



## Meeting of the Minds: Josiah Henson, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass in Conversation

In February 2022, the Josiah Henson Museum and Park partnered with the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historic Site and the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site to put together a virtual re-enacted first-person conversation between these three historical figures. They discuss early life experiences, how they fought their way to freedom and their roles in ending slavery—past and present. Re-published with permission from the Josiah Henson Museum and Park.

Pamela Kirkland: In this episode, we bring you a conversation between three legendary abolitionists on their legacies and humanitarian impact, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and Reverend Josiah Henson. Yes, you heard that right. In February 2022, the [Josiah Henson Museum and Park](#) partnered with the [Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historic Site](#) and the [Frederick Douglass National Historic site](#) to bring their audiences a virtual first person reenactment of these historical figures. In this audio titled The Meeting of the Minds, we get to eavesdrop on a conversation between these three Maryland natives about their early life experiences, how they fought their way to freedom and their roles in ending slavery, past and present.

Imani Haynes: Many of us are familiar with everyone here on this discussion today, but we don't know how much your lives overlap. So can you all just share with us a few things about your early life and we'll get started with Frederick Douglass.

Frederick Douglass: Yes, well, certainly I was born not under the name of Frederick Douglass, but Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was my birth name. I was born around the year 1818. I did not know the date of my birth as slaves did not know the dates of their birth. The closest we could come would be planting time or harvest time, cherry time, and of course, as the mechanism of the institution of slavery have it, that as soon as I was born I was taken away from my mother. My mother was sold to a plantation about 12 miles away. And so I'm there in Talbot County near St. Michael's and my mother is sold to another plantation, which was really only about a day's walking distance from where Harriet Tubman was born. And so I'm in this institution of slavery being taken care of by my grandmother, Betsy Bailey, until I was around six years old.

And then unfortunately she had no choice but to take me back to my master. And from the time I was around six years old, I was on that plantation. My mother only saw me a handful of times. I never saw her during the light of day. She would've occasionally walked 24 miles round trip just to rock me to sleep at night. And by the time I woke the next morning, she would be gone back to her plantation to answer the bill for that hard labor. And so that was my plight on the Lloyd

Plantation around the year 1818. Mrs. Tubman, did you ever travel through Talbot County or anything like that?

Harriet Tubman: I'm sure I did. I'm sure not time when you were there. I don't think. Well, I was born over Peter's neck, Dorchester County. We know that Maryland eastern shore. I born in year 1820. 1822 or 24. Like you said, color people ain't know the birthdate no more than they keep a record for calf or colt. They give me a name, Araminta Ross. And they calls me Minty and I was the fifth of nine children. Linah, Mariah Ritty, Soph, Robert, Minty, Ben, Rachel, Henry, and Moses. I born a slave like you, to make your flesh creep to know what they do to the slave. From the time I was wee child, I done get screaming and crying and my people been hooked. I too then felt the sting of the lash, time and again. Slave work can't see, can't see. Rise early in the morning for dawn to dark out there, can't see. Going out in the field, work all the day till dawn, can't see. Work, can't see, can't see.

I see families torn apart, sold to the highest bidder. Every time I see a white man, I was afraid to being carried away for when I stand about so high, I see my two sisters, Linah, and Soph sold on the chain game. I remember that day they marched them to the far south, all the other slaves where they've been sold, come down to the road for the big fat whale. I looked it down the road and I see them. They got chained by the neck. This one chained to the one, one come by. I looked it up in my mother's eye, I see all the hurt. What she feels. I looked it in my father eye, I see despair. So he know he can't help his daughters. All he can do is put his hand out and touch them when they passed by and he said, "I see you in heaven." That be the face of slavery, have nothing and still got something to lose. Ain't that right, Reverend?

Reverend Josiah Henson: Amen. Amen. Ms. Tubman, I too know slavery.

Harriet Tubman: Oh, yeah.

Henson: I was born also on the coast of Maryland, on the eastern shore. I was born. They gave me a date, June 15th, 1789 in Charles County, Maryland, on a farm belonging to a master Francis Newman. It was about a mile, a mile from Port Tobacco. You familiar with Port Tobacco?

