

**TWELVE YEARS
A SLAVE
THE BLACK
HISTORY CLASSIC**

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SOLOMON IN HIS PLANTATION SUIT.

Solomon for Thiep

From the 1853 edition.

TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE

The Black History Classic

SOLOMON NORTHUP

With an Introduction by

DAVID FISKE



CAPSTONE

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is Available:

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9780857089069 (hardback)

ISBN 9780857089083 (epub)

ISBN 9780857089090 (ePDF)

INTRODUCTION

BY DAVID FISKE

Slavery is among the greatest stains on human history. Appropriating a person's ability and right to pursue a livelihood and life of his or her own choosing – not temporarily, but for the remainder of their life – is a gross violation of natural law.

In the United States, the legacy of slavery – born out of endemic racism – is a cross the nation still bears. We all wish that slavery had been erased from our communities much earlier than it was. Slave narratives like *Twelve Years a Slave* rend the heart of every reader, and are a portal for deeper understanding of what happened.

This Introduction looks at the contribution of Solomon Northup's book to that understanding. I will try to give an account of the world in which Northup lived, the man himself, the kidnapping phenomenon, and finally how far we have come on slavery since *Twelve Years a Slave* was written.

My Solomon Northup journey began one day in the 1990s, on a visit to the Old Fort House Museum in Fort Edward, New York. It is a place with a rich history (including having once hosted George Washington), but what drew my attention was the fact that an African American named Northup had once lived there as a housekeeper with his wife. I learned that he had been kidnapped before the Civil War, sold into slavery, then rescued years afterward. I was especially struck that, at a time when there were few African American authors, Northup had written a book.

Having obtained a copy of *Twelve Years a Slave*, like most people I found it riveting and began to wonder about the rest of the story. Northup's narrative ends in 1853, the year he was liberated and rejoined his family. But what was the remainder of his life like? He had experienced horrific things as an enslaved man and must have had trouble dealing with them, even after regaining his freedom (today, we would likely say he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder). I had just learned the basics of genealogical research, and realized that the types of resources used by family history researchers could be put to work to learn more about Northup's later life.

In 1999, Union College in Schenectady, New York, commemorated Northup with an exhibit and also a series of lectures and seminars coordinated by Union College's Professor Clifford Brown. Local awareness of Northup's story was enhanced by the placing of a historical marker in Saratoga Springs, New York, and also the creation of Solomon Northup Day by African American resident Renee Moore.

A band of Northup researchers and enthusiasts, including myself, would meet and compare notes. Our efforts did increase awareness, but what seemed lacking was a full biography of Northup that told the story in complete and included all recent research. In 2013, we published *Solomon Northup: The Complete Story of the Author of Twelve Years a Slave* (David Fiske, Clifford Brown & Rachel Seligman), which coincided with Steve McQueen's award-winning film *12 Years A Slave*. Our joint findings added greatly to an understanding of Northup and his trials and tribulations. He could now be understood not just as a historical name, but as a human being who was forced to deal with misfortunes that were not of his own making.

It had been my hope that with the film's success, my research would gain attention and that some helpful person would come forward and shed light on the most aggravating aspect of my Northup quest: the circumstances of his death. Though I have received some information, the mystery of his final years is yet to be solved.

CASH FOR NEGROES.—I wish to purchase any number of Negroes, for the Louisiana market. Persons having servants to dispose of would do well to give me a call, as I am determined, at all times, to give the highest market prices. I can at all times be found at the Steamboat Hotel, formerly kept by Thomas Lloyd, and now by H. O. Shekell, on 7th street, opposite the Centre Market. All communications will be promptly attended to.

aug 14—dtf

JAMES H. BIRCH.

Date: 1841-01-23; Paper: Daily National Intelligencer

Advertisement placed by James H. Birch, the slave dealer who originally purchased Solomon Northup. From Birch's slave pen in Alexandria, Virginia (now the Freedom House Museum), Northup was sold on to slave dealers in Louisiana.

