

Biographies of Slaves

A Collection

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Olaudah Equiano



Olaudah Equiano was born in Essaka, an Igbo village in the kingdom of Benin (now Nigeria) in 1745. His father was one of the province's elders who decided disputes. According to James Walvin "Equiano described his father as a local Igbo eminence and slave owner".

When he was about eleven, Equiano was kidnapped and after six months of captivity he was brought to the coast

where he encountered white men for the first time. Equiano later recalled in his autobiography, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano the African* (1787): "The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast, was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror, when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled, and tossed up to see if I were sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions, too, differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, (which was very different from any I had ever heard) united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed, such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country."

Olaudah Equiano was placed on a slave-ship bound for Barbados. "I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a greeting in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life; so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across, I think, the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. The air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died. The wretched situation was again

aggravated by the chains, now unsupportable, and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable."

After a two-week stay in the West Indies Equiano was sent to the English colony of Virginia. In 1754 he was purchased by Captain Henry Pascal, a British naval officer. He was given the new name of Gustavus Vassa and was brought back to England. According to his biographer, James Walvin: "For seven years he served on British ships as Pascal's slave, participating in or witnessing several battles of the Seven Years' War. Fellow sailors taught him to read and write and to understand mathematics. He was also converted to Christianity, reading the Bible regularly on board ship. Baptized at St Margaret's Church, Westminster, on 9 February 1759, he struggled with his faith until finally opting for Methodism."

By the end of the Seven Years' War he reached the rank of able seaman. Although he was freed by Pascal he was re-enslaved in London in 1762 and shipped to the West Indies. For four years he worked for a Montserrat based merchant, sailing between the islands and North America. "I was often a witness to cruelties of every kind, which were exercised on my unhappy fellow slaves. I used frequently to have different cargoes of new Negroes in my care for sale; and it was almost a constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves; and these I was, though with reluctance, obliged to submit to at all times, being unable to help them."

James Walvin points out that "Equiano... also trading to his own advantage as he did so. Ever alert to commercial openings, Equiano accumulated cash and in 1766 bought his own freedom."

Equiano now worked closely with Granville Sharpe and Thomas Clarkson in the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Equiano spoke at a large number of public meetings where he described the cruelty of the slave trade. In 1787 Equiano helped his friend, Offobah Cugoano, to publish an account of his experiences, *Narrative of the Enslavement of a Native of America*. Copies of his book was sent to George III and leading politicians. He failed to persuade the king to change his opinions and like other members of the royal family remained against abolition of the slave trade.

Equiano published his own autobiography, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano the African* in 1789. He travelled throughout England promoting the book. It became a bestseller and was also published in Germany (1790), America (1791) and Holland (1791). He also spent over eight months in Ireland where he made several speeches on the evils of the

slave trade. While he was there he sold over 1,900 copies of his book.

David Dabydeen has argued: "With Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce and Granville Sharpe, Equiano was a major abolitionist, working ceaselessly to expose the nature of the shameful trade. He travelled throughout Britain with copies of his book, and thousands upon thousands attended his readings. When John Wesley lay dying, it was Equiano's book he took up to reread."

On 7th April 1792 Equiano married Susanna Cullen (1761-1796) of [Soham, Cambridgeshire](#). The couple had two children, Anna Maria (16th October 1793) and Johanna (11th April 1795). However, Anna Maria died when she was only four years old. Equiano's wife died soon afterwards. During this period he was a close friend of [Thomas Hardy](#), secretary of the [London Corresponding Society](#). Equiano became an active member of this group that campaigned in favour of universal suffrage.

Olaudah Equiano was appointed to the expedition to settle former black slaves in [Sierra Leone](#), on the west coast of [Africa](#). However, he died at his home at [Paddington Street, Marylebone](#), on 31st March, 1797 before he could complete the task.

Mary Prince

Mary Prince, the daughter of slaves, was born at Brackish Pond, Bermuda, in about 1788. Her father was a sawyer and her mother a [house-servant](#). Mary and her parents were the property of Charles Myners.

When Myners died Mary and her mother were sold to Captain Williams. Mary now became the personal slave of his daughter, Betsey Williams. When she was twelve years old Mary was hired out to another plantation five miles away. Soon afterwards Williams sold her to another family.

