

# HOG RIVER JOURNAL

## re: collections A “Tomitude”

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A Look at Objects in Collections in the Region Long before Star Wars or Harry Potter became cash cows for product merchandisers, the unprecedented popularity of Uncle Tom's Cabin caused eager profiteers to unleash a storm of decorative plates, games, lithographs, and other items based—sometimes quite loosely—on Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel.

Harriet Beecher Stowe published more than 30 works, but it was her best-selling novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin or Life Among the Lowly*, that brought her international celebrity and lasting fame. Serialized in 1851 in the anti-slavery newspaper *The National Era* and published in 1852, the book was an immediate success. Within days, 10,000 copies sold. By year's end, worldwide sales reached nearly 1.5 million. Only the Bible sold as well.

The popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made its images, particularly those based on the book's illustrations, recognizable across North America and Western Europe. Sensational theatrical productions, which Stowe neither approved nor profited from, capitalized on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and made such scenes even more familiar. The plays and traveling shows, known as “Tom Shows,” simplified Stowe's characters, altered her plot and incorporated minstrel show traditions. Perhaps most importantly to history, they also changed Stowe's young, strong, heroic Tom into a submissive, obedient, and aged figure. “Tom Shows” appeared on stage for nearly 75 years, and the earliest motion pictures used their familiar plots to lure audiences. The long lasting popularity of the dramatic productions is the basis of many of our modern attitudes toward Stowe's work.



Playwrights were not the only ones to profit from Stowe's fame without her consent. Would-be entrepreneurs also created *Uncle Tom's Cabin* memorabilia, known as “Tomitudes” and made of ceramic, fabric, or silver. These souvenirs came in a range of prices and appealed to an array of markets. Displaying costly items, such as this porcelain spill vase (c.1870; image shown) suggested support of Stowe's anti-slavery sentiments. Fans of the minstrel-like “Tom Shows” acquired cheaper, less skillfully made pieces that often depicted Tom and Stowe's other

characters in grossly stereotyped ways.

Spill vases, such as this one from the Stowe Center Collection, were produced in Paris for the American trade and shipped unpainted as “biscuit” to the United States where professional china painters readied them for the retail market. This vase depicts one of the book’s most popular scenes: Little Eva adorning Tom with jasmine wreaths. Another spill vase, also on display at the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center in Hartford, renders Eliza’s harrowing escape across the semi-frozen Ohio River.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin struck a nerve in American society and has found a permanent place in American culture. Controversial when first published, the story remains controversial today. Labeled America’s “first protest novel,” it has been both praised and criticized. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass, a contemporary of Stowe’s, called it an important weapon against slavery. Others have decried it for encouraging segregation and reflecting 19th-century racial biases. Uncle Tom’s Cabin was never as simple as it seemed. It still isn’t.

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For information on the ongoing exhibition Uncle Tom’s Cabin: “A Moral Battle Cry for Freedom” at the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, call 860-522-9258 (x-317) or visit [www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org](http://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org).