



## The Remarkable Journey of Josiah Henson

In this episode, Mark Thorne, the Historic Site Manager for the [Josiah Henson Museum and Park](#), explores the life and journey of Reverend Josiah Henson, a remarkable figure in Black history who emerged as one of the great abolitionists of his era. Henson, a contemporary of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, played a significant role in freeing numerous enslaved individuals. Thorne discusses Henson's experiences as an enslaved person on a plantation in Maryland, his struggles to gain freedom, and the challenges he faced along the way. Despite setbacks and betrayals, Henson's unwavering faith and determination led him to fight for his

family's freedom all the way to Canada. Reported by Juleyka Lantigua.

---

**Pamela Kirkland:** I'm Pamela Kirkland, a reporter and producer. The conversation around reparations can seem both overwhelming and contradictory. On one hand, it's hard to imagine how our country could ever fully atone for the centuries of injustice and atrocities committed against Black and brown citizens. On the other hand, there's the belief that reparations are not only achievable, but essential to healing and moving forward. What we know is that reparations are owed to the descendants of the enslaved, and frankly, the bill is past due.

**Juleyka Lantigua:** Hi everybody, this is Juleyka Lantigua. I'm the founder of [LWC Studios](#) and the creator of this series, and I just wanted to come in and share a little bit of why you are going to learn so much about Josiah Henson. It all started because about a year and a half ago, in February 2022, I learned that my house, where I had lived for eight years, was built on a former plantation. And that from the former plantation had emerged one of the great abolitionists of the era, and his name was Josiah Hanson. If you want to hear all about how that all went down, you can listen to the mini episode called, My House Was Built on a Former Plantation.

But for this episode, I went in to talk to Mark Thorne, who is the director of the Josiah Henson Museum in Rockville, Maryland. Josiah Henson was a fascinating figure in history. His contemporaries included Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. These were people who championed his work. He also helped to free a large number of formerly enslaved folks, and he literally has a trail that runs through the middle of the US, all the way to Canada. In a separate episode, we also had the opportunity to interview one of his descendants who is still very much carrying on his legacy of community work and community advancement. So I hope you enjoy this interview and the interview with Mia Anderson. Thanks for listening.

Thorne: My name is Mark Thorne. I'm a Historic Site Manager for [Josiah Henson Museum and Park](#).

Lantigua: And we're inside the museum, which Mark came to just for this interview. So we're so grateful. Why is this museum here?

Thorne: Well, the reason why we are here is because this is where it actually happened. This is the site where Josiah Henson was enslaved. Our part sits on about four acres of the 560 acre plantation that existed here when Josiah Henson came to this property as an enslaved boy. Now think about it, 560 acres. It's 423 football fields. So it was a massive, massive plantation. When Josiah Henson was brought to this plantation where he worked as all of the other enslaved until he kind of stuck out a little and eventually became the overseer for this plantation.

He initially was born down in southern Maryland, Port Tobacco, Maryland, and his master there, passed away. And when he did, the family was sold. And when they were initially sold, he was separated from his mother. So when he was separated from his mother, he was about four or five years old, and he became ill, very ill. And the Rileys that lived here, made a deal with the person that had purchased Josiah Henson and said, "You know what? I'll take him in exchange for some horseshoe work, and if he pans out, great, if he passes away, small risk." So this magnificent man was worth the value to his enslavers of a horseshoe fees. The only way they thought they could recoup their investment, was for his mother to kind of nurture and nurse him back to help, which she did.

Lantigua: So you said that his whole family was separated. How many siblings did he have? Do we know what happened to them?

Thorne: So they were all enslaved and went to different places. He and his mother came here. I can tell you that part of his journey to become a writer or to share his story, was to free his one brother that was still enslaved. So that was what inspired him to write his narrative in 1849, was to free that one brother that was still enslaved, and he was able to eventually free that brother.

Lantigua: All right, so let's talk about how he gained his freedom.

Thorne: We've kind of jumped over one of those things that really is a cornerstone of his life. It's when he was asked by Isaac Riley, the slave master at this plantation, to transport the enslaved here, to his brother's plantation in Kentucky. Now, if you've driven to Kentucky from Maryland, you know you go through a lot of states and a lot of places. He crossed Ohio, which was a free state, and he was tempted to free everybody, but he didn't, because as he said in his narrative, he had promised that man, that he would deliver his property. And Josiah, being a strong man of faith, believed that if he made a promise that he had to keep it.

Even though he didn't support slavery and the institution that he was in, he knew that he had to do that. And also, if they self emancipated at that time or freed themselves, they would still be wanted.