Mary Prince worked as a domestic slave and in the fields and during this period she was constantly flogged by her mistress. She later wrote: "To strip me naked - to hang me up by the wrists and lay my flesh open with the cow-skin, was an ordinary punishment for even a slight offence."

Her master later sold her to another man and in 1806 Mary Prince was sent to work on the salt pans of Turk Island. "I was immediately sent to work in the salt water with the rest of the slaves. This work was perfectly new to me. I was given a half barrel and a shovel, and had to stand up to my knees in the water, from four o'clock in the morning till nine, when we were given some Indian corn boiled in water, which we were obliged to swallow as fast as we could for fear the rain should come on and melt the salt."

In 1818 Mary Prince was then sold to John Wood, a plantation owner who lived in Antigua, for \$300. She later wrote: My work there was to attend the chambers and nurse the child, and to go down to the pond and wash clothes. But I soon fell ill of the rheumatism, and grew so very lame that I was forced to walk with a stick."

Mary Prince began attending meetings held at the Moravian Church. She later wrote: "The Moravian ladies (Mrs. Richter, Mrs. Olufsen, and Mrs. Sauter) taught me to read in the class; and I got on very fast. In this class there were all sorts of people, old and young, grey headed folks and children; but most of them were free people. After we had done spelling, we tried to read in the Bible. After the reading was over, the missionary gave out a hymn for us to sing."

While in Antigua she met the widower, Daniel Jones, a former black slave who had managed to purchase his freedom. Jones now worked as a carpenter and cooper and asked Mary to marry him. This she agreed to do and got married in the Moravian Chapel in December 1826. John Wood was furious when he found out and once again she had to endure a severe beating with a horsewhip.

John Wood and his wife took her as their servant to [London](#). Soon after arriving in England in 1828 she ran away and went to live at the Moravian Mission House in Hatton Gardens. A few weeks later she went to work for Thomas Pringle, a member of the [Anti-Slavery Society](#). In 1831 Pringle arranged for her to publish her book, [The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave](#).

After the publication of the book John Wood sued the publishers of [The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave](#) claiming that Mary Prince work had "endeavoured to injure the character of my family by the most vile and infamous falsehoods". Wood lost his case.

Two prominent supporters of slavery in Britain, James MacQueen and James Curtin, took up Wood's case and in an article in [Blackwood's Magazine](#), claimed that Prince's book contained a large number of lies. Prince and her publisher sued MacQueen and Curtin for libel and won their case.

Charles Ball

Charles Ball, a slave from [Maryland](#), was born in about 1780 . His grandfather was brought from [Africa](#) and sold as a slave. His mother was the slave of a [tobacco planter](#). When the planter died when Ball was four years old, he family were sold [separately](#), with his mother going to [Georgia](#): "My mother had several children, and they were sold upon master's death to separate purchasers. She was sold, my father told me, to a Georgia trader. I, of all her children, was the only one left in Maryland. When sold I was naked, never

having had on clothes in my life, but my new master gave me a child's frock, belonging to one of his own children. After he had purchased me, he dressed me in this garment, took me before him on his horse, and started home; but my poor mother, when she saw me leaving her for the last time, ran after me, took me down from the horse, clasped me in her arms, and wept loudly and bitterly over me."

Ball stayed with his father: "He was an old man, nearly eighty years old, he said, and he manifested all the fondness for me that I could expect from one so old. He was feeble, and his master required but little work from him. He always expressed contempt for his fellow-slaves, for when young, he was an African of rank in his native land. He had a small cabin of his own, with half an acre of ground attached to it, which he cultivated on his own account, and from which he drew a large share of his sustenance."

When he was about 12 years old, his master, Jack Cox, died. Ball later recalled in his autobiography, *The Life and Adventures of Charles Ball* (1837): "I was sorry for the death of my master, who had always been kind to me; and I soon discovered that I had good cause to regret his departure from this world. He had several children at the time of his death, who were all young; the oldest being about my own age. The father of my late master, who was still living, became administrator of his estate, and took possession of his property, and amongst the rest, of myself. This old gentleman treated me with the greatest severity, and compelled me to work very hard on his plantation for several years."