SOLOMON NORTHUP

What was Northup, the man, actually like? Information on his personality can be gleaned from several sources. There is, of course, his own narrative, which gives the impression that he was hard-working, affable, observant, and highly intelligent. He was generally well-respected, even by those who knew him only as a slave. In addition to Northup's own words, we have the accounts of those who knew him, or who had encountered him. There is also a documentary record which provides insight on aspects of his personality and behavior.

At the back of *Twelve Years a Slave*, transcriptions are included of affidavits sworn to by numerous individuals from the town where he had grown up. These describe him – and also his wife, and his father Mintus (a former slave) – as being well-respected in the community. Henry B. Northup, the white attorney who made the arduous trip to Louisiana to find and free Northup (and who was intent on bringing to justice the two men who had lured Northup away from Saratoga Springs), stated that he was “well acquainted with said Solomon ... from his childhood.”

Even as a slave, Northup gained the respect of others for his abilities, and was seen as a reliable person. Somewhat surprisingly, his plantation master Edwin Epps, when talking to Union soldiers during the Civil War, admitted that Northup's book was largely true, and described Northup as “an unusually 'smart nigger’”. (1)

In the film *12 Years a Slave*, Northup is portrayed before his kidnapping as being virtually a concert violinist. In fact, fiddling was never more than a moonlighting job for Northup, who played at country dances as opportunities arose. Primarily, he earned a living through manual labor: farming, working on railroad and canal projects, driving a carriage, and transporting materials via raft on the Hudson River. Aside from the problems and restrictions he faced due to being black, he was a typical working man of the nineteenth century.

Northup neglects to inform us of some aspects of his pre-slavery life. At about the time he was a farmer in Washington County, he became indebted to the point that legal proceedings were started against him. While living in Saratoga Springs, he had some run-ins with the law (according to local records, which are frustratingly short on details). At one point he was fired from a rafting job because the man who had hired him believed he was too

inebriated to safely guide the raft. Northup took the man to court, and witnesses testified that Northup had indeed been drinking, but not to the point that he couldn't have handled the raft. Northup won the case. Such behaviours were not atypical of men in those times, and do not detract from Northup's reputation for being clever, reliable and popular.

Little in his book has been contradicted by other sources, except for a misspelled name here and there, and a couple of misstated dates. Some of the events he mentioned had occurred nearly a dozen years before he penned his narrative, and yet he correctly recalls numerous persons and places. He describes in detail his construction of a raft, the design of a fish trap he built, the difference between axes used in the North and in the South, and the methods of planting and harvesting various crops raised in Louisiana, including cotton and cane. These suggest a man interested in the tools and undertakings around him, and an urge to completely understand them.

With no way to record the things he experienced while enslaved, Northup had to rely on his impressive memory. Indeed, it would not be surprising if he rehearsed facts and impressions frequently in his mind, so as to sear them into his memory and someday share everything that had happened. If so, it suggests a man who maintained a degree of positivity and optimism even through an interminable twelve years of misery.

LIFE PRE-SLAVERY

Prior to his kidnapping, Northup was far from being an anti-slavery activist. In discussing his time in Saratoga Springs, he makes mention of slaves he encountered who had accompanied their Southern masters to that resort town. He was sometimes asked for advice on how they

could escape their masters. In his first chapter, Northup tells us that “I could not comprehend the justice of that law, or that religion, which upholds or recognizes the principle of Slavery; and never once, I am proud to say, did I fail to counsel any one who came to me, to watch his opportunity, and strike for freedom.”

Generally, Northup seems to have been occupied with earning enough money to support his family. Living in a resort town, work was harder to find in the winter months, and his was probably a hardscrabble existence at times. There would not have been much time or energy left to agitate against slavery.

