Civil Rights Activists: Harriet Beecher Stowe

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Synopsis: Harriet Beecher Stowe was born on June 14, 1811, in Litchfield, Connecticut. Her father, Lyman Beecher, was a leading minister and the head of a family committed to social justice. Stowe achieved national fame for her anti-slavery book, "Uncle Tom’s Cabin." She died in Hartford, Connecticut, on July 1, 1896.

Early Life

Harriet Elisabeth Beecher was born on June 14, 1811, in Litchfield, Connecticut. She was one of 13 children born to minister Lyman Beecher and his wife, Roxanna Foote Beecher, who died when Harriet was a child. Harriet's seven brothers grew up to be ministers. One was the famous leader Henry Ward Beecher. Her sister, Catharine Beecher, was a writer and teacher who helped to shape Harriet’s views. Another sister, Isabella, became a leader in women’s rights.
Harriet enrolled in a school run by Catharine. She studied what young men usually study. At age 21, she moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where her father had become the head of the Lane Theological Seminary.

Lyman Beecher became an abolitionist following the pro-slavery fighting called the Cincinnati Riots of 1836. The abolitionists wanted to end slavery. They wanted to free the millions of black Americans who were kept as slaves and forced to do whatever their masters wanted.

Beecher’s thoughts strengthened the abolitionist views of his children, including Harriet. She found like-minded friends in a reading group called the Semi-Colon Club. Here, she formed a friendship with fellow member and seminary teacher Calvin Ellis Stowe. They were married on January 6, 1836. They later moved to Brunswick, Maine, near Bowdoin College.

**Career**

Harriet and Calvin Stowe shared a dedication to ending slavery. In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law. The law upset abolitionists because it required the return of runaway slaves and took away their rights. Stowe decided to express her feelings by writing a book about slavery. She based her work on the life of Josiah Henson, a former slave, and on her own experiences. Starting in 1851, parts of Stowe’s book, “Uncle Tom's Cabin,” appeared in the National Era newspaper. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was printed as a complete book the following year. It quickly became a best-seller.

Stowe's story about the effects of slavery captured the country’s attention. Embraced in the North, the book aroused anger in the South. Fans staged shows based on the story, with the characters of Tom, Eva and Topsy becoming icons.

After the Civil War began, Stowe went to Washington, D.C., and met with President Abraham Lincoln. According to a popular story, Lincoln said, “So you are the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war.” It is not known if Lincoln actually said this. Still, the story shows that people thought Stowe’s book played a part in the split between North and South.

**Later Life**

Stowe continued to write and to champion causes for the rest of her life. She wrote different types of works, including a long list of book-length stories. While none of these matched "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in popularity, Stowe remained well known and respected in the North. She often was asked to give her opinion on political problems.


Stowe died on July 1, 1896, in Hartford, Connecticut. She was 85.
Legacy

Today, some of Stowe's homes are preserved in her memory. The Harriet Beecher Stowe House in Brunswick, Maine, is where Stowe wrote "Uncle Tom's Cabin." In 2001, Bowdoin College bought the house. The college raised money to repair it.

The Harriet Beecher Stowe House in Hartford, Connecticut, is where Stowe lived during her final years. The home is now a museum and a library. The home of Stowe's neighbor, Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, is also open to the public.