

## Unboxing Henry “Box” Brown

### Overview

On March 23, 1849, Henry Brown began one of the most dramatic escapes from slavery in American history. In this lesson plan, students will learn about the institution of slavery by examining the life and experiences of Henry “Box” Brown, focusing on his innovative escape when mailing himself from a slave state to a free state. Through participation in activities such as class discussion, reading excerpts of *The Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*, and the creation of their own art and dramatic presentation based on Henry’s life and experiences, students will learn about the complexities of slavery and freedom in the 1800s.

### Grade

8

### North Carolina Essential Standards for 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Social Studies

- 8.H.1.1 - Construct charts, graphs, and historical narratives to explain particular events or issues.
- 8.H.1.2 - Summarize the literal meaning of historical documents in order to establish context.
- 8.H.1.3 - Use primary and secondary sources to interpret various historical perspectives.
- 8.H.1.4 - Use historical inquiry to evaluate the validity of sources used to construct historical narratives (e.g. formulate historical questions, gather data from a variety of sources, evaluate and interpret data and support interpretations with historical evidence).
- 8.H.1.5 - Analyze the relationship between historical context and decision-making.
- 8.H.2.1 - Explain the impact of economic, political, social, and military conflicts (e.g. war, slavery, states’ rights and citizenship and immigration policies) on the development of North Carolina and the United States.
- 8.C.1.3 - Summarize the contributions of particular groups to the development of North Carolina and the United States (e.g. women, religious groups, and ethnic minorities such as American Indians, African Americans, and European immigrants).
- 8.C&G.1.4 - Analyze access to democratic rights and freedoms among various groups in North Carolina and the United States (e.g. enslaved people, women, wage earners, landless farmers, American Indians, African Americans and other ethnic groups).

### Materials

- A wooden or cardboard box that is two feet/eight inches deep, two feet wide, and three feet long
- Video clip of Mike Wiley’s *One Noble Journey* (5 minutes in length):  
<http://www.craftingfreedom.org/brown/video.php>
- Excerpts from *The Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*, attached
  - The full narrative is available at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brownbox/brownbox.html>
- Optional: *The Great Escape From Slavery of Ellen and William Craft*, reading attached
- Optional resource: *One Noble Journey*, by Mike Wiley Productions -  
[http://mikewileyproductions.com/play\\_journey.html](http://mikewileyproductions.com/play_journey.html)

- Schools can arrange for artist Mike Wiley to visit and perform his one man show about Henry “Box” Brown. (The clip noted above is a sample from this show.) His live theatrical pieces inspire audiences to examine America’s racial history, teach the lessons of the past and encourage the application of these truths to the present.

### Essential Questions

- What various cruelties and injustices did enslaved people experience?
- Despite the situation they were forced into and the difficulties they experienced, in what ways did enslaved people remain resilient?
- Who was Henry “Box” Brown and what was his experience like as an enslaved man?
- How did Henry “Box” Brown escape slavery and what was he risking by doing so?
- What lessons can we learn from Henry “Box” Brown’s life story?

### Duration

1 class period for lesson; additional time will be needed for completion and performance of final project

### Preparation

- Students should have a basic understanding regarding slavery. For lesson plans teaching on the subject of slavery, go here: <http://database.civics.unc.edu/lesson/?s=&course=8th-grade-social-studies&lesson-topic=slavery>
- Before teaching this lesson, find or create a box that is the same size (or as close as possible in size) as that used by Henry Brown to escape. The exact measurements of Henry’s box were two feet/eight inches deep, two feet wide, and three feet long.
- While slavery can be a sensitive topic to discuss with students, it is important for students to explore such history to ensure they have a comprehensive understanding of America’s past. Prepare students in advance that they will encounter racist ideas and language when examining such history. To ensure students explore this material effectively and safely, teachers must have established a safe classroom community with clear expectations of respect, tolerance, open-mindedness, and civil conversation. See the Consortium’s “Activities” section of the Database of K-12 Resources for ideas and activities for creating such a foundation.

### Procedure

#### Warm Up: Imagining 24 Hours in a Box

1. Before students enter the room, place the box (see Preparation) at the front or in the center of the room, where all students can view it. (At this point, do not discuss the box with students.) Have the following prompt displayed for students to complete upon entering the room:
  - Imagine you will be traveling for 24 hours. What will you need within that amount of time? What would you pack? Create a list and be prepared to share this list with classmates.
2. After students have had 4 minutes to jot down a list, ask the class to share some of what they listed, and discuss why they chose these things. (Why do they need each item? i.e., a necessity, for comfort and/or security, entertainment, etc.? What ensures they have a comfortable trip when traveling?)

3. Next, turn students' attention to the box. Ask them to estimate its size, as well as whether everything they would want to take on their trip would fit in the box. Next, ask students whether they themselves would fit in the box (with or without all of their travel items.) Discuss:
  - How long do you think you could remain in this box comfortably?
  - Imagine that your trip is taking place in this box. How do you imagine it would feel to be in such a small space for a long time? Is there anywhere you would so love to go that you would be willing to travel there cooped up in this box? Explain.
    - Invite volunteers to get into the box and discuss the comfort level of being in there.

### **Who Was Henry "Box" Brown?**

4. Explain to students that in today's lesson, they are going to be learning about a man who actually stayed in a box this exact size for 27 hours! Explain to students that in 1849, Henry Brown mailed himself from Richmond, VA to Pennsylvania, a total of 275 miles that took over a day to travel.  
Ask:
  - Does anyone already know anything about Henry Brown?
  - Consider the year this took place, 1849. What was American society like at this time? Do you have any predictions as to why Henry may have done this? (It is possible a student will predict that Henry was enslaved and using the mail to escape.)
5. Tell students that Henry Brown was an enslaved 33-year-old living in Richmond, VA. Desperate to escape to freedom, Henry devised an ambitious plan. He had a sympathetic white friend, shoemaker Samuel Smith, nail him into a box and ship him to the free state of Pennsylvania from Richmond, a distance of about 275 miles. It was a tight fit for Henry, who was 5 feet 10 inches and more than 200 pounds (likely much larger than any student volunteer who got into the box in the classroom.) There were tiny holes within the box so he could breathe. Even though the box was marked "This side up with care," he spent some of the time upside down and was unable to shift his position for fear it might attract attention. The trip would take 27 hours in sum.
  - Ask any volunteers who climbed into the box earlier how they imagine it would feel to remain in there for that long and under such circumstances.
6. Next, to further solicit student interest, play the 5 minute clip at <http://www.craftingfreedom.org/brown/video.php>, which is a clip of actor Mike Wiley portraying Henry "Box" Brown as he plans and begins his trip. Discuss:
  - We sometimes forget that enslaved people were unable to manage their own time – they were always accounted for. How did Henry manage to get time away from his duties?
  - What stressful and uncomfortable circumstances of the journey were highlighted in this clip?
  - What do you think happened to Henry?

➤ **Teacher note:** This video is a clip of Mike Wiley's production of "One Noble Journey," an engaging and educational one man show regarding the life of Henry "Box" Brown. For more information, including details regarding how to arrange a presentation of "One Noble Journey" at your school, go to <http://mikewileyproductions.com/>
7. Tell students they will learn more about Henry's journey, as well as what happened in the end, by reading the handout you provide. Pass out the attached reading and corresponding questions.