So he was like, "I want to buy my freedom. I want to do it the right way." So he went to Kentucky, and there once again, he had immediately impressed. So he became an overseer there. The other Riley, George Riley, decided, you know, "He's a great guy." So when Josiah came and said, "Hey, I want to go visit your brother, and say hello. Can I?" He said, "Sure," and gave him a slave pass. So that written piece of paper allowed Josiah to have his first taste of freedom, because when he traveled back from Kentucky back here to Maryland, he had the slave pass so he could stay anywhere that a free Black man could go. He got ordained, he was preaching along the way. He earned money. When he showed up at this plantation, he had a nice suit, a nice horse. He was like, "I'm here now."

The minute Isaac Riley saw him and said, "Get down off that horse," he literally knocked him down off his high horse and told him, "Go sleep in that kitchen," which was considered the dirtiest place on the plantation. He then talked to Isaac Riley and said, "Look, I want to buy my freedom." And he said, "Okay, you can do it." So Josiah gave him the money, the horse, the clothes, and said, "I'm going to buy my freedom." He said, "Well, I'm going to give you your freedom papers and main mission papers."

So he gave him his main mission papers and said, "You know I'm going to do you a favor. I'm going to seal them up. Don't you let anybody get hold of them because they'll try to trick you and steal it from you." So Josiah thought he had this deal, that he could preach and earn a little bit of money, to pay off his debt and buy his freedom. When he got home, back to Kentucky, he discovered, the news had beat him home. The news about the price and this deal had beat him home. When he got home, his wife said, "Well, how are you going to pay that \$650?" He said, "What?"

He had been bamboozled, tricked, and the Rileys never saw those documents again, because he knew that that would've just sealed his fate even more. So when he comes back, the other Riley asked for these papers. He just said like, "I must have lost them. Don't know where they're at," because supposedly he didn't know the pretense that why Josiah wanted to come see his brother. So they were like okay. You know what we're gonna eventually they said, "We're gonna liquidate him," because the Riley brothers were both starting to fight over Josiah. Isaac wanted him back. George was saying, "No, he's worked here. He is doing a good job. How about we liquidate him, split the money?"

So at that point in time, they said, "Josiah, I want you to go with us to New Orleans. We're going to sell some goods." But Josiah was smarter than that. He knew, "Well, I am the goods." And he got on the boat with George Riley's son. They went down the Mississippi going down to New Orleans, and one fateful night, Josiah decided, "You know, it's over. I'm just going to kill all these guys on this boat. I'm gonna head to the hills and I'm gonna be free. It's going down

tonight." He had the ax in hand, and he said, "God spoke to him and told him, 'Don't do it. Don't do it. What kind of man are you? A man of faith, don't do it.'" And I'm sure Josiah questioned the big guy upstairs, the big guy all upstairs and said, "Okay, I've got faith." So he dropped the ax and didn't kill them. Well, strange as it is, the next day, the Riley son got sick. The only person that could nurse him back to health was Josiah Henson.

That saved Josiah's life. Josiah was not sold down south. He wasn't sold when they got to New Orleans, because he had to nurse the Riley back to health. So they come back, he makes it back to the plantation, and he thought, "My future is clear. I saved this Riley. They're going to love me." But he was a moral man, in a immoral system, because when he got back thinking, "I have won these people over," their reaction was, "Oh, he's worth more." So that's when he said, "Yeah, I'm going to have to be the one to self emancipate." So at that point in time, he started preparing his family for the journey to freedom.

The plan was to take his family with him, but the plan wasn't received well by his wife. She was not supportive of that because of the risk, if you're caught. It's a risk because you don't know what's out there. And that's one of the reasons why the idea of enslaved reading, if you don't know what's beyond the boundaries of this plantation, it's frightening. It's the fear of the unknown. And if you know this plantation, you spent your entire life on this plantation, you've been fed by that man, you've been clothed by that man, and for once, you're going to be outside of his domain, what is gonna happen?

So he eventually convinced his wife, Josiah had been injured when he was younger, and he couldn't lift his arms above his shoulders. But he had four children, two younger ones, he had to figure out how they were going to be along with them. So his wife sewed together some bags, and he would practice walking around the house with the two smallest kids in these bags so he could prepare himself and the kids for walking silent as they made their way through the woods to freedom.

So eventually the time came and they left. So it is a huge journey. Their journey was very similar to the journey of many that escaped along the Underground Railroad. So he did have help from abolitionists. He did have help from people along the way. He did have help from indigenous people. He did have help from a captain of a ship that actually sailed them from the US across the lake to Canada. So there were people that were actively helping and those that were passively helping. When he left Kentucky, he had already met people in Ohio. He was coming from Maryland, and then when he was going back to Maryland. So he had already established some relationships, but not along the entire route. So he had to — you know there were some tough times, there were for him and his family as they made their way to freedom.