The life of a free black person in the North was far from ideal. In New York State, there had been a requirement that, in order for any man to vote – regardless of his color – he must own a certain amount of property. In 1822, the state's constitution was amended and the property ownership criterion was removed for white voters – but not for blacks. (Hence the mention in Northup's first chapter that his father, being a property owner, had been entitled to vote.) There were many other limitations on African Americans, but they tended to be social rather than legal. Northup includes a few digs at these in his book. In Chapter I, he points out the respect his father had earned, despite having been a slave “and laboring under the disadvantages to which my unfortunate race is subjected ...” Mintus had pursued farming, rather than having sought “employment in those more menial positions, which seem to be especially allotted to the children of Africa.”

AFTER PUBLICATION

Despite these subtle reminders of the racism that existed in America, Northup's book is not a diatribe against slavery. In the year it was published, 1853, a local newspaper

observed that “Its tone is much milder than we expected to see exhibited ... but, while he seems to fully realize the magnitude of his sufferings, he does not condemn all.” (2)

Surprisingly, Northup exhibited little bitterness over what had befallen him. For several years after the publication of *Twelve Years a Slave*, he traveled throughout the northeastern states, telling the public about his time as a slave. When he gave a lecture in Vermont in 1855, someone who had heard it said it “was wholly without vituperation, or even harshness ...” (3)

In reports of his appearances, he was generally described as someone who spoke plainly and with directness. One newspaper writer noted “his unaffected simplicity, directness and gentlemanly bearing.” As was true of his book, Northup's straightforward and objective presentation was more impressive “than many fervid appeals to which we have listened.” (4) His approach in his book and his lectures was to stick to the facts, allowing others to reach their own conclusions about slavery.

Audiences were impressed with his storytelling talents. “Northup tells his story in plain and candid language, and intermingles it with flashes of genuine wit. It is a sure treat to hear him give some hazardous adventure, with so much sans [sic] froid, that the audience is completely enraptured and the ‘house brought down.’” (5) Those who listened to his lectures seemed to share the opinion of his neighbors who had provided affidavits in his favor: that he was trustworthy and intelligent.

During the period that Northup was lecturing – the mid-1850s – records show that he sometimes suffered financial difficulties. And the evidence is that he did not reside with his family full time. Given what he had gone through in the South, we can guess that it would have been difficult for him to simply slip back into family life. By about 1861,

according to letters from the son of an anti-slavery pastor, Northup was working with the clergyman to help runaway slaves reach safety in Canada – the so-called “Underground Railroad.” The letters indicate that Northup was still alive at the time of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 – because at the time he reportedly visited the pastor in Vermont.

WHAT HAPPENED TO NORTHUP?

Beyond 1863, no traces of Northup have surfaced in newspapers or official records. A listing of inhabitants of New York State in 1875 includes his wife, along with other family members – but not Northup. According to the record, his wife is widowed, so Northup seemingly was deceased by that year. (Earlier census records had shown the wife to be a married woman.)

What Northup may have been doing during the Civil War remains a mystery. It's possible that his money problems continued, and he perhaps wandered about seeking work, dying penniless in some unfamiliar place. Perhaps he pursued a different vocation. He wrote very positively about agriculture; possibly he took up farming. His autobiography does not give the impression that he was the retiring sort. Despite his stated hope, once he had achieved his freedom, “henceforward to lead an upright though lowly life,” it is hard to imagine this man of action quietly sitting at home in some Northern state, merely reading about the war in newspapers. Might he have gone south, seeking out his luckless slave friend Patsey? Might he have in some way provided assistance to the Union army (which had a presence in central Louisiana as early as 1862)? As a scout – or a spy – Northup could have provided valuable information. He knew the landscape, and he also knew how

to play the part of a slave, so could have gathered information without being noticed.

Perhaps a packet of letters or old newspaper clippings will be found in an attic somewhere, and the Northup story can have its proper ending. But his ultimate fate – how, when, and where he died – may never be learned.

ACCURACY AND AUTHORSHIP

Twelve Years a Slave is filled with so many details (in some cases, inconsequential ones) that it is hard to believe claims could be made that the narrative was fabricated – and yet, the charge has occasionally been made. The effort that would have been required to gather all the information about individuals, locations, and methods described by Northup would have been immeasurable. It would have been easier to simply write the book as a novel.

