Foster certainly was exposed early to vernacular black culture. He lived during this period of his life in Cincinnati, just across the Ohio River from the slaveryocracy. His family's black servant, Olivia Pise, took him to black church meetings, he often visited the slave state of Kentucky, and he heard the singing of black stevedores who labored near his own workplace. Foster undoubtedly absorbed and exploited this tradition.

"Uncle Ned" became an immediate hit in America and abroad. The Foster Hall Collection at the University of Pittsburgh reports fifty-three different editions printed in 1848 alone. As "An Ethiopian Melody," it became a standard feature of minstrel shows, where black-based music, dance, humor, and style were appropriated by white people who turned them into racist entertainment. Brown simply but decisively reversed the process when his version transformed "Uncle Ned" into a celebration of his freedom.

All the verses of Brown's subversive adaptation, what scholars of African American literature might call "signifying," are in his text, but it begins:

Have you seen a man by the name of Henry Brown,  
 Ran away from the South to the North;  
 Which he would not have done but they stole all his rights,  
 But they'll never do the like again.

## Chorus

Brown laid down the shovel and the hoe,  
Down in the box he did go;  
No more slave work for Henry Box Brown,  
In the box by express he did go.

Brown was not alone in subverting "Uncle Ned" via new lyrics. In his serialized 1850s novel *Blake*, Martin Delany includes another version:

Hang up the shovel and the hoe-o-o-o!  
I don't care whether I work or no!  
Old master's gone to the slaveholder's rest  
He's gone where they all ought to go.

## The Panorama

Success as a speaker and singer performing on the anti-slavery circuit not only agreed with Brown, it encouraged his abilities as an entrepreneur. The imagination that led him in the first place to his box now blossomed into an idea for a massive and spectacular panorama, a pictorial representation exhibited with changing scenes. A panorama as such was not an original idea of Brown's, but he grasped its potential significance both as a way to communicate the story of slavery through revealing comprehensible images, as well as to appeal to a public always receptive to something new and different.

On February 1, 1850, Brown wrote Gerrit Smith, the wealthy white abolitionist, and asked for a loan of \$150 to pay for his panorama. Brown engaged Josiah Wolcott to design and paint it, perhaps with the assistance of other artists. Wolcott was a white painter of portraits and of New England natural scenes in the Hudson River School style. One of his better known works is of Brook Farm, the utopian commu-

nity in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. Brown's panorama was entitled *The Mirror of Slavery*. It is now lost, but it certainly consisted of many thousands of square feet of canvas.

Brown made a second inspired choice in recruiting Benjamin F. Roberts to prepare an accompanying text and lecture, "The Condition of the Colored People in the United States." Roberts was an African-American Boston printer who, the year before, had filed a suit for the integration of Boston's public schools on behalf of his daughter Sarah, but the state Supreme Court ruled in favor of the city. Roberts also represented "A Committee of Colored Gentlemen" who had reissued in 1844 R. B. Lewis's *Light and Truth*, one of the first histories of people of color by an African American.

*The Mirror of Slavery* opened to the public on April 19, 1850, in Washington Hall on Boston's Bromfield Street. Admission was twenty-five cents for adults, with children at half-price. The panorama was exhibited for several months, and then it traveled to other New England towns in a tour coordinated by Roberts. When Brown fled the country in September, he managed to transport *The Mirror of Slavery* to England. Now accompanied by J. C. A. Smith, Brown put *The Mirror of Slavery* back on the road until the men split up and each went his separate way.

*The Mirror of Slavery* was not only a presentation by people of color, it portrayed images and views of American history as people of color perceived that history. The panorama of some fifty pictures opened with the beginning of it all, *The African Slave Trade*, the centuries old human commerce that had devastated Africa and corrupted America. The second and third images, *The Nubian Family in Freedom* and *The Seizure of Slaves*, revealed the destruction of the Old World; they were followed by *The Nubian Family at Auction* and *Modes of Confinement and Punishment* that revealed the depravity of the New World.

Brown aptly alternated traditional American scenic views, like *View of Richmond, Va.* with such scenes as *Whipping Post and Gallows at Richmond, Va.*

He did the same with *Washington's Tomb at Mount Vernon* and *Slave Prisons at Washington*. This interspersed threw into question every conventional idea of the American landscape. Just as Brown's version of "Uncle Ned" turned a sentimental ballad into a protest song, so his picture of America transformed sentimental representations into an honest reality most white Americans had never seen. Not to minimize his own historical role, Brown included two images of his own escape.

## England

The Compromise of 1850 was another futile attempt to hold together an America deeply fractured over the issue of slavery. For African Americans and their white abolitionist friends, the most objectionable feature of the Compromise was its strengthened Fugitive Slave Act. Now federal law required free people in the North to aid in the capture and return of black runaways. The law was often met with noncompliance and even resistance. On August 30, 1850, Henry Box Brown narrowly escaped capture by slave agents in Providence, Rhode Island. So did his tour companion, J. C. A. Smith, even though he was a freeborn Negro.

Both men fled to England, arriving in Liverpool in late October. Brown lectured, sold lithographs of himself, and sang spirituals, anti-slavery songs, and hymns to raise money for the shipment of his panorama. With *The Mirror of Slavery* Brown and Smith toured the north of England in the winter and spring of 1850–1851. Brown's showmanship developed even further, and he had himself shipped, theatrically, in his famous box from Bradford to Leeds.

Friction, probably over money, developed between Brown and Smith, and Brown officially dissolved their partnership on July 25, 1851. Now both men traveled the U.K. lecture circuit, each with his own panorama. We next get a picture of a new and different Brown, but it is hardly an

unbiased view since it comes from the spurned J. C. A. Smith. On August 6 from Manchester, Smith wrote Gerrit Smith to complain about Brown's breaking up their partnership and allegedly taking the money. "Brown has behaved very bad sense he have been here," Smith asserted, citing Brown's drinking, smoking, gambling, swearing, and said he "do many other things too Bad—to think off." What could be too bad to think of? "He have got it to his head to get a wife or something worse." Smith claimed Brown could have purchased his enslaved wife and children from their American bondage, but that he was apparently being seduced into the fast life of England. What was the evidence?

Smith said Brown was drinking "Rasbury wine, pop, peppermint, Sampson, ginger Beer, gingerale, Blackbeer . . . and many other things of that nature," although he admitted none of these beverages was actually alcoholic. Brown was also "smoking pipe, segars, and chewing tobacco, takin' snuff," as well as swearing. The gambling consisted of "playing doman noes-dice, drafts, and Bel[ge]re[is]." These may seem like innocent pastimes, but they were intended to discredit Brown by being reported to the pietistic and moralistic white American abolitionist community.

What happened to Brown is as yet unknown. Various unsubstantiated rumors have him adding minstrelsy to his performance, marrying an Englishwoman, and disappearing into Wales. No one has made a concerted effort to track Brown at this point, but there must be newspapers and civic records that could complete his story. Brown began and spent most of his life in anonymity, and, at least so far as we now know, ended it the same way.

## The Allegorical Box

The basic notion of a person emerging from a confined space is a deceptively simple one. The obvious analogy is the dead rising up from



their coffins and graves. Indeed, the literature and images of his day spoke often of Brown's resurrection. To an evangelically attuned society, white and black, the physical resurrection of the body was an entirely familiar and real expectation, as was the transformation from death in this world to new life in the next. As a metaphor, Brown's image resonated easily, familiarly, and unambiguously on the evangelical eye and ear, and, through them, on the American imagination.

