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# UNCLE TOM'S CABIN



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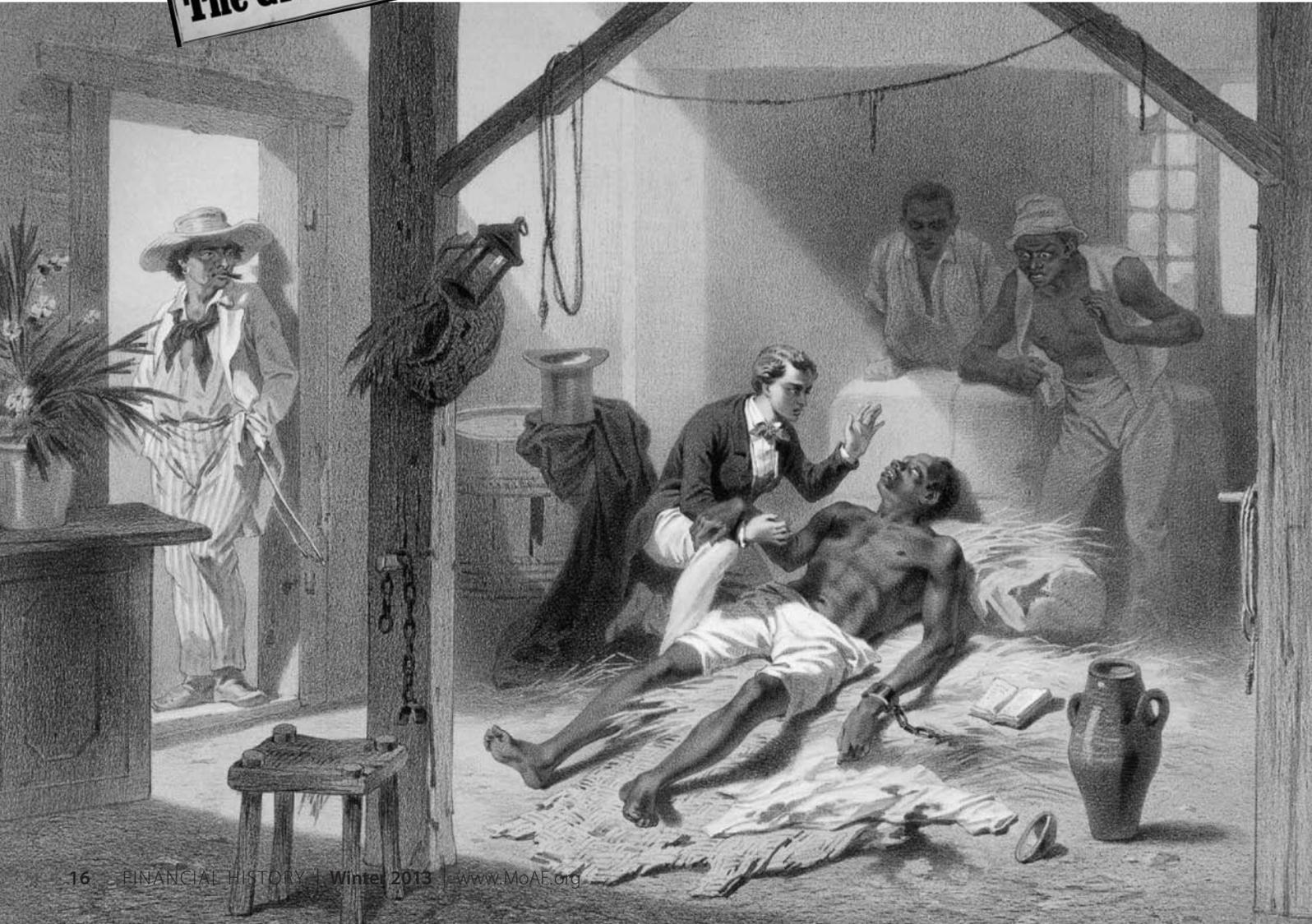
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# The Real Uncle Tom and the Unknown South He Helped Create

By Thomas Fleming



WHEN PRESIDENT ABRAHAM LINCOLN met Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, during the Civil War, he reportedly said: "So you're the little lady who started this great war." There was some truth to his words. The book played a huge role in persuading northerners to view southerners as cruel, corrupt and insatiably greedy.