(Students can read individually or in reading partners.) After students have read and completed the questions, discuss as a class:

- Henry was enslaved in Virginia for his entire 33 years of life. What do you imagine would have been difficult about this?
- When Henry was sent to Richmond, what happened to his parents and siblings? What do you imagine this would have been like?
  - Discuss with students that when studying slavery, we often focus on the terrible aspects such as the physical treatment of those enslaved. Equally excruciating was the emotional turmoil enslaved people faced, such as having their families split apart.
  - Point out to students that while we can try to empathize with Henry and other enslaved people who dealt with such, it is impossible to really know what enslavement would have been like, as well as the pain of being split from your family in this way.
- What do you think of Henry's plan? How would you characterize Henry based on his idea and its execution? (i.e., brave, creative, intelligent, desperate, etc.)
- Think back to the list of items you noted that you would bring on a 24 hour journey. What was Henry able to bring with him in the box? How does this compare with what you wanted to bring when traveling for a comparable amount of time?
- What do you imagine was going through Henry's head as he climbed into the box and began this journey?
- What do you imagine was most difficult about his journey? (Encourage students to try and imagine the reality of being locked in a dark, small box for so long, with barely any food and water, no access to a restroom, and nothing to occupy your mind other than your own thoughts and worries.)
- What do you think that Henry was most worried about throughout the journey?
- What was Henry risking by doing this? (i.e., overheating, smothering, claustrophobia, being discovered and subsequently punished, etc.)
- Why do you think he was willing to face such risks? What might this tell you about the institution of slavery?
- How do you think Henry felt when arriving at the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Office? (Ensure students consider the range of emotions possible. While he likely felt relief and joy, he would also have been exhausted, as well as fearful of being caught, etc.)
- How did Henry spend his time once free?
- Do you think people who escaped enslavement ever felt true peace? Why or why not?
- Do you have any additional questions regarding Henry "Box" Brown?

### **Creating a Panorama of Henry "Box" Brown's Life**

8. As the article mentioned, once Henry "Box" Brown escaped from slavery, for some time he earned a living through public presentations. Give students some additional information about Henry's panorama, which he titled *Mirror of Slavery*:
  - The moving panorama was an extremely popular form of entertainment in the mid-19th century. It consisted of huge canvases that were sewn together and displayed on vertical spool. The paintings could then be scrolled in front of an audience, revealing a sequence of scenes.
9. Pass out the attached assignment sheet and explain to students that in groups, they are going to be creating a panorama of their own based on Henry "Box" Brown's narrative, *Narrative of the Life of*

*Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*. In addition, students will create a short 3-4 minute performance to accompany the panorama that they will present to the class. Go over the assignment in detail, answer any questions and provide each group with one of the attached excerpts. Let students know in advance that they will encounter misspellings and other grammatical mistakes throughout the excerpts. Also let students know that they may encounter racial slurs in their excerpts, or read about situations which they find upsetting.

10. When discussing the performance aspect of the assignment, refer students back to the clip of actor Mike Wiley portraying Henry “Box” Brown that they previously watched. Ask students to discuss the techniques the actor used to effectively portray Henry “Box” Brown and interest the viewer in his story.

➤ *Teacher notes:*

- Teachers should determine beforehand whether to assign groups or allow students to choose. Teachers should also determine how much class time and homework time to provide for completion of this project.
- Teachers may want to provide large sheets of bulletin board paper to each group on which to create their panorama. Ideally, each group will use the same medium and create a panorama of the same size, which will make the display of the final products more cohesive.

11. Consider what space within the school will be most conducive to the presentations. Ideally, students will hang their panoramas along a wall with open space in front (i.e., the back wall of a theatre, a wall in the library or cafeteria, etc.). They should be hung in consecutive order based on the excerpt students were assigned. Performances would then take place in front of the panorama. On the due date of the project, have students hang their panoramas then go over the expectations for respectful audience members. Students should perform in consecutive order, based on which excerpt they were assigned. Instruct students to take notes throughout each presentation by creating a chart such as the following and filling it in:

Group #	What I learned about Henry Box Brown	What I learned about slavery

After each presentation, provide a few minutes for audience feedback in which students discuss what they learned about Henry and slavery. Teachers should use this time to point out any additional information students should know and correct any misconceptions if present.

12. After all students have presented, culminate with a discussion:
- Of everything that Henry experienced throughout his life, what do you think would have been most difficult? How do you think he found the strength to carry on with his life?
  - Based on Henry’s experiences, his means of escaping, and how he spent his time once free, what words would you use to describe him?
    - Discuss with students how when studying slavery, we sometimes have the misconception that those enslaved were passive beings who accepted all that was dealt to them, from

harsh punishment to cruel restrictions. It is important to note that in actuality, those enslaved were resilient in many ways, some by making the risky choice to run away. In addition, it is important to acknowledge the skills that enslaved people possessed and the lives they maintained despite the unjust situation they were forced into.

- What lessons can we learn from Henry’s life story?
- In the preface to Henry Brown’s slave narrative, Charles Stearns writes, “Here is the plain narrative of our friend, and is it asking too much of you, whose sympathies may be aroused by the recital which follows, to continue to peruse these pages until the cause of all his suffering is depicted before you, and your duty is pointed out?” What “duty” is he speaking of? Are there current stories of human suffering that motivate you to act on behalf of another?

### **Additional Activities**

- Have students examine the story of Ellen and William Craft, who passing as a white man traveling with his servant, fled their masters in a thrilling tale of deception and intrigue. See the attached article, *The Great Escape From Slavery of Ellen and William Craft*.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Henry "Box" Brown

Henry Brown was born into slavery in 1815 in Louisa County, Virginia at the Hermitage Plantation. Unlike many slaves who knew neither their parents nor their siblings, Brown spent his early years with his parents, his four sisters and three brothers, all of whom were enslaved to John Barret, a former mayor of Richmond. After Barret's death on June 9, 1830, Brown was separated from his family and sent to Richmond to work in the tobacco factory of Barret's son, William Barret, whose property he became. Brown's brothers and sisters were sent to various plantations, except for his sister Martha, who, according to Brown, was kept by William Barret as his mistress.



In 1836, Brown married an enslaved woman named Nancy from a nearby plantation. Together they had three children. The family joined the First African Baptist Church, where Henry sang in the church's choir. He had become a skilled tobacco worker and earned enough money through overwork to set up his family in a rented house. Then, in August 1848, Nancy Brown's master sold her and their three children to another master in North Carolina. At the time, she was pregnant with a fourth child.

After mourning his loss for several months, Brown resolved to escape from slavery and conceived an unusual method. Through James Caesar Anthony Smith, a free black and fellow member of the church choir, he contacted Samuel Alexander Smith, a white shoemaker and sometimes gambler, who agreed for a price to help Brown escape. (Ironically, Samuel Smith himself owned slaves.) The three men rejected several ideas before Brown had the inspiration to be shipped in a box by rail from Richmond to Philadelphia. Samuel Smith then contacted James Miller McKim, a Philadelphia leader of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society who was involved in Underground Railroad activities, and arranged for McKim to receive the package.

On March 23, 1849, the Smiths sealed Brown into a small wooden box that measured three feet long, two and one-half feet deep, and two feet wide. (Brown was five feet eight inches, and 200 pounds.) The shipping fee was \$84. There were tiny holes within the box so Henry could breathe and he packed a small amount of water and biscuits. Even though the box was marked "This side up with care," Brown was turned head down in the box for several hours on the steamboat transfer up the Potomac River and nearly died. At other transfers the box was roughly handled, but he endured silently. He later wrote that he "was resolved to conquer or die," even as "I felt my eyes swelling as if they would burst from their sockets; and the veins on my temples were dreadfully distended with pressure of blood upon my head."

After the parcel finally arrived in Philadelphia early on March 24, McKim took delivery at the office of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, where the box was opened with great trepidation. After twenty-seven hours' confinement, Brown emerged, alive and free. "I had risen as it were from the dead," Brown wrote.

Henry Brown survived his journey and became a well-known abolitionist speaker and performer for the Anti-Slavery Society. He was bestowed the nickname of "Box" at a Boston antislavery convention in May 1849, and thereafter used the name Henry Box Brown. In 1851, he wrote his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*. Brown traveled throughout free states performing with a panoramic display, but eventually was forced to move to England after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. Brown remarried while in England, and continued to perform and spread his anti-slavery message. Interestingly, Brown later lost the support of the abolitionist community, notably Frederick Douglass, who wished Brown had kept quiet about his escape so that more slaves could have escaped using similar means.

Brown's date and place of death are unknown, but his legacy as a symbol of the Underground Railroad and enslaved African Americans' thirst for freedom is secure.