There is a second major trope in Brown's confinement and emergence, but one that he transformed to the point of reversal. The Middle Passage was the most horrendous and torturous aspect of the Atlantic slave trade. Unmercifully packed together in sailing ships, Africans were pressed into enclosures little more than living tombs. With slaves defined as nonhuman products for the commodity market, they were crammed into spaces designed only to maximize numbers and profits. The result was hell.

Sickness, whipping, dysentery, and suicide turned slave ships' holds into slaughterhouses where the stench of blood and flux could be smelled as far as five miles away across the open sea. In this way, over the centuries, more than 15 million men, women, and children experienced their transport from African freedom to American slavery and were introduced to the horrors of the New World. Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes tellingly of Brown within this context: "He would transform this [Middle Passage] text into its opposite by converting the very stringencies of an African slave ship into a blueprint for freedom."

When one thinks about it, the box as container and symbol turns up everywhere. In Brown's own escape year of 1849 Rose Jackson, an Oklahoma slave who chose to stay with her owners on their trek west, was smuggled in a box over the whole length of the Oregon Trail, since slaves were forbidden in the Territory. During the Civil War, South Carolina slaves Anne and William Summerson were hidden in rice casks and successfully brought to the Charleston docks. William Still's history of the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia reports a

number of ingenious escapes, including what he called "other box or chest cases."

In 1996, Anthony Cohen, who retraces the journeys of escaped slaves, reenacted Brown's ordeal by having himself shipped over seven hours by train from Philadelphia to New York. Two years later he spent sixteen hours in a crate on the Memphis to Chicago Amtrak. Speaking of Amtrak, there is on the Internet a satire of Amtrak describing "Amtrak Econobox Class," which promises "You'll love curling up in our compact wooden crate." The parody is accompanied, of course, by a drawing of Henry Box Brown.

A recent (and one of the more significant) legacy of Box Brown is Charles Burnett's film *The Final Insult* (1997). Recipient of a MacArthur "genius" grant, Burnett is probably best known for his award-winning *To Sleep with Anger* (1990), and he is widely considered one of the finest African-American writer-directors. The central character in *The Final Insult* is Box Brown, named by his mother for the fugitive slave. Burnett's Brown lives in today's Los Angeles, a city deteriorating with racism, deep class divisions, and increasingly severe economic disparities.

Brown loses his job in a Kafkaesque experience and is reduced to living in his boxlike automobile. His consuming hope is that he will not be reduced further yet, that is, forced to abandon his car to live, like many of his fellows, out of a shopping cart. This would be "the final insult." Of course, in this bitterly paradoxical story, that is precisely what happens. In an ironic twist on Box Brown's slave narrative, Burnett's Box Brown's container is not only his assurance of freedom, it is his freedom itself.

### Brown's Legacy

Brown's life and work personify several of the interconnected themes integral to African-American experience and culture. First, he reinvents

himself. Once a slave, he becomes free; once a factory worker, he becomes an abolitionist lecturer, writer, and performer; once a nonentity, he becomes somebody. He even changes his name to mark the defining event in his life and signify his new identity. In Britain, if his critic is to be believed, he transposes himself still further, from a humble, religious abolitionist to something of a worldly dandy.

Second, Brown improvises, personally incorporating the essence of black speech, style, and music. His box is an original method of self-liberation. His rewriting of "Uncle Ned" is more than a mere revision or adaptation; it is a trope that turns Uncle Ned upside down and on his head; the mythic and passive slave becomes the real and active free-man. Brown's performance keeps adding new riffs, from songs and a massive panorama, to perhaps even elements of minstrelsy. The reinvented Brown finds that the black cultural tradition of improvisation is, in truth, his way to meet, live, and prevail in his new life.

Literary critic Houston A. Baker points out that every African American serves a prison sentence—enslaved on plantations, segregated into ghettos, incarcerated in prisons and housing projects, trapped in ignorance and poverty, constrained in a box of one kind or another. It is precisely this imprisonment Henry Box Brown confronts, challenges, and defeats. Brown's final word and continuing message is that he used confinement to achieve his liberation.

RICHARD NEWMAN

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Henry Brown emerges from his box. The black man is William Still, conductor of Philadelphia's Underground Railroad.

*Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.*

NARRATIVE  
OF THE  
LIFE OF HENRY BOX BROWN

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF



*Introduction by Richard Newman*

*Foreword by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.*

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## Foreword

*by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.*

One of the most curious, and fascinating, genres of literature is that created in America by fugitive black slaves. The very idea that slaves could, or would, escape from bondage, flee mostly on foot to the North, live in peril of slave-catchers in search of the heavy bounties offered for their return, and then, audaciously, write autobiographical narratives of their time in bondage, their escape, and their new lives as free women and men proved endlessly fascinating to the American and British reading public. These slave narratives, as a genre, as many scholars have demonstrated, were hugely popular, especially between 1850—the date of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act—and the end of the Civil War.

Several were best-sellers; most were extremely well reviewed and widely discussed, both for their considerable political value in the abolitionists' struggle against slavery, and for their significance as a novel genre of literature. Names such as William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, Josiah Henson, Linda Brent, and William and Ellen Craft—among dozens of others—were regularly included among the literary

lions of the decade preceding the Civil War. And of these ex-slave authors, none rendered a story more curiously compelling—and incredible—than did Henry “Box” Brown.

As difficult as it may be for us to believe, Henry Box Brown mailed himself from slavery to freedom. Whereas other slaves walked or rode (by horse, carriage, boat, or—in the case of Frederick Douglass—train), Henry Brown somehow decided that he could escape detection from his owner and slavery sympathizers by having himself “nailed inside a wooden crate and shipped via the Adams Express Company from slavery in Richmond, Virginia, to freedom in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,” as Richard Newman notes in the Introduction to this edition of Brown’s extraordinarily rare 1851 narrative. Confined for twenty-seven hours, Brown’s most unusual conduit to freedom consisted of a baize-lined wooden casklike container, three feet long and two feet wide, held shut with five hickory loops, traversing a distance of 350 miles.

Brown’s mode of escape, *sui generis*, was both ingenious and dangerous. As he puts it in his text, “the idea suddenly flashed upon my mind” that it was possible to shut “myself up” and be delivered to a safe address in “a free state . . . as dry goods.” (How dry Brown may have been after twenty-seven hours of confinement in a wooden box three feet by two feet, no one was apparently willing to say at the time.) Brown’s accomplice, a white man named Samuel A. Smith, would be arrested seven months later for attempting this same scheme with two other slaves, as was a free black man, James Caesar Anthony Smith, who also helped Brown and Samuel Smith to effect Brown’s successful escape in March 1849. Samuel Smith was jailed. James Smith, who admitted having helped slaves escape since 1826, was paradoxically acquitted. (Brown’s container, by the way, had been constructed by a black carpenter named John Mattaner.)

Richard Newman documents Brown’s subsequent career as a successful abolitionist lecturer and author, both in the North and in England, where he fled after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and

where he published the second and third editions of his slave narrative and became increasingly controversial within the abolitionist movement. In fact, no less a stalwart of the abolition movement than Frederick Douglass himself criticized Brown publicly for unveiling his method of escape, implying that Brown had chosen to profit from his own ingenuity rather than share it with other slaves who could have possibly utilized a similar passage to freedom.

Douglass, who considered the anti-slavery movement the moral equivalent of war, declined in his slave narrative of 1845 to disclose his mode of escape, which was to assume the disguise of a sailor and ride a train from slavery in Baltimore to freedom in Philadelphia. It is highly unlikely, however, that other slaves were able to utilize Douglass’s ruse, despite his discretion. Nonetheless, this contretemps between the two slave narrators who fled enslavement by rail is indicative of deep ambivalences within the abolitionist movement about disclosure and discretion and, indeed, about the entire profit-making aspect of the anti-slavery lecture circuit.

