

Enslaved!

The Slave Story that Triggered the Civil War

As we celebrate Pesach, "zman cheiruseinu," the "time of our freedom," read the emotionally riveting, history changing, true story of Solomon Northup. A freeborn black man living in New York, Northup was kidnapped and sold into slavery in the American South, where he was subjected to a grueling life under different slave owners. When Northup's story became known it aroused a storm of protest in the North and contributed to its support of the American Civil War.



(Note: All of the illustrations accompanying this article come from Northup's autobiography.)

Solomon Northup sat on a hard chair in his dark cell, his hands and feet bound in heavy chains that were attached to the floor. His thoughts were a confused jumble. He could not recall how he wound up in this miserable situation.

Suddenly he heard footsteps. A key was poked into the lock. The heavy door swung open, allowing a ray of light to penetrate the darkness. Two men entered Northup's cell. One was a middle-aged, heavyset man with a fleshy and frightening presence. Solomon did not know it, but this man was James Birch, an infamous slave trader in Washington DC. The other was the guard of his prison cell.

It took a while for Northup's eyes to accustom themselves to the sudden light. He could see through the open door out to the street, and he realized that he was near one of the main boulevards. The Capitol building was visible a short distance away. This was the very building where the voices of patriotic congressmen were heard daily discoursing on the inalienable rights of every human being to freedom and equality. How ironic that under the shadow of the Capitol building a dark cellar was being used to enslave blacks.

"How are you feeling, young man?" Birch asked his prisoner.

"I'm sick," Northup replied. "I demand to know the reason for my arrest."

"You are my slave," Birch responded in his deep, bass voice. "I bought you and I will sell you at the slave market in New Orleans."

"But I'm not a slave!" Northup protested. "I'm a free man, a resident of Saratoga Springs in New York, where I have a wife and children who are also free, and my name is Northup. What you are doing to me is a crime! Whoever did this to me will pay a price when I'm freed."

Birch broke out in a hearty laugh. "You're not a free man and you don't come from New York. You come from Georgia and I paid a large sum for you."

When Northup continued to argue and demanded that his shackles be removed, Birch only became agitated. He feared that Solomon's voice would be heard

by people passing outside. If he was discovered, he could be arrested for kidnapping. "Silence!" he shouted.

When Northup refused to keep quiet, Birch lost his cool. Amidst a barrage of curses, Birch turned to the guard and told him, "Bring me the whip! Let's knock some sense into this 'free man.'"

Who Was Solomon Northup?

Solomon Northup descended from black slaves who belonged to a white family named Northup in Rhode Island. The owner of Solomon's father, Mintus, was Captain Henry Northup, who later moved to Hoosick, in New York's Rensselaer County and brought Solomon's father with him. When Captain Northup died he stated in his will that Mintus should be freed. Mintus chose to keep the name Northup out of respect to his former owner.

Mintus Northup became successful and managed to put away enough money to purchase his own property in Minerva, in New York's Essex County. He married and had two sons, Solomon and Joseph, who were legally recognized as freeborn black men. Mintus even provided his sons with a proper education, something virtually unheard of for African-Americans of those times. The boys helped out on their father's farm where Mintus often shared with them the difficulties he suffered as a slave.

When Solomon Northup grew up he also married and had three children. He bought a farm in Hebron, in New York's Washington County. Northup took on various jobs to support his family, including cutting down trees for logging companies and transporting them downriver through rafting.

However, Northup's greatest talent was as a fiddler, a skill he had honed since childhood. His wife earned extra money as a cook in a local restaurant. They were happy and successful.

Then, in 1834, Northup decided to transform his fiddling abilities into a full career. He sold his farm and moved 20 miles away to Saratoga Springs, a resort city in upstate

New York. He was certain that he would find steady employment there. However, he had misjudged the situation. Although he found employment at several famous local hotels, he soon learned that the job was seasonal. He was very busy over the summer but without work the rest of the year. His wife was forced to supplement their income by cooking for a hotel.

Opportunity Knocks

On a spring day in 1841, Northup was strolling on the streets of Saratoga Springs deep in his thoughts. He was mulling over where to find employment until the busy summer season returned. At the moment, his wife was 20 miles away, working as a cook in a coffeehouse. His 10-year-old daughter was with her mother, while her 8-year-old sister and 5-year-old brother were staying with an aunt.

When he reached the corner of Congress Street and Broadway, he was met by two men standing in front of a bar. He had never seen these men before. They were dressed like successful businessmen and made a good impression.

"We heard what a good fiddler you are," the gentlemen told Northup. "We're connected with a circus company in Washington which is now here in New York. We're having a very hard time finding talented musicians for our performances. We would like to offer you an opportunity to become a famous fiddler. We'll bring you to New York where you'll play for our circus. We'll pay you \$1 for every day you are with us and \$3 for every performance you play at. We'll also pay you the cost of the return trip to Saratoga when it's finished."

The men identified themselves as Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton. The first man appeared to be around 40 while the second was barely in his twenties. Northup discussed the offer with the men and accepted. Having been a villager all his life he was curious to visit the big city and see Manhattan. In any case, he needed the money.



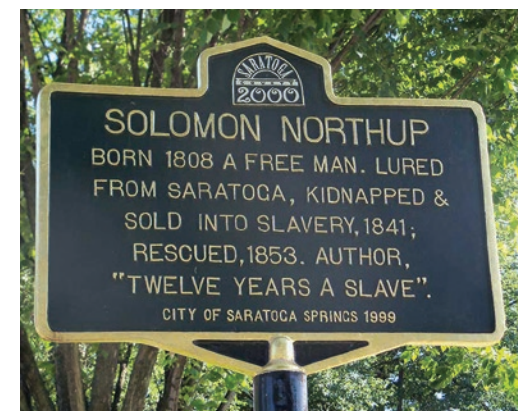
The first house where Solomon Northup lived after his marriage in Fort Edward, New York.



A room in the Fort Edward home.



A sign in the house which serves today as a museum.



Sign at Northup's house in Saratoga Springs.