Sources: <http://www.greatblacksinwax.org/Exhibits/Henry%20Box%20Brown.htm>  
[http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Brown\\_Henry\\_Box\\_ca\\_1815#start\\_entry](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Brown_Henry_Box_ca_1815#start_entry)

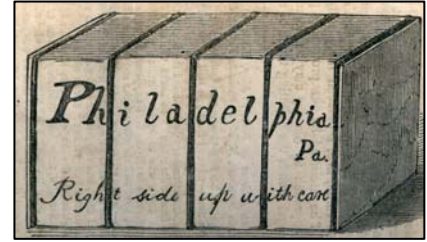
**Answer:**

1. Henry was enslaved in Virginia for the first 33 years of life. What do you imagine would have been difficult about enslavement?
2. When Henry was sent to Richmond, what happened to his parents and siblings? What do you imagine this would have been like?
3. What do you think of Henry's plan? How would you characterize Henry based on his idea and its execution?
4. Think back to the list of items you noted that you would bring on a 24 hour journey. What was Henry was able to bring with him in the box? How does this compare with what you wanted to bring when traveling for a comparable amount of time?
5. What do you imagine was going through Henry's head as he climbed into the box and began this journey?
6. What do you imagine was most difficult about his journey? What do you think that Henry was most worried about throughout?
7. What was Henry risking by doing this?
8. Why do you think he was willing to face such risks? What might this tell you about the institution of slavery?
9. How do you think Henry felt when arriving at the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Office?
10. Why do you think Henry became an abolitionist speaker and performer?
11. Do you think people who escaped enslavement ever felt true peace? Why or why not?



## Creating a Panorama of Henry “Box” Brown’s Life

Once Henry “Box” Brown had escaped from slavery, he decided to earn a living through public presentations. Brown commissioned a moving panorama to be painted, which he titled *Mirror of Slavery*. The moving panorama was an extremely popular form of entertainment in the mid-19th century. It consisted of huge canvases that were sewn together and displayed on vertical spool. The paintings could then be scrolled in front of an audience, revealing a sequence of scenes.



Your group will be provided an excerpt from Henry’s narrative, “Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself,” which he published in 1849. After reading and discussing the excerpt provided, **your group will create a panorama panel and dramatic presentation** based on what you read. The purpose of the panorama panel and presentation is to educate others regarding the life and experiences of Henry “Box” Brown, as well as the institution of slavery and its impact on the individuals enslaved.

- The **panorama panel** should artistically depict a scene from Henry’s life that relates to your excerpt and/or the institution of slavery in general. The illustrated panel should complement your dramatic presentation.
- The **dramatic presentation** should be 3-4 minutes when performed and should educate the audience regarding Henry Box Brown’s life and experiences, particularly noting the important/interesting aspects of the excerpt you were assigned. The presentation can also connect to the institution of slavery in general and can include additional information you have learned from other sources other than Henry’s narrative. Your presentation can utilize one or more dramatic forms such as song, dance, monologue, dialogue/dramatic scene, etc. The presentation may include just one person performing, or it may include several or all group members.

### Steps for completion:

1. **Read:** Read the excerpt provided to you and discuss the questions that follow together. As you read and discuss, consider what this passage teaches you about slavery in general and specifically, Henry “Box” Brown’s life and experiences.
2. **Brainstorm:** Based on the information provided in your excerpt, as well as prior knowledge about slavery, begin to consider ideas for your panorama and presentation. What from this excerpt might make an interesting and creative visual for your panorama and presentation? What is most important for an audience to know and how can you convey this to them in an engaging way?
3. **Design & Draft:** Review your ideas and begin to draft your presentation and panorama. As you draft the presentation, your group should work through some ideas by performing out loud, considering what works. (While not all group members have to perform in the presentation, all group members must equally participate in its writing.) After making your final decisions, write out your final presentation and create your panorama.
4. **Presenting Final Project:** Remember you will present your panorama and dramatic presentation to the remainder of class. While your performance does not need to be memorized, ensure your group practices. An effective performance:
  - Is presented as a serious performance (i.e. assume the appropriate persona of your character, keep a straight face, deliver lines as believably as possible, support your fellow actors, etc.)
  - Is organized and well-rehearsed; any props, music, costumes, etc. that you include should be used purposefully and effectively
  - Is engaging, educational, historically accurate and creative
  - Teaches us about Henry “Box” Brown

- Includes performers who vary vocal tone and volume; use effective pauses; use appropriate emotion to convey the characters; etc.

An effective panorama:

- Includes creative and detailed images that engage and educate the viewer regarding the life of Henry “Box” Brown and slavery.
- Can be literal, abstract, or a mixture of both
- Should show that time was spent thinking about the design and executing the design

**Due Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**What questions do you have about this assignment?**

## **Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself**

### **EXCERPT 1**

I was born about forty-five miles from the city of Richmond, in Louisa County, in the year 1815. I entered the world a slave--in the midst of a country whose most honoured writings declare that all men have a right to liberty--but had imprinted upon my body no mark which could be made to signify that my destiny was to be that of a bondman. Neither was there any angel stood by, at the hour of my birth, to hand my body over, by the authority of heaven, to be the property of a fellow-man; no, but I was a slave because my countrymen had made it lawful, in utter contempt of the declared will of heaven, for the strong to lay hold of the weak and to buy and to sell them as marketable goods. Thus was I born a slave; tyrants-- remorseless, destitute of religion and every principle of humanity--stood by the couch of my mother and as I entered into the world, before I had done anything to forfeit my right to liberty, and while my soul was yet undefiled by the commission of actual sin, stretched forth their bloody arms and branded me with the mark of bondage, and by such means I became their own property. Yes, they robbed me of myself before I could know the nature of their wicked arts, and ever afterwards--until I forcibly wrenched myself from their hands--did they retain their stolen property.

My father and mother of course, were then slaves, but both of them are now enjoying such a measure of liberty, as the law affords to those who have made recompense to the tyrant for the right of property he holds in his fellow-man. It was not my fortune to be long under my mother's care; but I still possess a vivid recollection of her affectionate oversight. Such lessons as the following she would frequently give me. She would take me upon her knee and, pointing to the forest trees which were then being stripped of their foliage by the winds of autumn, would say to me, my son, as yonder leaves are stripped from off the trees of the forest, so are the children of the slaves swept away from them by the hands of cruel tyrants; and her voice would tremble and she would seem almost choked with her deep emotion, while the tears would find their way down her saddened cheeks. On those occasions she fondly pressed me to her heaving bosom, as if to save me from so dreaded a calamity, or to feast on the enjoyments of maternal feeling while she yet retained possession of her child. I was then young, but I wellrecollect the sadness of her countenance, and the mournful sacredness of her words as they impressed themselves upon my youthful mind--never to be forgotten.

Mothers of the North! as you gaze upon the fair forms of your idolised little ones, just pause for a moment; how would you feel if you knew that at any time the will of a tyrant--who neither could nor would sympathise with your domestic feelings--might separate them for ever from your embrace, not to be laid in the silent grave "where the wicked cease from troubling and where the weary are at rest," but to live under the dominion of tyrants and avaricious men, whose cold hearts cannot sympathise with your feelings, but who will mock at any manifestation of tenderness, and scourge them to satisfy the cruelty of their own disposition; yet such is the condition of hundreds of thousands of mothers in the southern states of America...

While quite a lad my principal employment was waiting upon my master and mistress, and at intervals taking lessons in the various kinds of work which was carried on on the plantation: and I have often, there-- where the hot sun sent forth its scorching rays upon my tender head--looked forward with dismay to the time when I, like my fellow slaves, should be driven by the taskmaster's cruel lash, to separate myself from my parents and all my present associates, to toil without reward and to suffer cruelties, as yet unknown. The slave has always the harrowing idea before him--however kindly he may be treated for the time being--that the auctioneer may soon set him up for public sale and knock him down as the property of the person who, whether man or demon, would pay his master the greatest number of dollars for his body.