Henry Box Brown was a hugely popular lecturer; his story was so unusual, his method of escape so uncannily bold, that listeners and readers devoured his story, overcoming their skepticism about Brown’s veracity by insisting that Brown reenact his escape mechanism, which he did in England.

The perennial appeal of Brown’s tale to his contemporaries and to us, a century and a half later, stems, in part, from the fact that Brown made literal much that was implicit in the symbolism of enslavement. Slavery was a form of “social death,” as the sociologist Orlando Patterson has famously discussed. The slave narratives were “narratives of ascent,” as Robert Stepto has argued, stories of deliverance not only from slavery to freedom and South to North but also, in Patterson’s sense, from social death to social life, even if a less than perfect life of a black person in the North of antebellum America. Brown *names* this symbolic relation between death and life by having himself confined in

a virtual casket. He “descends” in what must have been a hellacious passage of the train ride—sweltering, suffocating, claustrophobic, unsanitary, devoid of light, food, and water—only to be resurrected twenty-seven hours later in the heavenly city of freedom and brotherly love that Philadelphia represented.

Brown, in other words, unwittingly had replicated the symbolic aspect of the crucifixion of Christ. He was the man who had been buried alive, yet lived to tell—and write—about it. Brown represented the potential of all slaves to return from the death-in-life that slavery was for the slave. Moreover, that it was a slave who devised this clever act of illusion—in clear defiance of racist claims that African slaves were pre-rational—only made Brown’s echo of the most important element in the whole of Christian symbolism all the more compelling. Brown was a Christlike figure, an escape artist, and something of an inventor all rolled into one. His text resonated for readers on each of these deeper levels.

That a slave would risk death by suffocation or dehydration to gain his freedom, in defiance of all odds for his own survival, and that he used two symbols of the official power structure—a shipping firm and the railroad—to do so, not only astonished his readers, but calls to mind in our own generation the determination to achieve democracy by oppressed peoples throughout the world. Clearly, for Brown, the will to flight was paramount, just as it continues to be for refugees fleeing totalitarian regimes today, from Bosnia to Burundi, from Cuba to China, from Turkistany to Tibet. Henry Box Brown’s story is just as relevant now as it was 150 years ago.

The scholar Richard Newman has performed a most outstanding and admirable service in restoring this rare and compelling text to a new generation of readers.

## Introduction

by Richard Newman

### The Book

*O*f the hundreds of thousands of African-American slaves who liberated themselves by escaping from human bondage in the South, very few specific names remain with us. Most, in fact, are not even known. Some ex-slaves, however, told or wrote the stories of their lives. These narratives give us much of what we know, not only about the resistance of escape, but about slave life and thought.

One name that has not been forgotten is Henry “Box” Brown. He is stamped indelibly on the popular imagination because of his ingenious method of escape. On March 29, 1849, Brown had himself nailed inside a wooden crate and shipped via the Adams Express Co. from slavery in Richmond, Virginia, to freedom in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In twenty-seven hours, he traveled 350 miles, most of it in discomfort and all of it in danger.

Brown, who immediately took the name “Box” as his own, has retained the public recognition he achieved at the time of his bold flight. A black wax museum in Baltimore features a life-size Brown emerging from his packing crate. The National Park Service recommends that its

site guides relate Brown's unique tale as a way to humanize any discussion of slavery, a subject most tourists apparently resist. Toyota Motors Sales Co. recently ran an advertisement telling Brown's story, picturing a large box, and "recognizing those individuals who overcame great obstacles."

The fugitives we know are remembered primarily through their published narratives. Box Brown also issued an account of his life and escape, but his book is essentially unavailable. The first edition, published in Boston in 1849, the same year as his escape, is also highly flawed. Brown, like most other slaves, was illiterate, so his and their stories were told by sympathetic whites, more or less based on their subjects' verbal accounts. Brown's amanuensis, Charles Stearns, was perhaps the first white man to write a narrative on behalf of a slave. Stearns was such a zealous abolitionist, however, that Brown's story is spoiled by Stearns' turgid style, scolding prose, and even the addition of a polemic essay of his own. It is hardly Box Brown's book.

Fearful of capture because of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Brown was forced to flee to England soon after his arrival in the North. In England, he, or someone under his direction, edited Stearns' overblown rhetoric out of the narrative, and a new version was issued in Manchester in 1851. The excision of Stearns' words and rhetoric is clear evidence of the kinds of restrictions ex-slaves faced under the control of their best anti-slavery white friends. Unable to read or write and with little access to printers or publishers, Box Brown was not free from saying what other people wanted him to say. Only in England did he experience the freedom to express himself in his own way. The Manchester edition is obviously closer to Brown's own telling of his own story, but it has never been published in the United States—until now.

The differences between the two books are clear from their titles. The American title is *Narrative of Henry Box Brown who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide Written from a Statement of Facts*

*Made by Himself With Remarks upon the Remedy for Slavery. By Charles Stearns.* This book, a reprinting of Brown's Manchester version, is simply entitled *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* and is twenty-three pages shorter. The real difference is that this version is told in Brown's own voice.

In their original published forms, both these books are scarce. Philip McBlain, the leading dealer in rare African-American books, reports that he has never seen a copy of the American edition. The New York book dealer Glen Horowitz did offer one for sale in 1996 at \$5,500. It does exist in major research libraries, however, and there were several reprints in the late 1960s, but now even these have disappeared. A dozen copies of this 1851 Manchester edition are in American libraries.

A second English edition came out in Bilston in 1852, but the stereotyped text is the same as this volume. The Bilston reprint indicates the book's popularity in the United Kingdom, where Brown became a feature on the abolitionist lecture circuit, as he had been in the United States. Currently, there is only one known copy of the 1852 edition in the United States.

### Brown's Story

Box Brown's birthdate, like that of all slaves, is uncertain, but we know he was born on a plantation in Louisa County, Virginia, near the capital city of Richmond, sometime around 1815. The first half of the nineteenth century through which he lived was a momentous period for a nation struggling with the crisis of slavery. The very existence of the United States as a federal union was at stake, first when the moralistic New England abolitionists cried, "No union with slaveholders," then when the white South used states' rights as a rationalization to protect the slave system.

Brown lived through a time of increasing national polarization. In the years before he became a fugitive, the South toughened its position, particularly as it saw the western territories as potential ground for the addition of slave states. In 1816, the American Colonization Society was formed to eliminate the "danger" of free Negroes in a slave society by shipping them to Africa. In the 1830s, black literacy was forbidden by law in many states. In 1836, a gag rule forbade even the introduction of anti-slavery legislation in the U.S. Congress. When pro-slavery Missouri applied for statehood in 1818, Thomas Jefferson perceptively called it "a firebell in the night," an alarm and a warning that an inevitable conflagration lay ahead.

African Americans also strengthened their own resolve during Brown's lifetime. In 1827, the first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, appeared in New York with the statement, "Too long have others spoken for us." Two years later, David Walker published in Boston his radical *Appeal*, calling for slave revolt. In 1831 Nat Turner in Virginia led the slaves' most successful rebellion. The famous *L'Amistad* mutiny was in 1839, and in 1843 Sojourner Truth became an anti-slavery activist. Personal escapes that came to national attention increased: Frederick Douglass in 1838, William and Ellen Craft in 1848, and Harriet Tubman just four months after Box Brown, in 1849.

The whole purpose of Brown's *Narrative* was, and continues to be, the creation of a medium for him to tell his own story. He describes his family and childhood, his work in a tobacco factory, and the heart-breaking account of the sale of his wife and children, which meant their forced separation. It was then that this law-abiding man decided to escape, and "the idea suddenly flashed upon my mind of shutting myself up in a box and getting myself conveyed as dry goods to a free State."