Ball was allowed to marry but in 1805: "I married a girl of color named Judah, the slave of a gentleman by the name of Symmes, who resided in the same neighborhood. I was at the house of Mr. Symmes every week; and became as well acquainted with him and his family, as I was with my master." Mrs. Symmes employed Ball's wife as her chambermaid. Ball commented that he regarded this "as a fortunate circumstance, as it insured her good food, and at least one good suit of clothes."

Ball was later sold to a cotton plantation owner in *South Carolina* while his wife and children remained in Maryland. "I had at times serious thoughts of suicide so great was my anguish. If I could have got a rope I should have hanged myself at Lancaster. The thought of my wife and children I had been torn from in Maryland, and the dreadful undefined future which was before me, came near driving me mad." Ball made several attempts to escape but was captured and became another man's slave in *Georgia*.

Ball escaped again and this time reached *Pennsylvania*. Later he managed to get back to his previous home in *Maryland*. "It was now clear that some slave-dealer had come in my absence and seized my wife and children as slaves, and sold them to such men as I had served in the South. They had now

passed into hopeless bondage, and were gone forever beyond my reach. I myself was advertised as a fugitive slave, and was liable to be arrested at each moment, and dragged back to Georgia. I rushed out of my own house in despair and returned to Pennsylvania with a broken heart."

With the help of Isaac Fisher, a white lawyer, wrote his autobiography, *The Life and Adventures of Charles Ball* (1837). It included the following passage: "For the last few years, I have resided about fifty miles from Philadelphia, where I expect to pass the evening of my life, in working hard for my subsistence, without the least hope of ever again seeing, my wife and children: - fearful, at this day, to let my place of residence be known, lest even yet it may be supposed, that as an article of property, I am of sufficient value to be worth pursuing in my old age." Afraid of being recaptured, Ball moved again and its not known when and where he died.

Nat Turner

Nat Turner was born in Southampton, Virginia on 2nd October, 1800. Nat, the son of slaves, was the property of Benjamin Turner, a prosperous plantation owner. Nat's mother and grandmother had been brought to America from Africa and had a deep hatred of slavery.

Nat grew up sharing his mother's view of slavery. Taught to read by his master's son, Nat developed deep religious beliefs and encouraged by his parents, gradually began to believe that God had chosen him to lead his people out of slavery.

In 1831 Turner was sold to Joseph Travis. In February of that year an eclipse of the sun convinced Turner that this was a supernatural sign from God to start an insurrection. However, it wasn't until August 21st that Turner and about seven other slaves killed Travis and his family to launch his rebellion. In all, about 50 whites were killed.

Turner had hoped this his action would cause a massive slave uprising but only 75 joined his rebellion. Over 3,000 members of the state militia were sent to deal with Turner's rebellion, and they were soon defeated. In retaliation, more than a hundred innocent slaves were killed. Turner went into hiding but was captured six weeks later. Nat Turner was executed on 11th November, 1831.



Henry "Box" Brown

Henry Brown was born into slavery in *Louisa County, Virginia*, in 1815. When he was 15 years old he was sold to a plantation owner in *Richmond*. He later recalled: "My father and mother were left on the plantation; but I was taken to the

city of Richmond, to work in a tobacco manufactory, owned by my old master's son William, who had received a special charge from his father to take good care of me, and which charge my new master endeavoured to perform."

The [Nat Turner Rebellion](#) took place in 1831 in neighbouring [Southampton County](#). Brown later explained the impact that this had on the slaves on his plantation: "About eighteen months after I came to the city of Richmond, an extraordinary occurrence took place which caused great excitement all over the town. I did not then know precisely what was the cause of this excitement, for I could get no satisfactory information from my master, only he said that some of the slaves had plotted to kill their owners. I have since learned that it was the famous Nat Turner's insurrection. Many slaves were whipped, hung, and cut down with the swords in the streets; and some that were found away from their quarters after dark, were shot; the whole city was in the utmost excitement, and the whites seemed terrified beyond measure. Great numbers of slaves were loaded with irons; some were half hung as it was termed - that is they were suspended from some tree with a rope about their necks, so adjusted as not quite to strangle them - and then they were pelted by men and boys with rotten eggs."

