Franklin and a Fugitive Slave Hero:
Josiah Henson's Exemplary Success Story

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Usually we associate Ben Franklin with such qualities as self-determination, practical ingenuity, personal and communal success. These are the virtues that white America in the 19th Century, the era following Franklin, found to be so valuable. With Blacks, however, and particularly black slaves, we often associate the opposite, such as loss of self because they were treated as property; and stereotypically we see them as shiftless and lazy, because they may have avoided the work on the plantation, or had no work at all after those days were over. For most historians Blacks, like Native Americans, are an adjunct to "real" history, or white history, that left them for the most part uneducated, poor, and dependent. But all this is only partially true. If we read carefully the slave narratives that began to surface at the mid-19th Century,¹ we find them filled with creative thinking and personal success, if only in the way black men and women, from giants like Frederick Douglass to Harriet Jacobs, struggled on the human level to attain what millions of whites came to this country for--freedom. It is only that as a people they were not as successful as the European immigrants, in spite of the Civil War and the so-called Reconstruction that followed.

Among these black autobiographies, however, there is one that stands out as much more than an individual success story, for it is almost a white success story, including much of what we find in the Autobiography of Ben Franklin--something Larson calls "a model of the virtuous citizen, scientist, patriot, and philosopher" (779). Such is the case with The Life Story of Josiah Henson, first published through a ghost writer, Samuel Eliot, in 1849 and then in a fuller edition in 1856--still well before the Civil War. This narrative was tremendously popular in its day, if only because Harriet Beecher Stowe apparently used Josiah as a prototype for her characterization of Uncle Tom in her famous mid-century novel.² There is a Christian spirit and dedication to authority in Henson's life similar to Tom's, but as a total personality Josiah is far removed from Tom. As Peabody points out as early as 1849, Henson is unique in carrying out "large and far-
reaching schemes for the improvement of his brethren" (26). In
this sense, Henson's life more reflects that of the innovative and
aggressive Ben Franklin than it does Uncle Tom's, as though Josiah
were saying that Blacks would be a part of this new society, white
prejudice and stereotypes be damned.

Ben Franklin's life as contained in his Autobiography covers
most of the 18th Century and reeks with pride and egoism at his
success on so many levels. Indeed, he wrote Part I (1771) so his
son would know all he had accomplished. Franklin was born in
Puritan Boston in 1706, but, says Verner Crane, he never forgot
"the principles of enlightened self-interest" (5) that were part
of his father's morality. He then moved as a young man to
Philadelphia, the seat in America of rationalist thought,
something that would change his view of the world. As a printer
and publisher he bought out the Pennsylvania Gazette in 1729, and
in 1748 was able to retire at forty-two, then devoting himself to
scientific, social, philosophical and political matters. Always
interested in natural phenomena, he is responsible for the
lightning rod, bifocals, and the fireplace, or Franklin Stove.
Beyond science, he gave birth to such social institutions as the
lending library, the city fire department, and the Junto—a club
for discussing all kinds of ideas. Never a great speaker,
Franklin emerged as a listener and compromiser (Crane 65), and
from his early appointment as clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly
in 1776, he went on to take major roles in the French and Indian
War, as well as the Colonies' War with England, including
contributions to the Continental Congress and Declaration of
Independence. He negotiated France's help during the Revolution
and afterwards signed the Peace Treaty with England. In his later
years he was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention (1787).