My mother was a slave, a slave of Josiah McPherson, but hired to Mr. Newman, Master Newman to whom my father belonged. They were on two different plantations, but my mother was hired out to Mr. Newman, master Newman. I can remember the day my father received 100 lashes, 100 lashes on his bare back as a penalty for striking a white man. And then to also have his ear nailed to the whipping post, his ear nailed to the whipping post and then severed from his body, cut off, blood dripping down. After that, my father was never the same. He was eventually sold south and my family was separated.

That's some more, that is so sad. The separation is a part of slavery. My siblings were also sold. My mother was sold. She was sold to a master Riley in the plantation in Rockville, Maryland. I was eventually reunited with her. I became ill as a young lad, but I grew to be a robust and vigorous young man. So I was made the superintendent, you know, the overseer of the plantation. Yes, me, a slave, the superintendent of the plantation. But being a slave, I was not paid a dime for that job.

Imani Haynes: Thank you so much for sharing your early stories. I know that must be pretty hard, but the amazing thing about you all's story is that you weren't in bondage for all of your life. All three of you all were able to seek emancipation for yourselves, which is very brave. Harriet Tubman, can you please share with us just a little bit about freedom and how much it meant for you?

Harriet Tubman: Child, freedom be a all important thing. For 20 so years, I toil in the swamp, in the field, hauled timber in the woods with the loggers. And I heard a logger speak about the Underground Railroad. They say the safe house over camp, safe house over camp, and they'd be Black peoples in and white peoples. Will help you on the road to freedom? I hear that for safe people, for us always got freedom on my mind. And the Lord in my heart, I praise all the time, Lord, I praise for old master, convert old master, change that man's heart, make him Christian. Then I had tell, "Oh, master fix him, sell me and to my brothers on the chain game. I changed it my prayer. Lord, if you ain't never gonna change the old master's heart, kill him, take him out the way, so he won't do no more mischief."

Two, three daytime pass, I here tell, oh, master dead. Oh, we for sure down for chain gang now. I run off with my brothers, but they turn us back. They would fear to what the new master do to us when he catches. But then the night come, I fixed my eye on the north star and I kept moving. I didn't reason this out of my mind. There'd be one or two things. I has a right to liberty or death. If I could not have the one, I had the other but no man to take me alive. So I fought it in the night with my eye on the north star. The good Lord ain't put the north star in the sky. I got my hands on the tree, healing for the moss on the north side.

Douglass: Right.

Harriet Tubman: Tree over the field. I free, wasn't no one there welcome me to the land of freedom. All my peoples on the eastern shore on the slave quarters. To this solemn resolution, I come. I free and they would be free. I go up to the north and get little monies for, you get some little monies up here for. And when I got plenty, I go to the eastern shore, them get my peoples, and I bring them the freedom. They calls me conduct on the Underground Railroad. I ain't never run my train off the track and I ain't never lose a passage. Have at that, Frederick Douglass.

Douglass: Yes, I certainly commend you for bringing so many men and women out of bondage. You brought 12 runaways to my home in South Avenue Rochester. I gained my freedom. Of course, first of all, I want you to know until I could read and write, I really had no way to express myself or to be able to articulate what the misery I felt as a slave when I felt the horrors and described the horrors of bondage. And so my mind was in bondage, as well as my body. But once I had a few words to describe my misery as a slave, my mind became free and thus my body had to follow. You know you cannot enslave a free mind. This is why the slave masters wanted you to be docile and have no knowledge because they knew, and once you had any kind of education that you would start thinking about freedom and what it meant and you would try to run away.

And so when I was in Baltimore and Miss Auld learned to read and write, this is what opened my mind and I became quite unruly. They sent me back to Talbot County to try to break my spirit. They put me under the servitude of a notorious slave breaker by the name of Mr. Colby. Now, I had already tried to escape one time before I had actually, well, I had made a pact with four other slaves and we were going to run away. We were going to write a note to ourselves and catch a

canoe up the Chesapeake Bay and make our way to freedom. Well, unfortunately, one of those men was not so brave. He was a traitor and he turned us in. And so we ended up in the jail in St. Michael's for about three months. Well, they bond them off first. And then lastly, my master came and bonded me out.