Neither Lincoln nor the book's hundreds of thousands of readers had any idea that there was a real Uncle Tom and a real South that was very different from the portrait painted by Stowe and other anti-slavery critics such as her brother, the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher. Like Mrs. Stowe, most of these critics believed that God had inspired them to demand the immediate abolition of slavery—and condemn slave owners as contemptible. The vast majority of modern readers are equally unaware of the real Tom and the South he lived in.

The real Tom's name was Josiah Henson. He was born a slave in Maryland in 1789. Harriet Beecher Stowe admitted more than once that Henson's autobiography, published in 1849, was partly the inspiration for her novel. But she never explained why her fictional Uncle Tom was so different from the real one.

The difference was and is profound. The real Tom should prompt modern readers to reevaluate slavery's impact on American blacks. For too many decades the traditional story was something like this: slavery was a degrading, humiliating, demoralizing experience. Any black man or woman who endured it was reduced to subhuman status. They and their descendants, even when emancipated, would have to be treated like children at best—or creatures seething with a rage for revenge at worst.

Before and after the Civil War, this idea played no small part in poisoning the idea of black equality in the American public mind, North and South. In most northern states, before the war blacks could not vote, serve on juries or obtain decent jobs.

They lived a segregated way of life in housing, schools and even churches.

Equally poisonous was the portrait of the southern economy and society that these critics of slavery created. The average southern planter was described as a dissolute wastrel who spent most of his time seducing his slaves. The non-slave holding whites were supposedly even more degraded. In time, these critics became paranoid believers in a myth they called "The Slave Power." They saw the South as a giant conspiracy which sought to inflict slavery and immorality on the entire nation.

In 1857, a North Carolina writer, Hinton Rowan Helper, published a book, *The Impending Crisis in the South*, which sold 150,000 copies. Helper claimed to base his gloomy predictions on census data and other hard facts, which proved the South was on the brink of economic collapse. Today we know the book was total nonsense.

The same can be said of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, from a factual point of view. Mrs. Stowe never spent any serious time in the South. Almost everything she knew about the slave system was acquired from conversations with abolitionist relatives and friends. She made only two or three visits to nearby plantations during the 10 years she and her husband spent in Cincinnati, across the Ohio River from Kentucky.

To inspire outrage and pity, Mrs. Stowe portrayed her fictional Uncle Tom as an impossible mixture of competence and servility. She mentioned almost casually that he ran his master's plantation. But she never gave readers a glimpse of him at work. Instead she spent pages describing Tom as so kind-hearted he verged on a pathetic yes man who rarely, if ever, challenged his master's decisions.

Henson gives us a very different picture of the slave experience in his autobiography. When he was still in his teens, his master, Isaac Riley, began calling him "a smart fellow." His fellow blacks predicted he would do "great things" when he became a man. Soon he was vowing to "out-hoe, out-reap, out-husk, out-dance, out-everything every competitor." He did not hesitate to compete with white men as well as fellow slaves. He had a low opinion

of the farm's sloppy and careless overseer. When he caught the man defrauding the master, Henson reported him.

Isaac Riley fired the thief and Henson asked for a chance to oversee the farm. He was soon raising "more than double the crops, with more cheerful and willing labor, than was ever seen on the estate before." Not only did Henson superintend the day-to-day work, he brought the harvested wheat and tobacco to market and bargained skillfully to bring home astonishing profits.

