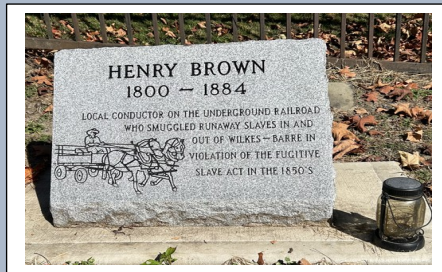


HENRY BROWN

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD CONDUCTOR

WHEN?
c. 1800-1884

WHERE?
Wilkes-Barre, PA



EVENT
Brown was a conductor on the underground railroad

VOCABULARY
Abolitionist teamster
kettle white washer

The hay rustled in the back of the wagon. Uncle Henry pulled on the reins to stop the horses. “Everything ok back there?” The reply came in a hoarse whisper, “Yes, sir.” While the dialogue is made up, the scenario could well have taken place. “Uncle” Henry was the nickname of Henry Brown who lived in Wilkes-Barre. The Black abolitionist would hitch his wagon with a load of hay and travel toward Harrisburg from Wilkes-Barre late at night to get runaway slaves who were making their way north. That is the reason for the engraving of the wagon and horses portrayed on his tombstone. The escapees would hide under the hay during the trip. He would then transport them to his home where he and his wife, Cathren, would hide them.

The couple kept the runaways behind a trap door in the middle of their Northampton Street home (Wilkes-Barre Record). Their daughter reported that “the family kept two big kettlefuls of hot water on cranes in front of the fireplace to throw on slaveholders if they tried to break in” (Wilkes-Barre Record). When Uncle Henry thought it safe, he loaded the slaves under the hay on his wagon and transported them toward Pleasant Valley (now Avoca). They were then transferred to William Gildersleeve another city resident who would take the escapees farther north most often to Montrose though sometimes to Scranton.

Henry, (not to be confused with Henry “Box” Brown from Philadelphia), was born as a free Black in Maryland around 1800 or 1801. The 1860 U.S. census lists his occupation as a white washer while in 1870 he is a carpenter. He also worked as a teamster. He and his wife Cathren were married in the home of George R. Wright’s grandmother where they were employed. The couple had three children, Sarah, Essbella (sometimes referred to as Isabella), and a son John. When Essbella was interviewed at age 102 about her life, she spoke about her parents’ exploits in the Underground Railroad. Her older sister, Sarah, married Moses Morris who fought in the Civil War with the famed 54th Massachusetts Regiment under the command of Robert Gould Shaw.

An active member of the A.M.E. Zion Church in Wilkes-Barre, Henry Brown died in August of 1884. He is buried in the Wilkes-Barre city cemetery near the grave markers of U.S. Colored Troops. In 2023 he received a marker for his grave through the efforts of the Shawnee Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, Wilkes-Barré Preservation Society, Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, the Wilkes-Barre City Cemetery Committee, and Rediscovery Ancestry Through Culture and Education.

The death certificate for Henry Brown, a newspaper obituary from *The State Journal*, and census information from 1860, 1870, 1880 along with his will are online as well as the

information included in the online resources at the end of this article.

ONLINE RESOURCES

[WVIA HENRY BROWN](#)

PRINT RESOURCES

Moss, Edmund. *African Americans in the Wyoming Valley 1178-1990*. Wilkes-Barre, PA: Wyoming Historical and Geological Society. 1992.

"Woman, 102, Says Parents Hid Escaped Slaves Here". The Wilkes-Barre Record. 31, May, 1938.

(Excerpt included here for the reader.)

Woman, 102, Says Parents Hid Escaped Slaves Here

Centenarian's Longevity Credited to 'Plenty of Good Victuals'; Smoking a Comfort

"No, I wasn't a slave during the Civil War, but it still stands out in my mind, how in the dark of the night my father and mother used to hide slaves smuggled into Wilkes-Barre in the cellar of their home on Northampton Street, between Welles and Lincoln Street." The clear, deep voice came from the small, brown figure of Esabella Brown, a former nursemaid in the family of the late George R. Wright of South River Street and who, now in her 102nd year, spends all of her time in her home at 32 Cinderella Street.

"Underground Railroad Here

Led back to her Civil War days experiences, the small shrivelled woman recalled how her father used to start from Wilkes-Barre for Harrisburg with a big load of hay—meet colored Uncle Sam Jones halfway there, transfer a load of slaves to his wagon, hiding them under the hay and start back for Wilkes-Barre. Then, her father and mother Cathren Brown, partly Indian, would sneak the slaves through a trap door in the middle room of their Northampton Street home. She said: "My mother, Cathren, was a little woman but oh, dear, she had the courage and spunk of 20 men and she weren't afeared of the devil. She always kept two big kettlefuls of hot water on cranes in front of the fireplace to throw on slaveholders if they tried to break in. A Mrs. Rex helped her, she said, and it was common talk that the slaveholders used to say if they could get rid of Cathren Brown they could get the slaves. When things had quieted down my father would say, 'Well, Cathren, I got to go up to Pleasant Valley with a load of hay.' In the small hours he and the slaves would be well on their way in direction of Montrose to be met halfway by Mr. Gildersleeve, a white man who transported the load to Montrose."

Mrs. Brown says the slaveholders 'rid Mr. Gildersleeve on a rail' because he protected the slaves. If she lives to be 200 she'll never forget how one night her mother had to soak the shirt from one of the slaves, whose back was covered with welts by his master's whip.

Born in the old stone house of Capt. Riley at Newtown, Mrs. Brown is the only member of the old Zion Church on Northampton Street living. Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Brown, were married in home of George R. Wright's grandmother on South River Street where they were both employed. She was born a Brown, her first husband was a Sampson, a barber, father of their only child Frances A., and eight years after his death she married a John B. Brown, just a "snip" of a lad from Petersburg, Va., a water carrier in the Civil War, who came back from the war with Col. Orr of Wilkes-Barre. He later worked for the Stoddarts in this city for 45 years and died 21 years ago. Mrs. Brown's youngest brother used to drive express wagon for Col. Stark who owned a livery.