

The Road to Dawn: Josiah Henson and the Story That Sparked the Civil War by Jared A. Brock, Hachette Book Group, New York, 2018. (46 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols.)

1. A Tool of Ignorance.

Enslaved people simply didn't know, or weren't allowed to know, their date of birth. Slave owners discouraged the recording of birthdates of slaves, because one of the most effective tools of slave oppression was ignorance. [page 5]

2. In the South Slaves Faced Cruelty.

Maryland wasn't the worst place to be a slave, however. All the slaves knew—the northern owners made certain they knew—that down South, in the steamy and forbidding regions of Louisiana, Alabama, and Georgia, slaves faced cruelty far worse than in the northern states. [page 6]

3. In the Caribbean and South America Treatment Was Even Worse.

Slavery in the Deep South was undoubtedly horrific, but conditions were still often far worse on plantations in the Caribbean and South America, which frequently implemented a “work to death” policy. The Church of England's Codrington plantation in Barbados relied on a steady stream of new slaves from Africa because slaves died so frequently from sickness and overwork. It was reported that four in ten slaves bought by the plantation in 1740 were dead within three years. [page 6]

4. Millions of Slaves Died on Their Passage from Africa.

Between 1525 and 1866, almost 500,000 Africans arrived in North America. In total, over 12 million Africans were shipped to the New World, with almost 2 million dying during their treacherous trip across the Middle Passage. [page 8]

5. The Portuguese Imported 6 Million Slaves.

Incredibly, America was not the biggest offender when it came to the transatlantic slave trade. The Portuguese imported upward of 6 million slaves to Brazil, with approximately 700,000 dying en route. Brazil reluctantly became the last Western nation to abolish slavery on May 13, 1888. [page 8]

6. The Massive Slave System.

For the massive slave system to work, the slaves needed to be kept ignorant, in a state of anxiety, and fearful of the cost of rebellion or escape. [page 11]

7. Families Were Separated.

In 1857, Pierce Butler sold 429 of his slaves in order to pay off his debts. It is thought to be the largest sale of humans in U.S. history. An acquaintance of Butler's who was familiar with the sale, Sidney George Fisher, wrote that "families will not be separated, that is to say, husbands and wives, parents and young children. But brothers and sisters of mature age, parents and children of mature age, all other relations and the ties of home and long association will be violently severed." The sale, which took place in Georgia, lasted two days. It was not recorded how many families were broken up in the process. [page 12]

8. Singing Parting Hymns at Separation.

As the sale of Josiah and his family proceeded, slaves from various other estates and plantations in the area were sold and separated by their owners. Through their grief and mourning, victims sang parting hymns:

My brethren, farewell; I do you now tell,
I'm sorry to leave you, I love you so well

Strange friends I shall find; I hope they'll prove kind;
Neither people nor place shall alter my mind:
Wherever I'll be, I'll still pray for thee,
And, O, my dear brethren, do you pray for me. [page 12]

9. Food Was a Weapon and a Luxury.

The slaves labored from sunrise until noon without rest. Breakfast was at noon, and supper was eaten in the dark when the day's work was through. Both meals consisted of cornmeal and salt herring. In the summer, they got a little buttermilk and whatever vegetables each slave had managed to raise on the little piece of land assigned to him.

Food was both a luxury and a weapon. In the life of a plantation slave, food was the primary source of personal enjoyment. The astute slave owner knew this, and therefore used the quality and quantity of food granted to the slaves as an effective tool of indoctrination and suppression. The trick was to allow the slaves just enough food to keep their spirits up and maintain their strength for the hard work of the fields, but never so much as to make them satisfied or complacent. To a man who is constantly hungry, the promise of an extra morsel to eat is an incentive nearly as powerful as the desire to avoid the lash or the branding iron. [page 18]