Josiah Henson was born in 1789 at the very end of Franklin's
life. The original 1849 edition of his story, much shorter and
not as convoluted as Franklin's,4 is "simple, straightforward, and
to the point" (Peabody 26). Both style and content change,
however, in 1858, and more profoundly in the 1870s, editions in
which Henson collaborated with John Lobb (Winks 132). The story
itself covers nine or ten stages. Henson grows up in Maryland to become superintendent on Isaac Riley's plantation. After his master's bankruptcy, he guides a group of slaves to Amos Riley's in Kentucky. Thinking he can buy his freedom through preaching, he returns to Maryland, but is foiled by the two Riley brothers. Back in Kentucky, he sees the slaves he brought there auctioned off. Then on a trip to New Orleans he takes over the boat and, though he discovers that he was to be sold downstream and the profits split between Amos and Isaac, he still nurses the sick Amos back to health and home. Now convinced he owes these men no more loyalty, Josiah escapes with his wife and four children to Canada. In Ontario he organizes Blacks before going back to Ohio to help with the underground railroad. His leadership in securing land, promoting a mechanical school, and starting a lumber business also help define his communal prowess. He then makes trips to New England and abroad to secure advantages for his projects and promote the dignity and reputation of his people in Canada.

What is strange about these biographies is that, for all the differences between the two characters--one a white choosing to go south to define his own life, the other black locked into a cruel southern system--they are thematically quite similar. Initially, Franklin tells about his poor family, then how he terminates the apprenticeship to his brother James and moves toward independence in Philadelphia, the seat of his success as writer and publisher. Henson's father is not only poor, but humiliated and broken trying to defend his mother from a rapist, after which the boy and his mother are purchased by a merciless master. Though food, clothing, and living conditions are atrocious, the fatherless Josiah grows up in spite of his surroundings to succeed on his own terms. He becomes a "robust and vigorous lad" who at fifteen says he could "run faster, jump higher, and out-wrestle anybody" (19) around him. If Franklin's sayings in The Way To Wealth (1773) depict his interest in frugality, sobriety, and hard work, Henson's master praises him because he can "out-hoe, out-reap, out-husk, out-dance, out-everything every competitor." And no less than
Franklin's, Henson's vanity is "inflamed" (19) at his own accomplishments. Josiah's work ethic gets him promoted to superintendent, whereupon he remarks, "yes, I was now practically overseer" and "master of every kind of farm work" (23). Uncle Tom, of course, was not vain and hardly competitive. Josiah does resembles Tom in maintaining a positive attitude while being passed from a gentle master to a cruel one; still, Josiah is no passive personality; he "doubles the crops . . . with cheerful and willing labor." However unjust the system, it is his Franklinesque "pride and ambition" (23) that drive him forward.

In Part II of the Autobiography Franklin describes how a man ought to improve his condition by developing a "Habitude" (91) of virtues. He lists these as temperance, frugality, resolution, sincerity, humility, and so on. In short, one develops character by practicing these moral virtues. Franklin, of course, never asked the question, "Who am I?" So the result of his program, according to John Ward, was a "common sense utilitarianism which sometimes verges on crassness" (61). It is interesting that Stowe's Uncle Tom simply had character. As with Franklin, Josiah develops it as part of the key to his success. As "overseer" for Isaac, he practices the "strictest honesty" (40) in business dealings. Once he drags Isaac from a drunken brawl, and though maimed for life for striking a white man, he forgives his persecutors, proud of Isaac's favor and the "character and reputation" he earns by "strenuous and persevering efforts" (41). Actually, it is Isaac who goes broke because of "shiftlessness, licentiousness and drink" (45), whereupon he commissions Josiah to guide his family and eighteen slaves to his brother Amos' in Kentucky. Proud of this new responsibility, he passes up the chance for freedom passing through Ohio, for his "strength of character, the feeling of integrity" and "the sentiment of high honor" (54) predominate over what he later sees as an error of judgment. According to Andrews, this act of "sublime renunciation," was pivotal in Stowe's depiction of Uncle Tom (122), but the context of Josiah's action appears to be more that of character building than self-sacrifice. Later, when he goes to
buy back his freedom in Maryland, Francis Riley, whom he counseled as a boy, testifies to Josiah's character--his faithfulness, "skill and influence" (70). After returning to Kentucky, still unfree because of Amos' dishonesty, he has a chance when piloting the boat back from New Orleans to kill his companions and flee. This is one instance where he pictures himself in a negative light, changing "from a lively . . . pleasant-tempered fellow" to a "savage, morose, dangerous slave" (88). Franklin, of course, occasionally criticizes himself in a humorous vein, as he does his own laziness in "Dialogue Between Franklin and the Gout" (1789). In Josiah's case, however, he is dead serious, choosing not to flee because all his "efforts at self-improvement" and "character" (90), even his "peace of mind (Franklin's tranquility) would be lost. Uncle Tom might remain faithful because of his religion-- "Slaves, obey your masters" (Eph. 6:5)--but Josiah, though he speaks of Christian hope and Providence, seems far more interested in the chance to build character through his own painstaking efforts.