**Answer:**

1. According to the first paragraph, how does Henry feel about slavery and his enslavers?
2. Henry mentions that America's "honoured writings declare that all men have a right to liberty..." What message is he conveying by noting this?
3. What types of lessons did Henry's mother teach him in their brief time together?
4. In what ways do you imagine the experiences noted here shaped Henry?
5. What does this passage teach us about this institution of slavery and life for enslaved people?
6. In your opinion, what was most interesting about this passage?
7. What images came to mind when reading this passage? (What did you visualize in your mind?)

## **Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself**

### **EXCERPT 2**

My brother and myself were in the habit of carrying grain to the mill a few times in the year, which was the means of furnishing us with some information respecting other slaves, otherwise we would have known nothing whatever of what was going on anywhere in the world, excepting on our master's plantation. The mill was situated at a distance of about 20 miles from our residence, and belonged to one Colonel Ambler, in Yansinville county. On these occasions we used to acquire some little knowledge of what was going on around us, and we neglected no opportunity of making ourselves acquainted with the condition of other slaves.

On one occasion, while waiting for grain, we entered a house in the neighbourhood, and while resting ourselves there, we saw a number of forlorn looking beings pass the door, and as they passed we noticed they gazed earnestly upon us; afterwards about fifty did the very same, and we heard some of them remarking that we had shoes, vests, and hats. We felt a desire to talk with them, and accordingly after receiving some bread and meat from the mistress of the house we followed those abject beings to their quarters, and such a sight we had never witnessed before, as we had always lived on our masters plantation, and this was the first of our journeys to the mill. These Slaves were dressed in shirts made of coarse bagging such as coffee sacks are made from, and some kind of light substance for pantaloons, and this was all their clothing! They had no shoes, hats, vests, or coats, and when my brother spoke of their poor clothing they said they had never before seen colored persons dressed as we were; they looked very hungry, and we divided our bread and meat among them. They said they never had any meat given them by their master.

My brother put various questions to them, such as if they had wives? did they go to church? &c., they said they had wives, but were obliged to marry persons who worked on the same plantation, as the master would not allow them to take wives from other plantations, consequently they were all related to each other, and the master obliged them to marry their relatives or to remain single. My brother asked one of them to show him his sisters:--he said he could not distinguish them from the rest, as they were all his sisters. Although the slaves themselves entertain considerable respect for the law of marriage as a moral principle, and are exceedingly well pleased when they can obtain the services of a minister in the performance of the ceremony, yet the law recognizes no right in slaves to marry at all. The relation of husband and wife, parent and child, only exists by the toleration of their master, who may insult the slave's wife, or violate her person at any moment, and there is no law to punish him for what he has done. Now this not only may be as I have said, but it actually is the case to an alarming extent; and it is my candid opinion, that one of the strongest motives which operate upon the slaveholders in inducing them to maintain their iron grasp upon the unfortunate slaves, is because it gives them such unlimited control over the person of their female slaves. The greater part of slaveholders are licentious men, and the most respectable and kind masters keep some of these slaves as mistresses. It is for their pecuniary interest to do so, as their progeny is equal to so many dollars and cents in their pockets, instead of being a source of expense to them, as would be the case, if their slaves were free. It is a horrible idea, but it is no less true, that no slave husband has any certainty whatever of being able to retain his wife a single hour; neither has any wife any more certainty of her husband: their fondest affection may be utterly disregarded, and their devoted attachment cruelly ignored at any moment a brutal slave-holder may think fit.

The slaves on Col. Ambler's plantation were never allowed to attend church, but were left to manage their religious affairs in their own way. An old slave whom they called John, decided on their religious profession and would baptize the approved parties during the silent watches of the night,

while their master was asleep. We might have got information on many things from these slaves of Col. Ambler, but, while we were thus engaged, we perceived the overseer directing his steps towards us like a bear for its prey: we had however, time to ask one of them if they were ever whipped? to which he replied that not a day passed over their heads without some of them being brutally punished; "and" said he "we shall have to suffer for this talk with you. It was but this morning," he continued, "that many of us were severely whipped for having been baptized the night before!" After we left them we heard the screams of these poor creatures while they were suffering under the blows of the hard treatment received from the overseers, for the crime, as we supposed, of talking with us. We felt thankful that we were exempted from such treatment, but we had no certainty that we should not, ere long be placed in a similar position.

**Answer:**

1. How did Henry get information regarding what was happening in the world?
2. Describe the conditions of the enslaved people Henry meets. In what way were they treated?
3. According to this passage, what role does marriage play to those enslaved?
4. In what ways do you imagine the experiences noted here shaped Henry?
5. What does this passage teach us about this institution of slavery and life for enslaved people?
6. In your opinion, what was most interesting about this passage?
7. What images came to mind when reading this passage? (What did you visualize in your mind?)

## **Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself**

### **EXCERPT 3**

Our old master, being unable to attend to all his affairs himself, employed an overseer whose disposition was so cruel as to make many of the slaves run away. I fancy the neighbours began to clamour about our masters mild treatment to his slaves, for which reason he was induced to employ an overseer. The change in our treatment was so great, and so much for the worse, that we could not help lamenting that the master had adopted such a change. There is no telling what might have been the result of this new method amongst slaves, so unused to the lash as we were, if in the midst of the experiment our old master had not been called upon to go the way of all the earth. As he was about to expire he sent for my mother and me to come to his bedside; we ran with beating hearts and highly elated feelings, not doubting, in the, least, but that he was about to confer upon us the boon of freedom--for we had both expected that we should be set free when master died--but imagine our deep disappointment when the old man called me to his side and said, Henry yon, will make a good Plough-boy, or a good gardener, now you must be an honest boy and never tell an untruth.

I have given you to my son William, and you must obey him; thus the old gentleman deceived us by his former kind treatment and raised expectation in our youthful minds which were doomed to be overthrown. He went to stand before the great Jehovah to give an account of the deeds done in the body, and we, disappointed in our expectations, were left to mourn, not so much our masters death, as our galling bondage. If there is any thing which tends to buoy up the spirit of the slave, under the pressure of his severe toils, more than another, it is the hope of future freedom: by this his heart is cheered and his soul is lighted up in the midst of the fearful scenes of agony and suffering which he has to endure. Occasionally, as some event approaches from which he can calculate on a relaxation of his sufferings, his hope burns with a bright blaze: but most generally the mind of the slave is filled with gloomy apprehension of a still harder fate. I have known many slaves to labour unusually hard with the view of obtaining the price of their own redemption, and, after they had paid for themselves over and over again, were--by the unprincipled tyranny and fiendish mockery of moral principle in which their barbarous masters delight to indulge--still refused what they had so fully paid for, and what they so ardently desired. Indeed a great many masters hold out to their slaves the object of purchasing their own freedom--in order to induce them to labour more--without at the same time, entertaining the slightest idea of ever fulfilling their promise.

On the death of my old master, his property was inherited by four sons, whose names were, Stronn, Charles, John, and William Barret; so the human as well as every other kind of property, came to be divided equally amongst these four sons, which division--as it separated me from my father and mother, my sister and brother, with whom I had hitherto been allowed to live--was the most severe trial to my feelings which I had ever endured. I was then only 15 years of age, but it is as present in my mind as if but yesterday's sun had shone upon the dreadful exhibition. My mother was separated from her youngest child, and it was not till after she had begged most pitiously for its restoration, that she was allowed to give it one farewell embrace, before she had to let it go for ever. This kind of torture is a thousand fold more cruel and barbarous than the use of the lash which lacerates the back; the gashes which the whip, or the cow skin makes may heal, and the place which was marked, in a little while, may cease to exhibit the signs of what it had endured, but the pangs which lacerate the soul in consequence of the forcible disruption of parent and the dearest family ties, only grow deeper and more piercing, as memory fetches from a greater distance the horrid acts by which they have been produced. And there is no doubt but they under the weighty infirmities of declining life, and the increasing force and vividness with which the mind retains the memoranda of the agonies of former

years--which form so great a part of memory's possessions in the minds of most slaves --hurry thousands annually from off the stage of life.