10. Schooling Was Illegal.

Many slaves wanted to learn to read, write, and do arithmetic. This was illegal in most states, but some learned anyway. It wasn't illegal for slaves in Maryland to learn to read and write, but whites were discouraged from teaching them. Sometimes slaves learned from each other or from free blacks. In Baltimore in the 1820s, a nineteen-year-old free black man named William Watkins ran a school for any black person who was allowed to attend. [page 20]

11. Slaves No Better than Animals.

Many owners were like Francis Newman and Isaac Riley — hard men who saw their slaves as deserving no better treatment than animals. Others believed in the humanity of their slaves and sought to somehow balance the harsh reality of slavery with an acknowledgement that slaves were sentient beings with human souls. [page 20]

12. The Happy Moments.

Josiah's life was hard, but despite being boxed in by circumstances, his joyful exuberance overcame them all. The slavery system did its best to make Josiah wretched, yet, alongside the hardships of dirty cabins, frozen feet, backbreaking toil under the blazing sun, and frequent beatings, happy moments appeared — Christmas parties, extra meat on holidays, midnight visits to apple orchards, the discovery of stray chickens, which could be covertly broiled, and the discovery of ways to escape hard labor. [page 21]

12. Christ Died for Slaves.

Josiah ran through the forest until his lungs forced him to stop. He heaved for air. He had never heard such talk before.

Did Jesus Christ die for him?

He paced back and forth. *What would have compelled someone to die for a slave?*

Josiah kept repeating the preacher's phrases to the forest.

“The compassionate Saviour ... loves *me*. He looks down in compassion from heaven on *me* ... He died to save *my* soul” Describing the moment later, Josiah said he had been “transported with delicious joy.”

In that moment, a transformation occurred in Josiah Henson's heart. He became painfully aware not only of the spiritual dimension of the great sin of slavery, but also of the subtler faults in his own life. He perceived the shadowy darkness of his pride and ego, his arrogance and selfishness.

This was his spiritual awakening. [page 30]

13. Misery Forgotten at Religious Services.

Religious services — whether permitted by owners or conducted in secret—provided slaves with welcome respite from incessant labor. They offered companionship and some measure of hope. The slaves could, for a fleeting moment, forget their misery. Religion helped them overcome the weakness they felt as individuals, as they felt stronger and safer as a group protected under the eyes of God. [page 31]

14. The Church Owned Slaves.

The church was not, of course, innocent of the sin of slavery. Take, for example, Christopher Codrington, born to one of the wealthiest plantation owners in Barbados. The young man attended All Souls College at Oxford before taking over the family's Caribbean sugarcane plantation. When Codrington died in 1710, his will (found in one of his boots) left £10,000 in slavery profits to his Christian alma mater in order to build a library. Codrington also bequeathed his nearly eight-hundred-acre plantation to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel so they could start a missionary college. The Anglican Church happily became a slave owner for the next 123 years, branding its initial three hundred slaves on the chest with the word "Society" to remind people that they belonged to the Lord. [pages 31-32]

15. "Jumping the Broom."

While details of Josiah and Charlotte's marriage are lost to history, it was common for slave marriages to include a simple ritual that involved "jumping the broom," where the couple jumped over a broomstick to symbolize their union. The details of this custom varied from plantation to plantation. In one tradition, the bride and groom required to jump backward over a broom held a foot off the ground. If either partner failed to clear the obstacle, the other would be declared head of the house. On other plantations, the couple would place two brooms on the floor in front of each other and step across the brooms at the same time, joining hands to signal that they were married. [page 42]

16. A Preacher in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

He learned how best to communicate with people, how to keep them interested, and how to point them toward redemption.

