

Biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe for Students

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) is one of America's most famous writers. Her best-known book is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an anti-slavery novel published in 1852.

Born in Litchfield, Connecticut in 1811, Harriet was called "Hattie" by her seven brothers and three sisters. Her father was a famous minister, Lyman Beecher, who guided the community with his powerful sermons and taught his children to be involved in the issues of the day. As a teenager, Harriet attended an all-girls school in Hartford run by her older sister, Catharine.

In 1832, Harriet moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where she was introduced to slavery debates, the Underground Railroad and fugitive slaves. She used her powers of observation and vivid imagination to begin her writing career. The true story of a runaway slave mother, who clasped her child in her arms as she fled from the slave state of Maryland to the free state of Ohio by jumping from ice floe to ice floe in the Ohio River became one of the most dramatic scenes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

While living in Ohio, Harriet married Calvin Stowe, a brilliant professor, who encouraged her writing career. They had seven children. After one of her sons died from cholera, a distraught Stowe wrote, "it was at his dying bed and at his grave that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn from her."

In 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law was passed, which punished anyone who offered runaway slaves food or temporary shelter. Harriet drew on her passionate anger at this unjust law, the death of her child and the personal accounts of former slaves to write her novel. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* first appeared in an abolitionist newspaper, then in book form in 1852. An immediate bestseller, the book received both high praise and harsh criticism and catapulted the issue of slavery, and Harriet, into the international spotlight.

When President Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1862, he is reported to have said, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this Great War." *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was certainly not the sole cause of the Civil War, but it stirred anti- and pro-slavery opinions held by the North and South that led to the Civil War.

In 1873, Harriet and her family moved into their Victorian cottage on Forest Street in the Hartford literary and social reform community known as Nook Farm. She lived there for 23 years. Her neighbors included writers Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) and C.D. Warner. Over the course of a long career as an author, Harriet wrote over thirty books and essays, poems, articles and hymns. However, no work had the impact of her first novel. By picking up her pen, Harriet Beecher Stowe had created sympathy for people who lived in bondage and motivated her readers to abolish slavery.