Mother, my sister Jane, and myself, fell into the hands of William Barret. My sister Mary and her children went another way; Edward, another, and John and Lewis and my sister Robinnet another. William Barret took my sister Martha for his "keep Miss." It is a difficult thing to divide all the slaves on a plantation; for no person wishes for all children, or all old people; while both old, young, and middle aged have to be divided:--but the tyrant slave-holder regards not the social, or domestic feelings of the slave, and makes his division according to the moneyed value they possess, without giving the slightest consideration to the domestic or social ties by which the individuals are bound to each other; indeed their common expression is, that "niggers have no feelings."

My father and mother were left on the plantation; but I was taken to the city of Richmond, to work in a tobacco manufactory, owned by my old master's son William, who had received a special charge from his father to take good care of me, and which charge my new master endeavoured to perform.

**Answer:**

1. What role does an overseer play?
2. What disappointment did Henry face when called to his dying master's bed?
3. What tragedy did Henry's mother experience and how does Henry describe this level of pain?
4. What do you imagine was most difficult regarding families being separated in this way?
5. In what ways do you imagine the experiences noted here shaped Henry?
6. What does this passage teach us about this institution of slavery and life for enslaved people?
7. In your opinion, what was most interesting about this passage?
8. What images came to mind when reading this passage? (What did you visualize in your mind?)



## **Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself**

### **EXCERPT 4**

The name of our overseer was John F. Allen, he was a thorough-going villain in all his modes of doing business; he was a savage looking sort of man; always apparently ready for any work of barbarity or cruelty to which the most depraved despot might call him. He understood how to turn a penny for his own advantage as well as any man. No person could match him in making a bargain; but whether he had acquired his low cunning from associating with that clan, or had it originally as one of the inherent properties of his diabolical disposition, I could not discover, but he excelled all I had ever seen in low mean trickery and artifice. He used to boast that by his shrewdness in managing the slaves, he made enough to support himself and family--and he had a very large family which I am sure consumed not less than one hundred dollars per annum--without touching one farthing of his own salary, which was fifteen hundred dollars per annum.

Mr. Allen used to rise very early in the morning, not that he might enjoy sweet communion with his own thoughts, or with his God; nor that he might further the legitimate interest of his master, but in order to look after matters which principally concerned himself; that was to rob his master and the poor slaves that were under his controul, by every means in his power. His early rising was looked upon by our master as a token of great devotedness to his business; and as he was withal very pious and a member of the Episcopalian Church, my master seemed to place great confidence in him. It was therefore no use for any of the workmen to complain to the master of anything the overseer did, for he would not listen to a word they said, but gave his sanction to his barbarous conduct in the fullest extent, no matter how tyrannical or unjust that conduct, or how cruel the punishments which he inflicted; so that that demon of an overseer was in reality our master.

As a specimen of Allen's cruelty I will mention the revolting case of a coloured man, who was frequently in the habit of singing. This man was taken sick, and although he had not made his appearance at the factory for two or three days, no notice was taken of him; no medicine was provided nor was there any physician employed to heal him. At the end of that time Allen ordered three men to go to the house of the invalid and fetch him to the factory; and of course, in a little while the sick man appeared; so feeble was he however from disease, that he was scarcely able to stand. Allen, notwithstanding, desired him to be stripped and his hands tied behind him; he was then tied to a large post and questioned about his singing; Allen told him that his singing consumed too much time, and that it hurt him very much, but that he was going to give him some medicine that would cure him; the poor trembling man made no reply and immediately the pious overseer Allen, for no other crime than sickness, inflicted two-hundred lashes upon his bare back; and even this might probably have been but a small part of his punishment, had not the poor man fainted away: and it was only then the blood-thirsty fiend ceased to apply the lash! I witnessed this transaction myself, but I durst not venture to say that the tyrant was doing wrong, because I was a slave and any interference on my part, would have led to a similar punishment upon myself. This poor man was sick for four weeks afterwards, during which time the weekly allowance, of seventy cents, for the hands to board themselves with, was withheld, and the poor man's wife had to support him in the best way she could, which in a land of slavery is no easy matter.

The advocates of slavery will sometimes tell us, that the slave is in better circumstances than he would be in a state of freedom, because he has a master to provide for him when he is sick; but even if this doctrine were true it would afford no argument whatever in favor of slavery; for no amount of kindness can be made the lawful price of any man's liberty, to infringe which is contrary to the laws of humanity and the decrees of God. But what is the real fact? In many instances the severe toils and

exposures the slave has to endure at the will of his master, brings on his disease, and even then he is liable to the lash for medicine, and to live, or die by starvation as he may, without any support from his owner; for there is no law by which the master may be punished for his cruelty--by which he may be compelled to support his suffering slave.

My master knew all the circumstances of the case which I have just related, but he never interfered, nor even reproved the cruel overseer for what he had done; his motto was, Mr. Allen is always right, and so, right or wrong, whatever he did was law, and from his will there was no appeal.

**Answer:**

1. How would you describe John Allen based on this excerpt?
2. What options did the enslaved people under Allen's watch have when they were mistreated?
3. Characterize Allen's treatment of the "sick man." Why didn't Henry stand up for him?
4. How does Henry argue the notion that enslaved people are better off than in a state of freedom?
5. In what ways do you imagine the experiences noted here shaped Henry?
6. What does this passage teach us about this institution of slavery and life for enslaved people?
7. In your opinion, what was most interesting about this passage?
8. What images came to mind when reading this passage? (What did you visualize in your mind?)

## **Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself**

### **EXCERPT 5**

Mr. Colquitt, however, determined that I should suffer too, and for that purpose he proceeded to sell my wife to one Samuel Cottrell, who wished to purchase her. Cottrell was a saddler and had a shop in Richmond. This man came to me one day and told me that Mr. Colquitt was going to sell my wife[,] and stated that he wanted a woman to wait upon his wife, and he thought my wife would precisely suit her; but he said her master asked 650 dollars for her and her children, and he had only 600 that he could conveniently spare but if I would let him have fifty, to make up the price, he would prevent her from being sold away from me. I was, however, a little suspicious about being fooled out of my money, and I asked him if I did advance the money what security I could have that he would not sell my wife as the others had done; but he said to me "do you think if you allow me to have that money, that I could have the heart to sell your wife to any other person but yourself, and particularly knowing that your wife is my sister and you my brother in the Lord; while all of us are members of the church? Oh! no, I never could have the heart to do such a deed as that."

After he had shown off his religion in this manner, and lavished it upon me, I thought I would let him have the money, not that I had implicit faith in his promise, but that I knew he could purchase her if he wished whether I were to assist him or not, and I thought by thus bringing him under an obligation to me it might at least be somewhat to the advantage of my wife and to me; so I gave him the 50 dollars and he went off and bought my wife and children:--and that very same day he came to me and told me, that my wife and children were now his property, and that I must hire a house for them and he would allow them to live there if I would furnish them with everything they wanted, and pay him 50 dollars, a year; "if you dont do this," he said, "I will sell her as soon as I can get a buyer for her." I was struck with astonishment to think that this man, in one day, could exhibit himself in two such different characters. A few hours ago filled with expressions of love and kindness, and now a monster tyrant, making light of the most social ties and imposing such terms as he chose on those whom, but a little before, had begged to conform to his will[.]

Now, being a slave, I had no power to hire a house, and what this might have resulted in I do not know, if I had not met with a friend in the time of need, in the person of James C. A. Smith, Jr. He was a free man and I went to him and told him my tale and asked him to go and hire a house for me, to put my wife and children into; which he immediately did. He hired one at 72 dollars per annum, and stood master of it for me; and, notwithstanding the fearful liabilities under which I lay, I now began to feel a little easier, and might, perhaps, have managed to live in a kind of a way if we had been let alone here. But Mr. S. Cottrell had not yet done with robbing us; he no sooner saw that we were thus comfortably situated, than he said my wife must do some of his washing. I still had to pay the house hire, and the hire of my wife; to find her and the children with everything they required, and she had to do his washuig beside.