Many details Northup included can be, and have been, verified through other sources. I could cite a number of facts that support Northup's account as being based on reality, but will merely provide one which I believe clinches the case.

Northup tells how, while he was aboard the slave-laden brig *Orleans*, it anchored near the city of Norfolk, Virginia. A boat set out from shore, and several more slaves were transferred to the *Orleans*. The ship continued its fateful trip to Louisiana, and Northup tells us that a slave, Robert, died along the way and was buried at sea. In those days, the United States government kept records showing what slaves ships were transporting between domestic ports. The so-called “slave manifest” for the *Orleans* is preserved in the National Archives. There are two pages: one lists the slaves who had departed Richmond, Virginia (including Northup, under the name Plat Hamilton); the second page

gives the names of those taken aboard at Norfolk. The names on the manifest do not exactly match the ones Northup gives in his book – but a number do match. The second page (which at the top has Richmond crossed out, and Norfolk written in) includes the notation, added once the ship arrived at New Orleans: “Examin'd and found Correct with the exception of Robert Jones who Capt Wickham states died on the Passage.” It is inconceivable that, had some parties prepared a falsified book, they would have managed (or even bothered) to seek out an obscure government document that showed the *Orleans* took on extra slaves at Norfolk, and that Robert had passed away in the course of the voyage.

25	Richarda ^{Chiswary}	Male				
26	Mary	Female	12	4	7	
27	Hannah	"	5	3	9	
28	Sam Whittles	Male	27	6	0	
29	Henry Williams	"	25	5	5	
30	Lethe Shilton	"	25	5	0	Brown
31	Mehala Arvin	Female	23	5	6	Black
32	Caroline Parnell	"	20	5	2	"
33	Plat Hamilton	Male	26	5	7	Yellow
34	John Woodard	"	19	5	7	Black
35	Rudal Jones	"	15	5	1	"
36	Eliza Ann	Female	18	5	3	"
37	Drady Cooper	"	22	5	5	"
38	Emily Cooper	"	7	5	7	"
39	Jas Childers	"				

do solemnly swear, to the best of our knowledge and belief, that the abovementioned Slave, w
imported or brought into the United States from and after the first day of January, one thousand eight hundred
and that under the laws of the State they are held to service or labor. So HELP us GOD.

Sworn to this 27th day of April, 1841.

Thomas Nelson Collector.

Wm. Wickham
Luther Jc

Ship's manifest from the Orleans, which transported Northup south to his life as a slave. He is listed as “Plat Hamilton,” male, age 26, height 5’7”, skin colour “yellow.”

The question of authorship has also arisen over time. Did Northup pen the narrative, or was it David Wilson? Wilson has sometimes been called the book's "ghost writer," yet he is clearly identified as the book's editor (even supplying his own preface). Wilson explains that the content of the book came from Northup, in response to questions from Wilson. We know that Wilson authored other books, and a comparison of the writing style in *Twelve Years a Slave* with those titles indicates much more dry and matter-of-fact language compared to the Northup book, which is highly descriptive. Though it's possible that the difference is due to the intervention of an editor at the publishing house, it is more likely that this is simply Northup's style. We know that, when he lectured, he was a dramatic storyteller who did not require Wilson's presence on stage to captivate an audience.

Another clear sign of Northup's voice in the book are the sometimes tortuously detailed detours from the main narrative. In Chapter XIV, for example, he devotes several paragraphs to how he designed and built a fish trap. Throughout the book, he goes into great detail in explaining agricultural practices in Louisiana. It is hard to imagine that anyone besides Northup would have demanded inclusion of such secondary topics.

Finally, there is the matter of Northup's motivation for putting his story to paper. He states this very clearly at the book's beginning: "I can speak of Slavery only so far as it came under my own observation - only so far as I have known and experienced it in my own person. My object is, to give a candid and truthful statement of facts: to repeat the story of my life, without exaggeration ..." Although incidents portrayed by Northup are sometimes used as evidence of what slavery was like throughout the United States, it was not his intention to present a wide overview

of slavery – whose practices differed greatly from one region to the next.

