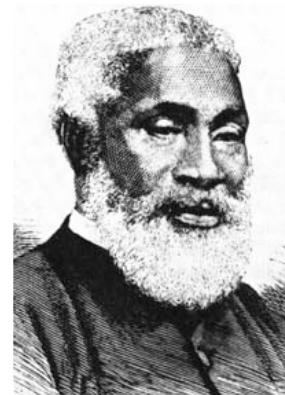


Chapter 7

Three Responses to Slavery: Josiah Henson, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth

Every slave responded differently to the fact he/she was owned by another person and did not have his/her freedom. The two slaves you will be reading about in this chapter had very different responses. One decided to do what he had promised -- even though it meant returning to slavery. The other fought back against his master. Read both stories and decide -- which of the two was more to be admired?



Josiah Henson

Josiah Henson: The Slave Who Kept His Promise

His master trusted him to take a group of 21 slaves from Maryland to Kentucky. Josiah Henson had given his solemn promise that he would complete this mission for his master. But he had a chance to escape to freedom. What should he do? In the following reading Josiah Henson described his dilemma and the difficulty it caused him:

My master had money problems which led to a lawsuit from his brother-in-law. He was charged with dishonest management. The lawsuit caused my master's ruin. He saw no way out but to escape to another state.

My master came to my cabin. He told me he was ruined and ask for advise. He said he had but one hope and that depended on me. He begged me to promise to do what he advised. I was afraid the sheriff would take every one who belonged to him and we would all be separated. Some of the slaves might be sold to Georgia or Louisiana. I therefore promised my master I would do all I could to save him. He told me I must take the slaves to his brother in Kentucky. He said that this was the only means by which he could be saved. The result was that I agreed. There were eighteen Negroes, besides my wife and two children, to transport nearly 1,000 miles.

We started in the month of February, 1825. My master gave me a small amount of money and some food. I bought a one-horse wagon to carry them.

The trip over land went well. When we arrived at Wheeling, West Virginia I sold the horse and wagon. With the money I bought a boat and floated down the Ohio River without any trouble.

There was one great temptation I had to resist. In Cincinnati, Ohio the colored people gathered around us, and urged us to remain with them. They used all arguments to get us to leave our master.

I had always wanted to be free, but only by purchasing myself from my master. The idea of running away was not one that I had considered. I had an idea of honor on the subject which I would not have broken even for freedom. Every cent I had ever called my own, had been kept for this great purpose. Now I might free my family my companions, and myself at one stroke.

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*But I had promised my master to take his property to Kentucky. This, and this only, I planned to do. I left Cincinnati before night, and camped a few miles below the city. I had often had painful doubts as to carrying so many people into slavery again, but I acted as I thought at the time was right.*²⁶

Frederick Douglass and the Slave Breaker



Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was the most famous slave to escape from slavery. After coming North he played a major part in the movement to end slavery, and became the chief national spokesperson for all African-Americans. He also wrote a book about his experiences as a slave -- parts of which you already read. In this reading Douglass talks about his most important act as a slave -- fighting back against his master. He was sixteen years old at the time of this incident. As you read the story -- think about why he was sent to the slave breaker, why the slave breaker sent him out to gather wood with two unbroken oxen, whether there was magic power in a root that supposedly kept him from being punished, and what Douglass meant when he said at the end he was no longer a slave in fact. You will also be asked whether you admire Douglass more than Henson.

Mr. Covey, the Slave Breaker

I lived with master Thomas for nine months. During this time he had given me a number of severe beatings. They had not served their purpose. He decided to put me out to be broken. For this purpose he rented me for one year to a man named Edward Covey. Mr. Covey had a very high reputation for breaking slaves. He was so good at it that some slave owners lent Mr. Covey their slaves for one year for the sake of the training which he forced on them.

I left Mr. Thomas's house and went to live with Mr. Covey on the 1st of January, 1833. I was now, for the first time in my life a field hand.

The Oxen

Mr. Covey sent me very early in the month of January to the woods. He told me to get a load of wood and gave me a team of unbroken (not trained) oxen. I had never driven oxen before. Before I got far into the woods, the oxen took flight and started running. They upset the cart, dashing it with great force against a tree. How I escaped death I do not know. I was entirely alone in the thick wood, the cart was upset and shattered, and the oxen were entangled. After a long spell I got my cart righted.

