

## **Biography of Solomon Northup**

Solomon Northup was born 1808 in the town of Minerva in upstate New York. His father, Mintus Northup was a former slave who after gaining his freedom made his living farming. Solomon's mother remains unknown except she was a free woman. On Christmas Day 1829, Solomon married Anne Hampton, a free black woman also from upstate New York. Within a decade the couple had three children and was living in Saratoga Springs, New York. There Solomon did seasonal work such as farming and rafting on the Lake Champlain Canal. He also regularly supplemented his earnings as a popular local fiddler.

Solomon Northup's modest, contented life took a dramatic turn in late March, 1841, when he met two white men who said they were circus performers seeking a high-quality fiddler for engagements in the Washington, D.C., area. Eager for extra income, Northup made the journey south with the affable talent scouts. But after an evening of social drinking in Washington, Northup fell ill and returned to his room. When he woke up, he found himself in chains in a slave pen in the nation's capital.

Northup's kidnappers robbed him of his free papers and sold him to an infamous slave trader, James H. Birch (spelled "Burch" in *Twelve Years a Slave*). Northup's protests and insistence on his free identity led to severe beatings followed by eventual transfer to New Orleans. On the way south, Northup met Eliza, an enslaved mother with two young children. In a New Orleans slave market, Northup witnessed Eliza's children sold away from her and later saw how her inconsolable grief led to her eventual death.

Northup, along with Eliza and a third slave, was purchased in June 1841 by a cotton planter named William Prince Ford. Ford ran a plantation in central Louisiana. Northup's initiation into slavery commenced under unusually favorable circumstances. Ford treated his newly-acquired Negro "Platt" (Northup's slave name) with uncommon respect due to Northup's multiple skills, good business sense, and initiative. Unfortunately for Northup, he spent scarcely more than six months under Ford before his master, needing money, sold him to a local carpenter with whom Northup clashed. But Northup's good reputation as a "Jack at all trades" among local planters led to his being recruited to work on a variety of jobs, such as lumbering, rail splitting, and sugar cane cutting. Platt's value as a resourceful, hard-working slave was part of the reason why his third master, Edwin Epps, paid \$1,500 for him in the spring of 1843.

The latter half of *Twelve Years a Slave* recounts Northup's eight years under the control of the sadistic, near-psychotic Epps. He was as cruel and despicable as any slaveholder depicted in any African American novel or autobiography before 1865. Epps's twisted, pathological attachment to his female slave, Patsey, was described in detail by Northup. Celebrated for much more than physical beauty or traditional womanly virtue, the noble Patsey becomes a genuinely tragic and pitiable figure in *Twelve Years a Slave*.

For almost his entire tenure on Epps's small Red River plantation, Northup served as his master's slave driver. Just as he had distinguished himself in the eyes of William Ford, Epps took notice of Epps' work ethic, skills, and steady temperament. Epps was so favorably impressed he turned the daily management of his slaves largely over to Northup. *Twelve Years a Slave* is thus written from the point of view of a slave driver, whose complex status in the plantation pecking order often protected the driver from punishments inflicted on ordinary slaves but only by acceding to the master's demand that the driver administer those punishments himself.

## ***Twelve Years a Slave: Analyzing Slave Narratives***

In the summer of 1852, a compassionate white Canadian who had been hired to do temporary carpentry for Epps wrote a letter at Northup's urging to two white Saratoga storekeepers whom Northup trusted. The letter identified Northup's enslavement and location. At the request of Ann Northup, a team of influential white men gathered the necessary documentation to authorize Solomon's rescue which took place on January 3, 1853. Restored to his family a little less than three weeks later, Northup became front-page news in several New York newspapers and in the antislavery press. Northup's suit against Birch yielded him no satisfaction partly because he was prohibited from testifying against the slave trader, the testimony of a black man against a white being inadmissible in District of Columbia court. Northup's later efforts to bring his two kidnapers to justice also failed, mired in legal technicalities.

A celebrity in abolitionist circles, Northup appeared before New York and New England antislavery audiences as a speaker. A collaboration with a white ghostwriter named David Wilson produced Northup's best-selling, as-told-to slave narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave*. It was published in Auburn and Buffalo, New York, as well as London in 1853. By 1856 *Twelve Years a Slave* had sold 30,000 copies, a record of sales rivaling that of Frederick Douglass' 1845 *Narrative* in its first five years of publication. But after the fall of 1857, the fifty-year-old Northup disappeared from the public record. The time, place, and cause of his death remain unknown.

In 2013, 160 years after Northup's narrative was first published, a major motion picture based on Northup's life was released. Early acclaim for the film, *12 Years a Slave*, galvanized sales of reprints of *Twelve Years a Slave*, propelling it into the *New York Times* best-seller list. For more information on Northup's life, please see this summary of Northup's life at Documenting the American South: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/summary.html>