

Background for the teacher

Slave narratives are former slaves' accounts of their experiences during enslavement, how they became free, and their lives in freedom. Because of their influence on American literature, they are also increasingly viewed as seminal literary works in their own right. Slave narratives are critical historical documents on slavery, as well. Although readers have responded to the narratives' disturbing scenes of inhumanity and struggle with incredulity, studies conducted to authenticate slave narratives have discovered few discrepancies with historical fact.

Slave narratives raise questions about how commonplace the experiences depicted in narratives were. For example, was Solomon Northup's being kidnapped and sold into slavery in the South exceptional or commonplace? To make such determinations we must gather evidence from multiple sources including reviewing conclusions of other historians who have examined the available evidence.

Some historians conclude that the economic, social, and legal conditions in the antebellum period were conducive to kidnapping free blacks and selling them into slavery. Selling "slaves" was lucrative. Moreover, public outcry about free black kidnappings lessened over the course of the 19th century as many whites increasingly saw slavery as the natural condition for all blacks. Southern law often abetted the kidnapper because blacks in Southern states could not testify against a white person and kidnappers were generally white. Although kidnappings are frequently mentioned in primary sources, the precise number of victims remains unknown, as few survived enslavement to report having been kidnapped.

Solomon Northup occupied the high-status position of a slave driver for eight years and was responsible for whipping fellow slaves to ensure they met the master's expectations of maximum productivity. The manner in which he executed his role raises questions about whether his approach to being a driver was unique. One historian has estimated that two-thirds of all plantation slaves worked under drivers and asserts that slave drivers were caught in the middle position between the master's demand for productivity and the slaves' need for fairness and respect for their work rhythms. Northup whipped fellow slaves vigorously at times yet at other times he risked whippings himself and even losing his privileged position by faking whippings or refusing to whip. Were these actions exceptional or did other slave drivers handle the role similarly?

In the summer of 1853, within months of Northup's rescue, his slave narrative was published in Auburn and Buffalo, New York, as well as in London. By 1856, *Twelve Years a Slave* had sold 30,000 copies. The renewed popularity of this narrative, due to the release of the film *12 Years a Slave* in 2013, underscores how America's greatest human tragedy, chattel slavery and its legacy of racism and discrimination, remain a compelling theme for the American people.