Stowe's Uncle Tom admired his incompetent master, even after he sold him to pay his bills. "Set him 'longside of other masrs—who's had the treatment and the livin' I've had?" he told his wife. The real Uncle Tom had no such high opinion of Riley. He was "coarse and vulgar in his habits, unprincipled and cruel in his general deportment." Riley sometimes cursed Henson for not getting a better price for a crop—and simultaneously boasted to friends about his new overseer's skill at the bargaining table. "He was quite incompetent to handle the business himself," Henson added.

At the age of 22, Henson married "a very well-taught girl, belonging to a neighboring family." By this time he had become a devout Christian, thanks to his mother's influence, and a white man named McKinney, who was a part-time preacher to local slaves. Henson's religion helped him put up with Riley. He considered it his duty to be "faithful to him in the position in which he placed me."

Henson was not some sort of mysterious exception to the rule in the slave world of the South. There were black men like him in every southern state. In South Carolina, William Ellison's master apprenticed him to a cotton gin maker. Ellison swiftly learned this technology and soon had enough money from repairing cotton gins to purchase his freedom and then the freedom of his wife and children. By 1860, he owned 1,000 acres of land and 63 slaves. He was one of the richest planters in the state.

By the 1850s, black overseers were far more common than most northerners of that era—and most Americans of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—have realized. Some historians

Top: Poster advertising *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as "The Greatest Book of the Age," 1859.

Bottom: Lithograph engraved by Charles Bour (1814–1881) of "The Death of Uncle Tom," from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

estimate that blacks predominated in that position on roughly 70% of the South's plantations that had 100 or more slaves. On smaller plantations, the overseer was almost always black.

The importance of these black men can be glimpsed from a cry of distress from a Louisiana planter when his slave overseer died. "I have lost poor Leven, one of the most faithful blacks that ever lived. He was truth and honesty and without a fault that I ever discovered. He has overseen the plantation nearly three years, and has done better at it than any white man had ever done before..."

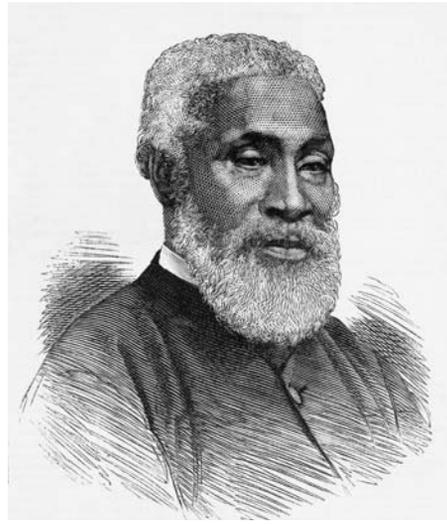
Managing a plantation was by no means the only goal to which a slave might aspire in the South—27% of the adult male slaves in the city of Charleston were skilled artisans: blacksmiths, carpenters, coopers who operated as virtually free men. A slave plumber or shoemaker would and could advertise his services, negotiate his own contracts, receive and pay money and even live in his own house. His slave status required him to pay a percentage of his income to his owner. Otherwise, he was a relatively free man.

Slave artisans frequently made enough money to buy their freedom. In the 1850s, with the price of cotton soaring on the commodity exchanges, the price of a slave was high, perhaps \$1,700 for a skilled worker like a blacksmith—the equivalent of \$25,000 in modern dollars. That a black artisan could set aside this much money while paying his own living expenses and a portion to his owner is impressive. His slave status was in many ways more an artificial legality than a daily reality. The South's 260,000 free blacks were also far from penniless. They owned property estimated to be worth \$25 million.

Even more surprising to modern readers is the number of slaves who worked in factories, displaying a gamut of industrial skills. The papers of David Ross, who operated the Oxford Ironworks in Campbell County, VA, one of the nation's largest factories in the pre-Civil War era, reveal that the business was staffed and run entirely by slaves. A man named Abram was responsible for the highly-technical and demanding day-to-day management of the blast furnace. The furnace keepers, Abram's chief assistants, had to know precisely how much charcoal and limestone to put into the furnace when it was in blast. All the other skilled

workers—blacksmiths, potters, hammer men, miners—were slaves.