Ben Franklin, of course, was a Deist who accepted God's "Providence" (99), along with the Puritan work ethic he learned in Boston, but in Philadelphia moved away from dogmas and hierarchies. A student of John Locke and other rationalists, he argued for changes in the established social order, which he thought would result in more freedom of thought and action. Josiah Henson was a Christian who at eighteen like Jonathan Edwards was "swallowed up in the beauty of divine love" (29); in this sense he resembles Uncle Tom, but with this difference: the motive for his transformation is undercutting the patriarchal order, having discovered that Christ was for "every man" (28). In the Key Stowe calls attention to Henson's "immediate conversion" (26) as the source of all his other actions, but this is to miss his vanity and emphasis on his own willpower. Moreover, Henson was no Puritan; once stealing a chicken to feed some starving woman, he claims that what he did was "good, moral, heroic" (22). Though illiterate, he becomes an "esteemed preacher," but his reasoning is primarily utilitarian--to be "useful" (30); later in
life he tries to buy his freedom by making $160 preaching on the way back to Maryland. All in all, though Henson’s faith might be a prelude to Uncle Tom’s serene attitude toward God and the Bible, his religious posture is always related to something productive. He claims,

Religion is not so much knowledge as wisdom; and observation upon what passes without, and reflection upon what passes within a man’s heart, will give him a larger growth in grace than is imagined by the devoted adherents of creeds, or the confident followers of Christ, who call “Lord, Lord,” but do not the things which he says. (132)

For all his calling on God, Josiah closely resembles Franklin’s position that “the most acceptable Service to God is doing Good to Man” (99).

There is no way, of course, in which Josiah Henson could duplicate the inventions of Ben Franklin. Franklin was not only wealthy and well read, but he had time to experiment. Henson was a slave, illiterate and penniless. In a sense, however, he had an inventive mind akin to his predecessor. As Isaac’s superintendent, for instance, he is able to plant the right crops and double the price of them. As a “smart nigger” (49) he guides two dozen slaves from Maryland through Ohio to Kentucky, keeping them in tow while avoiding all the hazards of the trip. When he returns to Maryland he learns the art of preaching to pay his way and partially buy his freedom. Back in Kentucky on the way to New Orleans he actually learns to pilot the vessel, and in doing so actually saves those who would destroy him. All these acts are the product of a practical, creative mind. Uncle Tom might be a wonderful counselor for little Eva, and stand up on principle to the cruel Simon Legree, but we simply don’t see him as the kind of everyday innovator that is Josiah Henson.