As the veracity of slave narratives go, Northup's has one clear advantage. Because he was kidnapped into slavery, instead of having been born into it, he has less reason to overstate the horrors of the trade. Most other narratives were written by people who had fled slavery. They ran away and, in doing so, they were breaking the laws of the time. To justify why they had absconded, they needed to give as evil an image of slavery as possible. Northup did not need to do that, and could afford, at times, to make certain aspects of his experience sound almost positive. Indeed, along with chilling portraits of men like James Burch (slave dealer), John Tibeats (carpenter overseer who tried to kill Northup several times) and, of course, Edwin Epps (brutal, drunken plantation master), Northup is careful to give accounts of better individuals in the slave system, including William Ford (his initial “owner” who treated his slaves kindly and who became a Baptist preacher), and Mr. Chapin, a white overseer who saved Northup from being lynched and hanged by Tibeats.

RECEPTION AND IMPACT

When *Twelve Years a Slave* was released in the summer of 1853, it was received very well by the public. Though not as popular as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a work of fiction, many readers liked that Northup's book related actual events. One reader recommended the book to “those persons who are so conscientious that they will not read ‘Uncle Tom's Cabin’ because they say it is a Novel” and promised that after reading Northup, “they [would] acquit Mrs. Stowe of all exaggeration.” (6)

In the mid-nineteenth century the abolitionist movement was strong, but many Americans felt that slavery was

basically the hand dealt to African Americans. For people living in the North who had little direct contact with the “peculiar institution,” it was not something that impacted their daily lives. However, they often encountered free blacks, who provided various services in their communities. That a decent, industrious man like Northup could be lured away from home, held in a slave pen, spirited away to the deep South, and made into a slave – this was unacceptable. Thus *Twelve Years a Slave*, while preaching to the congregation of those who hated slavery, also likely made converts of many who were still unsure of what they thought.

Abraham Lincoln, in a speech in 1854, estimated that if all the nation's free people of color were made into slaves, they would be worth \$200 million. (7) So long as the United States had a population of blacks who were divided into free and slaves, kidnapping was arguably too profitable to disappear.

As a first-hand account that detailed the process of kidnapping from the inside, *Twelve Years a Slave* mostly stands alone in documenting the crime. There is also the *Narrative of Stephen Dickenson, Jr.* (8), and the *Narrative of Dimmock Charlton*. The former tells how three African American sailors were removed from the steamship they worked on, taken to a slave pen, and sold as slaves. The latter details how a black man – rescued from the slave trade by the British – was taken from a warship as a prisoner of war during the War of 1812, and then made into a slave in America.

In a 1999 lecture, historian Joseph Logsdon (who with Sue Eakin produced the first scholarly edition of *Twelve Years a Slave*) stated that he had begun the assignment thinking that kidnapping was rare. He quickly learned it was a

reasonably common crime. Northup's narrative stands in for the many victims who did not have their stories told.

THE FORGOTTEN PHENOMENON

Thousands of books have been written on American slavery. Much less attention has been given to the kidnapping problem. *Twelve Years a Slave* stands as a reminder that it occurred, but the question of its prevalence has never been fully answered. Incidents that have been discovered come almost entirely from cases where the victims were rescued. Unknown is the number of people who were abducted or fooled into slavery via duplicity (as Northup was) but were never able to contact friends or relatives, and who never became the subject of a rescue mission.

These victims went on “dragging out lives of unrequited toil” (as Northup feared happened to Eliza Berry's two children who were sold away from her, in one of the book's more horrible scenes). Such people remained enslaved until death or emancipation – whichever came first. A correspondent for a Northern newspaper, reporting from Alabama just weeks after the end of the Civil War, came across a man in his seventies who had been born free in a Northern state and kidnapped at the age of 15. In all that time, he had never had the least chance to regain his liberty. (9) Even if a captive was able to read and write, it was virtually impossible to send a letter back home. Slaves were forbidden pen and paper, and if caught reading a book were invariably flogged.