Still we felt ourselves more comfortable than we had ever been before. In this way, we went on for some time: I paid him the hire of my wife regularly, whenever he called for it--whether it was due or not--but he seemed still bent on robbing me more thoroughly than he had the previous day; for one pleasant morning, in the month of August, 1848, when my wife and children, and myself, were sitting at table, about to eat our breakfast, Mr. Cottrell called, and said, he wanted some money to day, as he had a demand for a large amount. I said to him, you know I have no money to spare, because it takes nearly all that I make for myself, to pay my wife's hire, the rent of my house, my own ties to my master, and to keep ourselves in meat and clothes; and if at any time, I have made anything more than that, I have paid it to you in advance, and what more can I do? Mr. Cottrell, however said, "I want

money, and money I will have." I could make him no answer; he then went away. I then said to my wife, "I wonder what Mr. Cottrell means by saying I want money and money I will have," my poor wife burst into tears and said perhaps he will sell one of our little children, and our hearts were so full that neither of us could eat any breakfast, and after mutually embracing each other, as it might be our last meeting, and fondly pressing our little darlings to our bosoms, I left the the house and went off to my daily labour followed by my little children who called after me to come back soon. I felt that life had joys worth living for if I could only be allowed to enjoy them, but my heart was filled with deep anguish from the awful calamity, which I was thus obliged to contemplate, as not only a possible but a highly probable occurrence. I now went away to my work and I could as I went see many other slaves hastening in the same direction. I began to consider their lot and mine, and although my heart was filled with sorrow I felt still disposed to look upon the bright side of the future. I could still see some alleviation to my case of sorrow; it was true that the greater portion of my earnings were stolen from me by the unscrupulous hand of my master; that I was entirely at his mercy, and might at any moment be snatched from those enjoyments as well as those I thought were open to me; that if he chose he might still further gratify his robbing propensities and demand a larger portion of my earnings; so that the pleasures of intellect would be completely closed to my mind, but I could enjoy myself with my family about me while I listened to the pleasing prattle of my children, and experience the kindness of a wife, which were privileges that every slave could not enjoy.

I had not been many hours at my work, when I was informed that my wife and children were taken from their home, sent to the auction mart and sold, and then lay in prison ready to start away the next day for North Carolina with the man who had purchased them. I cannot express, in language, what were my feelings on this occasion...

**Answer:**

1. In what ways did Mr. Colquitt take advantage of Henry?
2. What do you think it took on Henry's part to meet all of Mr. Colquitt's demands, plus his required duties as an enslaved person?
3. What options did Henry have in how to deal with Mr. Colquitt?
4. How do you imagine Henry felt learning his wife and children had been sold?
5. In what ways do you imagine the experiences noted here shaped Henry?
6. What does this passage teach us about this institution of slavery and life for enslaved people?
7. In your opinion, what was most interesting about this passage?
8. What images came to mind when reading this passage? (What did you visualize in your mind?)

## **Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself**

### **EXCERPT 6**

My agony was now complete, she with whom I had travelled the journey of life in chains, for the space of twelve years, and the dear little pledges God had given us I could see plainly must now be separated from me for ever, and I must continue, desolate and alone, to drag my chains through the world. O dear, I thought shall my wife and children no more greet my sight with their cheerful looks and happy smiles! For far away in the North Carolina swamps are they henceforth to toil beneath the scorching rays of a hot sun deprived of a husband's and a father's care! Can I endure such agony—shall I stay behind while they are thus driven with the tyrant's rod? I must stay, I am a slave, the law of men gives me no power to ameliorate my condition; it shuts up every avenue of hope; but, thanks be to God, I a law of heaven which senates' laws cannot agon !

While I was thus musing I received a message, that if I wished to see my wife and children, and bid them the last farewell, I could do so, by taking my stand on the street where they were all to pass on their way for North Carolina. I quickly availed myself of this information, and placed myself by the side of a street, and soon had the melancholy satisfaction of witnessing the approach of a gang of slaves, amounting to three hundred and fifty in number, marching under the direction of a *agon* st minister, by whom they were purchased, and amongst which slaves were my wife and children. I stood in the midst of many who, like myself, were mourning the loss of friends and relations and had come there to obtain one parting look at those whose company they but a short time before had imagined they should always enjoy, but who were, without any regard to their own wills, now driven by the tyrant's voice and the smart of the whip on their way to another scene of toil, and, to them, another land of sorrow in a far off southern country[.] These beings were marched with ropes about their necks, and staples on their arms, and, although in that respect the scene was no very novel one to me, yet the peculiarity of my own circumstances made it assume the appearance of unusual horror. This train of beings was accompanied by a number of wagons loaded with little children of many different families, which as they appeared rent the air with their shrieks and cries and vain endeavours to resist the separation which was thus forced upon them, and the cords with which they were thus bound; but what should I now see in the very foremost *agon* but a little child looking towards me and pitifully calling, father! Father! This was my eldest child, and I was obliged to look upon it for the last time that I should, perhaps, ever see it again in life; if it had been going to the grave and this gloomy procession had been about to return its body to the dust from whence it sprang, whence its soul had taken its departure for the land of spirits, my grief would have been nothing in comparison to what I then felt; for then I could have reflected that its sufferings were over and that it would never again require nor look for a father's care; but now it goes with all those tender feelings riven, by which it was endeared to a father's love; it must still live subjected to the deprivation of paternal care and to the chains and wrongs of slavery, and yet be dead to the pleasure of a father from whose heart the impression of its early innocence and love will never be effaced[.]

Thus passed my child from my presence—it was my own child—I loved it with all the fondness of a father; but things were so ordered that I could only say, farewell, and leave it to pass in its chains while I looked for the approach of another gang in which my wife was also loaded with chains. My eye soon caught her precious face, but, gracious heavens! That glance of agony may God spare me from ever again enduring! My wife, under the influence of her feelings, jumped aside; I seized hold of her hand while my mind felt unutterable things, and my tongue was only able to say, we shall meet in heaven! I went with her for about four miles hand in hand, but both our hearts were so overpowered with feeling that we could say nothing, and when at last we were obliged to part, the look of mutual love which we exchanged was all the token which we could give each other that we should yet meet in heaven.

**Answer:**

1. What do you imagine would have been most difficult regarding the situation Henry describes in this excerpt?
2. Summarize the manner in which Henry's family and the other enslaved people are being transported. While Henry has seen sights such as this before, why was this more difficult to bear witnessing?
3. In what ways do you imagine the experiences noted here shaped Henry?
4. What does this passage teach us about this institution of slavery and life for enslaved people?
5. In your opinion, what was most interesting about this passage?
6. What images came to mind when reading this passage? (What did you visualize in your mind?)

## **Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself**

### **EXCERPT 7**

I was well acquainted with a store-keeper in the city of Richmond, from whom I used to purchase my provisions; and having formed a favourable opinion of his integrity, one day in the course of a little conversation with him, I said to him if I were free I would be able to do business such as he was doing; he then told me that my occupation (a tobacconist) was a money-making one, and if I were free I had no need to change for another. I then told him my circumstances in regard to my master, having to pay him 25 dollars per month, and yet that he refused to assist me in saving my wife from being sold and taken away to the South, where I should never see her again; and even refused to allow me to go and see her until my hours of labour were over. I told him this took place about five months ago, and I had been meditating my escape from slavery since, and asked him, as no person was near us, if he could give me any information about how I should proceed. I told him I had a little money and if he would assist me I would pay him for so doing. The man asked me if I was not afraid to speak that way to him; I said no, for I imagined he believed that every man had a right to liberty. He said I was quite right, and asked me how much money I would give him if he would assist me to get away. I told him that I had 166 dollars and that I would give him the half; so we ultimately agreed that I should have his service in the attempt for 86. Now I only wanted to fix upon a plan. He told me of several plans by which others had managed to effect their escape, but none of them exactly suited my taste. I then left him to think over what would be best to be done, and, in the mean time, went to consult my friend Dr. Smith, on the subject. I mentioned the plans which the storekeeper had suggested, and as he did not approve either of them very much, I still looked for some plan which would be more certain and more safe, but I was determined that come what may, I should have my freedom or die in the attempt.