Josiah was not formally trained in theology, of course, but he was an incredibly compelling preacher. He spoke passionately of his own sinfulness and imperfection, and as he labored to improve himself, he inspired those around him to do the same. In 1828, after three years of observation, practice, and prayer, Josiah was admitted as a preacher in the Methodist Episcopal Church. [pages 57-58]

17. Had Church in the Forest.

In cases where attendance was barred, slaves did their best to avoid getting caught. They met in forests, thickets, or ravines, for example, which came to be called “hush harbors.” One slave preacher, Calvin Woods, recalled how they would hang up wet quilts around them like a “little room,” “to keep the sound of their voices from penetrating the air.” [page 58]

18. The Underground Railroad.

The Underground Railroad (UGRR), started primarily by American Quakers, reached its peak in the 1850s and 1860s. By that time, safe houses were called “stations,” slaves were called “passengers,” and guides were called “conductors.” An entire code had developed from phrases buried in hymns. “Israel” referred to the slaves. “Egypt” represented the slave states. The “pharaohs” were the slave owners, and “Canaan” — the Promised Land — was Canada. Some claim the UGRR was itself called “a sweet chariot,” and that to “swing low” meant to make your way down south to “carry me home.” [page 85]

19. *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.*

... the song “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” was not written and composed until after the Civil War, likely by a Choctaw Indian living in Oklahoma. The earliest known recording was produced in 1909, by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University. [page 85]

20. Help along the Way.

Josiah’s luck didn’t seem any better with the second house. The man of the house cursed him just like his neighbor had, but the man’s wife overheard the conversation.

She scolded her husband. “How can you treat any human being so?” she asked. “If a dog was hungry, I would give him something to eat. We have children, and who knows but they may some day need the help of a friend.”

The kind woman invited Josiah into the house. She loaded a plate with bread and venison. Josiah put the feast in his handkerchief and placed a quarter on the table. The woman quietly picked it up and put it in his handkerchief, along with another slab of meat.

“God bless you,” she said. [page 90]

21. Native Americans Assisted Runaway Slaves.

Many slave narratives in the days prior to and during the Underground Railroad include stories of being helped by Native Americans. It made sense — rich white slave owners not only oppressed black people and the impoverished whites among them, but

also Native American individuals and tribes. An American expansionism squeezed the tribes and pushed them further and farther from their territorial lands, the ancient saying proved true: “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

In fact, some black fugitives and indigenous people married, and their offspring were labeled “black Indians.” DNA testing suggests that approximately 5 percent of African Americans have at least one Native American great-grandparent.

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, some African Americans settled in Upper Sandusky with Wyandot natives, while the slaves who escaped from South Carolina’s rice plantations (the Gullah people) sometimes banded with Seminole Indians in Florida and Oklahoma. Other black fugitives formed a community in eastern North Carolina with the Tuscarora tribe; later they and their descendants lived as maroons in the Great Dismal Swamp, the wetland on the Virginia border that at one time occupied about a million acres. Many African Americans hoped that whites — who were already fearful of Native Americans — wouldn’t search for them among the natives. [pages 94-95]

22. Free Soil.

On the morning of Thursday, October 28, 1830, Josiah Henson’s feet touched the Canadian shore for the first time. He threw himself on the ground and rolled in the sand. He grabbed fistfuls of free soil and kissed them. He danced circles around Charlotte and the children until a crowd of onlookers stopped to watch the madman. A well-dressed gentleman pushed through the crowd. Colonel John Warren was the customs collector, and he stopped short at the sight of this large black man, covered in sand, whopping at the top of his lungs. Warren scanned the scene and explained to the crowd, “He’s some crazy fellow.”

Josiah scrambled to his feet and rushed to the colonel.

“Oh no, master!” Josiah explained. “Don’t you know? I’m free!”

Colonel Warren burst into laughter. “Well, I never knew freedom make a man roll in the sand in such a fashion!”

Josiah couldn’t control himself. He hugged and kissed Charlotte and the boys and continued to dance in the sand before the growing crowd.

