

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

Activity 1. Free Black Kidnapping: Examining Evidence, Assessment

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Class: _____

Read the excerpts below, as well as the sources referenced in “[Growth and Entrenchment of Slavery](#)” on the EDSITEment–reviewed website [Africans in America](#), which includes a segment, “Kidnapping.” Read the “Kidnapping” paragraph carefully and all links related to kidnapping. Then answer the questions that follow the readings.

Excerpted and Abridged from Solomon Northup’s Narrative from [Documenting the American South](#)

ONE morning, towards the latter part of the month of March, 1841, having at that time no particular business to engage my attention, I was walking about the village of Saratoga Springs, thinking to myself where I might obtain some present employment, until the busy season should arrive. On the corner of Congress street and Broadway near the tavern, then, and for aught I know to the contrary, still kept by Mr. Moon, I was met by two gentlemen of respectable appearance, both of whom were entirely unknown to me. I have the impression that they were introduced to me by some one of my acquaintances, but who, I have in vain endeavored to recall, with the remark that I was an expert player on the violin. ... Their names, as they afterwards gave them to me, were Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton, though whether these were their true appellations, I have strong reasons to doubt. ... They were connected, as they informed me, with a circus company, then in the city of Washington; that they were on their way thither to rejoin it, having left it for a short time to make an excursion northward, for the purpose of seeing the country, and were paying their expenses by an occasional exhibition. They also remarked that they had found much difficulty in procuring music for their entertainments, and that if I would accompany them as far as New-York, they would give me one dollar for each day’s services, and three dollars in addition for every night I played at their performances, besides sufficient to pay the expenses of my return from New-York to Saratoga.

I at once accepted the tempting offer, both for the reward it promised, and from a desire to visit the metropolis. They were anxious to leave immediately. Thinking my absence would be brief, I did not deem it necessary to write to Anne whither I had gone; in fact supposing that my return, perhaps, would be as soon as hers. So taking a change of linen and my violin, I was ready to depart. The carriage was brought round—a covered one, drawn by a pair of noble bays, altogether forming an elegant establishment. ... I drove away from Saratoga on the road to Albany, elated with my new position, and happy as I had ever been, on any day in all my life.

We passed through Ballston, and striking the ridge road, as it is called, if my memory correctly serves me, followed it direct to Albany. We reached that city before dark, and stopped at a hotel southward from the Museum. ... Early next morning we renewed our journey ... and in due course of time, we reached New-York, taking lodgings at a house on the west side of the city, in a street running from Broadway to the river. I supposed my journey was at an end, and expected in a day or two at least, to return to my friends and family at Saratoga. Brown and Hamilton, however, began to importune me to continue with them to Washington. They alleged that immediately on their arrival, now that the summer

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season was approaching, the circus would set out for the north. They promised me a situation and high wages if I would accompany them. Largely did they expatiate on the advantages that would result to me, and such were the flattering representations they made, that I finally concluded to accept the offer.

The next morning they suggested that, inasmuch as we were about entering a slave State, it would be well, before leaving New-York, to procure free papers. The idea struck me as a prudent one, though I think it would scarcely have occurred to me, had they not proposed it. We proceeded at once to what I understood to be the Custom House. They made oath to certain facts showing I was a free man. A paper was drawn up and handed us, with the direction to take it to the clerk's office. ...

With the evidence of freedom in my possession, the next day after our arrival in New-York, we crossed the ferry to Jersey City, and took the road to Philadelphia. Here we remained one night, continuing our journey towards Baltimore early in the morning. In due time, we arrived in the latter city, and stopped at a hotel near the railroad depot, either kept by a Mr. Rathbone, or known as the Rathbone House. All the way from New-York, their anxiety to reach the circus seemed to grow more and more intense. We left the carriage at Baltimore, and entering the cars, proceeded to Washington, at which place we arrived just at nightfall, the evening previous to the funeral of General Harrison, and stopped at Gadsby's Hotel, on Pennsylvania Avenue.

After supper they called me to their apartments, and paid me forty-three dollars, a sum greater than my wages amounted to, which act of generosity was in consequence, they said, of their not having exhibited as often as they had given me to anticipate, during our trip from Saratoga. They moreover informed me that it had been the intention of the circus company to leave Washington the next morning, but that on account of the funeral, they had concluded to remain another day. They were then, as they had been from the time of our first meeting, extremely kind. No opportunity was omitted of addressing me in the language of approbation; while, on the other hand, I was certainly much prepossessed in their favor. I gave them my confidence without reserve, and would freely have trusted them to almost any extent. Their constant conversation and manner towards me—their foresight in suggesting the idea of free papers, and a hundred other little acts, unnecessary to be repeated—all indicated that they were friends indeed, sincerely solicitous for my welfare. ...