I was certainly terrified that I might be sold down south to Mississippi or Alabama. We called that the Valley of the Shadow of Death. No one would've returned from Mississippi or Alabama. But eventually, I made my way back to Baltimore and I'm working in the shipyards and still under bondage. I'm working in the shipyards and I have to give my master all my earnings. By working in the shipyards, I might have made anywhere from six to nine dollars an hour, a week that is, and I would give that to my master and he would have the audacity to hand me back six cents out of nine dollars. six cents. A robber. A robber he was. And so it was very fortunate that I was on the weekends, had some free time and I was going to the camp meetings in Baltimore and I met my future wife, Anna Murray, and me I told her she was a free woman at the time.

She was the first of eight children to be born free. And so I told her my story about being in bondage and we made a pact that she would help me escape, and she helped me escape, and I made my way by train from Baltimore to Annapolis and then from Annapolis by ship to New York. And then once I arrive in New York, I'm in free land.

She's finding out what it means to be free and you're in free territory, but you can't be at this time solely comfortable because there are still bounty hunters, people who would want to take you back to bondage. And so even in New York, I couldn't trust anyone. There might be sympathizers who are trying to cash on on the purse from a bounty hunter. And so I had to be very careful and it wasn't until I made my way to New Bedford and myself and my wife, that we were living with Nathan and Polly Johnson that I finally started to feel somewhat comfortable about being free, well, free in free territory.

It wasn't until I had to go to England and Ireland that Julia Griffiths and the Richardson family in England raised the money to purchase my freedom. They negotiated across the big lake to my masters, \$733.13 would win my freedom and then I could come back to America. Well, they gave me a proposition. This is a rhetorical question to you all listening on this audience here. If you were given the proposition that, why even go back to America. They say it's the free land, but they have the institution of slavery. Stay here in England and live out your life. We'll send for your family. We'll help you buy a new house and land and you can live the rest of your life at a comfortable setting.

Well, what would you do? Freedom means that you're not free until all your people are free. And so I had left my brothers and sisters on the plantation, my aunts, Eliza, Perry, my Aunt Harriet. I was hoping that my grandmother would still be alive. And so I made the decision to come back to America and fight to free, not just my family, but whole millions of men and women in bondage. And I'm sure, I was really following in the footsteps of Reverend Henson. He had escaped and made his way to Canada. And so I had many examples to follow. It wasn't just Frederick Douglass.

Henson:

Well, I too understand what freedom means. Actually, freedom had always been an object of my ambition. I always wanted to be free, but I never dreamed of running away. So I tried to negotiate my freedom with Master Riley, Isaac Riley and

we settled on \$450. So I traveled back to Montgomery County because I was in Kentucky, from his brother's plantation in Kentucky for just that purpose. I had saved \$350 in cash because I was allowed to minister throughout that area. And I had made some money, \$350 in cash and then planned to work off the rest back in Kentucky.

But, and that's a big but, but when I got back to Kentucky, I learned the cruel trick played on me by the Riley brothers. So when I got back to Kentucky, I learned that the price had been increased for my freedom. Instead of I had saved 350, they say I needed 450 to be free, but when I got back, his brother said, the price for your freedom is 1000. Not 100, 1000. Well, as you can imagine, I was beside myself with rage and then paralyzed with despair. My dream of bliss was over. So I had made the hard decision to get myself and my family Charlotte and our four boys to freedom. I said I wouldn't run away, but by running away, I had two little boys at the time and I had been injured on both shoulders, basically paralyzed on both shoulders from protecting my master Isaac Riley in an incident.

And so my wife strapped the two boys on both sides of me with cloth. We journeyed from Kentucky with them on the sides and my other two sons with my wife from Kentucky. We made it all the way to Canada. And when I stepped off that boat, I hugged and kissed my family in turn and then I got down and rolled on the sandy shores. I was so happy. People may have thought I was a little crazy, but I was so happy and I made a promise that all could hear. That promise was I will use my freedom well. I will give and I have given my soul to God.