To illustrate how common it was for free blacks to be kidnapped and sold into slavery, consider that among the few dozen African Americans on board the *Orleans* there were three who'd been kidnapped: Northup, Robert, and Arthur. Newspapers from those days contained many reports of kidnappings. Kidnappers could make substantial

sums of money selling free persons as slaves, and for able conmen like Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton (who got Northup to believe he was joining a travelling music show), it was not especially hard to do. Though victims were sometimes physically seized, criminals more often lured their victims away with promises of employment. Taking their victims to slave trading cities, kidnappers could readily secure a profit. Slave traders were anxious to purchase slaves – sometimes with no questions asked – and kidnappers could easily find buyers since newspapers carried advertisements crying “Cash for Negroes.” Once they were converted into slaves, there were plenty of ships ready to transport victims to the deep South, where prices were high for healthy men, women and children.

Adding to the ease with which kidnappers operated were the laws regarding fugitive slaves, especially the notorious Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Blacks could be seized with minimal evidence that they were runaways, declared to be such at hearings in which they had no rights, and sent to slave states where their insistence that they were free usually fell on deaf ears.

The slave system was powered by deep, unquestioning racism. Many whites believed those of African descent belonged to an inferior race. Though there were some cases of whites being sold into slavery, it was rare. In many Southern slave states, blacks were generally assumed to be slaves, unless they possessed sufficient paperwork proving otherwise. A white woman named Abby Guy contested her enslavement in court, claiming to have been kidnapped when young. The court sessions, rather than investigating her claim, dwelled instead on whether she was black or white, with testimony from various experts on the matter. It was decided that she was white, and she and her children were set free.

