Today in History - June 5

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Today's Stories: **Uncle Tom's Cabin**

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Uncle Tom's Cabin

On **June 5**, 1851, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* began to appear in serial form in *The National Era*, an abolitionist weekly published in Washington, D.C. Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery story was published in forty installments over the next ten months. For her story Mrs. Stowe was paid $300.

> *In matters of art there is but one rule, to paint and to move. And where shall we find conditions more complete, types more vivid, situations more touching, more original, than in Uncle Tom?*
>
> George Sand

Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1811-1896, [ca. 1880], Prints & Photographs Division

Although the *National Era* had a limited circulation, its audience increased as reader after reader passed their copies along to one another. In March 1852, a Boston publisher decided to issue *Uncle Tom's Cabin*[] as a book and it became an instant best-seller. Three hundred thousand copies were sold the first year, and about two million copies were sold worldwide by 1857. For a three-month period Stowe reportedly received $10,000 in royalties. Across the nation people discussed the novel and debated the most pressing sociopolitical issue dramatized in its narrative: slavery.

Because *Uncle Tom's Cabin* so polarized the abolitionist and anti-abolitionist debate, some claim that it is one of the causes of the Civil War. Indeed, when President Lincoln received its author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, at the White House in 1862, legend has it he exclaimed, "So this is the little lady who made this big war!"

For some sixty-five years after its debut, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was frequently presented on stage. According to the author of the 1913 article The Negro on the American Stage, *Even today there are about four Uncle Tom's Cabin Companies on tour, and at least two of them are doing a good business.*" By the late 1800s, however, productions often caricatured Stowe's more carefully depicted literary figures. While at first white actors usually played all the parts (rendering characters such as the slaves Uncle Tom, Eliza, and Little Eva in blackface), some productions starred African-American actors and singers.

Theatrical Posters

A black actor, Sam Lucas (for whom the song "Uncle Tom's Gwine to Stay"[] was written) first played the title role on film in 1914. By 1927, at least seven silent film versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been made. More recently, *The King and I* — a Broadway play, movie, and animated feature film — contains a stylized version of Uncle Tom's Cabin within its own story. Over time *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been translated into at least twenty-three languages.

Uncle Tom's Cabin, Uncle Tom], N.Y.: A.S. Seen's Union Square Print., c1886, Posters: Performing Arts Posters, Prints & Photographs Division

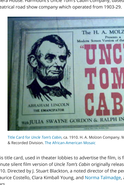
George Peck's Grand Revival of Stetson's Uncle Tom's Cabin, [Logan], N.Y.: A.S. Seen's Litho. Print, [1886], Posters: Performing Arts Posters, Prints & Photographs Division

George Peck's Grand Revival of Stetson's Uncle Tom's Cabin, [Eliza], N.Y.: A.S. Seen's Litho. Print, [1886], Posters: Performing Arts Posters, Prints & Photographs Division

Uncle Tom's Cabin, [Topsy], N.Y.: A.S. Seen's Union Square Print., [1886], Posters: Performing Arts Posters, Prints & Photographs Division

Poster for Production of Uncle Tom's Cabin[], Monday, September 27 (year unknown), The African-American Experience in Ohio[], Ohio History Connection

This poster publicized Harmount's production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the Wilmington, Ohio, Opera House. Harmount's Uncle Tom's Cabin Company, based in Williamsport, Ohio, was a theatrical road show company which operated from 1903-29.



Title Card for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ca. 1919, H. A. Molton Company: Motion Picture, Broadcasting & Recorded Division, The African-American Mosaic

This title card, used in theater lobbies to advertise the film, is from a rare issue of a thirty-minute silent film version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* originally released by Vitagraph Studio in 1919. Directed by J. Stuart Blackton, a noted director of the period, this version featured Maurice Costello, Clara Kimball Young, and Norma Talmadge, all of whom became major stars.

Anthony Burns, John Andrews, engraver: Boston, Massachusetts: R. M. Edwards, printer, c1855, Cartoons Prints, American, Prints & Photographs Division

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- The harsh Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, was one of the factors that impelled Harriet Beecher Stowe to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The above buzz image of Anthony Burns, whose trial under the Act touched off riots and protests by abolitionists and citizens of Boston in 1854, was drawn from a daguerreotype. The print depicts scenes from his life.
- Read *Documentary History of Slavery in the United States* from the collection African American Perspectives: Materials Selected from the Rare Book Collection for a concise review of slavery in the US, between 1774 and 1850, when the Fugitive Slave Act was passed.
- Search across the Library's website on the term *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to find a wide variety of material concerning the book, subsequent theatrical adaptations, and related music. See, for example, the musical pieces "Eliza's Flight," published in 1852 and "Eva to Her Papa."
- The National Era, the newspaper that first published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in serial form, is included in Chronicling America, a database of historic American newspapers. Use the research guide Slavery and Abolition: Topics in Chronicling America to help guide your search on these topics in the database. Selected articles are also provided.
- Search on the term *Harriet Beecher Stowe* in the Cornell University Library Making of America Collection to find contemporary material written by and concerning Mrs. Stowe.
- Between 1852 and the Civil War, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* evoked at least twenty-five proslavery ("anti-Tom") novels. Search on the term *slavery* in First-Person Narratives of the American South to reveal many non-fiction accounts of slavery. Topics in Tom by John Hill Aughey, describes the plight of abolitionists living in the South at the time of secession while quoting a Southern perspective on slavery.
- Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938 contains more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves. Read An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives to learn the background of this ambitious effort of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. Also select "Photographs" from the Subject Index to display images that accompany many of the narratives.
- Search on the term *Uncle Tom* in America Singing: Nineteenth-Century Song Sheets to find song sheets based on the drama of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," at the National Theater, N.Y.

- Search on the names *Jenny Lind* and *Mark Twain* in Today in History to learn more about two contemporaries and admirers of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Search on the term *Walden* to learn about another American literary classic which addressed a social conundrum.

- The African-American Pamphlet Collection presents 396 pamphlets published from 1824 through 1909 by African-American authors and others who wrote about slavery, African colonization, Emancipation, Reconstruction, and related topics. For example, Uncle Tom in England presents a review of Stowe's book as published in the London Times on September 3, 1852. This pamphlet collection is part of African American Perspectives: Materials Selected from the Rare Book Collection.

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