Douglass: Reverend Henson, I just wanted to say, sir, you learned as I did. I prayed for 20 years for my freedom. It wasn't until I prayed for my legs that I attained my freedom.

Henson: Yes.

Imani Haynes: On the topic of emancipation and your legacy, I want you all to share with us the life that you built after you were free and you all lived very long lives. So we cannot wait to hear all about everything you've accomplished. So Reverend Henson, can you get us started and share with us your legacy after emancipation?

Henson: Yeah, my legacy, I always say it didn't start in Canada, but let's just talk about once I arrived in Canada. There was not much time to frolic at this extraordinary moment of freedom. I was a stranger in a land and as a free man, I had to provide for my family. So soon I found work with the man, Mr. Hibbert, and it was he who helped me procure the first real home for my family, not sticks and living out in the field as we traveled for freedom, through freedom, not living with multiple other slaves, but I purchased a home for freedom. A few years after settling in that home I was able to improve my conditions for me and my family greatly. I set about to join our other colors who also escaped in the states, awakening in the sense of advantage that were on in our grasps. That was become independent proprietors and not just to be content with working for hire on the land of others.

And so I helped lead us to a region between Lake Charles County and Lake St. Clair and Detroit River. We settled on 200 acres, 200 acres in a town called Dawn. We did that in about 1842 and on that land, I'm so proud of this because we built a manual labor school. I saw Dawn as a place to elevate, to enjoy, to participation in the best blessings of civilization. After a time there where I had to taste the blessings of freedom, my mind reverted to those I was still grown in captivity. I

eventually led over 118 souls to freedom on what you call, Minty and Frederick, what we call the Underground Railroad. My work continued from there, years after in the work toward ending the bondage for all in the states and I spoke to the very thing through Europe and Canada. I shared my humble life through a story or a narrative published in 1849.

With those proceeds, I was able to liberate my brother John from bondage. As time went on, the work of freedom of Dawn was such that I exhibited at the world's great fair in London. I went to London, some of the best specimens of Black walnut lumber in hope it might lead to sales in England and profits for my school at Dawn. At the end of that exhibit, do you know, I received a bronze medal and I was entertained with the audience of Queen Victoria herself. Me, a former slave, was in the presence of a queen. And I'll pose that to you, my Queen, Harriet, how about your life?

Harriet Tubman: After I get my liberty, I help to free others, my family and others as conductor on Underground Railroad and I was in the Civil War. I lead all military raid for Colonel James Montgomery down South Carolina with United States Colored Troops, and I helps the women's with the suffrage. But I tell you, I always dream that one day, I have a hospital. A hospital to care for the sick and disabled. A home for the needy and neglected peoples of my race. For one glorious spring day, in the year 1896, they had 25 acre of land auctioned off next door to where I lived in New York. I figured that just about what I need. I takes what little piece of monies I've got, going on next door to buy the property to build my hospital. I was amongst all white folk.

When that auction be old, they called out for the high bidder. I stepped out, I say, "Harriet Tubman done bought this land." The people looked at me said, "How you expect you going to pay for this land, Auntie?" I tell them why, I'm home, ask the Lord Jesus about us right now. And I did that. And he say, hold steady onto that deed and you keep nursing the peoples in your home till you got enough to build your hospital.

Well, to a yes and yes, here come another glorious day, for the 23rd day of June in the year 1908, my hospital jubilee. We had parade, prayers, speeches, band were playing, people frolicking, everything. I could not take it all in. When they asked me for some word, I could hardly speak. Lord done been so good to me. I tell them, I did not take up this work for my own benefit. But for those of my race who need help. The work can now well started and I know God going to raise up others to take care of the future. And he did that, Frederick Douglass.

Douglass: That he has, that he has and I always ask the modern audience, what have you done to contribute to our society? We cannot live on the fame and fortune of our forefathers. We have to do our own work. You have done your work and you have done much of it well.

Harriet Tubman: I did it all well. What do you mean much?

