

## Mary Prince

---

Courtesy of Anti-Slavery International | [www.recoveredhistories.org](http://www.recoveredhistories.org)

---

Mary Prince was born into slavery in 1788 on a farm in Bermuda, at the time a British colony off the coast of Virginia, USA. When she was 12, she was sold for £20 to owners who treated her brutally; her mistress would frequently punch her head and it is thought that these blows may have led to Mary Prince's near blindness later on in life. She was also regularly flogged, sometimes while tied to a ladder and she finally ran away when her master struck her in the small of her back as violently as he could and lashed her until she could no longer stand. She never fully recovered from this beating. Five years later she was sold to a new owner and taken to Turks Island, where she witnessed murders and was repeatedly stripped naked, hung up by her wrists and beaten. Throughout her enslavement, Mary Prince had always shown a spirit of resistance and protest. As she was both born and sold into slavery in Bermuda, she had avoided the ordeals experienced by African slaves such as kidnapping, the Middle Passage, the period of 'seasoning' before being sold and the gruelling plantation work.

Apart from cultivating and selling crops she had also learned other skills such as milking cows, herding sheep and cattle, feeding animals, taking care of children, cooking for a family and doing the household chores. In this way she became extremely useful to her owners and through this gained courage and a sense of self worth that led her to freedom. The last period in her life that she spent as a slave was with a Bermudan merchant, John Wood and his wife, who took her to Antigua. A period of ill health initially dominated Mary Prince's life and caused her many problems with her new owners. They had heard that Mary Prince was a hard worker, but found themselves unable to exploit her as much as they had intended. Throughout their constant complaints about her job performance, the punishments, the floggings and probably the sexual harassment (as Mr Woods would have seen Mary Prince not just as his slave but also as his sexual property), Mary Prince stood up to the Woods. Without telling them of her plans, she married a religious and dedicated free black man, Daniel James, a carpenter and musician. This infuriated the Woods because it showed refusal to accept her role as a slave.

Mary Prince also used her time with the Woods to save for her freedom. By selling coffee, yams and other provisions to Ship's captains and washing clothes for money she eventually found herself in a position to negotiate her freedom.

When the Woods travelled to London in 1828, Mary Prince saw an opportunity for her freedom and asked if she could accompany them. They agreed to this and indeed she did eventually find freedom in England, but the battle was long and gruelling and

---

worsened Mary Prince's health considerably. The Woods continued to be as persistent and dominating towards Mary Prince, but unfortunately for them, their cultural arrogance, feelings of white superiority and fear blinded them to Mary Prince's intelligence. And although they did manage to prevent a discussion in the House of Commons about their behaviour as slave owners and delay the presentation of a petition gathered by Mary Prince (the first anti-slavery petition by a woman to the British Parliament), the Woods left England for Antigua without her. The case of Mary Prince had become public and the Woods were forced to give up their struggle to avoid any more embarrassment. Survival in London was a challenge for Mary Prince. She had very little money, she missed her husband and old friends and her health was getting her down. Eventually she heard of the Anti-Slavery Society who she turned to for help. She wanted desperately to return to Antigua but the Society told her that the laws of England could do nothing to ensure her freedom in Antigua. Finally, in December 1829, after a series of different jobs and lodgings Mary Prince was employed by the Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, Thomas Pringle and his wife. The Society helped Mary Prince as much as they could by offering her money from time to time and also by trying, although unsuccessfully, to persuade Mr Woods to let her return a free woman to her husband in Antigua. When this failed, Mary Prince decided she would write her autobiography to tell people in England the truth about slavery.

Mary Prince was the first black British woman to write and publish an autobiography, an angry account of slavery. Her 'History' also formed a central part of the British anti-slavery campaign and offered an important narrative to world history, because it was not only a story of suffering and human indignity but also one of the strengths and triumphs of the human spirit.

