

# TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE

SOLOMON NORTHUP





# TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE

Solomon Northup

Introduction by  
Philip S. Foner

DOVER PUBLICATIONS, INC.  
Mineola, New York



Copyright Copyright © 1970 by Dover Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.

*Bibliographical Note*

This Dover edition, first published in 2000, is the second Dover unabridged republication of the work first published in 1853 by Derby and Miller, Auburn, New York. The Introduction written by Philip S. Foner for the 1970 Dover edition is included in this edition, as are 7 illustrations from the 1854 edition.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Northup, Solomon, b. 1808.

Twelve years a slave / Solomon Northup ; introduction by Philip S. Foner. p. cm. Originally published: Auburn, N.Y. : Derby and Miller. Includes index.

9780486130699

1. Northup, Solomon, b. 1808. 2. Slaves-United States—Biography. 3. Afro-Americans-Biography. 4. Plantation life—Louisiana-History-19th century. 5. Slavery-Louisiana—History-19th century. I. Title.

E444 N87 2000

306.3'62'092-dc21

99-089488

Manufactured in the United States by Courier Corporation 41143508  
[www.doverpublications.com](http://www.doverpublications.com)

# INTRODUCTION TO THE DOVER EDITION

COMMENTING on the literally hundreds of slave narratives published during the antislavery crusade, Ephraim Peabody, a contemporary writer, noted that they were “calculated to exert a very wide influence on public opinion” because they contained “the victim’s account of the workings of this great institution.” Among the autobiographies by former slaves, a few were especially effective in presenting a clear picture of the nature and operations of that “peculiar institution.” The most famous were Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative*, published in 1845, William W. Brown’s *Narrative*, published two years later, Josiah Henson’s autobiography, published in 1849, and Solomon Northup’s *Narrative*, published in 1853. Northup’s account is considered one of the most authentic descriptions of slavery from the viewpoint of the slave himself. Ulrich B. Phillips, who doubted the value and authenticity of many of the slave autobiographies, wrote of Northup’s book: “... this one has a tone which engages confidence. Its pictures of plantation life and labor are of particular interest.”

Kidnapping of free Negroes and their sale into slavery was not uncommon, especially as the price of slaves mounted in the decades following the legal closing of the African slave trade. But one of the most notorious kidnapping cases was that of Solomon Northup. He had been a raftsman and farmer around Lake Champlain in New York until 1841 when, on the ground of his talent with the fiddle, two strangers offered him employment in a circus which they said was then at Washington. Going there with them, without even bidding farewell to his wife and children, for what he thought would be merely temporary employment at good wages, Northup was drugged, shackled, robbed of his free papers, and sold to the firm of Price, Burch and Co., a well-known slave trading establishment. Each time he protested that he was a free man, Northup was whipped until he learned not to mention the fact to anyone. Confined in a slave jail

“within the very shadow of the capitol,” Northup observed: “The voices of patriotic representatives boasting of freedom and equality, and the rattling of the poor slaves’ chains almost commingled.” These slave pens were constructed by large traders, and the Negroes were confined in them while awaiting sale or transportation to a market. Northup was shipped to the New Orleans market. As he was marched to the ship handcuffed in a slave coffee, he reflected that the slaves were moving “through the capital of a nation, whose theory of government, we are told, rests on the foundation of man’s inalienable right to life, LIBERTY, and the pursuit of happiness! Hail! Columbia, happy land, indeed !”

At New Orleans, Northup was sold by the firm of Theophilus Freeman to a planter who lived on a Texas road, twelve miles from Lamourie. Sold again to a planter near the Red River in Louisiana, he was enslaved on a plantation for a dozen years until a letter, which a friendly white carpenter had written for him, brought one of his former patrons with an agent’s commission from the Governor of New York. With the assistance of the local authorities, Northup’s real identity was established, his liberty procured, and in 1853 he returned to his wife and children at Saratoga.

In closing his *Narrative*, Northup comments: “I doubt not hundreds have been as unfortunate as myself; that hundreds of free citizens have been kidnapped and sold into slavery, and are at this moment wearing out their lives on plantations in Texas and Louisiana.”

In the year of his rescue, David Wilson took down Northup’s story as “a correct picture of slavery.” It was published that year with the title, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup*. The title page announced the author as “a citizen of New York, kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and rescued in 1853, from a cotton plantation near the Red River in Louisiana,.” An Appendix contained the text of the law passed by the New York legislature in 1840 to protect the free citizens of the state from being kidnapped or reduced to slavery, the petition of Mrs. Anne Northup, Northup’s wife, to the Governor of New York, which led to her husband’s restitution to freedom, and letters establishing the authenticity of Northup’s claim that he was a free Negro who had been kidnapped and sold into slavery.

Northup's *Narrative* was dedicated to Harriet Beecher Stowe whose *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1853 as a reply to the attacks on the accuracy of the facts in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had noted that Northup "was carried to a plantation in the Red River country—that same region where the scene of Uncle Tom's captivity was laid—and his account of this plantation, and the mode of life there, and some incidents which he described, form a striking parallel to that history." In his dedication, Northup cited his *Narrative* as "affording another key to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."

Within a year after its publication, Northup's *Narrative* had sold 25,000 copies. It is the 1854 edition, carrying the notice "Twentieth Thousand," which is reprinted in this volume. The author made no changes from the first edition other than reprinting on the dedication page the reference to him in *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Written immediately after Northup's rescue from slavery, the *Narrative* had none of the errors in detail present in accounts put down from distant memory. It is not surprising, then, that Northup's slave narrative has proved to be an important source for scholars studying the internal slave trade, slave auctions and the separation of slave families, the life of the slave on the Southern plantations, the role of the slave driver, and the extent of slave resistance. (Like Frederick Douglass, Solomon Northup whipped his overseer and was involved in two near-rebellions.) Northup's picture of cotton plantation work is one of the few detailed contemporary portraits that exist—that is, from the viewpoint of the slave. His description of conditions on a cotton plantation in the mid-1840's and early 1850's is certainly one of the most valuable we have. His account of how the woods and swamps of Louisiana were "continually filled with runaways" who stole provisions from the surrounding farms is extremely useful in the study of the relatively permanent settlements of runaway slaves (called maroons) which were to be found in woods and swamps in many parts of the South.

"Ten years," Northup wrote, "I was compelled to address him [the master] with downcast eyes and uncovered head—in the attitude and language of the slave,." The whip was the antidote to any infringement of this conduct. Indeed, as Northup's narrative makes abundantly clear, the whip was the symbol of slavery, especially in the deep South. Northup's description of his brutal Louisiana master "whose chief delight was in

dancing with his ‘niggers’ or lashing them about the yard with his long whip,” and of the repeated floggings of the slave girl, Patsey, made a tremendous impact on thousands of readers. Few of these readers could disagree with Northup’s insight about slavery as he expressed it toward the end of his narrative:

“There may be humane masters, as there certainly are inhuman ones—there may be slaves well-clothed, well-fed, and happy, as there surely are those half-clad, half-starved and miserable; nevertheless, the institution that tolerates such wrong and inhumanity as I have witnessed, is a cruel, unjust, and barbarous one.”

The present-day reader will find in the *Narrative* absorbing descriptions of the operations of the slave system as well as a comprehensive portrait of the arbitrary and absolute power of slavery.

PHILIP S. FONER

*Lincoln University, Pennsylvania*

*November, 1969*



*Solomon Kar Tree*

**SOLOMON IN HIS PLANTATION SUIT.**