Perhaps the greatest testimony to his rational mind is his decision to jump the system. After having seen the people he guided to Kentucky sold again, and viewing their demise in Vicksburg on the way to New Orleans, he decides that his own
guided to Kentucky sold again, and viewing their demise in Vicksburg on the way to New Orleans, he decides that his own goodness has been counterproductive. Then, when Amos gets sick and needs Josiah to get him back to Kentucky, suddenly treating him as a friend rather than as property, Henson realizes that his own virtuous conduct is the very thing that makes him more marketable for his owner—a kind of twist on Franklin's overall thought. In justice to Franklin, however, in 1887 he was elected president of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery, and in the last year of his life wrote a scathing letter calling for "abolishing the Slave-Trade" (821). For Josiah, it is the realization of the contradictory nature of his actions which leads him to break with the Rileys. He sees that Isaac's dishonesty in not adhering to his part of the bargain regarding Josiah's freedom, and his attempt to "kidnap me again" through Amos, after having pocketed "three-fourths of my market value" (101) absolves him of all obligation. He then decides to take his family and flee across the Ohio to Canada. This crucial decision, of course, goes far beyond Uncle Tom, who dies a faithful servant, and it opens up a whole new series of creative actions—now much more social and political than those that characterized his life under the Rileys.

After retirement, Franklin went beyond self-development, financial success, and even scientific experimentation to communal planning. John Ward claims that virtue alone was not enough for Franklin, that "it counts for nothing without its public dress" (57). So his mind turned to aid people living in common. Among these social concerns were the efficient delivery of mail, fire protection, city lighting and street paving, and the opportunity to obtain and discuss reading material. Josiah Henson's life, when he decides to move to Canada, also takes on a far more other-centered nature. Initially, Josiah uses his Franklinesque ingenuity to convince his fearful wife, "an ignorant unreasoning slave-woman" (104) to risk the trip, then devises a scheme to get his son Tom away from Isaac's house long enough that he won't be noticed—both acts preceding their escape. In Uncle Tom's Cabin,
Mrs. Stowe dramatizes the escapes of Eliza and George at different times to Canada, and in her Key she speaks of the sources of their character, but for Josiah escaping to Canada is a family project which he orchestrates. On the way to Canada he uses his organizational and communication skills, much as he did when taking Amos' slaves down the Ohio to Kentucky, to guide his wife and children through "regular nigger-catchers" (122) to the border. On the way through an unknown wilderness he finds refuge with friendly Indians who treat them as "human beings" (119)--a subject Franklin treats sympathetically in "Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America" (1784)7--and he negotiates a boat ride across the Ohio with a congenial black laborer and his captain. After the final ferry ride at Buffalo he rolls in the sand like a "madman" (127), hugging and kissing his whole family. As with Franklin, he concentrates on the group rather than simply individual effort.

Having arrived in Canada Josiah sees the Blacks clustered in one place, but working for wages, or leasing a few acres, but not gaining any land or equity. So Josiah calls meetings of Blacks so he can "awaken them" to new "advantages" (139). He gets them to invest in land in order to apply that "Yankee spirit," or "energy, enterprise, and self-reliance" (140) to something of their own. Again using his sixth sense, he appeals to the legislature to get them relief from unnecessary rent, and later seeks out an area called Dawn for future development. Like Franklin he looks to the future betterment of all. Then one day, talking to James Walker, who came to Canada alone, Josiah proposes to return with him to get his kin, whereupon he discovers others gathered to escape, so he organizes and leads them on a two-week trek to Canada. This begins a larger commitment to the underground railroad where he says he is "instrumental in delivering one hundred and eighteen human beings" (163). Robin Winks points out that some of these trips to the South are "unaccountably forgotten" (125) in the 1849 edition and appear for the first time in 1858, so Henson was not beyond embellishing his text, perhaps for the benefit of white
readers. Whatever his motives, however, he had a communal vision not unlike Franklin's.

The last two parts of Franklin's Autobiography were written later in life and tell of his social-political involvements all over Europe, which prepared him for the Revolutionary crisis. He had actually learned French and German in order to relate more easily in those countries, but he spent most of his time abroad in England--fifteen years all told--where he had all the accouterments of an English gentleman. It is interesting that Josiah Henson, when he returns to Kentucky to buy his freedom, is dressed as a "gentleman" (67), something that shocks Amos, who still makes him sleep in a pig sty. At any rate, this was that Franklin-like vanity that at times brought Josiah to imitate the dress and manners of the class he later came to abhor. In spite of his love of class and its pleasures, however, Franklin defended the Colonies against the British desire to treat them as children. At the time of the Stamp Act, Franklin put on a campaign for the American position against taxation without representation, among other things writing his "Edict by the King of Prussia" (1773), where he satirizes the British claim on America by having the King of Prussia do the same thing. And in other pamphlets, like "Information for Those Who Would Come to American (1774), he shows that in the New World talent and hard work go hand in hand with virtuous living, and here people are content with modest prosperity.