One day, while I was at work, and my thoughts were eagerly feasting upon the idea of freedom, I felt my soul called out to heaven to breathe a prayer to Almighty God. I prayed fervently that he who seeth in secret and knew the inmost desires of my heart, would lend me his aid in bursting my fetters asunder, and in restoring me to the possession of those rights, of which men had robbed me; when the idea suddenly flashed across my mind of shutting myself up in a box, and getting myself conveyed as dry goods to a free state.

Being now satisfied that this was the plan for me, I went to my friend Dr. Smith and, having acquainted him with it, we agreed to have it put at once into execution not however without calculating the chances of danger with which it was attended; but buoyed up by the prospect of freedom and increased hatred to slavery I was willing to dare even death itself rather than endure any longer the clanking of those galling chains[.] It being still necessary to have the assistance of the store-keeper, to see that the box was kept in its right position on its passage, I then went to let him know my intention, but he said although he was willing to serve me in any way he could, he did not think I could live in a box for so long a time as would be necessary to convey me to Philadelphia, but as I had already made up my mind, he consented to accompany me and keep the box right all the way.

My next object was to procure a box, and with the assistance of a carpenter that was very soon accomplished, and taken to the place where the packing was to be performed. In the mean time the storekeeper had written to a friend in Philadelphia, but as no answer had arrived, we resolved to carry out our purpose as best we could. It was deemed necessary that I should get permission to be absent from my work for a few days, in order to keep down suspicion until I had once fairly started on the road to liberty; and as I had then a gathered finger I thought that would form a very good excuse for obtaining leave of absence; but when I showed it to one everseer, Mr. Allen, he told me it was not so bad as to prevent me from working, so with a view of making it bad enough, I got Dr. Smith to procure

for me some oil of vitriol in order to drop a little of this on it, but in my hurry I dropped rather much and made it worse than there was any occasion for, in fact it was very soon eaten in to the bone, and on presenting it again to Mr. Allen I obtained the permission required, with the advice that I should go home and get a poultice of flax-meal to it, and keep it well poulticed until it got better. I took him instantly at his word and went off directly to the store-keeper who had by this time received an answer from his friend in Philadelphia, and had obtained permission to address the box to him, this friend in that city, arranging to call for it as soon as it should arrive. There being no time to be lost, the store-keeper, Dr. Smith, and myself, agreed to meet next morning at four o'clock, in order to get the box ready for the express train. The box which I had procured was three feet one inch wide, two feet six inches high, and two feet wide: and on the morning of the 29th day of March, 1849, I went into the box-- having previously bored three gimlet holes opposite my face, for air, and provided myself with a bladder of water, both for the purpose of quenching my thirst and for wetting my face, should I feel getting faint. I took the gimlet also with me, in order that I might bore more holes if I found I had not sufficient air. Being thus equipped for the battle of liberty, my friends nailed down the lid and had me conveyed to the Express Office, which was about a mile distant from the place where I was packed.

**Answer:**

1. What was Henry risking by asking the shopkeeper for assistance in his escape? Why do you think Henry took this risk?
2. How did Henry manage to get time away from work?
3. What gave Henry the courage to execute this plan, despite the danger?
4. What do you imagine Henry was thinking as he hunched in the dark box, listening to the nails being pounded in?
5. In what ways do you imagine the experiences noted here shaped Henry?
6. What does this passage teach us about this institution of slavery and life for enslaved people?
7. In your opinion, what was most interesting about this passage?
8. What images came to mind when reading this passage? (What did you visualize in your mind?)



## **Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself**

### **EXCERPT 8**

On the morning of the 29th day of March, 1849, I went into the box-- having previously bored three gimlet holes opposite my face, for air, and provided myself with a bladder of water, both for the purpose of quenching my thirst and for wetting my face, should I feel getting faint. I took the gimlet also with me, in order that I might bore more holes if I found I had not sufficient air. Being thus equipped for the battle of liberty, my friends nailed down the lid and had me conveyed to the Express Office, which was about a mile distant from the place where I was packed.

I had no sooner arrived at the office than I was turned heels up, while some person nailed something on the end of the box. I was then put upon a waggon and driven off to the depôt with my head down, and I had no sooner arrived at the depôt, than the man who drove the waggon tumbled me roughly into the baggage car, where, however, I happened to fall on my right side.

The next place we arrived at was Potomac Creek, where the baggage had to be removed from the cars, to be put on board the steamer; where I was again placed with my head down, and in this dreadful position had to remain nearly an hour and a half, which, from the sufferings I had thus to endure, seemed like an age to me, but I was forgetting the battle of liberty, and I was resolved to conquer or die. I felt my eyes swelling as if they would burst from their sockets; and the veins on my temples were dreadfully distended with pressure of blood upon my head. In this position I attempted to lift my hand to my face but I had no power to move it; I felt a cold sweat coming over me which seemed to be a warning that death was about to terminate my earthly miseries, but as I feared even that, less than slavery, I resolved to submit to the will of God, and under the influence of that impression, I lifted up my soul in prayer to God, who alone, was able to deliver me. My cry was soon heard, for I could hear a man saying to another, that he had travelled a long way and had been standing there two hours, and he would like to get somewhat to sit down; so perceiving my box, standing on end, he threw it down and then two sat upon it. I was thus relieved from a state of agony which may be more easily imagined than described[.]

The next place at which we arrived was the city of Washington, where I was taken from the steam-boat, and again placed upon a waggon and carried to the depôt right side up with care; but when the driver arrived at the depôt I heard him call for some person to help to take the box off the waggon, and some one answered him to the effect that he might throw it off; but, says the driver, it is marked "this side up with care;" so if I throw it off I might break something, the other answered him that it did not matter if he broke all that was in it, the railway company were able enough to pay for it. No sooner were these words spoken than I began to tumble from the waggon, and falling on the end where my head was, I could bear my neck give a crack, as if it had been snapped asunder and I was knocked completely insensible...I was then tumbled into the car with my head downwards again, but the car had not proceeded far before, more luggage having to be taken in, my box got shifted about and so happened to turn upon its right side; and in this position I remained till I got to Philadelphia, of our arrival in which place I was informed by hearing some person say, "We are in port and at Philadelphia." My heart then leaped for joy, and I wondered if any person knew that such a box was there.

Here it may be proper to observe that the man who had promised to accompany my box failed to do what he promised; but, to prevent it remaining long at the station after its arrival, he sent a telegraphic message to his friend, and I was only twenty seven hours in the box, though travelling a distance of three hundred and fifty miles.

I was now placed in the depôt amongst the other luggage, where I lay till seven o'clock, P.M., at which time a waggon drove up, and I heard a person inquire for such a box as that in which I was. I was then placed on a waggon and conveyed to the house where my friend in Richmond had arranged I should be received. A number of persons soon collected round the box after it was taken in to the house, but as I did not know what was going on I kept myself quiet. I heard a man say, "let us rap upon the box and see if he is alive;" and immediately a rap ensued and a voice said, tremblingly, "Is all right within?" to which I replied--"all right." The joy of the friends was very great; when they heard that I was alive they soon managed to break open the box, and then came my resurrection from the grave of slavery. I rose a freeman, but I was too weak, by reason of long confinement in that box, to be able to stand, so I immediately swooned away. After my recovery from the swoon the first thing, which arrested my attention, was the presence of a number of friends, every one seeming more anxious than another, to have an opportunity of rendering me their assistance, and of bidding me a hearty welcome to the possession of my natural rights, I had risen as it were from the dead; I felt much more than I could readily express...

I was then taken by the hand and welcomed to the houses of the following friends:--Mr. J. Miller, Mr. M'Kim, Mr. and Mrs. Motte, Mr. and Mrs. Davis, and many others, by all of whom I was treated in the kindest manner possible. But it was thought proper that I should not remain long in Philadelphia, so arrangements were made for me to proceed to Massachusetts, where, by the assistance of a few Anti-slavery friends, I was enabled shortly after to arrive. I went to New York, where I became acquainted with Mr. H. Long, and Mr. Eli Smith, who were very kind to me the whole time I remained there. My next journey was to New Bedford, where I remained some weeks under the care of Mr. H. Ricketson, my finger being still bad from the effects of the oil of vitriol with which I dressed it before I left Richmond. While I was here I heard of a great Anti-slavery meeting which was to take place in Boston, and being anxious to identify myself with that public movement, I proceeded there and had the pleasure of meeting the hearty sympathy of thousands to whom I related the story of my escape. I have since attended large meetings in different towns in the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and New York, in all of which places I have found many friends and have endeavoured, according to the best of my abilities, to advocate the cause of the emancipation of the slave; with what success I will not pretend to say--but with a daily increasing confidence in the humanity and justice of my cause, and in the assurance of the approbation of Almighty God.