After 15,109 days—over forty-one years—in slavery, Josiah Henson was a free man. [page 103]

23. Freed Slaves Took First Job Offer.

Newly free slaves, delighted in their emancipation, often accepted the first job offers they received and settled for wages far lower than what they could have earned. For generations, the word “no” had never been an option, and they’d been trained to

believe they were incapable of accomplishing the same things as white people. [page 109]

24. Arousing Ambition in Hearts of Freed Slaves.

Josiah knew many men who were no further ahead in ten years than when they'd first arrived. They were happy to get paid for their work, but that was the height of their ambition. They didn't dream of becoming independent landowners themselves. Josiah made it his mission to arouse ambition in the hearts of his fellow escapees. They needed to organize, diversify, and learn how to negotiate. [pages 109-110]

25. The Beginning of Dawn.

When Josiah came to the territory east of Lake St. Clair and the Detroit River, he felt the soil's fertility was far better than anything else he'd seen. The township's name was Dawn. [page 110]

26. Harriet Tubman, the Black Moses.

After her escape from Maryland to St. Catharines, Ontario, Harriet Tubman made more than a dozen trips back to America to help at least seventy people escape to Canada, earning her the nickname "Black Moses" for leading so many people out of slavery. A legend persists that southern slavers offered a \$40,000 bounty for her capture, "dead or alive." This figure is highly unlikely, considering that a typical slave sold for a few hundred dollars, and a prime male might fetch \$1,000. An \$800 reward was posted for Peter Pennington, who escaped with Tubman's help on November 16, 1856. If a \$40,000 reward had been offered, it would have made national news, as it would be the equivalent of more than \$1 million today. The US government offered \$50,000 for John Wilkes Booth, Abraham Lincoln's assassin, in 1865. The \$40,000 figure was likely concocted by Sallie Holley, a New York antislavery activist, for an 1867 newspaper article. The only published notice that's been found concerning a reward for Tubman's capture is an October 3, 1849, advertisement in the *Cambridge Democrat* offering a \$300 reward for the return of "Minty [Tubman's birth name was Araminta Ross] and her two brothers, Ben and Harry." [page 112-113]

27. Tubman and Henson Returned South Repeatedly to Rescue Slaves.

The Underground Railroad ran north to Canada and south to Mexico and the Caribbean. Some escapees were transported in wagons, boats, and trains, but many walked on foot. Approximately 100,000 people made the journey in all, many of them led by conductors. It was a dangerous choice to return to the South and rescue slaves, but people such as Tubman and Josiah did so repeatedly. Although we don't know how many trips he took during his first decades in Canada, Josiah returned to America

again and again, by his count rescuing 118 people from the strangling grip of merciless slaveholders. [page 113]

28. Prejudice Rampant in Canada.

Despite being known as a land free of slavery, Canada was still rife with prejudice. In many districts, it was impossible to overcome the racism of white settlers, and black children were often barred from attending local schools. Starting their own school would not only train up their own people to then train others, but it would gradually enable black people to become independent of white men for their intellectual progress and physical prosperity. [page 117]

29. Revival Meetings in Dresden.

As early as 1839, when Dresden was still a dense forest, settlers of all races and creeds from a forty-mile radius would meet on the flats of the southern banks of the river for religious camp meetings. The meetings could often run a week or more, with families bringing tents along with “stands for the preachers, seats for the sinners, and pens for the saved.” The camp site continued to be used for river baptisms until at least 1949. [page 118]

30. What Was Dawn?

But what was Dawn, exactly? There was as much confusion about it then as there is today. Dawn was not the BAI (British American Institute), nor was the BAI Dawn. Josiah raised funds for the BAI, but he also personally helped the settlers at Dawn. The BAI had a board, while Dawn was a free-form, grassroots community. The nearby town of Dawn Mills was not Dawn. The surrounding township of Dawn was not Dawn. Dawn was something more spiritual, more of an idea and an area of refuge than a place with well-defined borders. It was a vision. [page 122]

31. Several Black Settlements.

In a way, all the black settlements were like refugee camps, in that they lacked definite sense of permanency and were supported predominantly by white outsiders. The newcomers faced prejudice — many Canadians were hostile to the black settlers — and the life of land-clearing and city building was incredibly arduous. These small pockets of freedom continued to develop nonetheless. Other well-known colonies included the Elgin Settlement near Buxton, Henry Bibb’s Refugee’s Home Society near Windsor, the Wilberforce Colony, and settlements at Port Royal, Shrewsbury, and rural locations in between. Each of these colonies was supported by white abolitionists, Christian denominations, and wealthy patrons. The Elgin Settlement was likely the largest — at 9,000 acres — and certainly the most organized. But Dawn was easily the most influential and best known of the settlements, thanks in part to the British American

