

A VERY SPECIAL DELIVERY

HOW A VIRGINIA SLAVE HAD HIMSELF PACKED AND SHIPPED TO PHILADELPHIA—AND FREEDOM

By Alison Leigh Cowan

The wooden crate that arrived in Philadelphia that day was the plain-looking sort typically used to transport clothing and textiles. Just over 3 feet long, it was 2 feet 8 inches deep and not quite 2 feet wide. Written on the side were the words “this side up with care.”

Although the recipient of the box was expecting the delivery, he was not fully prepared for what was inside: a 200-pound man named Henry Brown.

Brown was a slave when he left Richmond, Virginia, on March 23, 1849, concealed in the box he had designed for this purpose.

When he arrived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a day later—by express mail—he was a free man.

Risking his life by having himself shipped like an order of merchandise was an audacious act at a time when the nation was embroiled in a fight over slavery. But the story of Brown’s flight from slavery—several hours of which he spent upside down—never quite earned the recognition it deserved.

Abolitionists no doubt found Brown’s escape inspiring, but some feared that publicity would only make it harder for other slaves to follow the same path to freedom. That was true of James Miller McKim, the man in Philadelphia who accepted the delivery. McKim, a Presbyterian minister and abolitionist, shared a dramatic account of the event with a friend, but urged him to keep it quiet. He warned that it might “prevent all others from escaping in the same way.”

To bring attention to this extraordinary pre-Civil War story, the New York Historical Society made available to *The New York Times* its copy of the account that McKim wrote three days after Brown’s arrival:

“Here is a man who has been the hero of one of the most extraordinary achievements I ever heard of,” McKim wrote to his friend in New York. “He came to me on Saturday morning last in a box tightly hooped, marked ‘this side up’ by overland express, from the city of Richmond!! Did you ever hear of any thing in your life to beat that?”

27 HOURS IN A BOX

The letter goes on to describe how Brown spent 27 grim hours entombed in a tight-fitting box that was tossed and turned repeatedly during the 350-mile journey by wagon, railroad, and steamship.

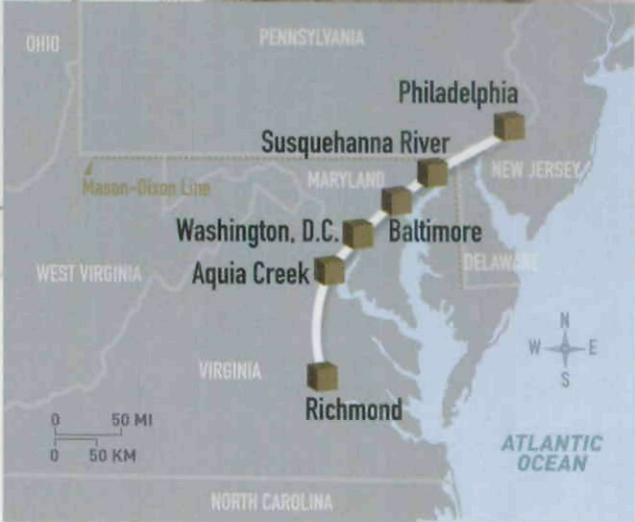
According to McKim, the box had only a few tiny cracks to let in air. Brown carried a cow’s bladder full of water with which he frequently bathed his face and neck; he fanned himself with his hat throughout the trip.

At one point, Brown was traveling upside down in a noisy freight car and was able to shift position enough to relieve the pressure on his head. But when he was turned upside down again on the steamboat leg of the trip, passengers were standing too close. He had to remain still for 20 miles or risk being caught.

“This nearly killed him,” McKim reported.



MARCH 1849:
An illustration shows Henry Brown emerging from the box; his route from Richmond (right).



To assure speedy delivery, Brown's accomplices had hired Adams Express, a private shipper that promised next-day delivery from Richmond to Philadelphia.

McKim had agreed in advance to accept delivery. But after one too many delays, he was fairly sure that anyone transported in this manner would not have survived. He wrote that he could hardly "describe my sensations when in answer to my rap on the box and question—"all right?" the prompt response came 'all right sir.'"

As Brown later recounted in published narratives of his life, he continued on to Boston, adopted the middle name "Box" as a reminder of his ordeal, and turned his deliverance from the box into something of a theatrical spectacle.

In a written account of his escape published in 1849, Brown recalls the moment when he was finally freed from the box—and from slavery.

"The first impulse of my soul, as I looked around, and beheld my friends, and was told that I was safe, was to break out in a song of deliverance. . . . Great God, was I a freeman!"

While Brown's tale thrilled the antislavery crowd and got picked up by some newspapers, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass criticized those who had published details about the escape, saying it would make it difficult for anyone else to escape by similar means.

In fact, Brown's accomplices in Richmond tried twice more to ship human "cargo," but failed, according to Jeffrey Ruggles, author of *The Unboxing of Henry Brown*. Alerted by

the publicity of Brown's escape, Adams Express had warned its agents to be "suspicious of boxes that emitted grunts" and "the two slaves on the second expedition were not as stoic as Henry Brown and gave out little noises."

FROM CARGO TO PASSENGER

Brown himself was soon back on the run. Eighteen months after he arrived in Philadelphia, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which mandated that runaway slaves be returned to their masters.

To avoid capture, Brown sailed for England, where he apparently lived for 25 years.

But in 1875, according to a ship manifest found at Ancestry.com, Henry Brown returned to the United States. This time, a decade after the 13th Amendment outlawed slavery, Brown was not human cargo, but something even more precious—a passenger. ●

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