

Henry's Freedom Box

Ellen Levine

Narrators 1-7, Master, Nancy, Henry, James, Dr. Smith, Mother, Passenger 1, Passenger 2, William Still, Railroad Workers

ALL: Brown laid down the shovel and the hoe.
Down in the box he did go;
No more slave work for Henry Box Brown,
In the box by Express he did go, In the box by Express he did go.

Narrator 1: HENRY'S FREEDOM BOX
A true story of the Underground Railroad

Narrator 2: Henry Brown wasn't sure how old he was. Henry was a slave. And slaves weren't allowed to know their birthdays.

Narrator 3: Henry and his family worked in the big house where the master lived. Henry's master had been good to Henry and his family. But Henry's mother knew things could change.

Mother: "Do you see those leaves blowing? They are torn from the trees like slave children are torn from their families."

Narrator 4: One morning the master called for Henry and his mother. Some slaves were freed by their owners. Henry's heart beat fast. Maybe the master would set him free.

Master: "Henry, come closer and listen. I am very ill. You are a good worker, so I am giving you to my son. You must obey him and never tell a lie."

Narrator 5: Henry nodded, but he didn't say thank you. That would have been a lie.

- Narrator 6:** Later that day, Henry said good-bye to his family.
- Mother:** “Henry, you are going to work for a new master. Take a look high above the trees. Do you see those free birds? Those happy birds? Don’t forget us. Never give up hope. Goodbye, my son.” (*hugs him goodbye*)
- Narrator 7:** Henry worked for his new master’s tobacco factory. He was good at his job, and he met another slave, James.
- James:** “Hey kid, welcome to the factory. Listen, don’t tear the tobacco leaves, or the boss will yell at you. Don’t make a mistake, or the boss will beat you with a switch...be on the lookout.”
- Narrator 1:** Besides his talks with James, Henry’s days were lonesome, but one day after work, Henry met Nancy.
- Henry:** “Good day, ma’am, can I help you carry that basket? It looks mighty heavy.”
- Nancy:** (*hands over a basket of bread*) “Oh, thank you sir. You’re a great help. My name’s Nancy.”
- Henry:** “Hello, Nancy, My name’s Henry Brown. This bread looks delicious! Will you be having it for dinner tonight? Would you mind if I join you?”
- Nancy:** “Oh, that would be mighty fine, Mr. Brown, but this bread is for my mistress. She’s throwing a huge party and I dare not eat one bite, or she’ll have my hide.”
- Narrator 2:** Nancy and Henry walked and talked and agreed to meet again. Henry felt like singing. But slaves didn’t dare sing in the streets. Instead, he hummed all the way home.
- Narrator 3:** Months later, Henry asked Nancy to be his wife. When their masters agreed, Henry and Nancy were married. Soon they had 3 children. Henry knew they were lucky. They had a home together even though they had different masters. But Nancy was worried.
- Nancy:** “Henry, I heard that my master has lost a great deal of money. I’m so afraid he will sell our 3 beautiful children.”
- Narrator 4:** Henry threw himself into his work that day, trying to forget what Nancy had said.
- James:** “Henry, I have some bad news. I just heard that your wife and children were just sold at the slave market.”
- Henry:** “No!”

- Narrator 5:** Henry couldn't move. He couldn't think. He couldn't work. At lunchtime, Henry rushed to the center of town, where he watched a large group of slaves, his wife, and his children disappear down the road. Henry wiped away tears, and knew he would never see his family again.
- Narrator 6:** Many weeks passed. One morning, Henry heard a singing bird.
- Henry:** "I see you, little free bird. How can I be free? How?"
- Narrator 7:** As he lifted a crate, he knew the answer.
- Narrator 1:** Henry met with Dr. Smith, a white man who knew slavery was wrong. Henry met Dr. Smith and James early the next day at an empty warehouse.
- Henry:** (*showing a box*) "I will mail myself to a place where there are no slaves!"
- James:** "Henry! What if you cough and someone hears you?"
- Henry:** "I will cover my mouth and hope."
- Dr. Smith:** "If you make it, you will arrive at my friends' home in Philadelphia. Here is the address: William H. Still, Arch Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania."
(*shows the box to Henry, labeled THIS SIDE UP WITH CARE*)
- James:** "The boss will try to come after you if you don't show up for work. You need an excuse."
- Narrator 2:** Henry winced as James poured acid on his skin, burning it to the bone. Now the boss would have to let him stay home!
- Narrator 3:** Dr. Smith bandaged Henry's hand. They arranged to meet the next morning.
- Narrator 4:** The sun was not yet up when Henry climbed into the box.
- Henry:** "Ready!"
- Narrator 5:** Dr. Smith and James took the box to station by wagon. The railway clerk took the box.
- Dr. Smith:** "Please be careful, this package is quite fragile."
- Railroad Worker:** "Sure, sure." (*kicks and shoves box*)
- Narrator 6:** Hours passed. Henry was lifted up and thrown again. Upside down! He heard waves splashing. This must be the steamboat headed for Washington DC. Blood rushed to his head. His face got hot. His eyes ached. He thought his head would burst. But he was afraid to move. Someone might hear him. Henry heard a passenger talking.
- Passenger 1:** "I'm tired of standing."

Passenger 2: “Why don’t we move that box and sit on it?”

Narrator 7: Henry held his breath. Could they be talking about his box? Henry was pushed. The box scraped the deck.

Passenger 1: “What do you think is in here?”

Passenger 2: “Mail, I guess.”

Henry: (*whispering to audience*) I am mail, but not the kind they think!

Narrator 1: Henry was carried off the steamboat and placed in a railroad car. He fell asleep to the rattling song of the train wheels.

Narrator 2: He awoke to loud knocking.

William: “Henry are you alright in there?”

Henry: “Alright!”

Narrator 3: The cover was pried open. Henry stretched and stood up.

Henry: “How do you do, sir?”

William: “Welcome to Philadelphia, Henry!”

Narrator 4: At last Henry had a birthday – March 30, 1849, his first day of freedom!

Henry: “And from that day on, I also had a middle name. Everyone called me Henry ‘BOX’ Brown.”

Narrator 5: THE END