

HENRY 'BOX' BROWN

He Mailed Himself to Freedom—1849

The Box

Henry's box was 3 feet by 2 feet by 2 feet, 8 inches. It was a tight fit for a man who stood 5 feet, 8 inches tall and weighed 200 pounds.

Inside the box, Henry had a biscuit, a gimlet (a type of hand drill to create air holes), a hat (to use as a fan), and a pouch of water.

Leaves & Slavery

When Henry was young, his mother took him to the forest in autumn, where the wind stripped leaves from the trees and sent them whirling. She told Henry that the life of a slave was like the leaves.

"The wind scatters 'em, scatters 'em where it will. And there ain't no gettin' 'em back."

Sadly, his mother's words came back to haunt Henry because his family was taken away from him twice. First, his family was sold away when he was 15 years old. Then, when he was 33, his wife and children were sold away. That's when he decided to escape.



The Resurrection of Henry Brown

Henry Brown, a slave from Richmond, Virginia, felt that God was telling him, "Go and get a box, and put yourself in it."

So he obeyed. In 1849, with the help of a white man and a free black, Henry was sealed inside a wooden box and shipped from Richmond to Philadelphia—a grueling 27-hour ordeal. It's one of the most incredible escape stories of the Underground Railroad.

In the 19th Century, his escape became known as "the resurrection of Henry Brown." His box was like a casket, and Henry symbolically died by entering the box in Richmond as a slave. He was resurrected in Philadelphia as a free man.

Later in life, Henry became a magician. But his greatest trick was in 1849 in Richmond, when he made a slave disappear.



The William Barret house still stands in Richmond today.

The Cast of Characters

James Smith was Henry's close friend, a free black who ran a cake shop in Richmond. He helped Henry escape.

Samuel Smith (no relation to James) was a white shoemaker, a gambler who lost everything—his wife and home—because of his gambling. He helped Henry escape, taking the biggest gamble of his life.

John Allen was the overseer at the tobacco factory where Henry Brown worked. He was a brute, and he used the whip, although he wasn't allowed to harm Henry.

Miller McKim was a member of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia. He agreed to receive Henry's box, but he tried to back out when he became afraid that Henry would die along the way.

William Barret was Henry's master, who owned the tobacco factory in Richmond. Henry was given to William by John Barret, who passed away, scattering Henry's family among his sons.



Doug Peterson at the Underground Railroad Museum in Cincinnati

Upside Down for Four Hours?

Henry's box went by wagon, then train, then steamboat, then wagon again, then train, then ferryboat, and then train before finally reaching Philadelphia.

The box was dropped off the back of a wagon, nearly breaking Henry's neck. Most grueling, for four hours Henry was upside down inside the box aboard the steamboat—and he couldn't make a sound because two men stood right next to the box.

Henry also had a terrible wound on his hand. He needed an excuse to be away from the factory for a couple of days, so he poured acid on his hand. He poured too much, burning himself to the bone.

The Disappearing Man

Henry's story is told in Doug Peterson's novel, *The Disappearing Man*. You can find *The Disappearing Man* on Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