What did the slaves themselves, particularly the vast majority who were the plantation field hands, say was the worst aspect of bondage? It was not the whippings, the labor of sixteen-hour workdays, the food minimized to survival levels, the special clothing woven from mill-floor scraps. Their deepest anxiety and greatest suffering came from

the arbitrary breaking up of their families, husbands from wives, parents from children, children from each other. This severance and sundering created an emotional death that left scars deeper than the lash marks on their backs.

Brown's five-foot, eight-inch, 200-pound body was fitted into a baize-lined container sealed by five hickory loops, marked "THIS SIDE UP WITH CARE," and mailed to William H. Johnson, an abolitionist sympathizer on Philadelphia's Arch Street. The city's Anti-Slavery Committee sent for the box, and it was brought to their office at 107 N. 5th Street on March 30, 1849. Nervous abolitionists opened the box, and Henry Brown calmly emerged, said, "How do you do, gentlemen?" and promptly fainted.

After a glass of water, a disheveled Brown regained his aplomb and proceeded to sing the Fortieth Psalm. Provided with money and clothes, Brown stayed with abolitionists James and Lucretia Mott, and then was sent to Boston and New Bedford. Brown's imaginative escape immediately caught public attention. He became an instant celebrity, a status he discovered he liked and learned to exploit. He went on the abolitionist lecture circuit, singing his songs and telling his story.

Sentiment against slavery was rising in the North, largely because a national government dominated by pro-slavery southerners was pushing its agenda. Brown, and others, found increasingly sympathetic audiences. Northern whites were particularly attracted to fugitive slaves who could describe from their own experiences what slavery was really like. They were fascinated by Brown, in part, of course, because of his successful but dangerous escape. He stayed on tour until the early fall of 1850.

### The Smiths

Back in Virginia, meanwhile, the seriousness of Brown's escape was dramatized by the arrest of Samuel A. Smith, the white man who facilitated



Brown's flight by packing him into his famous box. Smith was convicted in October 1849 for boxing up two more potential escapees, Alfred and Sawney, who were discovered and captured. Smith was refused witnesses, and spent five summer months chained in a cell five feet by eight feet, not unlike the restrained enclosure of his friend Brown. In prison, Smith survived five stab wounds, reportedly inflicted by a hired assassin. Like St. Paul, however, Smith converted his jailer—who petitioned the governor of Virginia for Smith's release. The governor refused, and Smith was not set free until June 18, 1856.

James Caesar Anthony Smith, the free black who helped Samuel Smith ship Brown to Philadelphia, was also arrested and tried. He allegedly introduced Alfred and Sawney to Samuel Smith, and he was therefore charged as an accomplice in the conspiracy to assist their escape. J. C. A. Smith also allegedly outfitted escape trunks that had been constructed by John Matrauer, a black carpenter. Smith admitted having helped slaves escape since 1826. Interestingly, while the white Samuel Smith was convicted, the black J. C. A. Smith was released, perhaps because a lawyer who charged \$900 argued his case.

Immediately following his release, Samuel A. Smith left the South for Philadelphia, the same destination as Brown. Well aware of his role in Brown's escape as well as Smith's own personal suffering, Philadelphia's African-American community held a mass meeting on his behalf at the Israel Church on July 1, 1856. After hearing Smith quietly recount his experience in prison, the meeting passed this resolution:

We the colored citizens of Philadelphia, have among us Samuel A. Smith, who was incarcerated over seven years in Richmond Penitentiary, for doing an act that was honorable to his feelings and his sense of justice and humanity, therefore.

Resolved, That we welcome him to this city as a martyr to the cause of Freedom.

Resolved, That we heartily tender him our gratitude for the good he has done to our suffering race.

## Resistance

Although history has long recognized white abolitionists, it has largely ignored the anti-slavery struggle of African Americans, even though it was the blacks themselves who were the real abolitionists. The people who were against slavery were, after all, the slaves. There were 3,204,313 slaves in the United States in 1850, owned by 347,725 white families. Slave resistance to bondage started at the plantation itself: slowed-down work, theft, broken tools, stable doors left open, crops damaged, dissembling, feigned illnesses. There was a second level: burned barns and poisoned soup. And a third: armed rebellion. At least 250 slave revolts in the United States have been documented, and recent research on the Atlantic slave trade documents another 250 aboard ship.

In the North, free blacks supported their brothers and sisters in chains. Most opposed the American Colonization Society, and strengthened their resolve to achieve black freedom in this country. African Americans organized themselves against slavery, petitioned, founded newspapers, held mass meetings, and even urged slave rebellion. There were over fifty black anti-slavery societies by 1830, all before William Lloyd Garrison formed the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. Garrison's famous *Liberator* newspaper was subsidized and subscribed to by people of color.

The major resistance to slavery, however, was escape, what Frederick Douglass called "praying with your feet." With his unique variation, this was the means Box Brown chose to free himself. Running away was by definition a secret and dangerous undertaking, not only illegal, but with high prices to pay by those who were captured. As a result, many aspects and elements of the process are not now fully known.

Many runaways followed the North Star to the free states and Canada, but a large number, almost entirely undocumented, escaped to Mexico, where they disappeared into the population. The estimate

is that several thousand slaves became fugitives from the South's "peculiar institution" each year during the first half of the nineteenth century.

It was not death, but life, not heaven, but Canada that was the encoded message of the slave song:

No more auction block for me,  
No more, no more.

No more auction block for me,  
Many thousand gone.

While many fugitives made their way on their own, others followed the Underground Railroad, a loose network of clandestine escape routes. There were signals, disguises, passwords, safe houses, and guides or "conductors." With a price on her head, Harriet Tubman made repeated trips below the Mason-Dixon line to bring out men, women, and children. Fugitives traveled by boat and wagon, but mostly by foot, often walking at night and hiding during the day, but always heading North. Since slaves were legally defined as property, escape was actually a curious form of the slaves' stealing themselves.

We are just now discovering some of the hidden aspects of escape. African-American-made quilts, for example, innocently airing in a cabin window, were sometimes disguised maps, and could contain coded messages about dangers and directions. It is now well-known that the slave songs or Negro Spirituals are full of allusions to escape as well as ways of communicating within the black community without white people understanding what was being said. In these songs, for example, Canaan is Canada; the Jordan is the Ohio River (the dividing line between the slave and free states); and the many references to travel (shoes, wheels, chariots, trains) are all about running away.

## Slave Narratives

In 1849, the year of Brown's escape, Ephraim Peabody, the minister of Boston's King's Chapel, commented that America had contributed a new genre to world literature—the slave narrative. Nineteenth-century America was a land dominated by slavery in economics, politics, and social relationships, and where nearly every African American was in bondage. It is not until we hear the voices of these slaves themselves, therefore, that we can begin to understand who the vast number of African Americans were and what their lives, thoughts, and experiences were all about.

It is not known how many ex-slaves told their stories in published form, but there were many hundreds—in books, pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, every medium of the day. It is generally held that *A Narrative of the Unknown Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* issued in 1760 was the first, and that this distinctive category of American literature concludes with Booker T. Washington's 1901 autobiographical classic *Up from Slavery*. Slave narratives in fact constitute the basis of the African-American literary tradition. Early writers like Phillis Wheatley largely reflect European style and content.

Box Brown's *Narrative* shares several characteristics typical of the genre. It follows the usual outline of events. It serves as an anti-slavery tract. It is a way to make money, the purpose of which was often to help ex-slaves buy their wives and children still in bondage. Brown's narrative advertises his abolitionist lectures and is a memento to be sold afterwards. Brown took very easily to his new role as author and lecturer, and the income provided his livelihood.