After receiving the money from them, of which they appeared to have an abundance, they advised me not to go into the streets that night, inasmuch as I was unacquainted with the customs of the city. Promising to remember their advice, I left them together, and soon after was shown by a colored servant to a sleeping room in the back part of the hotel, on the ground floor. I laid down to rest, thinking of home and wife, and children, and the long distance that stretched between us, until I fell asleep. ...

From early in the morning, I was constantly in the company of Hamilton and Brown. They were the only persons I knew in Washington. ... My friends, several times during the afternoon, entered drinking saloons, and called for liquor. They were by no means in the habit, however, so far as I knew them, of indulging to excess. On these occasions, after serving themselves, they would pour out a glass and hand it to me. I did not become intoxicated, as may be inferred from what subsequently occurred. Towards evening, and soon after partaking of one of these potations, I began to experience most unpleasant sensations. I felt extremely ill. My head commenced aching—a dull, heavy pain, inexpressibly disagreeable. At the supper table, I was without appetite; the sight and flavor of food was nauseous. About dark the same servant conducted me to the room I had occupied the previous night. Brown and Hamilton advised me to retire, commiserating me kindly, and expressing hopes that I would be better in the morning. Divesting myself of coat and boots merely, I threw myself upon the bed. It was impossible to sleep. The pain in my head continued to increase, until it became almost unbearable...The memory of

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that night of horrible suffering will follow me to the grave. ... I was conscious of some one entering my room. There seemed to be several—a mingling of various voices,—but how many, or who they were, I cannot tell. Whether Brown and Hamilton were among them, is a mere matter of conjecture. I only remember with any degree of distinctness, that I was told it was necessary to go to a physician and procure medicine, and that pulling on my boots, without coat or hat, I followed them through a long passage-way, or alley, into the open street. It ran out at right angles from Pennsylvania Avenue. On the opposite side there was a light burning in a window. My impression is there were then three persons with me, but it is altogether indefinite and vague, and like the memory of a painful dream. Going towards the light, which I imagined proceeded from a physician's office, and which seemed to recede as I advanced, is the last glimmering recollection I can now recall. From that moment I was insensible. How long I remained in that condition—whether only that night, or many days and nights—I do not know; but when consciousness returned I found myself alone, in utter darkness, and in chains.

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 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 tried in vain to stand upon my feet. Waking from such a painful trance, it was some time before I could collect my thoughts. Where was I? What was the meaning of these chains? Where were Brown and Hamilton? What had I done to deserve imprisonment in such a dungeon? I could not comprehend. There was a blank of some indefinite period, preceding my awakening in that lonely place, the events of which the utmost stretch of memory was unable to recall. I listened intently for some sign or sound of life, but nothing broke the oppressive silence, save the clinking of my chains, whenever I chanced to move. I spoke aloud, but the sound of my voice startled me. I felt of my pockets, so far as the fetters would allow—far enough, indeed, 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. But that I thought was incredible.

There must have been some misapprehension—some unfortunate mistake. It could not be that a free citizen of New-York, who had wronged no man, nor violated any law, should be dealt with thus inhumanly. The more I contemplated my situation, however, the more I became confirmed in my suspicions. It was a desolate thought, indeed. I felt there was no trust or mercy in unfeeling man; and commending myself to the God of the oppressed, bowed my head upon my fettered hands, and wept most bitterly.

Excerpted and abridged from Chapter I. "[The Kidnapper](#)" from *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed: Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and his Wife "Vina," after Forty Years of Slavery* (from [Documenting the American South](#))

This is from the story of Peter Still and his brother Levin, free black children who were kidnapped in the North and sold into slavery.

LATE in the afternoon of a pleasant summer day, two little boys were playing before the door of their mother's cottage. They were apparently about six or eight years old, and though their faces wore a dusky hue, their hearts were gay, and their laugh rang out clear and free. ... How they ran races down the road, and turned summersets on the green grass! How their eyes danced with merriment, and their white teeth glistened in the pleasant light!

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But as the day wore on they grew weary, and with childhood's first impulse, sought their mother. She was not in the house. All there was still and lonely. In one corner stood her bed, covered with a clean blanket, and the baby's cradle was empty by its side. Grandmother's bed, in another corner of the room, was made up nicely, and every article of the simple furniture was in its accustomed place. Where could they all have gone? ... "Mammy! O Mammy!" Thus they called their mother, and cried because she did not answer, till their eyes were swollen, and their pleasant play forgotten. Soon the sound of wheels diverted them for a moment from their childish grief, and looking up the road, they saw a handsome gig approaching. Its only occupant was a tall dark man, with black and glossy hair, which fell heavily below his white hat

He looked earnestly at the little boys as he approached, and marking their evident distress, he checked his horse, and kindly asked the cause of their sorrow.

"Oh! Mammy's done gone off, and there's nobody to give us our supper, and we're so hongry."

"Where is your mother?"

"Don't know, sir," replied Levin, "but I reckon she's gone to church."

"Well, don't you want to ride? Jump up here with me, and I'll take you to your mother. I'm just going to church. Come! quick! What! No clothes but a shirt? Go in and get a blanket. It will be night soon, and you will be cold."

