

A Watermelon, a Post Card and the Fate of Old Man Henson

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Grey Roots Archival Collection 968.61.15

The book, *Broken Shackles*, begins with James “Old Man” Henson working on the streets of Owen Sound in August, 1888. He was earning money for the annual Emancipation Day celebration boat cruise. *Broken Shackles* was written under the pseudonym Glenelg by one of the town’s most prominent citizens, John W. Frost Jr. He was a lawyer and later elected mayor in 1892 and 1893. Frost must have heard Henson’s stories over many years, the large African American having arrived in Owen Sound in the 1850s. By 1888, the stories were finally written down and formed the basis for *Broken Shackles*. Henson would have been at least 90 years old, but was still doing manual labour.

Henson was listed in two successive censuses, with the usual inconsistencies found in these types of records.

1871: James Henson, Age 60, Widowed, African, B. Meth E., Owen Sound.

1881: James Henson, Age 82, Widowed, English, E. Meth., Owen Sound.

The 1881 census shows Henson living in the William and Hannah Jackson household. The Jacksons are listed as English in 1881, but as African in the 1871 census.

John Frost's book ends with Henson preaching at the British Methodist Episcopal Church, still in Owen Sound at the time of the book's writing. But the "Old Man" does not appear in the 1891 census. However, there is a clue as to what happened to him after 1888. A letter from New Jersey was received by Henson and the author included its contents in *Broken Shackles*.

Medford, July 5, 1888

Dear Uncle James:

It is with the greatest pleasure that I write informing you of the people of Medford. Those that are living are well. Uncle Stephen gave us your address. I will tell you about the people of old Medford. Father is an old man now, not able to do anything much. Mother is living and is well, and both send their love to you. We live in the same place yet. A great many of the folks are dead and gone. Your daughters Comfort and Rose are both dead also. Uncle Isaac Shockley and his wife are also dead. Aunt Catherine, your wife, is still living. She was very low last winter; we thought she would have gone before now. Aunt Isabella is living and is well. Aunt Catherine is living with her. They live in a little village called Wrightsville. Please write to them, for Aunt Catherine is nearly wild to hear from you. Her address is Cinnaminson P.O., Burlington Co., N.J.

I do hope you are making preparations to make the blessed shore, so that if those who have seen you should never see you again in this world, they will see you on the other side of the River Jordan.

Please write soon, as we are anxious to hear from you, and we want you to come here and live with us. May God bless you is the desire of your niece,

Julia Truitt,

P.S. - Uncle John Truitt died last winter. His wife is dead also. I can't tell you how many of our people are gone.

In *From Quill to Ballpoint, 1591 - 1988*, Dorothy Vick wrote that "The publication of his (John Frost) book led to the reuniting of Jim Henson and his wife in Philadelphia." She

may have seen the July 1, 1927 *Owen Sound Daily Sun-Times* article "Watermelon Means of Uniting Escaped Slave With His Wife." The article includes the following information:

But it was a dispensation of Providence the day when Edward Ferguson gave Dad Henson the watermelon, for it led him back to Maryland, where he was united again to his wife of the slavery days. It happened in this manner. Taken with the photograph he set about to sell them among the friends in Owen Sound. By some means one got to a friend's house in Toronto where the details of Henson's life were known. One day a preacher of the American Episcopal Church (colored) was visiting at the Toronto home and in looking through the album came across Dad's picture with the watermelon. He became interested and learned the story. 'Why, I know an old lady named Henson, whose history corresponds with Henson's. She lives in Maryland.' With the preacher's aid correspondence was begun and the Maryland woman was identified as Henson's wife. Learning the fact, Henson doubled his diligence and sold many of his photographs, until he had enough money to take him back to Maryland, where he was united with his wife, who was living with a granddaughter, and thus his hopes and prayers were answered.

Henson's story must have been part of Grey County's oral history before being recorded in the *Sun-Times*. There are a few minor discrepancies in the article when compared to the family's letter. For instance, it mentions that Henson returned to Maryland. In Dorothy Vick's writings it is noted that the old couple reunited in Philadelphia. This is likely since the Pennsylvania city's train station was only 16 kilometres from the home of Catherine Henson in Wrightsville, a hamlet near Cinnaminson, New Jersey. Julia Truitt wrote from Medford, a town 20 kilometres east of Cinnaminson. Julia was listed as 52 years of age and from Maryland in the 1870 U.S. census. In the 1885 census, she is listed in a household with her husband Major and daughter Julia.

James Henson never made it into the American census records. However, New Jersey recorded the death of James Hensen (sic) on November 8, 1891 in Cinnaminson. His age is listed as 110. Catherine's death occurred three years later on November 11, 1894, at the recorded age of 90. After more than 30 years, the aged pair had just a short time together.

There is a small African American church in Wrightsville, New Jersey, which was established in 1873. Beside the church is an even older cemetery. When it first opened, it was known as the "Harmony Cemetery for Negroes." Old Man Henson may also have achieved some harmony at the end of his long and turbulent life. He was able to see his grandchildren for the first time, renew acquaintances with old family members, and to fulfill the promise with Catherine of "until death do us part."

Source material:

Broken Shackles: Old Man Henson, From Slavery to Freedom (Natural Heritage, 2007) is available for purchase in the Grey Roots Museum & Archives Gift Shop.

The original version of *Broken Shackles* is available online at:

http://archive.org/details/cihm_03264

The brochure Tour Guide – African American Historic Sites – Burlington County New Jersey is available online through the Burlington County, New Jersey website:

www.co.burlington.nj.us