Douglass: You did. You certainly did. And I cannot claim all the credit for the things I accomplished in my lifetime. In that time, many men said, "I am a self-made man." And I gave a speech on the self-made man. But even the self-made man with the hard work that he puts in, work, work, toil and work, needs the help of others, needs the help of strangers, lest he fall by the wayside. And so some of the things that I was able to accomplish with this hard work and with the help of others,

certainly I would not have started my newspaper, the North Star, not the help of the Richardson family who raised \$2,500 for me to start the newspaper. And I moved my family to Rochester and started the newspaper. And to my good fortune, Rochester and Seneca Falls was the epicenter of the new suffrage movement. I worked with those women for the suffrage movement. We decided to call it universal suffrage for the suffrage of men and women, Black men and women, Black women and white women all needed our rights. And of course, I wrote three narratives in my lifetime, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom and Life and Times of Frederick Douglass. As you might know, we didn't mention this, Harriet that we were invited to be on the raid of Harpers Ferry. Neither one of us went. You got to believe you were sitting. I was. And I declined to go. I told Captain Brown, this is the perfect steel trap. I don't think I will go. But he took 19 men with him. And you know the story of that. I hope they will read the story of John Brown. We were part of the Civil War. You were part of the Civil War. And I was too.

I lobbied Abraham Lincoln to add the Black soldier to the fight. When they objected, when his cabinet objected, when his generals objected, I said, if we were good enough to fight for Washington in the Revolutionary War, why would we not be good enough to fight for McLaw? The Black man fought for the founding of this country. The Black men and men of Massachusetts, the East European regiment. So why would we be not good enough to fight to save the union? And so once they finally agreed, then my sons, Charles and Lewis joined the 54th regiment. We went on a recruiting blitz across the country. I sent my son Frederick Junior down to the Mississippi Valley and he recruited soldiers down there. We recruited 900 soldiers for the 29th infantry division in Connecticut in New Jersey. And of course, we kept the press on Abraham Lincoln to sign an emancipation proclamation.

Now he and his wisdom, cut a fine line. There were, not just slave holders in the south, but slave holders in the north. And when you read the Emancipation Proclamation, he gives a pass to those in the north. He knew that if he took those slaves away from those border states like West Virginia, the 48 counties of West Virginia, Norfolk, even St. Bernard. You read the Emancipation Proclamation and you'll see that those people were given a pass for 100 days. And fortunately, the war was ended. Then we entered to reconstruction. And so I had a hand in reconstruction. Well, my first job in Washington DC was the recorder of deeds for Washington DC, me and my son Charles, worked in that office.

They nominated me as a US Marshal for the District of Columbia. They eventually convinced me to take over the President of the Freedman's Bank and Trust. I followed John Mercer Langston as the president of the Freedman's Bank and Trust. I followed him as the ambassador to the country of Haiti. And so I was very fortunate to be appointed to many political positions, although I never ran for political office, I'm not a politician. Well, I won't come to Washington DC and say one thing and then go to Maryland and say something else. I am for the 100% enfranchisement of the Black man in American society. And so these are just some of the things that we collectively were able to accomplish in the abolition of slavery and the betterment of our society.

Henson: Amen.

Imani Haynes: Well, on behalf of all of us, we thank you all for your bravery because without people like you, I don't know if I'd be here. So I just wanted to touch on the fact

that you all were Christians and your faith was a major part of the things that you all did. So my question would be, what did your faith as Christians mean to you and why was it so important?

Douglass:

Well, for me, certainly what I saw, and Harriet can testify to this, that slavery created a contradiction to those people who call themselves Christian. The slave holders of the South and many of their wicked allies in the north claim the Bible for slavery. Now if you can't read the Bible for yourself, if you have an overseer reading the Bible for you, then you may not know what the Bible says. You may not have a direct relationship with your savior. And this is the same true of the Constitution. If you cannot read it for yourself, you may think that the document is flawed and should be torn up and rewritten. So this is what I had to settle with as far as looking at the contradictions of slavery as opposed to Christianity and all those that call themselves Christian.