In examining these narratives, credibility is often in question. Ulrich B. Phillips, whose right-wing views dominated the historiography of slavery virtually until the modern Civil Rights Movement, insisted that



slave narratives were unreliable. A few are, in fact, novels or novelized. There is considerable external evidence, it should be said, to confirm completely Box Brown's account of his life.

Some slave autobiographies were careful, reluctant, or even silent with some facts because it would have been dangerous to expose names and places involved in their escapes. In his later autobiographies, Frederick Douglass not only reveals more information about his own flight, he admonishes Brown for "drawing attention to the manner of his escape," and bluntly claims that, if he had not, "we might have had a thousand Box Browns per annum."

But something far more important is going on here. The literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out that "the act of writing for the slave constituted an act of creating a public, historical self." That is, those who were defined by law and custom as less than human literally wrote themselves into human existence as men and women. Denied both a meaningful history and a status within humanity, slave autobiographies, even when composed by others, made it possible for African Americans to become the sources of their own history and the authenticators of their own existence.

The self-creation of autobiography obviously follows the self-liberation of escape. Gates suggests that white people usually write their biographies at the conclusion of their careers, while blacks tend to begin their careers with autobiographies—in order to establish and confirm themselves at the outset as real and visible selves in America's racist society. They may now be unknown or forgotten, but, as Vijayalakshmi Teelock points out, every slave had a face and a name, a story to relate, a past and a future. To see that name in print goes beyond validation to a kind of human triumph.

Slave narratives constitute, therefore, a literature of resistance and a means of subversion at the same time that they are personal memoirs and historical documents. These are themes that continue in African-

American literature in such autobiographies as those of Malcolm X, Anne Moody, and the series of memoirs by Maya Angelou. The motifs even spill over into fiction, in such biographical-type novels as Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

### Charles Stearns

Who was the man who first wrote and published Box Brown's narrative? He was obviously personally inspired by Brown, and, even more so, saw the propaganda uses to which Brown's story could be put. Charles B. Stearns (1818–1899) was a doctrinaire pacifist, a militant Garrisonian abolitionist, and an activist participant during Reconstruction in schemes to reform southern plantation agriculture. Born in Greenfield, Massachusetts, Stearns may have inherited his radicalism from his mother's brother, George Ripley, the founder of the utopian colony Brook Farm.

Oberlin College reports Stearns' attending their preparatory school in 1841–1842. Influenced by the evangelist Charles Finney, he intended to study for the ministry. Early on, Stearns became an argumentative ideologue who embraced pacifism and vehemently denounced all physical force. In 1845, he instigated the curious "Rights of God" controversy in the pages of Garrison's *Liberator*. He legalistically argued that the biblical God who takes human life and punishes sinners runs contrary to God's own self-imposed limitations, and so even God himself has no right to kill.

In the 1850s, the struggle over the admission of Kansas into the union as a free or slave state inspired many white New England abolitionists to migrate, especially to the city of Lawrence, the center of free state agitation. Stearns opened a store there while he served as a

correspondent for the *Liberator* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. On May 1, 1856, pro-slavery forces from Missouri attacked Lawrence. Stearns' store was sacked and burned, his clerk was murdered, and he barely escaped with his life.

The violence of pro-slavery "Border Ruffians" in Bleeding Kansas utterly demolished Stearns' doctrinaire pacifism, and, perhaps because he was a natural extremist, pushed him to the totally opposite end of the spectrum. "When I live with men made in God's image, I will never shoot them," Stearns wrote to the *Midford [MA] Practical Christian* in 1856, "but these pro-slavery Missourians are demons from the bottomless pit and may be shot with impunity." Pacifist and abolitionist Abby Kelly Foster admitted, somewhat more mildly, that "Kansas was the great argument against us."

Following the Civil War, Stearns and his wife bought a plantation in Columbia County, Georgia, apparently to participate in land reform during Reconstruction. Stearns was involved with the Laborers' Homestead and Southern Emancipation Society of which his fellow Garrisonian James Buffum was director. In 1869, Stearns sold the plantation and moved to Boston. Here his trail runs cold, but this acerbic and difficult man deserves a biography, if for no other reason than that he gave us Brown's.

### Deliverance

As Henry Brown emerged from the packing crate, his first act as a liberated man was to sing the Fortieth Psalm. This was obviously an intentional and carefully planned performance on Brown's part to which he must have given much thought. The psalm continued to be important enough to Brown for him to include the text in both the American and British versions of his autobiography. It also became part of his stage presentations in this country and abroad.

In biblically literate Protestant America, especially the evangelical South, Brown would have been intimately familiar with the Psalter. The words he chose are strikingly appropriate to him and his situation. Psalm 40 actually consists of two separate songs: verses 1-11 and verses 13-17. Brown sings, in anthem form, the first song. It is a public pronouncement of righteousness; it is "the glad news of deliverance," as the Revised Standard Version translates it. The singer praises God: "I waited patiently for the Lord; and . . . he heard my cry." God has brought the singer up "out of a horrible pit" and "out of the miry clay," synonyms for hell, and "set my feet upon a rock."

This long-awaited and miraculous deliverance calls for "a new song" that "many shall see," and, as a consequence, "trust in the Lord." Brown fulfills this prophecy by his performance in the Anti-Slavery Office and onstage. Brown's new song stands in fulfillment, also, of a newspaper report at the time of Brown's escape explaining what and why he had done: "After his wife and children were stolen, his heart was broken. He had learned to sing, to lighten the tedium of his labor, and for the gratification of his fellow captives, but now he could not sing."

The psalm perfectly describes Brown's own personal experience. He can affirm, "Thou art my help and my deliverer," or, in the New World Translation, "You are my assistance and the provider of escape for me." For Brown the evangelical Christian, this is all not a matter of locating relevant verses about deliverance and escape, nor even of believing that the Bible somehow engages him personally, but, rather, of understanding that the Bible at its deepest level tells his own existential story.

### Uncle Ned

Having discovered the pleasures and power of performance, Brown adapted the lyrics of a popular song of the day into another medium for him to tell his story. The song was "Uncle Ned," sometimes called

"Old Uncle Ned," composed by Stephen Foster (1826–1864), and Brown made the rewritten version part of his own repertoire.

Foster's original "Uncle Ned" was one of the earliest songs by the man who would become "America's Troubadour," the composer of some of the country's most familiar and popular ballads, from "Oh Susanna" and "Camptown Races" to "Way Down upon the Suwannee River." Foster wrote "Uncle Ned" in 1848, the year before Brown's escape:

Dere was an old Nigga, dey called him Uncle Ned —  
 He's dead long ago, long ago!  
 He had no wool on de top ob his head —  
 De place whar de wool ought to grow.

#### *Chorus*

Den lay down de shubble and de hoe,  
 Hang up de fiddle and de bow;  
 No more hard work for poor Old Ned —  
 He is gone whar de good Niggas go.

His fingers were long like de cane in de brake,  
 He had no eyes for to see,  
 He had no teeth for to eat de corn cake  
 So he had to let de corn cake be.

When Old Ned die, Massa take it mighty bad,  
 De tears run down like de rain,  
 Old Missus turn pale and she get berry sad,  
 Cayse she nebber see Old Ned again.