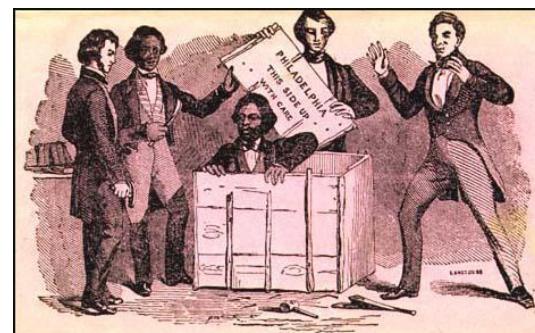
Brown met another slave, Nancy, who he wanted to [marry](#). "I now began to think of entering the matrimonial state; and with that view I had formed an acquaintance with a young woman named Nancy, who was a slave belonging to a Mr. Leigh a clerk in the Bank, and, like many more slave-holders, professing to be a very pious man. We had made it up to get married, but it was necessary in the first place, to obtain our masters' permission, as we could do nothing without their consent. I therefore went to Mr. Leigh, and made known to him my wishes, when he told me he never meant to sell Nancy, and if my master would agree never to sell me, I might marry her. He promised faithfully that he would not sell her, and pretended to entertain an extreme horror of separating families. He gave me a note to my master, and after they had discussed the matter over, I was allowed to marry the object of my choice." Over the next few years Nancy gave birth to three children.

In 1848 Nancy and her three children were sold to a slave trader who sent them to [North Carolina](#). Brown later recalled: "I had not been many hours at my work, when I was informed that my wife and children were taken from their home, sent to the auction mart and sold, and then lay in prison ready to start away the next day for North Carolina with the man who had purchased them. I cannot express, in language, what were my feelings on this occasion. I received a message, that if I wished to see my wife and children, and bid them the last farewell, I could do so, by taking my stand on the street where they were all to pass on their way for North Carolina. I quickly availed myself of this information, and placed myself by the

side of a street, and soon had the melancholy satisfaction of witnessing the approach of a gang of slaves, amounting to three hundred and fifty in number, marching under the direction of a Methodist minister, by whom they were purchased, and amongst which slaves were my wife and children."

The following year Brown, with the help of Samuel Smith, a store-keeper in [Richmond](#), decided to try and escape. "I then told him my circumstances in regard to my master, having to pay him 25 dollars per month, and yet that he refused to assist me in saving my wife from being sold and taken away to the South, where I should never see her again. I told him this took place about five months ago, and I had been meditating my escape from slavery since, and asked him, as no person was near us, if he could give me any information about how I should proceed. I told him I had a little money and if he would assist me I would pay him for so doing."

The two men devised a plan where the slave would be shipped to a free state by [Adams Express Company](#). Brown paid \$86 to Smith, who contacted the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, who agreed to receive the box. Smith sent the box to [Philadelphia](#) on 23rd March, 1849. According to one account "Brown's box traveled by wagon, railroad, steamboat, wagon again, railroad, ferry, railroad, and finally delivery wagon. Several times during the 27-hour journey, carriers placed the box upside-down or handled it roughly, but Brown was able to remain still enough to avoid detection." The box containing Brown was received by [William Still](#) and [James Miller McKim](#).



Henry Brown arriving in [Philadelphia](#)

Henry "Box" Brown became active in the [Anti-Slavery Society](#) and became one of their most important speakers. In 1849 he published [Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown](#). After the passing of [Fugitive Slave Law](#) Brown moved to England. A second edition of his autobiography was published in [Manchester](#) in 1851.

Over the next ten years he made speeches all over Britain. [Samuel Fielden](#) was one of those who saw him when he visited [Todmorden](#): "There appeared in Todmorden at different times, several colored lecturers who spoke on the slavery question in America. I went frequently to hear them

describe the inhumanity of that horrible system, sometimes with my father, and at other times with my sister. One of these gentlemen called himself Henry Box Brown; the gentleman brought with him a panorama, by means of which he described places and incidents in his slave life, and also the means of his escape.... He was a very good speaker and his entertainment was very interesting."

He married a British woman and in 1875 he returned to the United States. It is not known when he died.



Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth (originally named Isabella Baumfree), was born a slave in Ulster County, New York State, in about 1797. At the age of nine she was auctioned off to an Englishman named John Nealey. Over the next few years she was owned by a fisherman in Kingston and then by John Dumont, a plantation owner from New York County. Between 1810 and 1827 she had five children with a fellow slave. She was dismayed when one of her sons was sold to a plantation owner in Alabama.

After New York State abolished slavery in 1827, Quaker friends helped her win back her son through the courts. She moved to New York City and obtained work as a servant. She became friends with Elijah Pierson, a religious missionary, and eventually moved into his home.

In 1843 Isabella took the name Sojourner Truth. With the help of a white friend, Olive Gilbert, she published her book, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. In an introduction to the book, William Lloyd Garrison wrote that he believed it would "stimulate renewed efforts to liberate all those still in slavery in America".

Over the next few years Truth toured the country making speeches on [slavery](#). After meeting Lucretia Mott, she also spoke at meetings in favour of [woman's suffrage](#). When a white man told her that her speeches were no more important than a flea bite, she replied, "Maybe not, but the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching."

At the beginning of the [American Civil War](#), she helped recruit black men to help the war effort. In 1864 she moved to Washington where she organised a campaign against the policy of not allowing blacks to sit with whites on trains. As a result of this, she was received in the White House by President [Abraham Lincoln](#). Sojourner Truth died at Battle Creek, Michigan, on 26th November, 1883.



Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman was born a slave in Dorchester County, Maryland in about 1820. In 1848 Tubman decided to try and escape from her plantation. Her husband, John Tubman, refused to go with her as he believed it was too dangerous. Her two brothers accompanied her but later they became frightened and decided to return to the plantation.

Tubman made her way north by the [Underground Railroad](#). Later, Tubman returned to rescue the rest of the family. This was the first of 19 secret trips she made to the South, during which she guided more than 300 slaves to freedom. Tubman's activities became so notorious that [plantation owners](#) offered a \$40,000 reward for her capture.

A supporter of [John Brown](#) and his insurrection at [Harper's Ferry](#) in 1859, she was so disappointed by its failure that she began an intensive speaking tour of the North. In her speeches she not only advocated an end to slavery but argued for [women's suffrage](#).

During the [American Civil War](#) Tubman worked as a nurse, scout and an intelligence agent for the Union Army. Tubman's former activities as a conductor on the [Underground Railroad](#) made her especially useful as a scout during the conflict.

With the help of Sarah Bradford, she wrote her autobiography, *Harriet Tubman, the Moses of Her People*, (1869). With the royalties from the book and a small pension from the [United States Army](#) she purchased a house in Auburn, New York and turned it into a home for the aged and needy. Harriet Tubman died on 10th March, 1913.



Elizabeth Keckley

Elizabeth Hobbs was born a [slave](#) in [Virginia](#) in 1818. She was the property of Colonel Burwell and she was put to work at the age of four: "Mrs. Burwell gave birth to a daughter, a sweet, black-eyed baby, my earliest and fondest pet. To take care of this baby was my first duty. True, I was but a child myself - only four years old - but I had been taught to rely upon myself, and to prepare myself to render assistance to others."

In 1825 she witnessed a slave being sold for the first time in [Prince Edward County](#): "We were living at Prince Edward, in

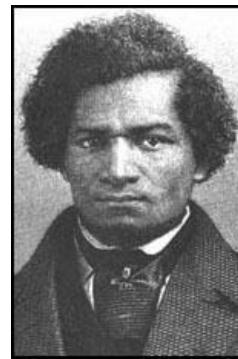
Virginia, and master had just purchased his hogs for the winter, for which he was unable to pay in full. To escape from his embarrassment it was necessary to sell one of the slaves. Little Joe, the son of the cook, was selected as the victim. His mother was ordered to dress him up in his Sunday clothes, and send him to the house. He came in with a bright face, was placed in the scales, and was sold, like the hogs, at so much per pound. His mother was kept in ignorance of the transaction, but her suspicions were aroused. When her son started for Pittsburgh in the wagon, the truth began to dawn upon her mind, and she pleaded piteously that her boy should not be taken from her; but master quieted her by telling her that he was simply going to town with the wagon, and would be back in the morning."