I was born into Christianity. I was introduced to Jesus Christ. But there were two distinct Christianities in America. And finally after I was able to read for myself the Bible, I understood that there was a true living God that protected not just the master but protected the slaves as well. And it did not demand that they received the lash and just in a docile, subservient attitude. That's from the Old Testament. And so I think one of the things that brought it to life, just not seeing the contradictions of the slave master who would be pious on Sunday and then whip a slave on Monday, but a great poem that I once heard, a Methodist minister read, and I'll leave this poem and then I will hand it over to someone who knows best. He preached many sermons, Reverend Henson.

But this poem, come saints and sinners hear me tell, how pious priests whip Jack and Nell, and women buy and children sell, and preach all sinners down to hell, and sing of heavenly union. They'll loudly talk of Christ's reward and bind his image with a cord and scold and swing the lash abhorred and sell their brother in the Lord to handcuff heavenly union. They'll raise tobacco, corn, and rye and drive and thief and cheat and lie and lay up treasures in the sky by making switch and cowskin fly in hopes of heavenly union. "Love not the world," the preacher said, and winked his eye, and shook his head, then seized on Tom, and Dick, and Ned, cut short their meat, and clothes, and bread, and still loved heavenly union. Another preacher whining spoke of one whose heart for sinners broke. He tied old Nanny to an oak, and drew the blood at every stroke, and prayed for heavenly union. All good from Jack another takes, and entertains their flirts and rakes. They dress as sleek as glossy snakes, and cram their mouths with sweetened cakes. And this goes down for union.

So I'm sure Reverend Henson would tell you to read the Bible before yourself and have a relationship with the Almighty God.

Henson:

And I would agree, I would agree with that. My closeness to God started with my mother. My mother was good to us and woman of deep piety, anxious above all things to touch our hearts with the sense of religion. How aware she acquired the knowledge of God or her acquaintance with the Lord's Prayer. Yes, a woman who couldn't read or write recited frequently, our father who are in heaven. She taught us to repeat that. On how she got that, I'm unable to say, but I thank her. So at 18, I asked the master to let me go to a sermon around the corner to at... What is that? Newport Mill.



It was there Brother Hensey, it was there, at 18 years old I learned that Jesus died for all of us, all of you listening, all of the slaves. All of all people. He died for all of us. The first text of the Bible that I ever heard came from Hebrew 2:9. The compassionate savior from whom I heard of loves me. He loves me with the faith of a mustard seed as explained by a savior was all, was all I needed. Religion was not so much knowledge as it was wisdom. Religion was not as much as knowledge as it was wisdom. And I would ask Ms. Harriet about that wisdom of the love of God.

Harriet Tubman: Y'all know, the Underground Railroad toward the Lord would kept sending me back to deliver his peoples from the land of bondage. When we come upon deep rivers to cross, he never let the water get above my chin, enraging wind, blinding snow. He never let me get the frostbite. With mass of men lying in wheat, what bounty offer for dead or alive, for the Lord would lead me in the night and he had in the day when weary, he sent the Underground Railroads to help us, to spirit us on to freedom. And with the bounty mens with guns and dogs hounding and tracking us, hoping to smell us when they couldn't see us, to the Lord but carried us on and we keep on moving with our fears. For we have the hand of the Lord gotten us to freedom just as long as he want to use me, I hold steady on to him all through my life.

Imani Haynes: My next question is about education. You all did not receive a formal education, but I know that the topic of education or educating yourself, learning to read, was very important to enslaved people and then people who are then freed. So Harriet, will you please share with us your views on the importance of education?

Harriet Tubman: Well I tell you, Frederick Douglass said, "Education, knowledge, be the path from slavery to freedom." And they say slavery be over when the civil war be over in the year 1865. But I have to tell all the children, slavery still right here. Slavery today be anything would keep you from doing and being all the you had to do and be. Slavery today be anything what own you. So you don't own your own self, but the Underground Railroad is here today too. Your Underground Railroad be education. You hear me? Education, the more you gets, the more free you stay. Freedom be the all important thing. Freedom give you choice. Education help you make the right one. And I'll say to all the mothers and father, grandmother, grandfather, auntie, uncle, teachers in the school house, just like I was conductor on the Underground Railroad to bring my peoples to freedom. You is the conductor now on the Underground Railroad education for these children. I want you to turn every child's face from the north star to the moon and sun. And I pray that you conductors on that Underground Railroad education would do like old Harriet do, never run your train off the track and never lose a pest. That's all right with you, that's all right with me.