The racism of "Uncle Ned" is obvious, with its dialect, "Niggas," and old Massa and pale Missus' tears at the demise of their human

property. Foster's defenders, however, claim that the song compassionately sympathizes with the dead slave, however romantic and sentimentalized the depiction of the mythical South. There is undoubtedly, it must be said, an element of black folk balladry in all of Foster's songs. The African-American philosopher Alain Locke even suggests that Foster shares the same relation to Negro folk songs as Joel Chandler Harris does to Negro folktales. That is, a tradition is preserved and distorted at the same time, perhaps a necessary condition for that tradition to enter mainstream (i.e., white) culture.

Foster certainly was exposed early to vernacular black culture. He lived during this period of his life in Cincinnati, just across the Ohio River from the slavery. His family's black servant, Olivia Pise, took him to black church meetings, he often visited the slave state of Kentucky, and he heard the singing of black stevedores who labored near his own workplace. Foster undoubtedly absorbed and exploited this tradition.

"Uncle Ned" became an immediate hit in America and abroad. The Foster Hall Collection at the University of Pittsburgh reports fifty-three different editions printed in 1848 alone. As "An Ethiopian Melody," it became a standard feature of minstrel shows, where black-based music, dance, humor, and style were appropriated by white people who turned them into racist entertainment. Brown simply but decisively reversed the process when his version transformed "Uncle Ned" into a celebration of his freedom.

All the verses of Brown's subversive adaptation, what scholars of African American literature might call "signifying" are in his text, but it begins:

Have you seen a man by the name of Henry Brown,  
 Ran away from the South to the North;  
 Which he would not have done but they stole all his rights,  
 But they'll never do the like again.

## Chorus

Brown laid down the shovel and the hoe,  
Down in the box he did go;  
No more slave work for Henry Box Brown,  
In the box by express he did go.

Brown was not alone in subverting "Uncle Ned" via new lyrics. In his serialized 1850s novel *Blake*, Martin Delany includes another version:

Hang up the shovel and the hoe-o-o-o!  
I don't care whether I work or no!  
Old master's gone to the slaveholder's rest  
He's gone where they all ought to go.

## The Panorama

Success as a speaker and singer performing on the anti-slavery circuit not only agreed with Brown, it encouraged his abilities as an entrepreneur. The imagination that led him in the first place to his box now blossomed into an idea for a massive and spectacular panorama, a pictorial representation exhibited with changing scenes. A panorama as such was not an original idea of Brown's, but he grasped its potential significance both as a way to communicate the story of slavery through revealing comprehensible images, as well as to appeal to a public always receptive to something new and different.

On February 1, 1850, Brown wrote Gerrit Smith, the wealthy white abolitionist, and asked for a loan of \$150 to pay for his panorama. Brown engaged Josiah Wolcott to design and paint it, perhaps with the assistance of other artists. Wolcott was a white painter of portraits and of New England natural scenes in the Hudson River School style. One of his better known works is of Brook Farm, the utopian commu-

nity in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. Brown's panorama was entitled *The Mirror of Slavery*. It is now lost, but it certainly consisted of many thousands of square feet of canvas.

Brown made a second inspired choice in recruiting Benjamin F. Roberts to prepare an accompanying text and lecture, "The Condition of the Colored People in the United States." Roberts was an African-American Boston printer who, the year before, had filed a suit for the integration of Boston's public schools on behalf of his daughter Sarah, but the state Supreme Court ruled in favor of the city. Roberts also represented "A Committee of Colored Gentlemen" who had reissued in 1844 R. B. Lewis's *Light and Truth*, one of the first histories of people of color by an African American.

The *Mirror of Slavery* opened to the public on April 19, 1850, in Washington Hall on Boston's Bromfield Street. Admission was twenty-five cents for adults, with children at half-price. The panorama was exhibited for several months, and then it traveled to other New England towns in a tour coordinated by Roberts. When Brown fled the country in September, he managed to transport *The Mirror of Slavery* to England. Now accompanied by J. C. A. Smith, Brown put *The Mirror of Slavery* back on the road until the men split up and each went his separate way.

*The Mirror of Slavery* was not only a presentation by people of color, it portrayed images and views of American history as people of color perceived that history. The panorama of some fifty pictures opened with the beginning of it all, *The African Slave Trade*, the centuries old human commerce that had devastated Africa and corrupted America. The second and third images, *The Nubian Family in Freedom* and *The Seizure of Slaves*, revealed the destruction of the Old World; they were followed by *The Nubian Family at Auction* and *Modes of Confinement and Punishment* that revealed the depravity of the New World.

Brown aptly alternated traditional American scenic views, like *View of Richmond, Va.* with such scenes as *Whipping Post and Gallows at Richmond, Va.*

He did the same with *Washington's Tomb at Mount Vernon* and *Slave Prisons at Washington*. This interspersed threw into question every conventional idea of the American landscape. Just as Brown's version of "Uncle Ned" turned a sentimental ballad into a protest song, so his picture of America transformed sentimental representations into an honest reality most white Americans had never seen. Not to minimize his own historical role, Brown included two images of his own escape.

### England

The Compromise of 1850 was another futile attempt to hold together an America deeply fractured over the issue of slavery. For African Americans and their white abolitionist friends, the most objectionable feature of the Compromise was its strengthened Fugitive Slave Act. Now federal law required free people in the North to aid in the capture and return of black runaways. The law was often met with noncompliance and even resistance. On August 30, 1850, Henry Box Brown narrowly escaped capture by slave agents in Providence, Rhode Island. So did his tour companion, J. C. A. Smith, even though he was a freeborn Negro.

Both men fled to England, arriving in Liverpool in late October. Brown lectured, sold lithographs of himself, and sang spirituals, anti-slavery songs, and hymns to raise money for the shipment of his panorama. With *The Mirror of Slavery* Brown and Smith toured the north of England in the winter and spring of 1850–1851. Brown's showmanship developed even further, and he had himself shipped, theatrically, in his famous box from Bradford to Leeds.

Friction, probably over money, developed between Brown and Smith, and Brown officially dissolved their partnership on July 25, 1851. Now both men traveled the U.K. lecture circuit, each with his own panorama. We next get a picture of a new and different Brown, but it is hardly an

unbiased view since it comes from the spurned J. C. A. Smith. On August 6 from Manchester, Smith wrote Gerrit Smith to complain about Brown's breaking up their partnership and allegedly taking the money.

"Brown has behaved very bad sense he have been here," Smith asserted, citing Brown's drinking, smoking, gambling, swearing, and said he "do many other things too Bad—to think off." What could be too bad to think of? "He have got it to his head to get a wife or something worst." Smith claimed Brown could have purchased his enslaved wife and children from their American bondage, but that he was apparently being seduced into the fast life of England. What was the evidence?

Smith said Brown was drinking "Rasbury wine, pop, peppermint, Sampson, ginger Beer, gingerale, Blackbeer . . . and many other things of that nature," although he admitted none of these beverages was actually alcoholic. Brown was also "smoking pipe, segars, and chewing tobacco, takin' snuff," as well as swearing. The gambling consisted of "playing doman noes-dice, drafts, and Belg[er]tels." These may seem like innocent pastimes, but they were intended to discredit Brown by being reported to the pietistic and moralistic white American abolitionist community.

What happened to Brown is as yet unknown. Various unsubstantiated rumors have him adding minstrelsy to his performance, marrying an Englishwoman, and disappearing into Wales. No one has made a concerted effort to track Brown at this point, but there must be newspapers and civic records that could complete his story. Brown began and spent most of his life in anonymity, and, at least so far as we now know, ended it the same way.

### The Allegorical Box

The basic notion of a person emerging from a confined space is a deceptively simple one. The obvious analogy is the dead rising up from



their coffins and graves. Indeed, the literature and images of his day spoke often of Brown's resurrection. To an evangelically attuned society, white and black, the physical resurrection of the body was an entirely familiar and real expectation, as was the transformation from death in this world to new life in the next. As a metaphor, Brown's image resonated easily, familiarly, and unambiguously on the evangelical eye and ear, and, through them, on the American imagination.

