

THE GATHERING STORM

Parcel post to freedom

Henry Brown took the extraordinary step of mailing himself to Philly **By Parke Pierson**

The baggage handlers ignored the "This Side Up With Care" label and rudely shoved the wooden box onto the steamship deck with those words exactly on the bottom. They would certainly have been surprised to learn that inside the crate was a man—Henry Brown, a Richmond slave who was mailing himself to freedom.

Brown was fully prepared to "conquer or die" on his mission, and at that point the latter looked more likely. Positioned upside down, he felt his eyes and the veins in his face begin "swelling as if they would burst." He endured for an hour and a half until two men flipped the box on its side to sit on it. The swelling subsided; his head cleared. Henry Brown, it seemed, just might conquer his bondage, after all.

Born in Louisa County, Va., in 1815, Brown's natural intelligence was quickly noticed by his master, who allowed him to go on errands as he grew older. On those trips off the plantation, Brown devoured any knowledge of the world at large he could gain.

When Brown was 15, his "uncommonly kind" master died, and he was sent to work in Richmond's tobacco industry. While there, he witnessed the retaliations against blacks brought on by Nat Turner's failed 1831 slave revolt, and saw bondsmen whipped, hanged and beaten in the streets. He also endured the vagaries of a series of overseers and experienced firsthand that there was "no law by which the master may be punished for his cruelty."

He married a woman named Nancy and then had to experience one of the most heartbreaking aspects of slave existence when she and their three children were sold away to North Carolina in 1848. Brown watched his wife, children and other slaves pass by on their way out of town. As the miserable gaggle walked on, he resolved to escape their fate, and it was not long before he came upon the idea of "shutting myself up in a box, and getting



Ecstatic abolitionists celebrate the safe arrival of escaped slave Henry "Box" Brown in Philadelphia. This 1850 lithograph was sold to the public to help finance the antislavery cause.

myself conveyed as dry goods to a free state."

Brown enlisted the aid of James C.A. Smith, a free black, and Samuel Smith, a white storekeeper who helped for a price. Brown paid him \$86 that he had managed to squirrel away in exchange for Smith arranging shipment to Philadelphia abolitionist James Miller McKim.

On March 29, 1849, Brown squeezed his 5-foot-8-inch, 200-pound frame into a wooden crate 3 feet long, 2 feet wide and 2.6 feet deep. With "three gimlet holes" opposite his face for air and fortified only with a bladder of water, he began his "battle of liberty," as he called it, at Richmond's express office.

He bumped and thumped for 27 hours as the box went from wagon, railroad baggage car, the deck of that miserable steamboat, wagon, another railroad car, ferry, railroad car yet again, and the final delivery wagon that took him to McKim's home in Philadelphia.

McKim and a group of abolitionist friends were awaiting their special delivery, and gathered around the box. Brown kept quiet. Finally, he heard someone ask, "Is all right within?" He replied, "All right." The box was broken open. Brown tried to stand and promptly passed out, but he had won his battle for liberty.

Henry "Box" Brown and his escape became a cause celebre in the North, but Southerners saw his escape as more Yankee meddling with their property, and pushed even harder for passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, which would force the federal government to help return escaped slaves. When that act passed in 1850, Brown had to flee to England.

Brown enjoyed his life in England. He published his autobiography and dramatized his escape onstage. He remarried and in 1875 returned to the United States. The man who mailed himself to freedom died in 1879. □



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