*Henry Brown, born in Louisa County, Virginia, and was a slave for thirty-three years. His life as a slave was relatively free from physical abuse by his slaveholders. His first owner was John Barret, a former Richmond mayor. Upon Barret's death*, the young boys were excited, as they "expected to be set free when he died" (p. [31](http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/boxbrown/boxbrown.html#p31)). However, he simply commanded that they be obedient to his son, William, who would inherit them as his own. Brown was thirteen years old at the time. *Brown was fed, clothed, and given spending money, much to the amazement of slaves on neighboring plantations.*

Brown spent the next several years in the Richmond, Virginia, tobacco plant owned by William Barret. Slaves there worked fourteen hours a day in the summer and sixteen in the winter. Brown exerted himself "to the utmost to please Barret who rewarded him with a new suit of clothing, spending money, and a continued immunity to the whip (p. [36](http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/boxbrown/boxbrown.html#p36)).

*However, despite this relatively liberal treatment, he suffered many trials and much heartache as a slave* In 1836, when Brown reached his twenties, he fell in love with Nancy, a woman enslaved by a Mr. Lee, who worked for the local bank. Brown was able to pay his wife's new slaveholder fifty dollars a year to persuade him to keep her in his ownership, as well as seventy-two dollars to rent a house for their family, which grew to include three children.

*In his narrative, Henry Brown explains that the horrors of slavery were not limited to physical abuse alone. The pains he suffered were tortures of the heart and soul, as illustrated by the sale of his wife and children.* In August of 1848, as usual, Brown left his wife and three children at home, where Nancy worked washing the clothes of her slaveholder's family. But when he returned, he learned that they had been sold to another slaveholder, a Methodist minister from North Carolina. Brown went to his master and begged for help in retrieving his family members but was told only that "you can get another wife" (p. [53](http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/boxbrown/boxbrown.html#p53)).

**Extremely distressed by this betrayal, Brown resolved to escape. He burned his finger with vitriol oil and claimed that he was too injured to work in order to excuse himself from work and buy time to plan his escape. In 1849, he heard in his mind these words: "Go and get a box, and put yourself in it" (p. [59](http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/boxbrown/boxbrown.html#p59)). Brown hired a carpenter to build a box and enlisted his friends Samuel Smith, a white Massachusetts native, and James C. Smith, a free African-American dentist and merchant, to help him make his escape. The Smiths put him in the three by two foot box and shipped it to the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia. The journey was physically exhausting and dangerous, as Brown spent much of it on his head, upside down, despite the "this side up with care" memo on top of the box. Brown did not bring any food or water besides a water bladder to "bathe [his] neck with, in case of too great heat" (p. [60](http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/boxbrown/boxbrown.html#p60)). After several hours of "terrible pain" in which death seemed an "inevitable fate," Brown arrived at his destination (p. [61](http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/boxbrown/boxbrown.html#p61)).

After a short time in Pennsylvania, Brown proceeded to Massachusetts, where he spoke at an anti-slavery rally in Boston. There he won the moniker "Henry 'Box' Brown". Brown continued to fight for abolition by publishing his narrative and touring New England to promote it with antislavery lectures in the fall of 1849. He did the same in England the following year.

**Works consulted**: Blackett, R.J.M., *Building an Antislavery Wall*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1983, 25; Brooks, Daphne, Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006; Emerson, Ralph W., "Tribute to George L. Stearns" in *Cambridge Sketches*, by Frank Preston Stearns, 115-7, Teddington: Echo Library, 2006; Encyclopedia Virginia. "[Henry Box Brown.](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Brown_Henry_Box_ca_1815)," accessed Nov. 18, 2011.; Heller, Charles E, *Portrait of an Abolitionist: a Biography of George Luther Stearns, 1809-1867*, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996; Switala, William J., *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2001; Wolff, Cynthia Griffin, "Passing Beyond the Middle Passage: Henry ‘Box' Brown's Translations of Slavery," *Massachusetts Review* 37.1, 1996. Rebecca Johnson