Henson: It's all right.

Douglass: Amen. Amen, Ms. Tubman. I certainly said earlier you can be in mental bondage as well as physical bondage. And if you are, I would say to anyone in this modern era, if you are still being told when to work, where to work, for what wage to work, you might not be a slave of any master, physical master, but you might be a slave of society. And so what we want as far as our enfranchisement in American society, and this is what Reverend Henson was trying to do at Dawn, is to make sure the men could establish their own enterprise, become entrepreneurs, develop their own products and such, be paid a wage. And you understand that slavery is not an identity, it's just an unpaid occupation. You have no wage and so free yourself

from that identity. First of all, you're not a slave, you are an African or you're an American, that's your identity.

But education for me certainly changed my entire life and I was able to accomplish many things. And so I always said that it is easier to build strong children than repair broken men. Just as you said about the Underground Railroad, Harriet, the teachers are there to make sure the parents are sending their children to school, to build up strong children so they won't crush under the weight of society because they'll be strong and meet the challenges of the modern era, whatever they might be. And so the importance is here, of course, is that, well, I would best quote the great Mark Twain who said, "Don't let your schooling get in the way of your education." Learning is a lifelong process. If you don't have the books, go get the books. Learning does not end when the bell rings. They're still learning outside of the classroom. Reverend Henson and I use the Sabbath to teach our fellow men and women in bondage how to read.

We use the Bible for those purposes. We were holding Sabbath study and we were teaching, not just teaching them the Bible, we were teaching them also how to read the Bible for themselves and how to read other notices and placards and such. And so that's my charge to any child in the modern era, is to read both sides of the equation, read both arguments and make up your own intelligent mind. Then we can rest that there will be new leaders in the future and that the legacy of what we have established will move on and to help us make a more perfect union.

Henson:

Yes, education. Well, when I was young, I tried to learn how to read. I tried and Master Riley caught me and he said if I tried again, he would kill me. He said he would kill me if I tried to read. So I didn't learn to read until I was in my fifties. Once we were in Canada, I sent my oldest son, Tom to school and he learned to read very well. Well, Tom used to read to me, read the Bible to me every Sunday morning to get me ready to preach on Sunday, but one day, hurt me so bad, one day, he asked me a question about the Bible that I could not answer. Why? Because I didn't know how to read. So my son Tom, he offered to teach me to read and it took time and I did learn to read.

But that one day, though I have to say this, that one day when he told me, because I know Canada brought great things, but when my son knew how to read and he said, "Dad, I'll teach you how to read." After that, I couldn't preach that Sunday, Harriet. Henson, brother Henson. I couldn't preach that day. I went out in the fields and I got on my knees and I said, "Thank you God." Because I've helped my family. My son can read. And what a blessing. Education is important. Under Dawn Settlement, we built a manual labor school manual that taught all men, not just men, women, boys, girls, that they could gain knowledge and skills. I simply wanted them to have a better life than I had lived.

Imani Haynes:

Thank you. Thank you so much. My last and final question is, you all were involved in creating your own narratives. So my question, and I'll start with Ms. Tubman, my question is, why is it so important for your story to be written down? Why is it so important for your story to be told to future generations? And also what do you want people to get from your story?

Harriet Tubman:

The truth be told child, it was important for my story to be told because my peoples, my family needed help. And it was important to me to raise monies to care for the old folk. Our hoping that if my story be told, the monies from the book would help out my situation. Now, I never learned to read nor write. So therefore,

white woman was named Sarah Bradford. She was a woman who write the book about Harriet Tubman. I ain't know much of except a father or a friend of William Sue. He was a man would sell me the land where I make my home. I stayed with Ms. Sarah quite some time. I tell her many stories, and she ain't put them in the book. She call on you, Frederick Douglass, and she called on Lucretia Mott and she called on Thomas Garrett and other peoples. She want to make sure that the things I tell her in my stories is things I did and that the story were true.

