

ADDITIONAL HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

by historian David Fiske

David Fiske's interest in Solomon Northup began in the 1990s, when he visited the Old Fort House Museum in Fort Edward, New York. This house is possibly the only structure still standing in which Northup resided. An exhibit at the museum mentioned Northup's book, Twelve Years a Slave, and Fiske became curious and slowly began researching Northup's life after his rescue. He recently worked with several other researchers, Professor Clifford Brown and Rachel Seligman to write a full biography of Northup: Solomon Northup: The Complete Story of the Author of Twelve Years a Slave.

Q: Solomon Northup was not the only free black person who was kidnapped and sold as a slave – can you talk about how much of a problem kidnapping was before the Civil War and if black people in the North were aware of the threat of being kidnapped?

Blacks (both free persons and slaves) were kidnapped and sold as slaves even in colonial times. The despicable practice was carried on with greater frequency after 1808, the year that the federal government banned the importation of slaves. Slaves could no longer be brought into the U.S. from other countries—a very good thing—but there was an unfortunate side-effect. The supply of additional slave labor (much desired by plantation owners in the South) was reduced, causing the value of slaves to rise—which made it very profitable for criminals to kidnap black people and transport them to a slave market where they could be sold. Slave traders, anxious to acquire slaves to send to the South, probably did not ask questions about where these black people had come from.

In New York State, the law recognized that kidnapping could be accomplished by trickery, because the statute against kidnapping included an old word “inveigling,” which meant the same thing. The law further provided that those accused of kidnapping could not argue as a defense that their victims had left with them willingly.

Citizens in the northern states, including blacks, had some idea of the possibility of black people being lured away and sold as slaves. An acquaintance of Solomon Northup, Norman Prindle, claimed, after Northup's return to the North, that back in 1841 he had warned Northup that the men he met in Saratoga might have other plans for him once they got him south. However, Northup either trusted the men or was so much in need of money that he decided to take the risk.

Q: What did Solomon Northup do after he was rescued from slavery?

Northup was reunited with his family (who had relocated from Saratoga to Glens Falls) a few weeks after being freed. Remarkably, in the first few days of February 1853, he appeared at anti-slavery

meetings with several famous abolitionists (including Frederick Douglass). Just one month earlier, he had still been a slave!

The general public was very interested in his story of kidnapping, slavery, and rescue, and he worked with David Wilson, an attorney and author, to compose a book, *Twelve Years a Slave*. The book was quite popular, and Northup traveled around giving lectures and selling copies of his book. He was also involved with some theatrical productions based on his narrative.

One newspaper noted that, during Northup's travels, he was generous toward fugitive slaves he encountered. Given his personal experience as a slave, it is understandable (predictable, even) that he would want to help others who had escaped from a life of servitude. There is evidence that he participated in the Underground Railroad, working with a Vermont minister to help escaped slaves reach freedom in Canada.

The last reference to Northup's presence was a recollection by the minister's son, who said that Northup had visited his father once after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. After that, no newspaper articles or personal papers have been found that mention contact with Northup. Neither the circumstances of his death, nor his burial site, are known.

Q: What did Northup's family do while he was a slave in Louisiana?

As Northup mentioned in *Twelve Years a Slave*, his wife Anne had a successful career as a cook at various dining establishments in the Saratoga/Glens Falls area of New York. After the disappearance of her husband—along with his earnings—she probably needed additional income. In the fall of 1841 she moved to New York City with her family. She worked there for the wealthy woman, Madame Eliza Jumel (who was once the wife of Vice President Aaron Burr). Anne was Madame Jumel's cook and resided at her mansion in Washington Heights (which is today open to the public as the Morris-Jumel Mansion). Her children filled other roles: Elizabeth assisted at the mansion, Margaret served as a playmate for a young girl who was related to Jumel, and Alonzo was a footman and did minor chores.

The family's stay with Jumel lasted from one to two years, after which mother and children returned to Saratoga. After a few years, the family moved to Glens Falls, a bit north of Saratoga, where Anne ran the kitchen at the Glens Falls Hotel. The family (which now included Margaret's husband Philip Stanton and their children) was living in Glens Falls in 1853 when Northup was rescued and rejoined his family.