Away they both ran for a blanket. Levin seized one from his mother's bed, and in his haste pushed the door against his brother, who was robbing his grandmother's couch of its covering.

The blanket was large, and little Peter, crying all the while, was repeatedly tripped by its falling under his feet while he was running to the gig.

The stranger lifted them up, and placing them between his feet, covered them carefully with the blankets, that they might not be cold. He spoke kindly to them, meanwhile, still assuring them that he would soon take them to their mother.

Away they went very swiftly, rejoicing in their childish hearts to think how their mother would wonder when she should see them coming. ...

When the gig stopped again, the sun was just setting. They were at the water side, and before them lay many boats, and vessels of different kinds. They had never seen anything like these before, but they had short time to gratify their childish curiosity; for they were hurried on board a boat, which left the shore immediately.

With the assurance that they should now find their mother, they trusted implicitly, in their new-made friend; who strengthened their confidence in himself by gentle words and timely gifts. Cakes of marvellous sweetness were ever ready for them, if they grew impatient of the length of the journey; and their childish hearts could know no distrust of one whose words and acts were kind.

How long they were on the boat they did not know; nor by what other means they travelled could they afterwards remember, until they reached Versailles, Kentucky. Here their self-constituted guardian,

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whom they now heard addressed as Kincaid, placed them in a wagon with a colored woman and her child, and conveyed them to Lexington.

This was the first town they had ever seen, and as they were conducted up Main street, they were filled with wonder and admiration.

Kincaid took them to a plain brick house where dwelt one John Fisher, a mason by trade, and proprietor of a large brick yard.

After some conversation between the gentlemen, which of course the children did not understand, they were taken out to the kitchen, and presented to Aunt Betty, the cook.

“There, my, boys,” said Kincaid, “there is your mother—we’ve found her at last.”

“No! no!” they shrieked, “that’s not our mother! O, please, sir! Take us back!” With tears and cries they clung to him who had abused their guileless trust, and begged him not to leave them there.

This scene was soon ended by John Fisher himself, who, with a hearty blow on each cheek, bade them “hush!” “You belong to me now, you little rascals, and I’ll have no more of this. There’s Aunt Betty, she’s your mammy now; and if you behave yourselves, she’ll be good to you.”

Kincaid soon departed, and they never saw him again. They learned, however, from a white apprentice, who lived in the house, that he received from Mr. Fisher one hundred and fifty-five dollars for Levin, and one hundred and fifty for Peter.

Poor children! what a heavy cloud now shadowed their young lives!

For the first few weeks they talked constantly of going back to their mother—except when their master was near. They soon learned that they must not mention the subject in his presence.

He was, in the main, a kind, indulgent man—but were they not his money? Why should he allow them to prate about being stolen, when he had bought them, and paid a right good price?

“Father,” said John Fisher, junior, “isn’t Philadelphia in a free State?”

“Certainly—it is in Pennsylvania.”

“Well, then, I reckon those two boys you bought were stolen, for they lived with their mother near the Delaware river; and Aunt Betty says that is at Philadelphia. It was too bad, father, for that man to steal them and sell them here, where they can never hear from their mother!”

“Pooh, boy! Don’t talk like a fool! Most likely they were sold to Kincaid, and he told them he would take them to their mother, in order to get them away without any fuss. And even if he did steal them—so were all the negroes stolen at first. I bought these boys, and paid for them, and I’ll stop their talk about being free, or I’ll break their black necks. A pretty tale that, to go about the country—just to spoil the sale if I should happen to wish to get shut of them! Free, indeed! And what is a free nigger? They’re better off here than if they were free, growing up in idleness, and with nobody to take care of them.”

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Before night the young offenders were thoroughly kicked and beaten, and received the assurance that they should be killed outright if they dared to tell such a tale again. So they grew cautious; and spoke those sweet memories of home and mother only in whispers to each other, or to some fellow-slave that knew how to sympathize with their sorrows.

1. Activity 1. Questions:

1. In both of the cases above, kidnappers took advantage of the vulnerabilities of the victims. What was Northup's vulnerability? What was the Still brothers' vulnerability?
2. How did the kidnappers enlist the trust of the victims while they were being lured south and ultimately into slavery?
3. Once the Still brothers had been sold into slavery, cite the text that explains what happened when they discussed the fact that they were free blacks.
4. In one of the excerpts there is a statement indicating the attitude that all blacks naturally belonged in slavery. Cite that quote and explain why this belief would serve the interest of free black kidnappers.
5. State one reason free black children were preyed upon that one can infer merely with prior knowledge of the behavior of children vs. that of adults. Provide at least one other reason children were preyed upon by kidnappers that requires knowledge of circumstances in which free black children lived and worked during the slavery era.
6. How was the profitability of cotton cultivation in the deep South related to Northup's kidnapping?
7. What was a major "loop-hole" in the Southern law that many kidnappers felt gave them "license" to kidnap?