Once Josiah Henson gets to Canada, and where he can freely use his talents, he becomes a Franklin-like spokesman of free enterprise, coupled with human equality. When he sees Blacks dissipating their labors or raising only one type of crop, he begins "lecturing upon the subject of crops, wages, and profit" (166). Consequently, a Mr. Fuller agrees to help his cause in England, starting a whole chain of relationships Henson will use to his advantage and that of all Blacks. Out of this comes a manual-labor school so that the kind of knowledge which Henson exhibited through his lectures could be carried on through the school. And if Franklin fights English elitism, Henson fights the
"prejudices of the inhabitants" (170) to accomplish his ends for Blacks. Then he negotiates large discounts for land at Dawn, sharing his profits so the whole institution might prosper. Duncan Rice claims that Henson was actually a bad manager and went into debt at Dawn, making his claims about success there somewhat dishonest (x-xi). At any rate, in Franklin-like style, he journeys to the New England states to elicit donations for a saw-mill through which to support the school. So he is a social-political person, who also "made some friends" (172) to insure the success of his business and guarantee equal opportunity for his own people. It is interesting that unlike Uncle Tom, Henson's Franklin-like egoism surfaces to take credit for people "had not taken a single step" toward larger enterprises "before I began to talk to them" (107).

Like Franklin Henson was a negotiator, not to gain support in wartime, but to pay his bills. He takes some of his walnut boards to New York where with the help of a Mr. Lawrence he is able to foil cheaters and negotiate a profit, canceling all his debts back home. He then goes to Boston via the St. Lawrence, this time taking pride in the fact that the custom officer does business with him in spite of the Fugitive Slave Law because, he says, "you acted like a man" (178). So Henson uses his skills with other people to foster industrial growth at Dawn, undercut individuals who would treat Blacks as inferior, and change the old habits of former slaves to that of self-determination, and in the process protect the freedom and industry of a whole area of people. Uncle Tom, of course, was a model to his race through his own character and faith; more than this Josiah Henson was able to position himself in a free land to actually change the condition of his people.

Strangely enough, Josiah also goes to England to expand his influence, much like Franklin in that country. Here he meets with all kinds of dignitaries, including Queen Victoria, who pauses at the World's Fair to view the display of lumber for which he is later awarded a bronze medal. Lord Grey then offers him a job traveling to North Africa, but Josiah refuses because of his
commitment to his people in Canada. Later, the Archbishop of England recognizes him in saying: "I have heard Negroes talk, but I have never seen one that could use such language as you" (197). Later, he is invited to dinner by the Prime Minister of England, where he is asked to sit at "the head of the table" (200). So Henson, like Ben Franklin, develops connections abroad that help both to foster his business and promote his race. Rice stresses the fact that in England Henson, like so many others, played upon the "romantic sympathy for Negro slaves" (vi) so prevalent among the British at the mid-century.