In the 1860s, the family (though apparently not Northup himself) moved to nearby Moreau (to a neighborhood known as Reynolds Corners). Anne probably still worked as a cook locally, and during the summers she would work at a hotel at Bolton Landing on Lake George. Anne died in 1876 at Reynolds Corners.

Q: Why was the book *Twelve Years a Slave* so popular before the Civil War?

Northup's book was not the only one that gave a first-hand account of slavery, but his had a unique perspective because he was a free man who had become a slave, whereas other writers had grown up as slaves. Northup was able to make comparisons between his life as a free person and his life as a slave. In addition, Northup's book was surprisingly even-handed. He did not condemn all Southerners—he mentions how several of them, such as Master Ford and overseer Chapin (whose name

in real life was Chafin), had treated him kindly. As one review of the book in a northern newspaper said at the time: “Masters and Overseers who treated slaves humanely are commended; for there, as here, were good and bad men.”

Authors of slave narratives who had escaped slavery by running away had an extra motivation to portray slavery in a very bad light—they had to justify why they had become fugitives. Northup, however, should never have been a slave in the first place (“if justice had been done,” he told Samuel Bass, “I never would have been here”). Northup therefore had little motivation to exaggerate the evils of slavery. He surely describes the many sufferings endured by slaves, but he also tells about their everyday life, the ways they supported one another, and the few occasional sources of pleasure they had. By telling the good as well as the bad, Northup’s account came across as authentic and convincing.

Q: Did Solomon Northup help with the Underground Railroad once he was free again and how did he get involved?

In the early 1860s (and possibly earlier) he worked on the Underground Railroad in Vermont. The Underground Railroad was a system run by anti-slavery advocates which helped slaves who had run away from the South. Northup, Tabbs Gross (another black man) and Rev. John L. Smith energetically helped fugitives make their way north, to Canada and freedom.

The details of how Northup became involved are not known, but it seems likely that, during his lecture tours, he at some point met Gross, a former slave who traveled around New York and New England at the same time as Northup, and who also gave lectures. At any rate, the minister’s son recalled later on that Northup and Gross were constantly at work aiding fugitives. Northup no doubt tackled this mission with his customary initiative and competence, and ended up keeping many fugitives from being returned to servility.

Q: What became of Northup’s slave masters -- William Prince Ford, Edwin Epps and Mistress Epps?

William Prince Ford was forced to sell Northup after he experienced financial difficulties. The man he sold him to, John M. Tibaut (called Tibeats in Northup’s book and in the film) could not afford to pay Northup’s full value, so Ford was in a way still a part-owner. This is why Ford was able to prevent Tibaut from murdering Northup. Ford was a prominent Baptist minister, serving several congregations. One of them, the Springhill Baptist Church, expelled him for heresy, partly because he had allowed a Methodist to take communion at the church (an example of his generous spirit). Ford wore several other hats: in addition to operating the lumber mill where Northup worked, Ford manufactured bricks and mattresses.

The woman Ford was married to while Northup was his slave, Martha (Tanner) Ford passed away in 1849, and he got married a second time, to Mary Dawson. Rev. Ford passed away on August 23, 1866 and was buried in a cemetery known as the Old Cheney Cemetery in Cheneyville, Louisiana.

Edwin Epps had wanted to contest Northup’s removal from his possession, but his legal counsel

advised him that the case was so clear-cut (due to documents presented in court in Marksville, Louisiana, which proved Northup had been born free), that he should simply give up Northup rather than incur pointless legal expenses, and he did so.

Epps gave up drink while Northup was still his slave, since Northup mentions that in his book. Epps continued working his plantation after Northup's departure. The 1860 Federal Census shows that he had assets amounting to over \$20,000.

