

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

Activity 2. Slave Drivers: Examining Evidence

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Class: _____

Read the following excerpts from Solomon Northup’s narrative as well as other primary and secondary sources about the plantation role of “slave driver” and then answer the questions at the end.

Source A. Solomon Northup’s explanation of how he came to be slave driver and his performance and views of that role:

“When I first came to Epps, Tom, one of Robert’s negroes, was driver. He was a burly fellow, and severe in the extreme. After Epps’ removal to Bayou Boeuf, that distinguished honor was conferred upon myself. Up to the time of my departure I had to wear a whip about my neck in the field. If Epps was present, I dared not show any lenity ... by refusing to perform the office. In that way, only, I escaped, and, withal, saved my companions much suffering, as it proved in the end. Epps, I soon found, whether actually in the field or not, had his eyes pretty generally upon us. ... If, on the other hand, he had seen me use the lash freely, the man was satisfied. Practice makes perfect, truly; and during my eight years’ experience as a driver, I learned to handle the whip with marvelous dexterity and precision, throwing the lash within a hair’s breadth of the back, the ear, the nose, without, however, touching either of them.” (Source: [Twelve Years a Slave](#))

Source B. Definition of the Slave Driver Role:

“Most planters of the Lower South and some of the Upper South appointed drivers whether or not they hired white overseers. The drivers, slaves themselves acted as foremen of the labor gangs. ... Capable drivers—and there were many of them—readily became the most important slaves on the place and often knew more about management than did the whites. The term ‘driver’ itself expresses the primary function of keeping the field hands moving. “Source: Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1976), 365.

Source C. Historian John Hope Franklin’s View of the Slave Driver:

“On some plantations a slave called the driver was selected to assist the owner in getting work out of slaves. The other slaves frequently resented the delegation of authority to one among them, and the [slave] driver was sometimes viewed as a traitor, especially if he took his duties seriously.” Source: John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: McGraw Hill, Inc. 1994), 130.

Source D. Historian Eugene D. Genovese’s View of the Slave Driver’s Role:

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“To keep their position and their privileges, they had to do their masters’ bidding. They had to demand a certain level of discipline and performance from the hands. When they did not get it, they used their whip. They asserted their authority and resolutely crushed, when they could, all challenges from below. But they too were black slaves and knew that no accomplishment would change their station - the constraints of being black inexorably prevailed. They lived among the others in the quarters and did not participate as did many drivers in the Caribbean in a separate privileged group. Consequently, they strove to mediate between the Big House and the quarters to lower the level of violence, to maintain order in the most humane way available which, to be sure, was not always all the humane. They were men in between.” Source: Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1976), 379.

Source E. An Antebellum Eye-Witness Account from a White Perspective about Slave Drivers:

“The colored overseers [slave drivers] are not over the slaves because they wish it, but are made so against their will. When they first commence to lash the backs of their fellows, they are like soldiers when they first go to the battle-field; they dread and fear the contest, until they hear the roaring of the cannon, and smell the powder, and mark the whizzing ball; then they rush into the battle, forgetful of all human sympathy while in the fight. So it is with the slave-drivers. They bear the angry tones of the slaveholder’s voice, admonishing them that if they refuse to whip, they must take it themselves. After receiving the instructions of their owners, they must forget even their own wives and children, and do all they can for ‘Master.’ If they do not do this, they must receive all that would be given the others. In this manner, their hearts and consciences are hardened, and they become educated to whipping, and lose all human feeling” (12). Source: Peter Randolph, [*Sketches of Slave Life: Or, Illustrations of the Peculiar Institution*](#), (Boston, 1855). EDSITEment-reviewed Documenting the American South website:

Source F. West Turner a former Virginia slave made this comment about “old Gabe,” a slave who did the whipping for his master:

“Ole Gabe didn’t like dat whippin’ bus’ness, but he couldn’t he’p hisself. Whan Mars was dere, he would lay it on ‘cause he had to. But when ole Marsa wasn’t lookin’ he never would beat dem slaves. Would tie de slave up to one post and lash another one. “Cose d slave would scream an’yell to satisfy Marsa ...” (Source: Genovese, Eugene D., *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, New York: Random House, 1976, p. 379 quoting from Work Projects Administration, *Negro in Virginia*, p. 156)

Questions

1. Solomon Northup says he simulated or faked whippings in Source A. Cite another source where there is evidence of another slave driver faking whippings. Where was the plantation master when these faked whippings occurred according to these two sources? Why did these slave drivers fake whippings?
2. Which source/s provide evidence that slave drivers could be “severe” and “harsh” in the way they executed their role? Cite source and underline relevant text.

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3. What source/s provide(s) evidence that some slave drivers were concerned with lowering the level of violence inflicted on their fellow slaves? Cite source and underline relevant text.
4. Sources C and D present historians' views of slave drivers. Which view comes closest to describing Solomon Northup as a slave driver and why?