

00:00 Nate diMeo: From the Maximum Fun Network, this is the Memory Palace, I'm Nate DiMeo.

00:06 ND: Picture a box, it's made of wood, maybe pine. It's simple, three feet long, two feet wide, two-and-a-half feet deep and open at the top.

00:20 Now, picture yourself climbing inside. Sit down, feel the wood against your back.

00:29 Run your fingers along the rough surface of the boards. Maybe you have to hug your knees to your chest just to fit inside.

00:37 Picture someone closing the box, nailing it shut. Picture the darkness.

00:46 Picture a man, five-foot-eight but big, barrel chested, nearly 200 pounds. His hair is parted in a thick wave, like Frederick Douglass when he was young. His hand is wrapped in a bandage. This man is Henry Brown. He was born bound in 1815 on a Virginia plantation owned by a man who treated Henry and his family well, which is a relative term.

01:14 ND: They weren't beaten. They were well fed and clothed and sheltered. But even as a boy, Henry Brown knew that wasn't enough because he felt that love and friendship were the most important things in life.

01:27 And he knew that if you were not free, those things could be taken from you at any moment. And when he was a young man they were, when the man who owned him and his family died.

01:39 And his assets were distributed among his four sons. And Henry Brown and his mother and father, and his sisters and brothers were among those assets.

01:49 Henry Brown went to work in Richmond in a factory owned by the man's son. He worked 14- and 16-hour days baling and boxing the tobacco leaves that had been cleaned and separated from seeds by women and children.

02:03 The factory's overseer would beat slaves. He tied a feverish man to a post in the center of the warehouse as an object lesson, teaching people what would happen if they tried to take a sick day.

02:16 ND: But this man was better, less cruel than many men in his position. Better, Henry had heard in rumors and whispers, than the men who now owned his parents and his siblings. But he would never know for sure because he would never see the family he loved again.

02:34 And so, when Henry Brown fell in love with a slave named Nancy he went to his owner. He told him he wanted to marry Nancy. He wanted to start a family with Nancy.

02:45 But he needed to know, he needed the man's word that they wouldn't be separated, that she wouldn't be sold. He said he would work his whole life for this man, he would never complain, he would never make a run for freedom if the man could make that promise.

03:01 The man gave him his word and gave him his blessing and Henry Brown and Nancy Brown started a family. They had three kids in three years. And Henry Brown was as happy as he could ever expect to be.

03:18 ND: And then the man who owned him changed his mind. Nancy was getting pregnant too often. She was missing too much work. And so, he sold her and her children.

03:31 Henry Brown was at work when he found out, his family had already been taken from his home. And so, Henry Brown did the only thing a man in his position could do. He finished his shift.

03:44 And when he was done and he was allowed to leave he ran out of the factory and through the streets of Richmond in the dying light of day to a corner where a thick crowd of slaves stood, where they always stood whenever their friends and family were marched away from them.

03:59 And Henry Brown got there in time to catch a glimpse of his oldest child in a wagon bound for North Carolina, and in the columns of people that trailed behind it, men and women, older children, dozens and dozens shuffling through the dust of the stone street he found Nancy. Rope around her neck, an iron band around her wrists.

04:20 And he ran to her and he slipped his hand between her bound hands and laced his fingers in hers. And he walked with her in the slow march for four miles and then watched as she disappeared into the night.

04:38 And Henry Brown swore this wouldn't be the last time he would see her. He found a man named Smith who knew another man named Smith who knew men in the North who would help Henry Brown if he could somehow find a way to escape to Philadelphia.

04:54 Picture a box, three feet long, two feet wide, two-and-a-half feet deep in the center of the floor of a shoemaker's shop owned by a man named Smith. Now, picture Henry Brown, five foot eight, 200 pounds, climbing into that box.

05:10 His hand is wrapped in a bandage because the only way he could leave work long enough to even attempt an escape was if you were injured. So, he stuck his finger in sulfuric acid until it ate to the bone and they let him take a day off.

05:25 Picture Henry Brown sitting in the bottom of the box, pulling his knees to his chest and leaning forward, curling himself into a ball so he could fit, as the man named Smith shut the top of the box, nailed it closed, and all went dark.