Lantigua:

Tell me about his brother.

Thorne: He met a publisher, and the publisher decided to have Josiah dictate his story, and he suggested, "Josiah, your story is incredible. Maybe we can raise some money to free your brother." And he did. And initially when he published the book, it had some resonance with people and there were some sales, but the big sale was the sale to Harriet Beecher Stowe. When she read his book, she was so inspired that she wrote his life as the basis for her character, Tom. And then she published it and the pro-slavery movement started to say, "Well, she didn't get this stuff. This is not how we treat our enslaved." And Harriet Beecher Stowe said, "Yeah, I know for a fact because I've used the narratives from people that were enslaved." She listed Josiah Henson as the real Uncle Tom, and in her second book, the Key to [Uncle Tom's Cabin](#), and once that came out, the sales of his book started to just, just go, go, go.

And so those funds are the funds that allowed him to purchase his brother's freedom. And his brother joined him in Canada. And then once emancipation took place, the brother actually came back to the states. Josiah stayed in Canada. This portrait that you see here was painted and given to us by one of the descendants. Now, what's incredible about this portrait is, the descendant that donated this, had never been to our site, never seen this wall, never seen the museum or anything. And when he unveiled it, it was right here. We unveiled it and we were like, "Oh, it's perfect. It looks like it was commissioned for this site."

So I mentioned him. But we also hosted the Henson family here for their family reunion this past summer. We had about 90 people. They had an old-fashioned family reunion with barbecue and horseshoes, good music. They took over the place and we loved it. And as a matter of fact, members of the Henson family are on our advisory board, but we also had members of the Riley family on our advisory board.

Lantigua: Okay, tell me about it.

Thorne: Yeah, yeah. So the Riley family, they are, people often say, "You've got to have a protagonist and an antagonist, that's when you look at a story," But their family, the Riley family, they've been very supportive of the museum, how we tell the story.

Lantigua: Do they still own any of...

Thorne: No. What's interesting is that the only artifacts, antiques rather, that we have in the house, came from the Riley family. They donated Isaac Riley's desk and his chair. Actually the week of the Henson family reunion, one of the Riley family members from Kentucky happened to be in town, and she came and toured. I opened up one day that week, just for her and toured with her, and she had a blast and bought arms full of stuff. And is trying to find ways to raise funds in Kentucky, sent to us, to support our museum.

Lantigua: So, tell me how we should understand Josiah Henson's story in this context, how this country came to be?

Thorne: Everyone says, "You don't know your history. You don't know where you come from. You don't know where you're going." And this helps to tell the story of slavery here in Maryland and more importantly in Montgomery County. Many people that come to the museum, the first question is, "There was slavery in Montgomery County? My house is on a plantation?" "Yes." And so people don't understand how pervasive slavery was in this country. They think of *Gone With the Wind*. They think of only a big house with columns, with someone drinking a mint julep on the second floor porch. But it existed, right, all over the place. And it's not just in the south, it existed in the north originally. So it existed everywhere in this country. So people, I tell some of my guests, "Well, if your house isn't on this plantation, it was probably on the neighboring plantation."

I don't say that to people, for them to feel bad. If you don't accept that slavery was the economic force that drove this country, the economic force that started building wealth, that still exists in families or the lack of wealth that still exists in families back then, you don't understand how hard we have to work to get everyone on the equal playing field or as close to it as possible.

It's not just that my kids and my neighbor's kids might be two years behind them, they might be 60 or 200 years behind them, because their family has had wealth that much longer. And once again, it's not to antagonize or to villainize people, but the more you know, the more you can improve the situation. And that's why this museum is important. Josiah Henson in Canada, he already has a postage stamp in Canada. He's well known in Canada, but not here as much in the US. Why? Because he remained a Canadian citizen after he gained his freedom. And also, there was an effort by pro-slavery forces to tear down Josiah Henson and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because of the success of the book.

Lantigua: What does Josiah's story tell us about, who is responsible, who has the power, who has the responsibility to make change happen?

Thorne: So the narrative of the story was changed primarily because pro-slavery forces, right? So these pro-slavery forces, they recognized immediately that the power of the book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, would have. And they decided we got to do something. So they started propaganda to tear down that book, to discredit the author, to discredit the book. That was the first step. The second step was the book wasn't copywritten, and there was no internet, there was no television. Not everyone could read. So the best way for people to experience literature was through performances and plays. Well, if you don't have a copyright on something and I'm a let's say pro-slavery producer, I can write a story that has a different narrative than the one of the original story and present it at *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. And I can change the characteristics of *Uncle Tom* from someone that's strong, intelligent, faithful, and I can change them to all of those negative stereotypes.