Institute. In time, however, the settlements had to compete for an ever-shrinking pot of donor money both at home and abroad. It is hard to imagine the cost of resettling tens of thousands of abused, illiterate, uneducated hungry former slaves on wild land not yet a nation. Each of the black colonies required a huge amount of sustainable funding, and there never seemed to be enough to go around. [page 123]

32. Josiah's Story Sparked the Civil War.

Josiah had no way of knowing then that his story would help spark the Civil War. [page 134]

33. The Value of a Slave.

By the time of the 1850 census, there were almost 23.2 million American, of which more than 3.2 million were enslaved. But how does one count a slave, exactly? Was a black slave equal to a white man? Certainly not in the eyes of the government. While many Americans believed that those of African descent were still human, the pervasive belief was that they were somehow lesser so. How much less? According to the law, 40 percent less. [page 135]

34. The Beginnings of Liberia.

Liberia was the brainchild of the American Colonization Society (ACS). Established by Robert Finley in 1816, the society supported the migration of free black people back to Africa, where ACS founded a colony on January 7, 1822. Though those favoring colonization were mainly Quakers and evangelicals, even some proslavery groups were in favor of "repatriation." Within forty-five years, the ACS had helped 13,000 Americans move back to Africa. At one point the colony was even called the *Republic of Maryland*. The settlement remained a colony of the ACS until it declared its independence in 1847; the United States recognized it as a sovereign nation fifteen years later, 1862. [page 138]

35. Josiah's Wife Charlotte's Death.

Josiah was profoundly thankful to have made it home while Charlotte was still alive. Charlotte was perfectly calm, and had surrendered herself to the will of God. As Josiah later wrote, she waited "with Christian firmness for the hour for her summons."

The loving couple reminisced about their life together, recalling the moments of sorrow and trouble, as well as the many bright and happy days they had shared. They talked until Charlotte was exhausted, and she sank into a quiet sleep.

Josiah's return seemed to lift Charlotte's spirits, and he hoped that she would soon be restored to health. But it was not to be. Josiah wrote that "God in His mercy granted her a reprieve, and her life was prolonged a few weeks. I thus had the melancholy

satisfaction of watching day and night by her bed of languishing and pain ... She blessed me, and blessed her children, commending us to the ever-watchful care of that Saviour who had sustained her in so many hours of trial; and finally, after kissing me and each one of the children, she passed from earth to heaven without a pang or groan, as gently as the falling to sleep of an infant on its mother's breast.

Josiah closed her eyes. Charlotte had been a sincere and devoted Christian and a faithful and kind wife. Even on the day of her death, she had arranged with her daughters to care for the family's domestic matters so that Josiah would be comfortable and happy without her. But who can bear such sadness alone? [page 164]

36. The Truth about Slavery's Cruelty.

Stowe's book was not an exaggerated account of the evils of slavery, of course. In fact, the true depths of slavery's violence and cruelty have never fully been told.

Such appalling crimes never saw the light of an honest courtroom, because even if a slave survived such heinous torture, they weren't allowed to testify against a white man in a court of law. Justice, as the powerless know well, is blind in one eye. [page 172]

37. Josiah Henson World Famous.

Stowe wrote in *The Key*: "The character of Uncle Tom has been objected to as improbable; and yet the writer has received more confirmations of that character, and from a great variety of sources, than of any other in the book." Stowe spends several pages describing the inspiration for various scenes in Uncle Tom's story, and then she declares: "A last instance parallel with that of Uncle Tom is to be found in the published memoirs of the venerable Josiah Henson ... now pastor of the missionary settlement at Dawn, in Canada.