It is here also that the first London edition of the book on his life is ready for sale; however, like Franklin who returns to his wife after many years away, Henson gives up the opportunity to sell ten thousand copies when he hears of his wife's illness. Supposedly a man of character, he returns to her bedside shortly before his "dutiful wife" (205) dies. Actually, Henson had little to worry about in terms of selling his book in England. Before him, Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown had created a fertile climate for slave narratives in England (Rice 8). And Henson himself made three trips abroad. More than this, John Lobb, in editing Henson's memoirs, changed the title, altered the text, and fabricated connections to Stowe's mythic hero (Winks 115). Andrews notes that Henson and others "were all highly sensitive to the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie, which they exploited to their own rhetorical advantage" (112). Even the Canadians, who "came to congratulate themselves on upon their lack of prejudice and to contrast themselves favorably with the immoral and once slave-ridden United States" (Winks 128), helped to sell Henson's story. Hence, he was able to appeal to three audiences, Americans interested in myth of Uncle Tom (whether or not Henson was Uncle Tom) and in Franklin's work ethic, Canadians critical of American slavery, and the British interested in romantic myth.

Ben Franklin himself, of course, was well aware that his Autobiography was not just a record of his past deeds, but an effort to sell America on a way of life. Larson says he was "America's premier writer of public, persuasive prose" (780).
Fisher points out that Henson, whose son Tom eventually teaches him to "read" (137), took an active part in later revisions of his work for the "educational improvement" (x) of others. In the end of his memoirs, Henson notes that the condition and prospects of a majority of the fugitive slaves in Canada are vastly superior to that of most of the free people of color in Northern States. He says:

... if thousands who are hanging about the corners of streets, waiting for a job, or who are mending old clothes, or blacking boots in a damp cellars in Boston, New York, and other large cities would but come among us... they would find themselves surrounded by a pleasant and profitable home, and their children growing up around them with every advantage for a good education, and fitting themselves for lives of usefulness and happiness. (211-12)

This indeed was Franklin's vision for all America, one that Josiah Henson was able to realize for his own people north of the border. Uncle Tom's Cabin ends with young George Selby coming too late to rescue Uncle Tom, and Stowe can only envision an apocalyptic setting wherein her major characters meet in heaven. In Josiah's case, his people are quite well off in Canada, thanks to the character, industry, communal vision, and political prowess of this curious black disciple of Benjamin Franklin.

Notes
1. In 1849 Peabody comments on the lives of F. Douglass, W. W. Brown, and J. Henson, while mentioning Henry Watson, and Lewis and Milton Clarke. All except Henson were literate and able to write their own stories.

2. Stowe wrote the preface to the 1858 edition of Josiah's life, and she refers to Josiah in her Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin (26), but Henson makes no reference to Uncle Tom; it is not until the fourth edition in 1879 that he acknowledges having met Stowe, and he never claims to be Uncle Tom (see Winks 123-36). If anything, Stowe's novel is a "composite" of Christian slaves she met and then "amplified by her own imagination" (Fisher vii).

3. Modern critics who say that Henson's story is substantially different from Stowe's Uncle Tom are Andrews (121), Rice (vi), and Fisher (v).

4. Leary says Franklin's Autobiography is badly organized and dry, with "hardly a metaphor in all its matter-of-fact pages" (xi).

5. Ketcham claims Franklin had a "zeal" to understand science, and a "passion" for civic government, but was unwilling to partake in any "deep religious experience" (184). For Leary he was "interested in all things about man except his spirit" (ix).

6. Masur traces the development of Franklin's attitude toward slavery, from having a few household servants to the 1770s when he condemns racism in tough language—the "constant butchery of the human species by this pestilential, detestable traffic in the bodies and souls of men" (13).

7. Here Franklin explains the reasonableness of Indian customs. Earlier, in "A Narrative of the Late Massacres" (1764), he defends "innocent Indians in danger of being lynched by an angry mob of frontiersmen" (Leary 77). In a larger sense, Crane discusses how Franklin models the "intercolonial government" on the "Six Nations of ignorant savages" (70).

8. Lobb changed the title of the 1849 edition from The life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada to "Uncle Tom's Story of His Life": An Autobiography of the Rev.
Josiah Henson (Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom") in the third or 1877 edition. Lobb was Henson's editor for editions that appeared in 1858, 1877, 1878, 1879, and 1881.
Works Cited


