

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

Activity 1. Free Black Kidnapping: Examining Evidence, Assessment Answers THE BEST OF THE HUMANITIES ON THE WEB

1. In both of the cases above, kidnappers took advantage of the vulnerabilities of the victims. What was Northup's vulnerability?

Answer: *Northup's need for income and his need/desire to see a "metropolis" and the boys' need to be with their mother.*

2. How did the kidnappers enlist the trust of the victims while they were being lured South and ultimately into slavery?

Answer: *With Northup the kidnappers were very considerate and caring and did thoughtful things like helping Northup get free papers in New York City; they also were generous with money; with the Stills' brothers, the kidnappers offered them "marvellous sweets" and were kind to them.*

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.

Answer: *"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."*

4. In one of the excerpts there is a statement indicating the attitude that free blacks naturally belonged in slavery. Cite that quote and explain why this belief would serve the interest of free black kidnappers.

Answer: *The quote is from the excerpt from Kidnapped and Ransomed in the second to the last paragraph: "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." This was a growing attitude among many whites and such public sentiments served to minimize the seriousness of free black kidnapping. This dismissive attitude served the interests of the 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 the conditions under which free black children lived and worked during the slavery era.

Answer: *An inference one can make merely with prior knowledge of children's vs. adult behavior is that children are more vulnerable because they are more innocent and less "suspicious" of the motives of adults and because they are smaller and weaker so can be physically controlled more easily than an adult. Another reason, learned from readings in this lesson, is that free black children were often indentured or hired out to work for a person who taught them a skill, so they were frequently not living with their parents. Therefore, they could be abducted without raising suspicion, since it could be assumed the children had gone to visit their families, or the families would assume they were under the care of the person with whom they had the apprenticeship.*

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6. How was the profitability of cotton cultivation in the Deep South relevant to Northup's kidnapping?

Answer: As cotton cultivation became highly profitable due to the invention of the cotton gin, the success of this plantation crop increased the demand for slave labor. This stimulated an internal slave trade in which slaves in the upper south were sold to the lower south. This demand for slaves to work as laborers in the cotton fields also created a social, economic, and legal climate that was conducive to kidnapping free blacks and selling them into slavery. Although living in upstate New York near Canada, Solomon Northup fell victim to ruthless kidnappers. They sold him to dealers trafficking in slaves transported to the Deep South as labor for the booming cotton plantations.

7. What was a major "loop-hole" in the Southern law that many kidnappers felt gave them license to kidnap?

Answer: Southern laws abetted kidnappers because an African American could not testify against a white person in court and kidnappers were generally white.