

# Harriet Beecher Stowe

1811–1896



**WHY SHE MADE HISTORY** An accomplished author, Harriet Beecher Stowe is best known for her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Her story exposed the brutality of slavery and increased tensions between the North and South prior to the Civil War.



*As you read the biography below, think about the impact *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had on the Civil War. Why do you think the book stirred such strong emotional responses?*



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In the years prior to the Civil War, people in the North and South lived very different lives. Ultimately, the northern and southern states were divided by their positions on the issue of slavery. Author Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* increased the tensions that led to war.

Harriet Beecher was born in 1811 in Litchfield, Connecticut. She was the daughter of a prominent Congregationalist minister and a member of a highly intellectual family. Harriet attended the Litchfield Female Academy, and later the Hartford Female Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut, which was run by her sister. Beecher taught at the seminary after graduating.

In 1832 Beecher and her father and sister moved to Cincinnati, Ohio. Her father became president of the Lane Theological Seminary, and Beecher began teaching at another school started by her sister. It was in Cincinnati that she met and married clergyman and professor Calvin Ellis Stowe. She also began writing stories for local journals.

For 18 years, Harriet Beecher Stowe lived in Cincinnati, just across the river from a slave-holding community. She met many fugitive slaves there, and learned about life in the South. In 1849 her 18-month-old son Samuel Charles died from cholera. Stowe said the experience taught her what a slave mother must go through when her child was taken from her.

In 1850 the Fugitive Slave Act was passed. The law was designed to encourage people in northern states to help capture and return runaway slaves. That same year, Stowe began writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She published sections of the book in an antislavery newspaper. The book tells the story of a fictional slave, Tom. Tom is a faithful slave who is sold, and resold, and eventually dies from a beating at the hands of his owner.

**The Nation Splits Apart****Biography**

When *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in book form, it sold over 300,000 copies in its first year. It was also turned into a stage play. The book was a hit with abolitionists, but it was hated by southerners who supported slavery. The story stirred antislavery and pro-slavery sentiments, and increased tensions between the North and South prior to the Civil War. In fact, upon meeting Stowe, President Abraham Lincoln reportedly said: "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war."

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the focus of criticism and controversy. In response, Stowe published *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1853. This book tried to provide answers to the questions raised by critics. Stowe also began traveling in Europe and speaking to antislavery organizations.

The story of Uncle Tom was not Stowe's only attempt to communicate her position on a social issue through fiction. She continued to write, much as her father preached, to address social issues. She wrote about the role of women, reform, Christianity, and domestic politics.

Stowe published her last book in 1878. It was a fictionalized memoir of her childhood. By then many critics dismissed her writing as melodramatic and her characters as stereotypes. She died in Hartford in 1896.

During the women's movement of the 1970s, Stowe's writings saw a resurgence in popularity, and her role in speaking out for the oppressed was again recognized. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* continues to be read and discussed for the role it played in bringing the nation's attention to the realities of slavery.

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

1. **Identify** Harriet Beecher Stowe was born into a prominent family. What did her father do?

2. **Summarize** What did *Uncle Tom's Cabin* come to symbolize?

**ACTIVITY**

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been presented as a stage play. With a group of students, select a scene from the play or the book to present to the class. Discuss the scenes presented. What did the scenes teach you about slavery and America in the years prior to the Civil War?