When she was fourteen she was sent to work for his son, who was a Presbyterian minister in [Virginia](#). In 1836 he moved to a church in [North Carolina](#): "The salary was small, and we still had to practise the closest economy. Mr. Bingham, a hard, cruel man, the village schoolmaster, was a member of my young master's church, and he was a frequent visitor to the parsonage." When she refused to have "relations" with Bingham she suffered a terrible beating. "He seized a rope, caught me roughly, and tried to tie me. I resisted with all my strength, but he was the stronger of the two, and after a hard struggle succeeded in binding my hands and tearing my dress from my back. Then he picked up a rawhide, and began to ply it freely over my shoulders. With steady hand and practised eye he would raise the instrument of torture, nerve himself for a blow, and with fearful force the rawhide descended upon the quivering flesh. It cut the skin, raised great welts, and the warm blood trickled down my back."

Elizabeth was later sold to another man who lived in [St. Louis, Missouri](#). When she was twenty-one she was raped by a [white man](#) and gave birth to a son. "I was regarded as fair-looking for one of my race, and for four years a white man - I spare the world his name - had base designs upon me. I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I became a mother. The child of which he was the father was the only child that I ever brought into the world. If my poor boy ever suffered any humiliating pangs on account of birth, he could not blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life; he must blame the edicts of that society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position."

In 1855 Elizabeth had saved enough money to buy her freedom. She married James Keckley but as a result of his alcoholism and laziness she moved to [Washington](#) where she worked as a dressmaker for the wife of [Abraham Lincoln](#). In 1868 she published her autobiography, *Thirty Years a Slave*.

Elizabeth Keckley, who served as president of the Contraband Relief Association, died in 1907.



Frederick Douglass

Frederick Washington Bailey, the son of a white man and a black slave, was born in Tukahoe, Maryland, on 7th February, 1817. He never knew his father and was separated from his mother when very young.

Douglas lived with his grandmother on a plantation until the age of eight, when he was sent to Hugh Auld in Baltimore. The wife of Auld defied state law by teaching him to read.

When Auld died in 1833 Frederick was returned to his Maryland plantation. In 1838 he escaped to [New York City](#) where he changed his name to Frederick Douglass. He later moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he worked as a labourer.

After hearing him make a speech at a meeting in 1841, [William Lloyd Garrison](#) arranged for Douglass to become an agent and lecturer for the [American Anti-Slavery Society](#). Douglass was a great success in this work and in 1845 the society helped him publish his autobiography, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

After the publication of his book, Douglass was afraid he might be recaptured by his former owner and so he travelled to Britain where he lectured on slavery. While in Britain he raised the funds needed to establish his own anti-slavery newspaper, the [North Star](#). This created a break with [William Lloyd Garrison](#), who was opposed to a separate, black-owned press.

During the [Civil War](#) Douglass, a [Radical Republican](#), tried to persuade President [Abraham Lincoln](#) that former slaves should be allowed to join the [Union Army](#). After the war Douglass campaigned for full [civil rights](#) for former slaves and was a strong supporter of [women's suffrage](#).

Douglass held several public posts including assistant secretary of the Santo Domingo Commission (1871), marshall of the District of Columbia (1877-1881) and U.S. minister to Haiti (1889-1891). In 1881 he published the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Frederick Douglass died in [Washington](#) on 20th February, 1895.



One of the most ingenious escapes from slavery was that of a married couple from Georgia, Ellen and William Craft. (The Granger Collection, New York)

The Great Escape From Slavery of Ellen and William Craft

Passing as a white man traveling with his servant, two slaves fled their masters in a thrilling tale of deception and intrigue

By Marian Smith Holmes

SMITHSONIAN.COM

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Most runaway slaves fled to freedom in the dead of night, often pursued by barking bloodhounds. A few fugitives, such as Henry "Box" Brown who mailed himself north in a wooden crate, devised clever ruses or stowed away on ships and wagons. One of the most ingenious escapes was that of a married couple from Georgia, Ellen and William Craft, who traveled in first-class trains, dined with a steamboat captain and stayed in the best hotels during their escape to Philadelphia and freedom in 1848. Ellen, a quadroon with very fair skin, disguised herself as a young white cotton planter traveling with his slave (William). It was William who came up with the scheme to hide in plain sight, but ultimately it was Ellen who convincingly masked her race, her gender and her social status during their four-day trip. Despite the luxury accommodations, the journey was fraught with narrow escapes and heart-in-the-mouth moments that could have led to their discovery and capture. Courage, quick thinking, luck and "our Heavenly Father," sustained them, the Crafts said in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, the book they wrote in 1860 chronicling the escape.