THE HUMANITY OF RESCUERS

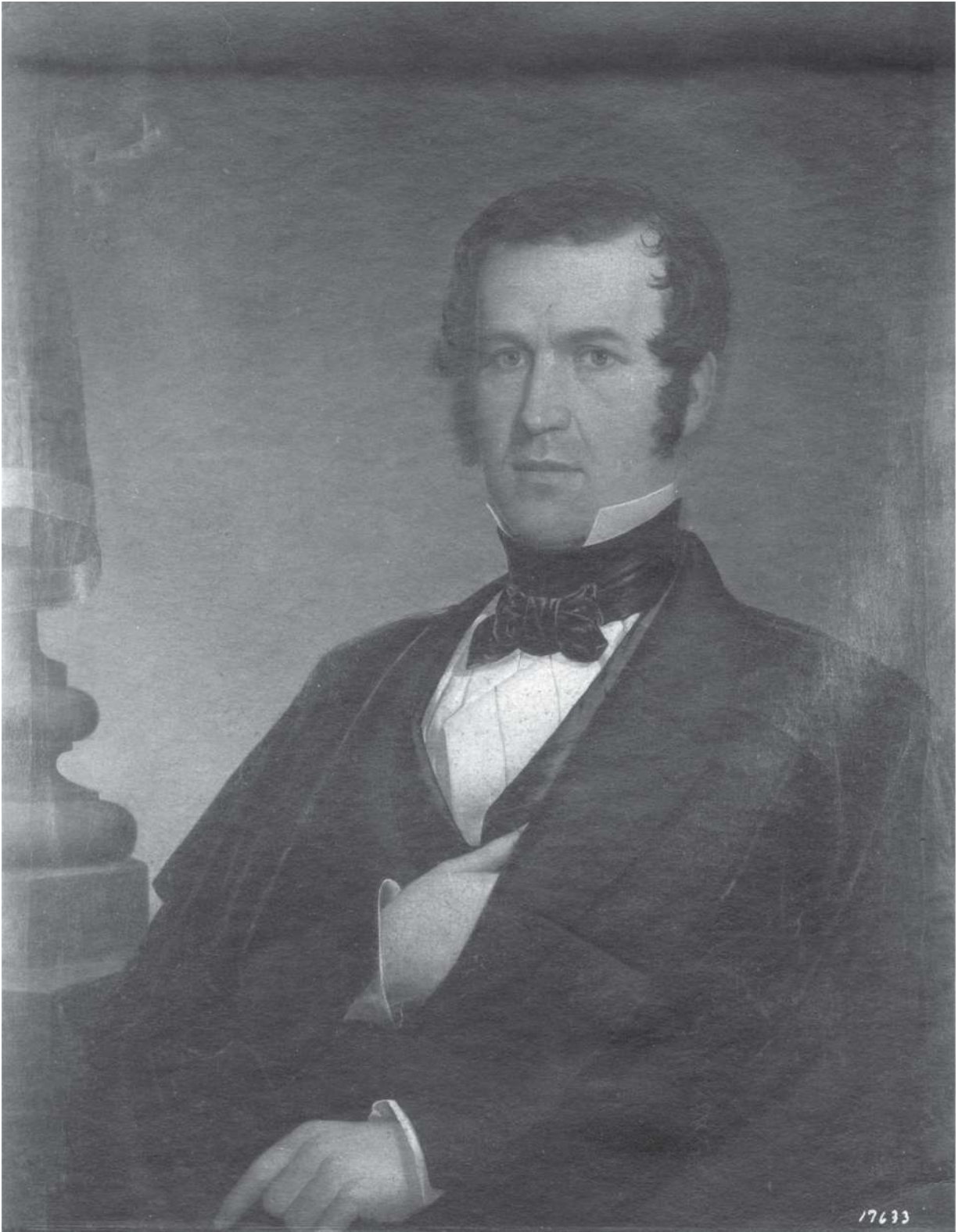
For kidnap victims, it was next to impossible for them to regain their liberty under their own steam. Victims were usually taken away from their familiar surroundings quickly, making it difficult for them to escape their captors and return home. They were often given different names, minimizing the chances that friends or relatives might locate them. (For most of his time as a slave, Northup was known as "Platt," a name given him by slave trader James Burch.) Their testimony about having been kidnapped was disbelieved. Paperwork was necessary in order for them to prove their free status, yet they had no way to gather such information. Consequently, the help of white friends and acquaintances was virtually a necessity to regain their liberty.

In Northup's case, two white men were responsible for his rescue. Samuel Bass, originally from Canada, was a travelling carpenter who befriended Northup while working on the Edwin Epps plantation. After Northup confided in him, Bass wrote and posted letters on his behalf. Being an anti-slavery man in the deep South, Bass took on some peril to himself by becoming involved. After all, if successful, he would be depriving Epps of Northup – a valuable piece of property. When it seemed that the letters were receiving no response, Bass volunteered to go a step further by traveling to Saratoga Springs to get help for Northup.

Help *did* finally arrive in the form of Henry B. Northup, whose family had once owned Solomon's father as a slave (the 2013 film instead has a storekeeper, a recipient of one of Bass' letters, as Northup's rescuer). Henry Northup had assiduously gathered affidavits from Northup's former neighbors, presented them to the governor of New York State, and been appointed as an agent to seek out and

retrieve Solomon Northup. He made the long trip in the winter of 1852, and through the assistance of a local attorney in Louisiana as well as Bass, established that Northup was working on the Epps plantation.

The scene where these gentlemen find Northup working in a field, and tell him he will now be free, is one of the great moments in literature, and is lovingly remembered by Northup in the last pages of the book.



Henry B. Northup, who undertook the mission to rescue Solomon Northup from the Epps plantation near Marksville, Louisiana. Portrait now at Middlebury College Museum of Art, Vermont.

OTHER KIDNAPPING CASES

Corrupt Northern officials were sometimes engaged in kidnapping (for example, the so-called “Kidnapping Club” in New York City), but there were other cases where law enforcement officers went to great lengths to rescue victims and bring their abductors to justice.