David Ross was proud of the many workers who had mastered more than one skill. His blacksmiths could double as potters and were adept at repairing or rebuilding the machinery of the forges, furnaces or mills. Of manager Abram, Ross wrote that he "supports an unblemished character, for his integrity, good understanding and talents." Like Henson, Abram had revealed these gifts virtually from his infancy, and still retained them in spite of his "gray hairs."



Undated engraving of Reverend Josiah Henson, the original "Uncle Tom."

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Once a white overseer of a nearby Ross farm complained that the owner had compared him unfavorably to Abram. Ross replied that the man must be mistaken. "It is hard to compare a farmer with an ironmaster." If Abram were a free man, Ross said, he would earn twice as much as the overseer, whether he was working in the North, South or West.

As the profitability of cotton culture rose in the 1850s, money became an ingredient in raising productivity on many plantations. Owners frequently paid between \$40 and \$110 a year—\$600 and \$1,650 in modern dollars—to experienced slaves for doing a good job. Slaves were also permitted to grow fruit and vegetables in their gardens and sell the produce. One industrious field hand made \$309 in a single year selling peaches and apples on the side. In modern money that sum would be about \$5,000.

In tobacco farming, where a high degree of skill was necessary, planters frequently paid slaves as much as \$300 a year to guarantee a good performance. Rice cultivation required equal amounts of savvy. The plantations were divided into dozens of small watery plots surrounded by dikes. One traveler visited a rice farmer in Georgia and found a slave engineer who received "considerably higher wages" (in the form of presents) than the white overseer for his skill in building and maintaining the dikes.

On cotton plantations, the "gang" system required another group of leaders, who functioned as assistant overseers, somewhat like foremen in a factory or sergeants in an army. Before his gang went to work, the assistant overseer had to measure out their tasks for the day—no small job in fields that were often shaped irregularly. With a boy helper, the overseer would set stakes that usually covered about 40 acres, with the aid of a five foot measuring rod.

Once his gang went to work, the assistant overseer watched them closely to make sure they were not "overstrained." If he saw they were tiring, he had the authority to call a halt to the day's work. The next day he would order part of his gang to finish the previous day's assignment while the rest moved on to another section of the field.

Some planters, to increase productivity, entered into profit-sharing arrangements with their slaves. One Alabama owner permitted his bondsmen to keep two-thirds of the profits of the plantation, setting aside a third for his private use. From the slaves' share came the cost of clothing and food for them and their families, the taxes for the farm and medical bills. "What clear money you make shall be divided equally amongst you in a fair proportion agreeable to the services rendered by each hand," the contract stated. "Those that earn most shall have most."

These startling facts have come to light in the last three or four decades, thanks to research by a new generation of historians, who are trying to get beyond the myths about "the Slave Power" perpetrated by the abolitionists. Southern defenders of slavery also contributed to the myth by portraying black Americans as inferior in intelligence and ambition to whites and, thus, unable to handle freedom.

Perhaps the most startling fact these statistic-minded scholars have uncovered is the South's wealth. In the 1850s, the 15

slave states were by far the most prosperous section of the nation. Southern farms, many of them slave-managed, were between 35–50% more profitable than comparable farms in the free North and Midwest. In 1860, the South, considered as a separate country, would have ranked as the fourth richest nation in the world. Southern whites had a higher per capita income than citizens of France or Germany or Denmark.

Instead of pleasure-wallowing wastrels, most southern planters were hard-working businessmen who studied the latest techniques in scientific farming and did their best to keep their slaves contented in spite of the restrictions and confinements of the system.