**Answer:**

1. Based on this excerpt, what do you think was most difficult about Henry's journey and why?
2. Describe Henry's attitude about his journey, despite the discomfort he experiences while confined in the box.
3. Why does Henry refer to this experience as a "battle of liberty"?
4. How do you imagine Henry felt when he heard that he'd arrived in Philadelphia?
5. In what ways do you imagine the experiences noted here shaped Henry?
6. What does this passage teach us about this institution of slavery and life for enslaved people?
7. In your opinion, what was most interesting about this passage?
8. What images came to mind when reading this passage? (What did you visualize in your mind?)

## The Great Escape From Slavery of Ellen and William Craft

Most runaway slaves fled to freedom in the dead of night, often pursued by barking bloodhounds. A few fugitives, such as Henry “Box” Brown who mailed himself north in a wooden crate, devised clever ruses or stowed away on ships and wagons. One of the most ingenious escapes was that of a married couple from Georgia, Ellen and William Craft, who traveled in first-class trains, dined with a steamboat captain and stayed in the best hotels during their escape to Philadelphia and freedom in 1848. Ellen, a quadroon with very fair skin, disguised herself as a young white cotton planter traveling with his slave (William). It was William who came up with the scheme to hide in plain sight, but ultimately it was Ellen who convincingly masked her race, her gender and her social status during their four-day trip. Despite the luxury accommodations, the journey was fraught with narrow escapes and heart-in-the-mouth moments that could have led to their discovery and capture. Courage, quick thinking, luck and “our Heavenly Father,” sustained them, the Crafts said in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, the book they wrote in 1860 chronicling the escape.

Ellen and William lived in Macon, Georgia, and were owned by different masters. Put up for auction at age 16 to help settle his master’s debts, William had become the property of a local bank cashier. A skilled cabinetmaker, William, continued to work at the shop where he had apprenticed, and his new owner collected most of his wages. Minutes before being sold, William had witnessed the sale of his frightened, tearful 14-year-old sister. His parents and brother had met the same fate and were scattered throughout the South.

As a child, Ellen, the offspring of her first master and one of his biracial slaves, had frequently been mistaken for a member of his white family. Much annoyed by the situation, the plantation mistress sent 11-year-old Ellen to Macon to her daughter as a wedding present in 1837, where she served as a ladies maid. Ellen and William married, but having experienced such brutal family separations despaired over having children, fearing they would be torn away from them. “The mere thought,” William later wrote of his wife’s distress, “filled her soul with horror.”

Pondering various escape plans, William, knowing that slaveholders could take their slaves to any state, slave or free, hit upon the idea of fair-complexioned Ellen passing herself off as his master—a wealthy young white *man* because it was not customary for women to travel with male servants. Initially Ellen panicked at the idea but was gradually won over. Because they were “favourite slaves,” the couple had little trouble obtaining passes from their masters for a few days leave at Christmastime, giving them some days to be missing without raising the alarm. Additionally, as a carpenter, William probably would have kept some of his earnings – or perhaps did odd jobs for others – and was allowed to keep some of the money.

Before setting out on December 21, 1848, William cut Ellen’s hair to neck length. She improved on the deception by putting her right arm in a sling, which would prevent hotel clerks and others from expecting “him”

to sign a registry or other papers. Georgia law prohibited teaching slaves to read or write, so neither Ellen nor William could do either. Refining the invalid disguise, Ellen asked William to wrap bandages around much of her face, hiding her smooth skin and giving her a reason to limit conversation with strangers. She wore a pair of men's trousers that she herself had sewed. She then donned a pair of green spectacles and a top hat. They knelt and prayed and took "a desperate leap for liberty."

At the Macon train station, Ellen purchased tickets to Savannah, 200 miles away. As William took a place in the "negro car," he spotted the owner of the cabinetmaking shop on the platform. After questioning the ticket seller, the man began peering through the windows of the cars. William turned his face from the window and shrank in his seat, expecting the worst. The man searched the car Ellen was in but never gave the bandaged invalid a second glance. Just as he approached William's car, the bell clanged and the train lurched off.

Ellen, who had been staring out the window, then turned away and discovered that her seat mate was a dear friend of her master, a recent dinner guest who had known Ellen for years. Her first thought was that he had been sent to retrieve her, but the wave of fear soon passed when he greeted her with "It is a very fine morning, sir." To avoid talking to him, Ellen feigned deafness for the next several hours.

In Savannah, the fugitives boarded a steamer for Charleston, South Carolina. Over breakfast the next morning, the friendly captain marveled at the young master's "very attentive boy" and warned him to beware "cut-throat abolitionists" in the North who would encourage William to run away. A slave trader on board offered to buy William and take him to the Deep South, and a military officer scolded the invalid for saying "thank you" to his slave. In an overnight stay at the best hotel in Charleston, the solicitous staff treated the ailing traveler with utmost care, giving him a fine room and a good table in the dining room.

Trying to buy steamer tickets from South Carolina to Philadelphia, Ellen and William hit a snag when the ticket seller objected to signing the names of the young gentleman and his slave even after seeing the injured arm. In an effort to prevent white abolitionists from taking slaves out of the South, slaveholders had to prove that the slaves traveling with them were indeed their property. Sometimes travelers were detained for days trying to prove ownership. As the surly ticket seller reiterated his refusal to sign by jamming his hands in his pockets, providence prevailed: The genial captain happened by, vouched for the planter and his slave and signed their names.

Baltimore, the last major stop before Pennsylvania, a free state, had a particularly vigilant border patrol. Ellen and William were again detained, asked to leave the train and report to the authorities for verification of ownership. "We shan't let you go," an officer said with finality. "We felt as though we had come into deep waters and were about being overwhelmed," William recounted in the book, and returned "to the dark and

horrible pit of misery.” Ellen and William silently prayed as the officer stood his ground. Suddenly the jangling of the departure bell shattered the quiet. The officer, clearly agitated, scratched his head. Surveying the sick traveler’s bandages, he said to a clerk, “he is not well, it is a pity to stop him.” Tell the conductor to “let this gentleman and slave pass.”

The Crafts arrived in Philadelphia the next morning—Christmas Day. As they left the station, Ellen burst into tears, crying out, “Thank God, William, we’re safe!”

The comfortable coaches and cabins notwithstanding, it had been an emotionally harrowing journey, especially for Ellen as she kept up the multilayered deception. From making excuses for not partaking of brandy and cigars with the other gentleman to worrying that slavers had kidnapped William, her nerves were frayed to the point of exhaustion. At a Virginia railway station, a woman had even mistaken William for her runaway slave and demanded that he come with her. As predicted, abolitionists approached William. One advised him to “leave that cripple and have your liberty,” and a free black man on the train to Philadelphia urged him to take refuge in a boarding house run by abolitionists. Through it all Ellen and William maintained their roles, never revealing anything of themselves to the strangers except a loyal slave and kind master.

Upon their arrival in Philadelphia, Ellen and William were quickly given assistance and lodging by the underground abolitionist network. They received a reading lesson their very first day in the city. Three weeks later, they moved to Boston where William resumed work as a cabinetmaker and Ellen became a seamstress. After two years, in 1850, slave hunters arrived in Boston intent on returning them to Georgia. The Crafts fled again, this time to England, where they eventually had five children. After 20 years they returned to the States and in the 1870s established a school in Georgia for newly freed blacks.

Source: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/The-Great-Escape-From-Slavery-of-Ellen-and-William-Craft.html#ixzz2IIa0WuuP>