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In Brunswick (the pew is marked with a bronze plaque); they may know of the shock she experienced when she attended a slave auction as a young adult, seeing families torn apart and humans treated as cattle. And some may know of an encounter one evening, at her home in Brunswick, with an unknown fugitive slave, an event she never officially wrote about. Other than a brief mention of the man in a letter to her sister at the end of 1850, without using a name, Stowe was silent on the event.

Historians long wondered, who was the man? What was his experience in her home? What became of him?

Scholar Susanna Ashton, a professor of English at Clemson University in South Carolina, recently visited Bowdoin College’s archives, and spoke on campus about the identity of the mysterious figure. It was Ashton who, in researching the writings of a former slave named John Andrew Jackson alongside Stowe’s own letters and papers, put a name to the freedom-seeking man who sheltered in Stowe’s home. He shared his story, of fleeing his plantation in desperation after losing his wife and daughter in a sale to a Georgia landowners. Ashton is convinced that this man, who went to on to become a famous abolitionist lecturer in England – and later in the U.S. – is the man who came to Stowe’s door, and moved her to write a series of articles that would become “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” Ashton is currently doing research for the first biography of John Andrew Jackson.

Speaking to a room of students and faculty recently in Massachusetts Hall at Bowdoin, introduced by Bowdoin Stowe scholar and Associate Professor of Africana Studies and English Tess Chakkalakal, Ashton was animated about the discovery, about being able to put a face and identity onto Stowe’s inspiration.

“Stowe had seen slavery, she had traveled in Kentucky, she had seen auctions, and her brother had helped a few slaves escape…. But most of her experience with abolition was intellectual – hearing sermons, reading books, hearing endless discussions with her brainy brothers and parents and those
geeky progressive circles they moved in, that's how she learned about abolition," Ashton said. "But when you open your door to someone, it's a very different kind of experience, it's an experience about power, about kindness and commitment and danger. And Stowe opened her door. Seven weeks later, she sat in that [First Parish] pew, and had a vision of Uncle Tom being murdered, and then wrote 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'"

In an essay for the Common-Place Journal of the American Antiquarian Society, Ashton recounts putting the pieces together, after researching Jackson's 1862 memoir, "The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina," and reading newspaper clippings and letters by Stowe. The closest Stowe ever came to identifying the man was writing to her sister that he was "a genuine article from the 'Ole Carling State."" As to why

Stowe never identified Jackson further, Ashton writes in her essay: "Her illegal harboring of Jackson not only couldn't have been publicly mentioned in 1853 under penalty of prosecution, but it also would have been, almost by definition, undocumentable, and wouldn't in any substantive way have helped her establish her public 'authority' in constructing Uncle Tom's Cabin. It might even have served to reveal crucial details of the Underground Railroad network in Maine, something she would have scrupulously avoided."

Bowdoin's Chakkalakal explains the importance of identifying the fugitive slave who knocked on the door of 63 Federal Street.

"For one thing, it's the only existing slave narrative – that we know of at this point – documenting the meeting of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who became such an important figure in the abolitionist movement. She had exchanges and experiences with slaves before, mostly in Ohio and Kentucky, but here is a written account of her helping a fugitive, in Maine. It also lends credibility to her writing on the issue of slavery."

The letter from Stowe to her sister described a fairly benign scene:

"Now our beds were all full & before this law passed I might have tried to send him somewhere else As it was all hands in the house united in making him up a bed in our waste room & Henry & Freddy & Georgy seemed to think they could not do too much for him—There hasn't any body in our house got waited on so abundantly & willingly for ever so long— these negroes posses some mysterious power of pleasing children for they hung around him & seemed never tired of hearing him talk & sing."

Jackson’s telling of the occasion was more somber, as this passage from his memoir reveals.

"Just as I was beginning to be settled at Salem, that most atrocious of all laws, the 'Fugitive Slave Law,' was passed, and I was compelled to flee in disguise from a comfortable home, a comfortable situation, and good wages, to take refuge in Canada. I may mention, that during my flight from Salem to Canada, I met with a very sincere friend and helper, who gave me a refuge during the night, and set me on my way. Her name was Mrs. Beecher Stowe. She took me in and fed me, and gave me some clothes and five dollars. She also inspected my back, which is covered with scars which I shall carry with me to the grave. She listened with great interest to my story, and sympathized with me when I told her how long I had been parted from my wife Louisa and my daughter Jenny, and perhaps, for ever."

Further evidence of Jackson being the unnamed slave Stowe harbored comes from the fact that Jackson carried a letter of introduction from Stowe when he was lecturing in England. After several years in New Brunswick, he’d learned to read and write, and he traveled abroad to speak on the tragedy of slavery; he became something of a sensation, packing large auditoriums and churches, and, as Ashton noted in her talk, "he drew many more people than Frederick Douglass ever did." No doubt the success of “Uncle Tom's Cabin” gave special value to the letter Jackson carried from Stowe, which Ashton presumes he secured well after their encounter, perhaps by mail ("Uncle Tom’s Cabin” was published two years after Jackson’s stay in Stowe’s home). An entry in Jackson's memoir under a section entitled “Testimonials” reads:

"Edinburgh, 7th May, 1857.

“Mr. Jackson, on producing what seemed to me sufficient testimonials, and particularly a strong one from Mrs. Beecher Stowe, was allowed to deliver two lectures in my Church, these lectures were, I have reason to know, very creditable to him. I have no doubt of his being entitled to countenance and support in his laudable undertaking.

--THOS. CANDLISH, D.D., Minister of Free St. George's"

While Stowe went on to enjoy the success – controversial as it was – of “Uncle Toms’ Cabin” and continued writing well into her later years, Jackson spent his remaining years after the war in the U.S., lecturing and raising money for impoverished freemen of South Carolina. He even attempted to buy his master's plantation when he went bankrupt, with a “vision of having 40 black families living on it, in some kind of utopian, sharecropping dream,” said Ashton. While that never happened, Jackson did defy the odds and become a property owner. "This was Ku Klux Klan territory, blacks did not own property, everything was worked out very carefully to keep people from owning land," Ashton said. It's clear to see this part of the story delights Ashton, and she laughs over Jackson having the audacity – or, as she put it, the "chutzpah" – to even talk about purchasing his former owner's plantation.

It's unknown, at this point, where Jackson died. "He probably died somewhere in the mid-1890s, but I don't know where...he always said he wanted to die in South Carolina," Ashton said. "I don't know -- yet -- if that happened."

That would be more than appropriate, as Jackson was fond of saying that he belonged to no man, he “belonged to South Carolina.”
An electronic version of Jackson's memoir can now be found online, with only a few print versions known to exist.