

Moses Roper

In the late 1830s and early 1840s the first outspokenly antislavery slave narratives found their way into print, led by the work of a North Carolina-born fugitive, Moses Roper, whose *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (1837), went through ten editions in Great Britain and the United States, selling more than 20,000 copies. In Roper's gripping narrative, personal memory and a graphic expose of slavery blend to produce a powerful expressive tool as both propaganda and literature. The opening paragraph of his narrative testified, in a disarmingly deadpan manner, to the violence that even the birth of an innocent baby could occasion in any household, white or black, in which slavery ruled:

I was born in North Carolina, in Caswell county, I am not able to tell in what year or month. What I shall now relate is, what was told me by my mother and grandmother. A few months before I was born, my father married my mother's young mistress. As soon as my father's wife heard of my birth, she sent one of my mother's sisters to see whether I was white or black, and when my aunt had seen me, she returned back as soon as she could, and told her mistress that I was white, and resembled Mr. Roper very much. Mr. R.'s wife being not pleased with this report, she got a large club stick and knife, and hastened to the place in which my mother was confined. She went into my mother's room with full intention to murder me with her knife and club, but as she was going to stick the knife into me, my grandmother happening to come in, caught the knife and saved my life.

To read the full narrative, at [Documenting the American South](#)

Roper's shocking narrative made white slaveholders appear to be the brutal and violent "other" while the fugitive narrator himself emerges as a thoughtful, family-loving aspirant to freedom, dedicated at the end of his story to gaining an education and embracing Christianity. The wide appeal and extensive sales of Roper's story led abolitionists to look for more fugitives who would be willing to speak and write about what they had seen and suffered during their enslavement.