There is a second major trope in Brown's confinement and emergence, but one that he transformed to the point of reversal. The Middle Passage was the most horrendous and torturous aspect of the Atlantic slave trade. Unmercifully packed together in sailing ships, Africans were pressed into enclosures little more than living tombs. With slaves defined as nonhuman products for the commodity market, they were crammed into spaces designed only to maximize numbers and profits. The result was hell.

Sickness, whipping, dysentery, and suicide turned slave ships' holds into slaughterhouses where the stench of blood and flux could be smelled as far as five miles away across the open sea. In this way, over the centuries, more than 15 million men, women, and children experienced their transport from African freedom to American slavery and were introduced to the horrors of the New World. Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes tellingly of Brown within this context: "He would transform this [Middle Passage] text into its opposite by converting the very stringencies of an African slave ship into a blueprint for freedom."

When one thinks about it, the box as container and symbol turns up everywhere. In Brown's own escape year of 1849 Rose Jackson, an Oklahoma slave who chose to stay with her owners on their trek west, was smuggled in a box over the whole length of the Oregon Trail, since slaves were forbidden in the Territory. During the Civil War, South Carolina slaves Anne and William Summerson were hidden in rice casks and successfully brought to the Charleston docks. William Still's history of the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia reports a

number of ingenious escapes, including what he called "other box or chest cases."

In 1986, Anthony Cohen, who retraces the journeys of escaped slaves, reenacted Brown's ordeal by having himself shipped over seven hours by train from Philadelphia to New York. Two years later he spent sixteen hours in a crate on the Memphis to Chicago Amtrak. Speaking of Amtrak, there is on the Internet a satire of Amtrak describing "Amtrak Econobox Class," which promises "You'll love curling up in our compact wooden crate." The parody is accompanied, of course, by a drawing of Henry Box Brown.

A recent (and one of the more significant) legacy of Box Brown is Charles Burnett's film *The Final Insult* (1997). Recipient of a MacArthur "genius" grant, Burnett is probably best known for his award-winning *To Sleep with Anger* (1990), and he is widely considered one of the finest African-American writer-directors. The central character in *The Final Insult* is Box Brown, named by his mother for the fugitive slave. Burnett's Brown lives in today's Los Angeles, a city deteriorating with racism, deep class divisions, and increasingly severe economic disparities.

Brown loses his job in a Kafkaesque experience and is reduced to living in his boxlike automobile. His consuming hope is that he will not be reduced further yet, that is, forced to abandon his car to live, like many of his fellows, out of a shopping cart. This would be "the final insult." Of course, in this bitterly paradoxical story, that is precisely what happens. In an ironic twist on Box Brown's slave narrative, Burnett's Box Brown's container is not only his assurance of freedom, it is his freedom itself.

### Brown's Legacy

Brown's life and work personify several of the interconnected themes integral to African-American experience and culture. First, he reinvents

himself. Once a slave, he becomes free; once a factory worker, he becomes an abolitionist lecturer, writer, and performer; once a nonentity, he becomes somebody. He even changes his name to mark the defining event in his life and signify his new identity. In Britain, if his critic is to be believed, he transposes himself still further, from a humble, religious abolitionist to something of a worldly dandy.

Second, Brown improvises, personally incorporating the essence of black speech, style, and music. His box is an original method of self-liberation. His rewriting of "Uncle Ned" is more than a mere revision or adaptation; it is a trope that turns Uncle Ned upside down and on his head; the mythic and passive slave becomes the real and active free-man. Brown's performance keeps adding new riffs, from songs and a massive panorama, to perhaps even elements of minstrelsy. The reinvented Brown finds that the black cultural tradition of improvisation is, in truth, his way to meet, live, and prevail in his new life.

Literary critic Houston A. Baker points out that every African American serves a prison sentence—enslaved on plantations, segregated into ghettos, incarcerated in prisons and housing projects, trapped in ignorance and poverty, constrained in a box of one kind or another. It is precisely this imprisonment Henry Box Brown confronts, challenges, and defeats. Brown's final word and continuing message is that he used confinement to achieve his liberation.

RICHARD NEWMAN

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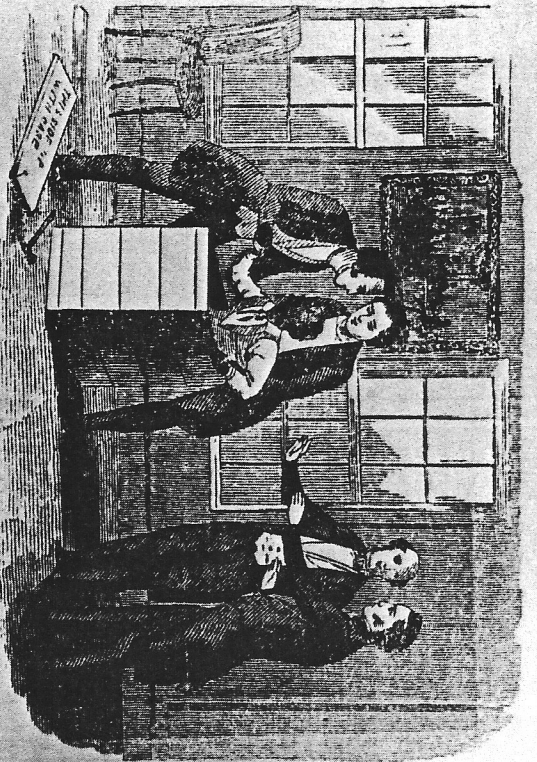


Henry Brown emerges from his box. The black man is William Still, conductor of Philadelphia's Underground Railroad.

*Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.*



HENRY BOX BROWN.

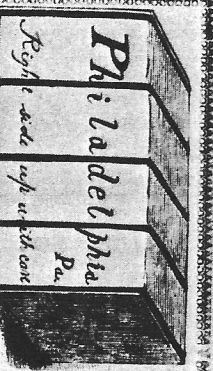


The following remarkable incident exhibits the cruelty of the slave system, while it shows the ingenuity and desperate determination of its victims to escape from it:—

A few months ago, a slave in a Southern city managed to open a correspondence with a gentleman in a Northern city, with a view to effect his escape from bondage. Having arranged the preliminaries he paid somebody \$40 to box him up, and mark him, "This side up, with care," and take him to the Express office, consigned to his friend at the North. On the passage, being on board of a steamboat, he was accidentally turned head downward, and almost died with the rush of blood to the head. At the next change of transportation, however, he was turned right side up, again; and after twenty-six hours' confinement arrived safely at his destination. On receiving the box, the gentleman had doubts whether he should find a corpse or a living man. He tapped lightly on the box, with the question, "All right?" and was delighted to hear the response, "All right, sir." The poor fellow was immediately liberated from his place of burial.\*

An engraving from *The Liberty Almanac*. William Still is not pictured.

Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.



ESCAPE FROM SLAVERY

HENRY BOX BROWN.

—O—

Here you see a man by the name of Henry Brown, who was sent from the South to the North. But they'll never do that here, they took all his rights, & he was in the box for the rest of his life.

Then the owners they were given and the case they did start, Roll along—Roll along—Roll along.

To have the baggage on board who wished to get down, Charles—Brown laid down the sheet and the box, Down in the box he did go.

No more slave work for Henry Box Brown, In the box by Express he did go.

When they posted the baggage on they turned him on his head! There were passengers on board who wished to get down, And Charles—Brown laid down the sheet and the box, Down in the box he did go.