Ellen and William lived in Macon, Georgia, and were owned by different masters. Put up for auction at age 16 to help settle his master's debts, William had become the property of a local bank cashier. A skilled cabinetmaker, William,

continued to work at the shop where he had apprenticed, and his new owner collected most of his wages. Minutes before being sold, William had witnessed the sale of his frightened, tearful 14-year-old sister. His parents and brother had met the same fate and were scattered throughout the South.

As a child, Ellen, the offspring of her first master and one of his biracial slaves, had frequently been mistaken for a member of his white family. Much annoyed by the situation, the plantation mistress sent 11-year-old Ellen to Macon to her daughter as a wedding present in 1837, where she served as a ladies maid. Ellen and William married, but having experienced such brutal family separations despaired over having children, fearing they would be torn away from them. "The mere thought," William later wrote of his wife's distress, "filled her soul with horror."

Pondering various escape plans, William, knowing that slaveholders could take their slaves to any state, slave or free, hit upon the idea of fair-complexioned Ellen passing herself off as his master—a wealthy young white *man* because it was not customary for women to travel with male servants. Initially Ellen panicked at the idea but was gradually won over. Because they were "favourite slaves," the couple had little trouble obtaining passes from their masters for a few days leave at Christmastime, giving them some days to be missing without raising the alarm. Additionally, as a carpenter, William probably would have kept some of his earnings—or perhaps did odd jobs for others—and was allowed to keep some of the money.

Before setting out on December 21, 1848, William cut Ellen's hair to neck length. She improved on the deception by putting her right arm in a sling, which would prevent hotel clerks and others from expecting "him" to sign a registry or other papers. Georgia law prohibited teaching slaves to read or write, so neither Ellen nor William could do either. Refining the invalid disguise, Ellen asked William to wrap bandages around much of her face, hiding her smooth skin and giving her a reason to limit conversation with strangers. She wore a pair of men's trousers that she herself had sewed. She then donned a pair of green spectacles and a top hat. They knelt and prayed and took "a desperate leap for liberty."

At the Macon train station, Ellen purchased tickets to Savannah, 200 miles away. As William took a place in the "negro car," he spotted the owner of the cabinetmaking shop on the platform. After questioning the ticket seller, the man began peering through the windows of the cars. William turned his face from the window and shrank in his seat, expecting the worst. The man searched the car Ellen was in but never gave the bandaged invalid a second glance. Just as he approached William's car, the bell clanged and the train lurched off.

Ellen, who had been staring out the window, then turned away and discovered that her seat mate was a dear friend of her master, a recent dinner guest who had known Ellen for years. Her first thought was that he had been sent to retrieve her, but the wave of fear soon passed when he greeted her with "It is a very fine morning, sir."

To avoid talking to him, Ellen feigned deafness for the next several hours.

In Savannah, the fugitives boarded a steamer for Charleston, South Carolina. Over breakfast the next morning, the friendly captain marveled at the young master's "very attentive boy" and warned him to beware "cut-throat abolitionists" in the North who would encourage William to run away. A slave trader on board offered to buy William and take him to the Deep South, and a military officer scolded the invalid for saying "thank you" to his slave. In an overnight stay at the best hotel in Charleston, the solicitous staff treated the ailing traveler with upmost care, giving him a fine room and a good table in the dining room.

Trying to buy steamer tickets from South Carolina to Philadelphia, Ellen and William hit a snag when the ticket seller objected to signing the names of the young gentleman and his slave even after seeing the injured arm. In an effort to prevent white abolitionists from taking slaves out of the South, slaveholders had to prove that the slaves traveling with them were indeed their property. Sometimes travelers were detained for days trying to prove ownership. As the surly ticket seller reiterated his refusal to sign by jamming his hands in his pockets, providence prevailed: The genial captain happened by, vouched for the planter and his slave and signed their names.