During the Civil War some northern soldiers sought out the Epps plantation as the army worked its way through Louisiana. They found many people, both black and white, who remembered Northup and his fiddle-playing, and they even located Epps. What Northup wrote in his book, Epps told the soldiers, was mostly true, and in a back-handed compliment to Northup he told them that he was an "unusually smart nigger." Epps died on March 3, 1867. His place of burial is uncertain.

The house that Northup and carpenter Samuel Bass worked on for Epps still exists. It has avoided destruction several times, and has also been moved several times. It is now located on the campus of the Louisiana State University at Alexandria, and it has been declared a historic structure.

Mistress Epps, whose maiden name was Mary Robert, became the "Natural Tutrix" (or guardian) of her and her husband's minor children following Epps' death. However she died soon afterward. Many, if not all, of the children left Louisiana and relocated to various places in Texas.

Q: Were the men involved in Solomon Northup's kidnapping ever brought to justice?

The slave trader in Washington, D.C. who purchased Northup from the men who lured him away from Saratoga was identified as James H. Birch, and was brought up on charges in that city when Northup was on his way home from Louisiana. In Washington, the law at that time did not permit black people to testify in court, and without Northup's testimony, there was little evidence of the crime, so Birch was not convicted. It surely helped that Birch had some influential friends in the city.

In 1854, over a year after Northup was freed, a man who had read *Twelve Years a Slave* helped to identify the two men who had taken Northup to Washington. (Their real names were Alexander Merrill and Joseph Russell—they had given Northup aliases. They were arrested, jailed, indicted, and put on trial. After various delays and appeals, the case against them was dropped without explanation in 1857. Their only punishment was the seven months they spent in jail while awaiting trial before they were released on bail.

Q: Solomon Northup was able to read and write—how did he get his education?

In New York State, blacks had never been formally excluded from the schools. In the city of Albany, slave children in colonial times attended school alongside white children. Even when slavery was still allowed in New York, a state law specified that slave owners had to teach their slaves to read, so that they could read the Bible.

As time went on, some large cities had separate schools for black students (which was permitted under state law). During his childhood, Northup lived in small towns in Washington County, which would not have had enough money to establish separate schools for blacks, so he probably attended school with white pupils from his neighborhood. Acquaintances of Northup and his father (who was illiterate

but whom Northup wrote made sure his sons received an education) were Quakers, to whom education was very important, so that may have offered extra encouragement for him to learn. Northup tells of his love of reading as a boy, so he probably built on what basic, formal schooling he received due to his curiosity and intelligence.

Q: Is it true that *12 Years a Slave* was actually written by a ghost writer named David Wilson, who was an abolitionist?

David Wilson certainly assisted Northup with his book, but he was not a ghost writer. Ghost writers typically write behind the scenes on behalf of someone else, implying that a book was actually authored by that person. When the book was first published in 1853, Wilson was clearly identified as its editor--he even wrote an Editor's Preface. There was nothing furtive about Wilson having been helped with the writing of the book.

The precise method of Wilson's and Northup's collaboration is not known, but based on Wilson's preface, newspaper reports at the time, and a letter written later on by a relative of one of the principals in Northup's story, Wilson extensively interviewed Northup, undoubtedly taking copious notes. Northup, who during his years of slavery had no way to record information, must have constantly reviewed in his head the events he had experienced, committing to memory the details of people he had met and places he had been. Wilson wrote that he was entirely convinced of the authenticity of Northup's recounting, because Northup had "invariably repeated the same story without deviating in the slightest particular."

Even Edwin Epps, located by Union soldiers when they reached Louisiana during the Civil War, admitted that Northup had pretty much told the truth in his book.

After Wilson had put the words onto paper, Northup reviewed them closely. He "carefully perused the manuscript, dictating an alteration wherever the most trivial inaccuracy has appeared," Wilson says. It is likely that the writing style--with its literary flourishes and turns of phrase--can be attributed to Wilson, but Northup was clearly satisfied that Wilson got all the facts right and he was also comfortable with the final wording.