Josiah Henson would soon be world famous. [page 176]

38. H.B. Stowe Saw the Cruelty of Slavery around Her.

... it was faith that drove Stowe to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the first place. As she explained in an 1853 letter, "I wrote what I did because as a woman, as a mother, I was oppressed and broken-hearted with the sorrows and injustice I saw, because as a Christian I felt the dishonor to Christianity — because as a lover of my country, I trembled at the coming day of wrath." [page 177]

39. The Issues of the Civil War.

Slavery was not the only cause of the Civil War. Religion played a role — southern "Christianity" versus northern humanism and transcendentalism — as did cultural and political differences. The South favored states' rights, whereas the North preferred more centralization. As in most wars, money and power lay near the root. But although

many in the modern South choose to underplay or forget it, the issue of slavery – along with its societal, religious, cultural, and economic implications – was the fulcrum on which all else turned.

On December 20, 1860, the slave state of South Carolina seceded from the Union. In February 1861, the Confederate States of America was formally established, with Jefferson Davis as its president and Montgomery, Alabama, as its capital. Their motto was “Under God, our Vindicator,” and the unofficial anthem was “God Save the South.” [page 199]

40. The First Shot of Civil War.

... at 4:30 a.m. on April 12, 1861, Confederate forces, under General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard (the “Little Napoleon”), fired a ten-inch mortar at Union-held Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. It was the first shot of the Civil War. [page 199]

41. 750,000 Dead in Civil War.

By the time Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at the Battle of Appomattox nearly four years later, upward of 750,000 Americans lay dead across the nation’s fields and forests. Among them were as many as 80,000 slaves. Potentially more than half of the fallen had died from the outbreaks of yellow fever, pneumonia, and small pox that had plagued camps in both the North and the South. [page 199]

42. Black Soldiers in the Union Army.

Black soldiers captured by Confederate troops faced far harsher treatments than white soldiers as prisoners of war – the Confederate Congress even threatened to enslave all black POWs. Nevertheless, approximately 10 percent of the Union Army was made up of black soldiers. Roughly 179,000 black men served in the US Army, and another 19,000 served in the Navy, along with nearly 80 commissioned officers and thousands more in noncombat support functions. By the end of the war, 16 black soldiers had been awarded the Medal of Honor for their bravery. [page 200]

43. No Lincoln, No Reunifying of the United States.

As Radical Republican leader and US senator Charles Sumner declared, “Had there been no *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, there would have been no Lincoln in the White House.” And without Lincoln, there may have been no reuniting of the United States of America. [page 218]

44. Blacks’ Freedom Made a Difference to America.

The proclamation deprived the South of a massive valuable slave labor force. Lincoln himself declared it a “military necessity.” It allowed more than 180,000 former slaves

and free black men to fight for and serve the Union Army. As the Civil War dragged on for two more years, nearly half of them would die in combat.

Without black freedom, America as we know it simply would not exist. [page 219]

45. Josiah Kept on Keeping On.

How did Josiah feel about the constant slander, the unproven accusations, and the ongoing character assassination? If he felt it, he never mentioned it. Josiah simply went about his business, working hard and plowing the profits back into his community. He knew his mission in life – to spread the abolitionist ideas and the Christian faith, to educate young people, and to help those in need – and he didn't stop for anyone or anything. Josiah spoke and preached often, sometimes three times on Sundays, with the aim of spreading the gospel and changing public sentiment about black people. His aim was to make blacks educationally and economically equal to whites in order to break down prejudice and gain their respect. [pages 226-227]

46. Legacy of Honor, Nonviolence, and Generosity.

No, Josiah Henson is not the “real Uncle Tom.” The man we remember is a real human being. He was the living embodiment of the best we can hope to achieve, if we are willing to selflessly serve our fellow man 'til the last of our breaths. Josiah Henson's life symbolizes the definitive triumph of the human spirit over the impossible cruelty of slavery. His legacy of honor, nonviolence, and selfless generosity will live on in the hearts of millions.

His name is Josiah Henson.

And that is more than enough. [page 255]