And people will believe it, because they haven't read the book. And I'm going to just assume that it's true to the story. And because of the way African Americans were portrayed in their book and the enslaved in the book, when you think of the imagery, you think of Birth of a Nation, which is very negative, toward the Black race. That's part of how that narrative was changed. And once it starts, it's kind of like urban legend. You don't know why, I don't want to read that book. I shouldn't read it. Your grandma's, grandma's grandma told her, "Don't read that book, it's bad," because maybe white man at the store told her, "It's a bad book," or somewhere along her life, that she was told, "It's a bad book." There are tons of people that come here, that never read the book. They don't know why. They just veered away from it.

And that's a result of the work of that propaganda of it being a bad book. It is not a bad book. It was the second most popular book to the Bible when it came out. But once again, if you continue to tell people it's bad, stay away from it, ban it, make it illegal for people to have it. All of which happened, and I can give you my personal experience, there were times when this museum was under development, when we would go out to do outreach, to drum up interest, support for this museum, there were people that when we told them that the museum was about Josiah Henson, the real Uncle Tom, that when I would say that, there were people that would turn their back to me and walk away, people that I was in the midst of engaging in a conversation, would turn their back and walk away, because that term is offensive.

And that's part of the legacy that we are working on trying to destroy, dispel, disappear, or whatever words that fits the occasion. We want to put him on that Maryland Mount Rushmore of those that impacted people. You've got Harriet, you've got Frederick Douglass, and Josiah should be right there beside those two. So Frederick Douglass actually wrote a letter of introduction for Josiah Henson for him to meet Rutherford B. Hayes.

Lantigua: Okay, tell me about that.

Thorne: So Josiah wanted to visit the White House. He wanted to meet the president. Because at that time, Josiah Henson was kind of a celebrity. He had met Queen Victoria. He had been to the World's Fair. He was doing speaking engagements, so he had to get an invitation and Frederick Douglass said, "Okay." He knew of his accomplishments and he was willing to do that.

Lantigua: Besides learning about him and besides understanding his proper context, how else can we honor Josiah Henson as people who are now trying to become really aware of what people like him endure so that we could have the life that we have?

Thorne: I love the word disciples. I look for disciples, not people that just agree with what we do here, like what we do here, support what we do here, you need to go out and actively tell people what we do. Being active in your efforts, really speaks to how much you really believe in a cause. So that's one. Reading his

narrative and not just his 1849 narrative. I tell my guests all the time, "The 1849, which was his first narrative that he dictated, it's great to read that one. But make sure you find time to read the 1881 edition because he's grown as a man. He wrote that himself. He had different perspective. He had had his taste of celebrity."

When I read that one, I told one of my colleagues, I was like, "He was a dude." Because in that one, he could share parts of his life that really could resonate to someone in a different way. He dealt with someone claiming that he wasn't who he was or things that we can relate to, identity theft. He had such a full life. He helped to recruit people to come down to fight in the Civil War on the side of the north. He fought for independence of Canada. He was that dude. And that's why I do what I do here. And that's why my team, we're passionate about this. We want him to have a reputation like Frederick Douglass. We want him to be the next Frederick Douglass.

Pamela Kirkland:

Special thanks to Mark Thorne and the entire staff at the Josiah Henson Museum and Park. This podcast is meant to be enjoyed in an order that makes the most sense for our listeners. Choose your reparations journey and keep the conversation going. For more information, all episodes and transcripts, visit [stillpayingthepricepod.com](http://stillpayingthepricepod.com). This is an open-source podcast. We encourage you to use our episodes and supporting materials in your classrooms, organizations, and anywhere they can make an impact. You may rebroadcast parts of or entire episodes of without permission, just please, drop us a line so we can keep track.

Still Paying the Price is made possible by a grant from the MacArthur Foundation and is an original production of LWC Studios. Juleyka Lantigua is the show's creator and executive producer. I'm Pamela Kirkland, the series co-editor. Kojin Tashiro is our sound designer and mixed this episode. Paulina Velasco is our managing editor. Michelle Baker is our associate producer. Amanda DeJesus is our production intern. Lindsay Hood is our fact-checker. Thank you for listening.

**CITATION:**

Lantigua, Juleyka, reporter. "The Remarkable Journey of Josiah Henson" *Still Paying The Price*, LWC Studios., July 24, 2023. [StillPayingThePricePod.com](http://StillPayingThePricePod.com).



Produced by

