

# Famous New Yorker: Solomon Northup

Solomon Northup endured the unthinkable: born a free American citizen, he was kidnapped and enslaved, but survived to tell his story for the permanent record of history.

Solomon's father came to New York State as the slave of a Rhode Island man who gave him the Northup family name, and gave him freedom in his will. Solomon Northup himself was born free in Minerva, Essex County, in 1808.

Although black men faced obstacles to full equality, Solomon Northup was free to learn to read, write, and play the violin. He was free to marry in 1829, free to choose where to work, and free to leave one job for another.

As a father of three children in Saratoga Springs, Northup was looking for better opportunities in 1841. When two men invited him to become a circus musician in Washington D. C., Northup took the offer. He made sure to carry official identification, because black people without such papers could be arrested as runaway slaves in the nation's capital.

In Washington, Northup fell ill and collapsed in his hotel room. When he recovered, he found himself chained in a basement without his identity papers. A white man beat him and threatened to do worse if Northup told anyone he was really free.

Northup was taken to New Orleans, where he was given new clothes, bathed and shaved. With other captives, he was put up for auction in a slave market. Shoppers felt his hands, examined his teeth, and listened to him play the violin. One of them bought Northup for \$1,000.

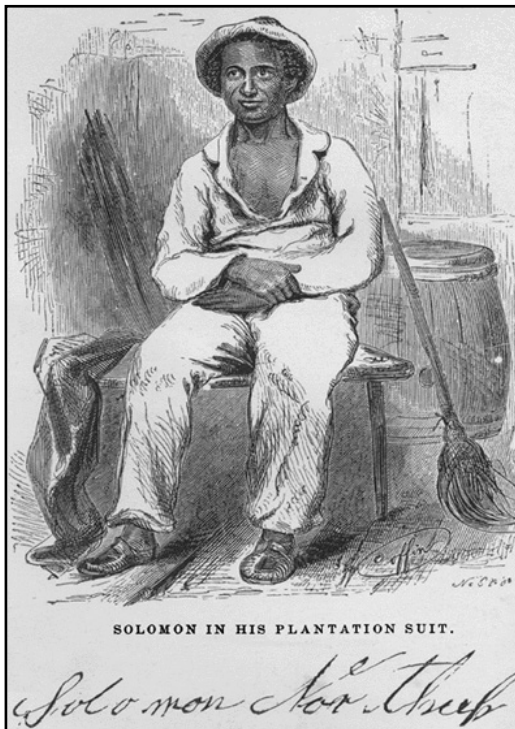
Over the next twelve years, Northup worked for three different masters in Louisiana. He spent most of that time on the cotton plantation of Edwin Epps. He slept on boards in a hut, endured brutal working conditions, suffered beatings, and sometimes had to beat other slaves on Epps's orders.

New York law required the state to intervene on behalf of enslaved black citizens, but nothing could be done for Northup until he told someone where he was. When he heard a Canadian-born carpenter criticize Epps for holding slaves in 1852, Northup decided to entrust him with a letter telling the true story of his kidnapping. The carpenter mailed it to Northup's former employers in Saratoga Springs. They contacted Henry B. Northup, a descendant of the Rhode Island slaveowner, who contacted the governor of New York.

In response to appeals from Northup's family and friends, the governor sent Henry Northup to Louisiana with evidence proving Solomon a free citizen of New York. When a court order forced Epps to free his supposed slave, Solomon Northup returned home to his family.

After newspaper reports created public interest in his life, Solomon Northup put the full story in writing. His memoir, "*Twelve Years A Slave*," was one of many books by former slaves, but his account of a free man's enslavement made the injustice of slavery especially clear. Once he found the courage to tell his story, Solomon Northup won the right to have the last word on his experience for all time.

Today, the third Saturday in July is celebrated as Solomon Northup Day - A Celebration of Freedom in Saratoga Springs, New York - where Solomon lived after he return to freedom.



Original illustration from *Twelve Years a Slave*  
Auburn: Derby and Miller..., 1853



**Saratoga Springs, New York** is about 30 miles north of the state capital, Albany.

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For links to more illustrations and an electronic version of "*Twelve Years a Slave*" go to <http://docsouth.unc.edu/northup/menu.html> This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA - Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2004.