

Solomon Northup's Odyssey

(Edited from Eakin, S. and Logsdon, J., eds. (1967). *Twelve Years a Slave*. Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press.)

Solomon Northup was a free Black man and a citizen of New York State. He lived in Saratoga Springs with his wife and three children. Northup was a skilled carpenter and violinist and also worked on the Lake Champlain Canal and on construction of the Troy and Saratoga railroad.

In 1841, Solomon Northup was kidnapped by slave traders and his freedom papers stolen while on a trip to Washington, DC. He was transported to Louisiana and sold as a slave. In Louisiana, Northup worked on cotton plantations until he was able to smuggle a letter to his wife and friends in New York. Using a New York State law designed to protect free Black citizens from being sold into slavery, they secured his freedom through the courts.

Northup was finally released from bondage after twelve years as a slave. When he returned to New York abolitionists helped him publish his memoirs as part of their campaign to abolish slavery. Solomon Northup's account is especially important as an historical because he is able to describe slavery from the point of view of a free man and a skilled worker. It is also unique because Northup was enslaved on plantations in the "deep" South.

These passages are from Solomon Northup's memoir. Read them and answer the questions at the end. As an extra-credit assignment, draw pictures that illustrate his story.

A. "The pain in my head had subsided in a measure, but I was very faint and weak. I was sitting upon a low bench, made of rough boards, and without a coat or hat. I was hand-cuffed. Around my ankles also were a pair of heavy fetters. One end of a chain was fastened to a large ring in the floor, the other to the fetters on my ankles. I felt in my pockets to ascertain that I had not only been robbed of liberty, but that my money and free papers were also gone. Then did the idea begin to break upon my mind, at first dim and confused, that I had been kidnapped." (19-20)

B. "James H. Burch, as I learned afterwards, was a well-know slave-dealer in Washington, D.C. 'Well, my boy, how do you feel now?' said Burch, as he entered through the open door. I replied I was sick, and inquired the cause of my imprisonment. He answered that I was his slave, that he had bought me, and that he was about to send me to New Orleans. I asserted, aloud and boldly, that I was a free man. Burch ordered the paddle and cat-o'-ninetails to be brought in. The paddle, as it is termed in slave-beating parlance, was a piece of hardwood board, eighteen or twenty inches long, molded to the shape of an ordinary oar. The flattened portion, which was about the size of two open hands, was bored with a small auger (drill) in numerous places. The cat was a large rope of many strands, the strands unraveled, and a knot tied at the extremity of each. As soon as these formidable whips appeared, I was seized and roughly divested of my clothing. With the paddle, Burch commenced to beat me. Blow after blow was inflicted upon my naked body. When his unrelenting arm grew tired, he stopped and asked if I still insisted I was a free man. I did insist upon it, and the blows were renewed, faster and more energetically. At length the paddle broke, leaving the useless handle in his hand. Still I would not yield. All his brutal blows could not force from my lips the foul lie that I was a slave. Casting madly on the floor the handle of the broken paddle, he seized the rope. This was far more painful than the other. My sufferings I can compare to nothing else than the burning agonies of hell!" (21-25)

C. "Next day many customers called to examine the 'new lot.' He would make us hold up our heads, walk briskly back and forth, while customers would feel our hands and arms and bodies, turn us about, ask us what we could do, make us open our mouths and show our teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase. Sometimes a man or woman was taken back to the small house in the yard, stripped, and inspected more minutely. Scars upon a slave's back were considered evidence of a rebellious or unruly spirit, and hurt his sale." (52-53)

D. "How heavily the weight of slavery pressed upon me. I must toil day after day, endure abuse and taunts and scoffs, sleep on the hard ground, live on the coarsest fare (food), and not only this, but live the slave of a blood-seeking wretch, of whom I must stand in continued fear and dread. Why had I not died in my young years before God had given me children to love and live for? What unhappiness and suffering and sorrow it would have prevented. I sighed for liberty but the bondman's chain was round me, and could not be shaken off. I could only

gaze wistfully towards the North, and think of the thousands of miles that stretched between me and the soil of freedom, over which a black freeman may not pass.” (92)

E. “Tanner was in the habit of reading the Bible to his slaves on the Sabbath. He was an impressive commentator on the New Testament. The first Sunday after my coming to the plantation, he called them together, and began to read the twelfth chapter of Luke. When he came to the 47th verse, he looked deliberately around him, and continued, ‘And that servant which knew his lord’s will and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.’” (94)

F. “His principal business was raising cotton. The ground is prepared by throwing up beds or ridges, with the plough. Oxen and mules are used in the ploughing. The women as frequently as the men perform this labor, feeding, currying, and taking care of their teams, and in all respects doing the field and stable work, precisely as do the ploughboys of the North. The beds are six feet wide. A plough drawn by one mule is then run along the top of the ridge, making the drill, into which a girl usually drops the seed, which she carries in a bag hung round her neck. Behind her comes a mule and harrow covering up the seed, so that two mules, three slaves, a plough and harrow are employed in planting a row of cotton. This is done in the months of March and April. In the latter part of August begins the cotton picking season. At this time each slave is presented with a sack. A strap is fastened to it, which goes over the neck, holding the mouth of the sack breast high, while the bottom reaches nearly to the ground. When a new hand, one unaccustomed to the business, is sent for the first time into the field, he is whipped up smartly, and made for that day to pick as fast as he can possibly. At night it is weighed so that his capability in cotton picking is known. He must bring in the same weight each night following. If it falls short, it is considered evidence that he has been laggard, and a greater or less number of lashes is the penalty. An ordinary day’s work is considered two hundred pounds.” (123-125)

G. “The only respite from constant labor the slave has through the whole year, is during the Christmas holidays. It is the only time to which they look forward with any interest of pleasure. It is the time of feasting and frolicking and fiddling, the carnival season with the children of bondage. They are the only days when they are allowed a little restricted liberty. It is the custom for one planter to give a ‘Christmas supper,’ inviting slaves from neighboring plantations to join his own on the occasion. When the viands (food) have disappeared and the hungry maws of the children of toil are satisfied, then next in the order of amusement is the Christmas dance. My business on these gala days always was to play on the violin. Had it not been for my beloved violin, I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage.” (163-166)

H. “Marriage is frequently contracted during the holidays, if such an institution may be said to exist among them. The only ceremony required before entering into that “holy estate” is to obtain the consent of the respective owners. It is usually encouraged by the masters of female slaves. The law in relation to divorce, or to bigamy, is not applicable to property of course. If the wife does not belong on the same plantation with the husband, the latter is permitted to visit her on Saturday nights if the distance is not too far.” (169)

I. “On larger estates an overseer is deemed indispensable. These gentlemen ride into the field on horseback armed with pistols, bowie knife, whip, and accompanied by several dogs. They follow in the rear of the slaves keeping a sharp lookout upon them all. The requisite qualifications in an overseer are utter heartlessness, brutality and cruelty. It is his business to produce large crops, no matter what amount of suffering it may cost. Goaded into uncontrollable madness, even the slave will sometimes turn upon his oppressor. One was executed a year ago for killing his overseer.” (170-171)

Questions

1. What did you learn about slavery in the United States from each passage?
2. What questions do you have about what is reported in the memoir?
3. What would you have done if you were in Solomon Northup’s position? Why?
4. What would you have done if you were an abolitionist and learned about Northup’s story? Why?