A man who owned 50 slaves and managed them well with the help of a good overseer could clear \$7,500 a year—the equivalent of \$250,000 today. In the 1850s, this was 60 times the average white American’s per capita income, North or South. The black slave overseer might get a bonus of \$50 or \$60 at the end of the year and a new suit. But he continued to live in a humble cabin in the slave quarters, starkly different from the master’s “Big House.” Worse, he was always in danger of being sold and separated from his wife and children.

Inevitably, this injustice bred resentment in black bondsmen. In addition to being classed as property, they were also cheated of a fair share of the profits from their labor. Historians estimate the average field worker was underpaid by \$3,000 or \$4,000 modern dollars annually. Overall, the South’s slaves would have earned \$84 million each year, if they had been given a fair share of the money they were making for their masters.

As property, the South’s four million slaves were worth \$3 billion. That sum exceeded the North’s investment in railroads and factories. This figure does not include the value of the land that the South’s farmers owned, which was worth at least another \$3 billion.

If we study the income of those men who owned 20 slaves or more, which qualified them as “planters,” some 46,274 individuals—a mere 0.58% of the South’s population—the portrait is even more astonishing. These men owned half of all the slaves—which means, when combined with the value of their farms, their net worth was at least \$1.5 billion. Put

another way, they composed 70% of the richest people in the United States in 1860.

On a per capita basis, the four wealthiest states in the Union were South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana and Georgia. In the top 12 were only two northern states, Connecticut and Rhode Island. These newly-discovered facts demolish the standard 19th century assumption that

***“In the past, black men and women have been given almost no credit for the South’s remarkable wealth. It is time to revise that mindset.”***

the North was the dynamic section of the country and the slave-encumbered South was mired in backwardness and poverty.

In the past, black men and women have been given almost no credit for the South’s remarkable wealth. It is time to revise that mindset. The slaves participated in the system, not as mere automatons, but as achievers, frequently mastering the technology of the South’s agriculture, as well as the psychology of leadership. A substantial number of black men and women did NOT succumb to the worst tendencies of the system. Their industrious lives within the unjust institution of slavery were a triumph of the human spirit over adversity that should no longer be overlooked.

These new facts about southern slavery not only contradict Hinton Rowan Helper’s prediction of an imminent economic collapse, but they lead to a more interesting and possibly significant conclusion: slavery was evolving. Overall it remained a deplorable institution. But American freedom, sometimes disguised as business enterprise, was constantly seeping into the system. Would it have continued to move toward more and more freedom?

It seems inevitable that sooner rather than later, masters would have had to confront American slavery’s greatest failure—its lack of freedom not only for gifted leaders like Josiah Henson and skilled artisans and factory managers like Abram—but for the children and grandchildren of such men. Slaves with above average intelligence and abilities found it harder and harder to tolerate a system which did not reward them adequately and condemned their descendants to the caprices of being sold to settle a dead master’s estate or pay the debts of an incompetent owner.

Southerners were aware of this resentment. They had seen it explode into violent revolts more than once. In 1831, a charismatic preacher named Nat Turner inflamed blacks in Southampton County, VA, with a belief that God would protect their cause. In a 24-hour rampage, they killed over 60 white men, women and children. Thereafter, although southerners seldom admitted it to northerners, they lived with a constant fear of a race war, in which blacks would slaughter whites and vice versa, reducing the South to a blood-soaked shambles. This unspoken fear had long since become a disease in the southern public mind.

The angry abolitionists in the North refused to recognize this fear, and relentlessly demanded immediate emancipation, claiming God as their inspiration. They convinced themselves that they were rescuing whites as well as blacks from a failed and floundering way of life. Their contempt for southerners poisoned the noble side of their cause, making it another disease in the public mind. As the 1850s drew to a close, a perfect storm of deadly emotions was poised to engulf the United States of America. **\$**

*Thomas Fleming is an historian and author of more than 20 books, including several best-sellers. He has served as president of the Society of American Historians and the PEN American Center and also spent 10 years as chairman of the New York American Revolution Round Table.*

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