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Study: Slave's Stay Inspired 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
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CHARLESTON, S.C. — A Clemson University professor is convinced that Harriet Beecher Stowe might not have written "Uncle Tom's Cabin" if it not for a fugitive South Carolina slave she harbored for a night before starting the history-making novel.

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The book, which fueled the abolitionist cause and helped put the nation on the path toward the Civil War, was published in 1852 after being serialized the previous year. It became a bestselling book of the 19th century, second only to the Bible.

Stowe mentions harboring the slave in her Maine home in a late 1850 letter to her sister. She writes that "he was a genuine article from the 'Ole Carling State.'" While it is well-known to historians that Stowe harbored a slave, neither her letter nor her later writings mention his name.

Susanna Ashton, a professor of American literature at Clemson, says her research has convinced her the slave Stowe harbored was John Andrew Jackson. He was born a slave on a Sumter County, S.C., plantation and escaped in 1847, fleeing to Charleston and then stowing away between bales of cotton on a ship heading north.

Ashton's conclusions appear in this summer's edition of "Common-Place," the journal of the Massachusetts-based American Antiquarian Society.

After fleeing, Jackson settled in Salem, Mass. But when the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1850 by Congress — meaning even slaves who had escaped from the South could be returned to their owners — Jackson headed north through Maine to Canada.

Jackson later learned to read and write, went to Europe and his book "The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina" was published in in England in 1862. After the Civil War, Jackson made a living as a writer and lecturer.

In his book, Jackson recalls the encounter with Stowe, mentioning her by name.

"She took me in and fed me, and gave me some clothes and five dollars. She also inspected my back, which is covered with scars which I shall carry with me to the grave. She listened

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with great interest to my story," he wrote.

In Stowe's letter to her sister, the original of which is in the Beineke Library at Yale University, Stowe notes the effect that night had on her family.

"There hasn't been anybody in our house (who) got waited on so abundantly and willingly for ever so long. These negroes possess some mysterious power of pleasing children for they hung around him and seemed never tired of hearing him talk and sing," she wrote.

In a recent interview, Ashton said: "Was it Jackson who was hidden by Stowe as a fugitive in Brunswick Maine? I'm 99.9 percent sure. That seems absolutely true. I think he was an inspiration for the novel. I think his pain touched her and helped her to act."

Ashton said after "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was published, a lot of blacks and former slaves wanted to meet Stowe and sought her endorsement.

"She was one of the biggest celebrities in the United States and had huge political and cultural clout," Ashton said. "It was only when I looked at the dates more closely I said wait a minute, Jackson met her before she wrote 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.' That's how the remarkable nature of this encounter began to unfold for me."

Stowe would later say she had a vision in a church in Brunswick — the pew is marked — where she imagined the ending of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and went home to write.

Ashton suggests Stowe never mentioned Jackson in her later writing because she would have had to admit she violated the Fugitive Slave Act.

Katherine Kane, executive director of the Harriett Beecher Stowe Center in Hartford, Conn., pointed out that critics have said Stowe, as a northerner, was writing about a section of the country where she had little firsthand experience.

Although born in Connecticut, Stowe spent 20 years in Cincinnati, just across the river from Kentucky, a slave state.

"I don't think we want to devalue the time in Cincinnati," Kane said, adding that Stowe was an abolitionist who would have seen owners hiring out their slaves for work. She also had servants in her household who were former slaves and collected stories of others writing about slavery, Kane said.

So, did Jackson prompt Stowe to write the book?

"Quite frankly that might be," Kane said, although she noted that it seemed Stowe was moving toward the book for some time.

"When you look at her accumulated letters from that time, you see it starting to build," she said. "But it gives me goose bumps that Dr. Ashton has been able to identify this unnamed person who was in the household at the time."

She added: "From the Stowe Center's point of view, we are trying to use all this history because it's important to us all today. Here we are still talking about "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and its impact, and the more we know about the individuals who inspired the story, the better it is."

On the Internet:

Ashton essay about Stowe and Jackson: <http://common-place.org/vol-13/no-04/ashton/>



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