05:43 Picture this man named Smith, a white man, only four foot nine inches tall, rolling the box in the dolly to the shipping clerk whispering to Brown to keep quiet, telling the clerk that this simple wooden box marked "this end up" contained shoes and fragile things,

06:01 and asking the man to be careful, because a lot could happen to the contents of a box that had to travel 250 miles by wagon and locomotive and steamboat.

06:11 Now picture this box and the man inside it as it made that journey, 27 hours. Picture Henry Brown inside as he felt himself lift off the ground, as he hoped he'd remain upright, as he hoped nothing on the wagon would block his air holes. Picture his relief as they didn't.

06:29 And picture a moment when the box was thrown onto the back of a train, and when it was transferred onto a steamship and placed upside down and he spent eight hours on his head, afraid his eyes would burst from their sockets, sure he would die, but unable to cry out because there were men sitting on top of the box, hanging out and drinking beers.

06:56 And then picture the box being opened in a fancy living room in Philadelphia and Henry Brown stepping out of the box a free man. Word got around. A man doesn't successfully mail his way out of bondage without word getting around.

07:14 His escape was celebrated by abolitionists throughout the North. His biography came out in September of 1849, just four months after he had come out of the box and Henry Brown became Henry "Box" Brown. And he was good at the role.

07:27 He had a hell of a story to tell and he told it well. All over the Northeast, people paid to hear him tell the story and hear him talk of his plan to one day earn enough money to buy freedom for his wife and his children, and reunite his family in the North.

07:44 But by the next year, things had changed. The man named Smith was arrested for trying to ship other slaves North, and Frederick Douglass himself was blaming Henry Brown, saying his fame had hurt the cause of liberty and cut off a route to freedom.

07:57 Henry Brown was beaten and nearly killed by thugs on his way to give a talk in Providence. And then Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act and Brown was not only a fugitive slave who could be legally kidnapped and taken back to his owner in Virginia, he was a famous fugitive slave.

08:13 So he left for England where things would be different and safe, vowing to return one day and free his family.

08:24 And things were different in England. He arrived in the fall of 1850 and found that he was already famous. This country that had banned slavery throughout its colonies 17 years before, was fascinated by slavery in its former colonies.

08:39 People lined up to hear the story that they had read about in the papers straight from the man who'd lived it. He sold out a month of shows in Liverpool.

08:48 He was joined on the road by the man named Smith, who had avoided prison thanks to the help of his wealthy friends up North and the two of them played concert halls in London and churches in the Midlands, and public houses in the Irish countrysides. Hundreds of performances. Money rolled in.

09:08 And then Smith told Brown it was time to go. He had enough money to buy the freedom of his wife and his children, and his parents and his siblings, several times over. It was time to go back and be a powerful symbol of freedom as the man who came out of the box.

09:23 But Henry Brown didn't want to go back. He didn't want to be a symbol of freedom when he could simply be free. Because what happens when you open the box, or you step out of the back of the cave, or whatever allegory you want to try to apply to this real man, and his real life?

09:43 A man who is born bound in the land of the free, who had first risked his life to go to a place where he was not bound, but he was not safe, and who then found his way to a place to where he was beloved, a place from which the people he had once loved so much were so far away, in every way.

10:04 Henry Brown was a free man, and he was free to choose. He was free to make money or make mistakes, and make any life he could in the time he had left.

10:15 And so the man named Smith left, back to America, to be an important man in an important movement for freedom. And Henry Brown stayed to be a free man.

10:29 Henry Brown didn't return to America until 1875, 10 years after the Civil War had freed the slaves without him. He was accompanied by his daughter Annie, and a new wife whose name no one now knows.

10:43 He would die several years later, no one knows when, and no one knows where. But they know he performed as a magician. He had for years in England, long after the Henry "Box" Brown story had worn itself out.

10:59 But the box itself had not. That same box he had climbed out of 26 years before was part of the act.

11:13 Picture a box, a simple wooden box, three feet long, two feet wide, two and a half feet deep, sitting in the spotlight in the center of a stage, at a magic show somewhere in America.

11:27 And picture a man in his 60s, 5'8" but stooped at the shoulders after years of living a singular life. His hair's gone white, like Frederick Douglass when he was old. Picture him climbing into the box and disappearing.

11:49 [music]