In 1819, New York City constable John C. Gillen went undercover pretending to be interested in buying some African Americans to be shipped south and sold as slaves. In doing so, he made contact with the man who was in the process of tricking one Mary Underhill into going away, and whom he planned to sell as a slave. Gillen's efforts averted the kidnapping, and the potential kidnapper was tried and convicted.

In another case, two policemen from New York City went to Baltimore, Maryland, in 1858 in search of the couple who had received permission from a 14-year-old girl's mother to take her away from home. They had said she would work in a New Jersey household, but instead they took her to Washington, D.C. and tried to sell her. The transaction was averted when the girl raised a ruckus, and she was able to return home. Learning the whereabouts of the perpetrators, the policemen laid a trap: one impersonated a post office worker in order to identify the kidnappers when one of them came to collect his mail. He was hauled back to New York where he was put on trial and convicted.

On occasion, officials in the South actually intervened to save victims. In 1858, the mayor of Richmond, Virginia,

Joseph Mayo, wrote to the mayor of New York City telling him of a young African American man, George Anderson, who claimed to be free, and whom Mayo believed had been kidnapped. The Southern mayor's information resulted in Anderson's rescue, and the apprehension and conviction of his kidnapper.

Although officials and anti-slavery organizations played roles in rescuing victims, numerous individual citizens undertook arduous trips to bring home the kidnapped and apprehend their kidnappers. The case of Eli Terry is remarkably similar to that of Northup. Terry had accepted a work opportunity, leaving Indiana with a white man. After the job was completed, his employer took him to Texas and sold him as a slave. It was years before friends in Indiana received information as to his whereabouts. But at the end of 1849, three men made the long journey (at one point they passed through Alexandria, Louisiana – putting them, unknowingly, within a few miles of Northup). After going to court, they got a judgment that Terry was a free man, and took him home.

A final case: Joshua Coffin traveled to Tennessee in 1838, in search of the kidnapped Isaac Wright. Finding Wright at his master's home, with the master away, Coffin got Wright onto a steamship and headed north. Wright was returned to his home in New York. Writing to an acquaintance, Coffin said: “I have in fact kidnapped him into freedom.” ([10](#))

NORTHUP'S POPULAR LEGACY

Northup's story cries out for dramatization, and he himself was involved with two projects that brought the story to the stage. These plays were not entirely faithful to his book, and sources indicate that they may not have been particularly successful. Minor productions were presented in Troy, New York, in 1858 ([11](#)), and in New York City in

1859 ([12](#)). The play in Troy was described as “the moral drama of ‘Sol Northrop [sic], the Slave,’ with lots of singing and dancing.” It was presented at the National Theatre in New York as *The Slave: Or, The Kidnapper's Victim*, and per an advertisement included four characters: Ichabod Bass, “Platt, the slave,” Sam (“a consequential nigger”), and Eliza (“a Quadroon”). Yankee Leffler and Miss Clara Le Roy appeared in both the Troy and New York productions, assisted by W. M. Ward and W. M. Reeve, who played the additional roles in the New York version.

Despite the fame it won on release, *Twelve Years a Slave* soon faded from public consciousness, and over a century became obscure. It was not until Louisiana State University Press's publication of the Lodgson/Eakin annotated edition in 1968 that the Northup story became better known again, and not only to scholars of slavery. In 1984, awareness was increased when an American Playhouse production aired on PBS, titled *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* (also known by the title *Half Slave, Half Free*), directed by Gordon Parks.

However, it would take until 2013 for Northup to once again become a household name. British director Steve McQueen had long wanted to bring a story of slavery to the screen, and was struggling with a fictional script based on a free man sold into bondage. Then his partner, cultural historian Bianca Stigter, discovered the then little-known Northup account. She could not put it down, and told her husband, “You do not have to write a script any more, this book is the script.” ([13](#)). The subsequent film, *12 Years a Slave*, won nine Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

The script, credited to John Ridley and Solomon Northup, is largely true to the 1853 book. A few liberties are taken here and there. The film incorrectly gives the impression that Northup's first owner in Louisiana, William Prince Ford, was aware of Northup's background as a freeman –