On my return, I told Mr. Covey what had happened. He then went to a tree with his axe, cut three large switches, and ordered me to take off my clothes. He then lashed me till he had worn out his switches, leaving scars for a long time after.

²⁶ Josiah Henson *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave*, (London, 1852),

My Life with Covey

During the next six months of the year scarce a week passed without his whipping me. My awkwardness was almost always his excuse for whipping. We were worked fully up to the point of collapse.

Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. My spirit was crushed; my mind became a blank. The dark night of slavery closed in upon me.

I Go to Master Thomas's

On one of the hottest days of August I broke down. My strength failed me, and I fainted. When Covey heard what happened, he took up a hickory stick and gave me a heavy blow on the head. It made a large wound, and the blood ran freely. He now left me to my fate. I decided to go to my old master and enter a complaint. I arrived, covered with blood, at my master's store after walking seven miles. I humbly asked my master to protect me. I told him that Mr. Covey would surely kill me. Master Thomas said I belonged to Mr. Covey and must go back to him.

I Fight My Covey

That next day on the way back I met Sandy Jenkins, a slave I knew. I told him my troubles, and he told me I must go to a part of the woods where there was a certain root. If I would take some of it with me, carrying it always on my right side, it would be impossible for Mr. Covey or any other white man, to whip me. I first rejected the idea, but Sandy insisted, so I took it to please him.

I immediately started for home. Upon entering the yard gate, out came Mr. Covey on his way to church. He spoke to me very kindly. This made me begin to think there was something in the root which Sandy gave me.

All went well till Monday morning. I was called to feed the horses. Mr. Covey entered the stable, and caught hold of my legs and was about tying me with a rope. I gave a sudden spring and we went sprawling on the stable floor. Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, but at this moment I decided to fight! I grabbed Mr. Covey by the throat, and as I did so, I rose. He held on me, and I to him.

We were at it for nearly two hours. Covey finally let me go saying he would not have whipped me as much had I not resisted. The truth was he had not whipped me at all. The whole six months afterwards, that I spent with Mr. Covey, he never laid weight of his finger upon me.

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It relit the fires of freedom. It revived within me a sense of my own manhood. My long-crushed spirit rose, fear departed and bold hope took its place. I now promised myself, that, however, long I might remain a slave in form; the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.²⁷

²⁷ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1968, pp. 71-83.

Ain't I A Woman?

Former slave, Sojourner Truth, delivered the following famous and often quoted speech in 1851 at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio



Sojourner Truth

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.²⁸

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. In the Josiah story, explain a. what Henson promised, and why he made the promise; b. what pressure there was on Henson not to keep his promise; and, c. whether Henson made the right decision.
2. In Frederick Douglass's story, explain a. whether the purpose of the slave breaker was to teach Douglass to work in the fields; b. why Covey sent Douglass out with the unbroken oxen; c. whether the root really worked; and, d. whether Douglass was right in saying that he was no longer a slave in fact.

²⁸ Internet Modern History Sourcebook

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3. Who did you admire more - Douglass or Henson? Why? In your answer refer to the idea that slaves were supposed to believe they should be slaves and to the spirit of Sojourner Truth.

Appendix

Douglass later tried to explain why Covey did not report him for raising his hand against a white man. His actions were against the law in all southern states. Douglass's explanation was that had Covey reported him, Covey's reputation as a slave breaker would have been destroyed. Douglass did not claim that the root had any magic power.



Harriet Beecher

Not long after Henson settled in Kentucky with his old master, the master stole the money Henson had been saving to buy his own freedom. This convinced Henson to strike out for himself, and he ran away, escaping to Canada. There he was visited by an American abolitionist, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe wrote the famous anti-slave classic, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It is said that the character of Uncle Tom, and obedient and loyal slave, was modeled after Josiah Henson. The term, "Uncle Tom" is used to today among some African-Americans to describe a black person who does everything whites want him to do without regard to the interests of his own race.