

Henry Parker

■ Biography

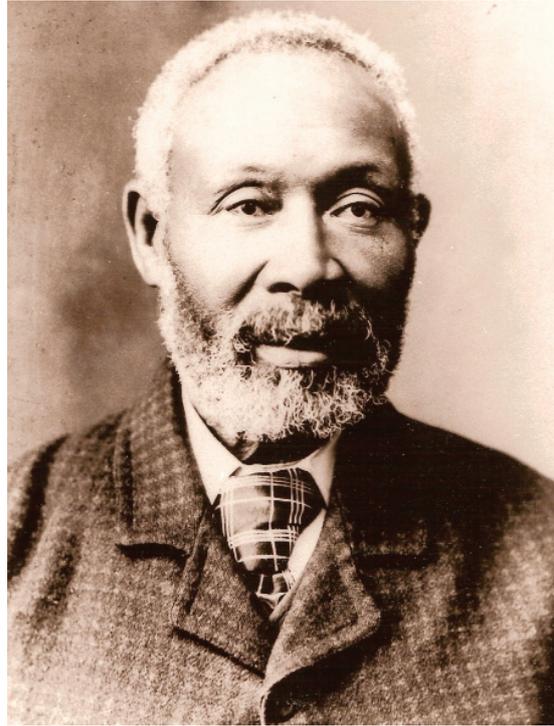
Date of birth: 1826

Place of birth: Florida

Date of arrival in UK: 1850s

Henry's descendants believe that his earliest memory is of being a young child of about five or six years old, when he was separated from his mother and sold as a slave to a plantation owner in Florida, America.

When he was about twenty years old, Henry managed to escape from the plantation and a family of Quakers took him in and helped him to make his way to Massachusetts, a state further north in America.



Henry Parker
Photo courtesy of Jenny Randall

This is similar to the route to freedom taken by other slaves who used the underground railway. This was not a real railway, but the name for a system of escape when a slave who had run away from the Southern states of America could gain freedom in the North, where new laws made slavery illegal.

Now he was free, Henry was able to work on a British ship, and for some reason he got off at Bristol. The city he arrived in had many very poor areas and overcrowded housing. Henry probably saw the local Baptist Church as a means of support and they welcomed him as a speaker who would attract audiences to their services and public events.

It is known from the records that he lived as a lodger near St. Mary Redcliffe. He put his birth down as 1826, his age as twenty-five years, and his occupation as labourer in the Census. He also put Bristol down as his birthplace, perhaps because he did not know where he was born, or maybe because he felt that Bristol was the start of a new life for him.

Henry managed to get work as a stonemason and then met and married a young woman called Louisa and they had seven children altogether. By 1871, the family had moved to St. Paul's and he was also a lay preacher at Hook Mills Church, now known as Ivy Church.

Henry's son George, was a shoemaker and became a local preacher like his father. His daughter, Emma, had thirteen children who survived to adulthood. One of her children, Bertie Head, died in the First World War.

By 1891, at the age of sixty five, Henry was still working as a stonemason and at that time lived with his wife, his daughter Celia, his son Thomas, his daughter-in-law Mary, two grandsons and a granddaughter.

Henry is remarkable as an escaped slave who had to survive with his wife as a poor, dual heritage family in a mainly white city, which had been a major port of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. With seven children to feed and clothe, times were hard. The threat of illness and disability leading to unemployment was a constant fear, so it is little wonder Henry worked until he was 70 years old. Henry is buried in an unmarked grave at Greenbank Cemetery in Easton.

This is a story of survival, bravery and courage and should be an inspiration to us all.

Henry Parker

■ Teachers' Background Notes

(Based on an interview with Jenny Randall, his descendant)

Family legend has it that Henry's earliest memory dates from being a young child of about five or six years old, and that he remembered being separated from his mother and sold to a plantation owner in Florida.

The native Americans who inhabited Florida had fought the French for the area. The Spanish then took it from the French and finally the United States gained it in 1821.

When he was a young man, approximately twenty years old, Henry managed to escape from the Florida plantation. A family of Quakers took him in and helped him to make his way to Boston, Massachusetts.

This is similar to the route to freedom taken by two famous escapees, Ellen and William Craft, who used the underground railway in 1850 where they were helped by anti-slavers in Boston. The underground railway was not a real railway but the name for a system of escape. A slave who had run away from the Southern states of America could gain freedom in the North where new laws made slavery illegal.

Once in Boston, Henry was able to obtain work on a British ship on its way to Germany, but for some reason he got off at Bristol. The city he arrived in had areas of extreme poverty, disease, appalling sanitation and atrocious, overcrowded housing. Henry probably saw the local Baptist Church as a means of survival and support. The church leaders would have welcomed him as a new congregational member and also as a speaker who would attract audiences to their services and public events.

It is known from the 1851 census that he was a lodger at a dwelling in the parish of St. Mary Redcliffe. He put his estimated birth down as 1826, his age as twenty-five years, and his occupation as labourer. He put Bristol down as his birthplace, perhaps because he did not know where he was born or because he felt that Bristol was the start of a new life for him.

Henry met and married a young woman called Louisa and they had seven children altogether. The 1861 census information tells us that they lived in the parish of St. Phillip and St. Jacob with their son George, and

daughters Celia, Emma, Louise and Mary. He was working as a stonemason at this time.

By 1871, the family had moved to St. Paul's and there were two more children, Thomas and Alice. Henry's job is listed on the census as a freestone sawyer, which is probably similar to a stonemason. He was also a lay preacher at Hook Mills Church, now known as Ivy Church in St Paul's.

Henry's son George married Elizabeth Slocombe on 28th May 1871 and they lived at Leek Lane. He was a shoemaker and became a local preacher like his father. Henry's daughter, Emma, had thirteen children who survived to adulthood. One of her children, Bertie Head, died in the First World War. He wrote a letter to his sister Mabel just before he died. It can be found at Bristol Record Office.

By 1881, Henry Parker had moved to 2 Paradise Cottages, still in St. Paul's, with his four youngest daughters and his youngest son. His son George and his wife, Elizabeth, lived at 4 Railway Terrace next door to Elizabeth's mother, father and brother.

By 1891, at the age of sixty five, Henry was still working as a freestone sawyer and was head of a household, which comprised his wife, his daughter Celia, his son Thomas, his daughter-in-law Mary, two grandsons and a granddaughter.

Henry is remarkable as an escaped slave who had to survive with his wife as a poor, dual heritage family in a predominantly white city, which had been a major port of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. With seven children to feed and clothe, times were hard. The threat of severe illness and disability leading to unemployment was a constant fear, so it is little wonder Henry worked until he was 70 years old. Henry is buried in an unmarked grave at Greenbank Cemetery in Easton.

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