Though Wilson has sometimes been described as an abolitionist, there is no evidence of that. One newspaper at the time said of Wilson: "I believe he never was suspected of being an Abolitionist--he may be anti-slavery--somewhat conservative." A few years after *Twelve Years a Slave* was published, Wilson was identified as a member of the American Party (called the "Know-Nothings"), which had no strong stance concerning slavery. In Wilson's own words, in his preface to the book, he writes "Unbiased, as he conceives, by any prepossessions or prejudices, the only object of the editor has been to give a faithful history of Solomon Northup's life, as he received it from his lips."

SHIP MANIFEST FOR THE BRIG ORLEANS, THE VESSEL THAT TRANSPORTED NORTHUP TO LOUISIANA AFTER HIS CAPTURE

Manifest of Slaves, intended to be transported on board the *Brig Orleans* of *Richmond* whereof *William Wickham* is Master, of the burthen *One Hundred & thirty six* tons, and bound from the Port of *Richmond*, State of *Virginia*, for the Port of *New Orleans*, in the State of *Louisiana*, this *27th* day of *April*, 1841

NAMES.	SEX.	AGE.	STATURE <small>feet. inches.</small>	COMPLEXION.	SHIPPER'S NAME	RESIDENCE	OWNER'S OR CONSIGNEE'S NAME	RESIDENCE	REMARKS
1	<i>Cuff Singleton</i>	Male	24 5 6	Black					
2	<i>Abing</i>	"	25 5 7	"					
3	<i>Nancy Wyman</i>	"	20 4 8	"					
4	<i>Nancy Watson</i>	"	20 4 7	Brown					
5	<i>Davy Singleton</i>	"	25 5 3	Black					
6	<i>Wm</i>	"	22 4 3	"					
7	<i>Anderson</i>	"	27 5 7	"					
8	<i>Jac Singleton</i>	"	17 4 3	"					
9	<i>Ala</i>	"	10 4 3	"					
10	<i>Henry</i>	"	19 4 3	"					
11	<i>Agnes</i>	"	23 3 4	"					
12	<i>Scout</i>	Female	-	-					
13	<i>Tomlin</i>	Female	-	-					
14	<i>China</i>	"	38 3 4	"					
15	<i>Ames</i>	Female	-	-					
16	<i>Ames</i>	Female	-	-					
17	<i>Origt</i>	"	16 4 3	"	<i>George W. Barnes</i>	<i>Richmond</i>	<i>Geo. Strousser</i>	<i>New Orleans</i>	
18	<i>Willy</i>	"	20 5 11	"					
19	<i>John</i>	Male	-	-					
20	<i>Sarah</i>	Female	30 4 8	"					
21	<i>Eliza</i>	"	7 4 11	"					
22	<i>Margaret</i>	"	8 3 7	"					
23	<i>Jane</i>	"	24 3 1	"					
24	<i>Amey</i>	"	-	-					
25	<i>Richard</i>	Male	-	-					
26	<i>Mary</i>	Female	12 4 7	"					
27	<i>Harrah</i>	"	3 3 9	"					
28	<i>Jam. Williams</i>	Male	27 6 0	"					
29	<i>Nancy Williams</i>	"	23 5 5	"					
30	<i>Cathey Singleton</i>	"	23 5 1	Brown					
31	<i>Michael</i>	Male	23 5 6	Black					
32	<i>Caroline</i>	Female	20 5 2	"					
33	<i>Mat Hamilton</i>	Male	24 5 7	Brown					
34	<i>John</i>	"	19 4 7	Black					
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Sworn to this *27th* day of *April* 1841.
Thomas Nelson Collector.

William Wickham Master of the *Brig Orleans*
having sworn to the above Manifest, consisting of *One Hundred & thirty six* Slaves and delivered a duplicate thereof, according to law, permission is hereby granted to the said *Brig Orleans* to proceed with the above described Slaves to the Port of *New Orleans*, as her aforesaid Port of destination.
Given under my hand, at *Richmond*, this *27th* day of *April* 1841.
Thomas Nelson Collector.

DISTRICT AND PORT OF RICHMOND.

Exam^{rs} & found correct
New Orleans 24th May 1841
Stuckey
23rd May 1841
Richmond