

★ IN THE NAME OF SCIENCE ★

Slavery could be a brutal institution. In the middle 1800s, Mr. Stevens, a large slaveowner from Georgia, fell seriously ill and was cared for by Dr. Hamilton. As a gesture of gratitude, Stevens told the doctor that if he ever needed a favor, his former patient would do anything to help. In conjunction with his medical practice, Dr. Hamilton researched cures for sunstroke. In Stevens's kind offer

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he found a monumental opportunity to further his studies. Rather than simply make hypotheses about potential cures, Dr. Hamilton borrowed one John Brown, a field slave who had belonged to Stevens for fourteen years. With John as the subject, Dr. Hamilton would now be able to compare his remedies firsthand. Of course, to keep John from missing his daily work in the fields, the experiments had to be conducted at night.

First the doctor ordered a hole dug three and a half feet deep, by three feet in length, by two and a half feet wide. Into the pit went fired, dried red oak bark, with the embers removed. Across the bottom the doctor put a plank with a stool. Brown was then

forced to strip and sit on the stool, while wet blankets were placed over the hole, locking in the heat. Hamilton allowed a slight gap in the blankets for Brown's head. After half an hour John Brown fainted. Dr. Hamilton then carefully measured the heat in the hole.

Every three or four days Dr. Hamilton repeated the experiment, each time with John taking one of the doctor's sunstroke remedies before descending into the hole. The time required for John to faint and the heat of the hole were meticulously recorded. Finally Dr. Hamilton concluded that cayenne pepper tea, a common household remedy at the time, afforded the best protection against heat. But every household had easy access to cayenne pepper. So Dr. Hamilton marketed pills containing ordinary flour, which, when dissolved in cayenne pepper tea—the instruction indicated—would give a person stamina and fortitude against sunstroke. Reportedly, Hamilton made a large fortune from the sale of his pills.

But the doctor was not through experimenting with John Brown. Next he tried to discover how deep John's black skin went, which left the slave with lifelong scars on his legs, hands, and feet. In all, Dr. Hamilton used John as a human guinea pig for approximately nine months. When the experiments made John too weak to work in the fields, he was transferred to the slave carpenter crew. John soon "got a liking for" this work and, in the end, claimed to be much happier swinging a hammer than he had been swinging his hoe in the fields.

SOURCE: John F. Bayliss, ed., *Black Slave Narratives* (New York: Collier, 1973), pp. 77–80.