No more slave work for Henry Box Brown, In the box by Express he did go.

When they got to the cars they threw the box off, And down upon his head he did fall.

Then the owners they were given and the case they did start, Roll along—Roll along—Roll along.

To have the baggage on board who wished to get down, Charles—Brown laid down the sheet and the box, Down in the box he did go.

No more slave work for Henry Box Brown, In the box by Express he did go.

When he got to Philadelphia they said he was in pain, And Brown he began to feel glad.

And he was taken on the wagon and carried to the place, And he was taken up with care.

Then the owners they were given and the case they did start, Roll along—Roll along—Roll along.

To have the baggage on board who wished to get down, Charles—Brown laid down the sheet and the box, Down in the box he did go.

No more slave work for Henry Box Brown, In the box by Express he did go.

The friends gathered round and asked if it was right, As down on the box they did sit.

Brown answered them saying "yes, all is right," And he was then set free from his pain.

Charles—Brown laid down the sheet and the box, Down in the box he did go.

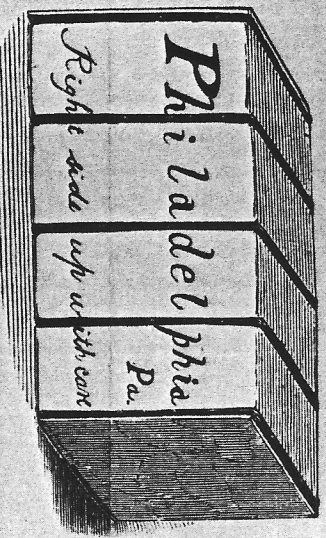
No more slave work for Henry Box Brown, In the box by Express he did go.

No more slave work for Henry Box Brown, In the box by Express he did go.

No more slave work for Henry Box Brown, In the box by Express he did go.

This 1849 broadside contains the full text of Brown's parody of "Uncle Ned." Brown probably sold copies at his lectures.

Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.



**Engraving of the Box in which HENRY BOX BROWN escaped from slavery in Richmond, Va.**

**S O N G,**

*Sung by Mr. Brown on being removed from the box.*

I waited patiently for the Lord :—  
And he, in kindness to me, heard my calling—  
And he hath put a new song into my mouth—  
Even thanksgiving—even thanksgiving—  
Unto our God !

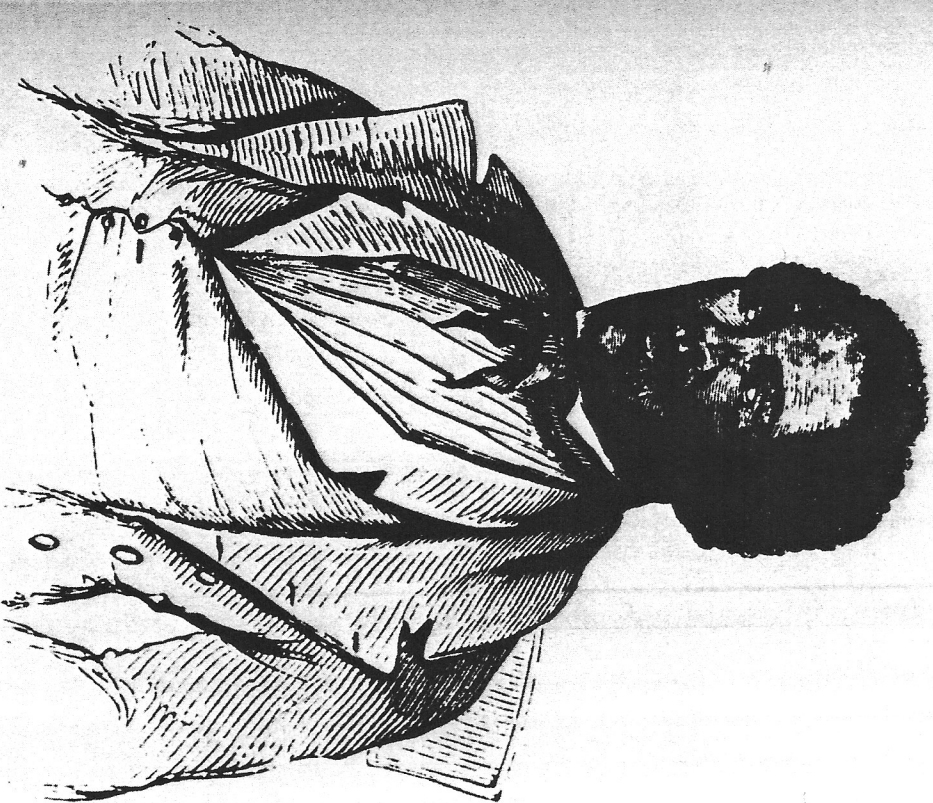
Blessed—blessed is the man  
That has set his hope, his hope in the Lord !  
O Lord ! my God ! great, great is the wondrous work  
Which thou hast done !

If I should declare them—and speak of them—  
They would be more than I am able to express.  
I have not kept back thy love, and kindness, and truth,  
From the great congregation !

Withdraw not thou thy mercies from me,  
Let thy love, and kindness, and thy truth, always preserve me—  
Let all those that seek thee be joyful and glad !  
Be joyful and glad !

And let such as love thy salvation—  
Say always—say always—  
The Lord be praised !  
The Lord be praised !

*Talbot's Steam Press, 1-23 Water Street, Boston.*



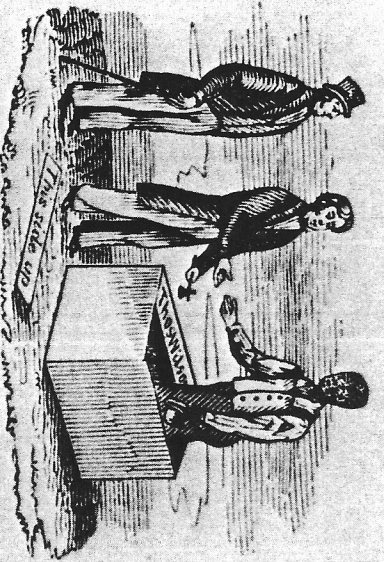
This image was used to advertise Brown's book, but it also appeared on the cover of an 1854 book on the famous runaway Anthony Burns.

*Author's collection.*

A Boston engraving of the text of the 40th Psalm. Singing this song was Brown's first act as a free person.

*Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.*





## HENRY BOX BROWN.

I will tell you the story of Henry Box Brown. It is a strange tale, and it is all true. Henry was a slave in Richmond, Virginia, and then his name was Henry Brown. He had a wife and four little children whom he loved very much.

One night when he went home to his little hut, his children and their mother, were gone, and poor Henry found they had been sold to a trader, and were taken away to Carolina. It made him almost crazy to hear this dreadful

An illustration from an 1849 book of children's stories.

*Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.*

## PREFACE

*by Henry Box Brown*

So much has already been written concerning the evils of slavery, and by men so much more able to portray its horrid form than I am, that I might well be excused if I were to remain altogether silent on the subject; but however much has been written, however much has been said, and however much has been done, I feel impelled by the voice of my own conscience, from the recent experience which I have had of the alarming extent to which the traffic in human beings is carried on, and the cruelties, both bodily and mental, to which men in the condition of slaves are continually subjected, and also from the hardening and blasting influences which this traffic produces on the character of those who thus treat as goods and chattels the bodies and souls of their fellows, to add yet one other testimony of, and protest against, the foul blot on the state of morals, of religion, and of cultivation in the American republic. For I feel convinced that enough has not been written, enough has not been said, enough has not been done, while nearly four millions of human beings, possessing immortal souls, are, in chains, dragging out their existence in the southern states. They