Ain't that something? She could put a lot more stories in my book if she take me on my own word. But that's all right. The book, she named it, Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman. And that book provides relief for my family and it helped me to repay many of my debts. And then a year later when I need to provide for my family, I asked Ms. Sarah if she do another book and she did. And that one she named, Harriet, the Moses of Her People. Now, I know it's important. Pictures started down like you say, child, but it was more important for me at that time to take care of my people. That's why I want to write the book with the lady, Sarah Bradford and, and I'm mighty grateful to her for helping me by doing that. I'm mighty grateful and obliged.

Henson:

I too, like you Harriet, I had a narrative. At the time, my narrative impacted many when it was released. It also influenced the Ms. Harriet Beecher Stowe to base her Tom character on my life. Yep. I was the uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. The popularity of that book spread the word about my narrative, which allowed me to purchase my brother's freedom. My story may have been able to provide good for many, but it was most important that I want my life story to be for the cheering expectations of benefiting, not only the present, but many of the future generations of my race. Because if I can be born as a slave and meet queens, meet presidents, start a community, I want it to inspire others to know that they could do whatever they set their heart to with the help of God. Now Brother Frederick, I understand you have a narrative.

Douglass:

Indeed, indeed, brother Henson. I wrote three narratives. I wrote a little novella actually. Historical fiction certainly doesn't go over quite as well as I was reading certainly Harriet Beecher Stowe's recount of your life. I republished many of the passages of Uncle Tom's Cabin in my newspaper, the North Star Newspaper. But of course, eventually I was able to get a copy of your narrative on my show. When I received the letter from Sarah Bradford about Mrs. Tubman's narrative, I was really taken aback that I would be asked to endorse the great Harriet Tubman. Certainly, she was a person who I had a bright career as a speaker, as an orator, as a writer, and sometimes received as much as \$200 to make a speech and sell my books. And here and in front of audiences of the thousands, many times there were thousands in my audience.

And Harriet Tubman, her audience was the stars. The moon applauding her as she trotted through thickets and briars bringing men and women out of bondage. And so for me to endorse her book was just a humbling experience. But I'll tell you that the narrative is wholly important in the telling of our story. And it's important for the modern audience to continue to read the narratives and understand not just three of us, but many others who wrote their own narratives in our time. This narrative is important for the future. And that is because one of the things after the Civil War that I was trying to decide what do I do now after the Civil War, now that we have been emancipated, now that we have Jubilee, what is my role? What is my role in freedom? And that is to make sure, number one, that we're successful in freedom.

And that this narrative, this counter narrative, that the Confederates pose, that the South would rise again, would not flourish and perpetuate itself into the modern era. You see, after the Civil War, the narrative was such that, well, they had forgotten all the suffering of our people. They did not give us any credit for the accomplishments we made. And so I was so taken aback by this, I wrote a speech. I called those people who would change the narrative as the apostles of forgetfulness. The apostles of forgetfulness, that you would leave out the whole suffering of millions of men and women and the accomplishments and the contributions made to the founding of this country. And so that's why the narrative is important.

And all the writers and speakers of our time understood this. Even Mark Twain and so many others. Abraham Lincoln understood this narrative that you told the narrative in such that men and women of both sides could understand the argument. Let me share something from Mark Twain. He said, "I am the poet of the body. I am the poet of the soul, and I go with the slaves of the Earth equally with the masters. And I stand between the masters and the slaves entering into both so that both will understand me alike." We're telling a story that might bridge the gap between points of view between generations. And so that's why the narrative is important.

Kirkland:

We want to thank actors Millicent Sparks, Nathan Richardson and Kelvin Fowler for their work in making this conversation from the past come to life. We also want to thank Imani Haynes, who's the education program manager at the Josiah Henson Museum and Park, and also the moderator of this conversation. We also want to thank the Josiah Henson Museum and Park for graciously allowing us to use this audio.

**CITATION:**

Kirkland, Pamela, host. "Meeting of the Minds: Josiah Henson, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass in Conversation." *Still Paying The Price*, LWC Studios. July 24, 2023. StillPayingThePricePod.com.

Produced by

