

## Twelve Years a Slave: Was the Case of Solomon Northup Exceptional?

### Activity 1. Free Black Kidnapping: Examining Evidence Responses THE BEST OF THE HUMANITIES ON THE WEB

1. How did the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 affect the kidnapping of free blacks and selling them into slavery?

*Answer: The Fugitive Slave Act triggered a lucrative underground kidnapping industry that capitalized on the inferior social status of free as well as enslaved blacks. The law made it legal for any white person to claim any black person as a fugitive slave, with the burden of proof resting on the captive. Since a black person could not testify against a white person in all Southern states, a kidnap victim would have no way to prosecute the person—usually white—who kidnapped them. This removed a major obstacle for kidnappers.*

2: How did the fact that cotton became a hugely profitable crop during the antebellum period relate to Solomon Northup's kidnapping?

*Answer: Within ten years of the invention of the cotton gin in 1807, cultivation of cotton became highly profitable and the major crop in the United States. The success of this plantation crop increased the demand for slave labor in the cotton—growing regions of the Deep South. This demand stimulated an internal slave trade in which slaves in the upper south were sold to the lower south. It also created a social, economic, and legal climate that fostered kidnapping free blacks and selling them into slavery. Although living in the far north near Canada, Solomon Northup fell victim to ruthless kidnappers who sold him to slave traders trafficking in slaves who were transported to the cotton-growing regions of the Deep South. Northup worked principally on cotton plantations for over a decade in Louisiana before being rescued.*

3. What aspects of Solomon Northup's kidnapping were exceptional or rare?

Answer:

- *He was living near Canada far from the South and most kidnappings of free blacks occurred in Northern states adjacent or very close to slave states.*
- *He crafted a means of being rescued from slavery; most enslaved people, including free blacks sold into slavery, rarely found a way out of bondage, so Northup's rescue was indeed exceptional.*

Note: These points must be inferred as they are not explicitly stated. (Students may have other answers, but they must be able to support their inferences with evidence from the sources, and demonstrate the rarity of the occurrence.)

4. Name at least three economic, social or legal conditions that created a favorable climate for kidnapping free blacks and selling them into slavery.

Answer: (Any of these three)

- *Economic: Slaves were valuable commodities and selling slaves was lucrative.*
- *Social: Public attitudes toward free black kidnapping lessened as many white increasingly saw slavery as the natural condition for all blacks.*

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- *Social: Slave dealers had a “no questions asked” policy about the origins or background of an African American sold to them.*
- *Legal: The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 triggered the development of a vast underground industry trafficking in human beings that took full advantage of the inferior legal status of free and enslaved blacks. According to this law, any white person could claim any black as a fugitive and the burden of proof was placed on the captive.*
- *Legal: Blacks were not allowed to testify against whites in Southern courts so there was little worry among kidnapers of being prosecuted for their crimes.*
- *Legal: Once a free black person was purchased as a “slave” their owners saw them as their legal property. Slave owners resisted having knowledge that their “slave” may have free origins as they had no interest in losing a valuable “piece of property.”*

5. How is the 1834 engraving entitled *Kidnapping* that depicts a free black man being kidnapped, different from Northup’s kidnapping? Are there any elements in this engraving that were also components of Northup’s kidnapping? Describe how would you visualize Northup’s kidnapping in one image or sketch it. (Note: This [image](#) is from the EDSITEment-reviewed website, [Africans in America](#))



- *Northup’s kidnappers were con artists who gained Northup’s trust and confidence as a means of manipulating him. Instead of controlling him by tying him up and whipping him, they controlled him with deceit, flattery and money.*
- *Two men kidnapped Northup just as there are two men in this engraving. Whipping later became a part of Northup’s story after he was sold into slavery, but whips were not used during his kidnapping.*

Note: There will be different ways students visualize Northup’s kidnapping so there is no “right answer.” Whatever image students describe (or sketch) should reflect an actual scene from the kidnapping segment of the narrative.

(In discussion, you may wish to point out that the subtle deceit and manipulation used to control Northup is more difficult to visualize in a single image than overt control like that in the engraving.)

6. Was kidnapping free blacks and selling them into slavery widespread during the antebellum period?

Answer: *Yes.*