Baltimore, the last major stop before Pennsylvania, a free state, had a particularly vigilant border patrol. Ellen and William were again detained, asked to leave the train and report to the authorities for verification of ownership. "We shan't let you go," an officer said with finality. "We felt as though we had come into deep waters and were about being overwhelmed," William recounted in the book, and returned "to the dark and horrible pit of misery." Ellen and William silently prayed as the officer stood his ground. Suddenly the jangling of the departure bell shattered the quiet. The officer, clearly agitated, scratched his head. Surveying the sick traveler's bandages, he said to a clerk, "he is not well, it is a pity to stop him." Tell the conductor to "let this gentleman and slave pass."

The Crafts arrived in Philadelphia the next morning—Christmas Day. As they left the station, Ellen burst into tears, crying out, "Thank God, William, we're safe!"

The comfortable coaches and cabins notwithstanding, it had been an emotionally harrowing journey, especially for Ellen as she kept up the multilayered deception. From making excuses for not partaking of brandy and cigars with the other gentleman to worrying that slavers had kidnapped William, her nerves were frayed to the point of exhaustion. At a Virginia railway station, a woman had even mistaken William for her runaway slave and demanded that he come with her. As predicted, abolitionists approached William. One advised him to "leave that cripple and have your liberty," and a free black man on the train to Philadelphia urged him to take refuge in a boarding house run by abolitionists. Through it all Ellen and William maintained their roles, never revealing anything of themselves to the strangers except a loyal slave and kind master.

Upon their arrival in Philadelphia, Ellen and William were quickly given assistance and lodging by the underground abolitionist network. They received a reading lesson their very first day in the city. Three weeks later, they moved to Boston where William resumed work as a cabinetmaker and Ellen became a seamstress. After two years, in 1850, slave hunters arrived in Boston intent on returning them to Georgia. The Crafts fled again, this time to England, where they eventually had five children. After 20 years they returned to the States and in the 1870s established a school in Georgia for newly freed blacks.

Read more: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-great-escape-from-slavery-of-ellen-and-william-craft-497960/#Ei8egcZF1Q8PFFWr.99>

Solomon Northup



Solomon Northup was born in [Saratoga Springs](#) in July 1808. His father, who had been a slave until his master had granted him his freedom in his will. Northup later recalled: "Though born a slave, and laboring under the disadvantages to which my unfortunate race is subjected, my father was a man respected for his industry and integrity, as many now living, who well remember him, are ready to testify. His whole life was passed in the peaceful pursuits of agriculture, never seeking employment in those more menial positions, which seem to be especially allotted to the children of Africa. Besides giving us an education surpassing that ordinarily bestowed upon children in our condition, he acquired, by his diligence and economy, a sufficient property qualification to entitle him to the right of suffrage. He was accustomed to speak to us of his early life; and although at all times cherishing the warmest emotions of kindness, and even of affection towards the family, in whose house he had been a bondsman, he nevertheless comprehended the system of Slavery, and dwelt with sorrow on the degradation of his race. He endeavored to imbue our minds with sentiments of morality, and to teach us to place our trust and confidence in Him who regards the humblest as well as the highest of his creatures. How often since that time has the recollection of his paternal counsels occurred to me, while lying in a slave hut in the distant and sickly regions of Louisiana, smarting with the undeserved wounds which an inhuman master had inflicted, and longing only for the grave which had covered him, to shield me also from the lash of the oppressor. In the church yard at Sandy Hill, an humble stone marks the spot where he reposes, after having worthily performed the duties appertaining to the lowly sphere wherein God had appointed him to walk."

On 25th December 1829 Northup married Anne Hampton and worked as a labourer in [Hartford](#). Over the next few years the couple had three children: Elizabeth, Margaret and Alonzo. In 1834 the couple moved to [Saratoga Springs](#) where Northup, a talented violin player, worked as a musician in local hotels. However, Solomon was captured by James H. Burch, a slave trader, while visiting [Washington](#) in 1841: "The light admitted through the open door enabled me to observe the room in which I was confined. It was about twelve feet square - the walls of solid masonry. The floor was of heavy plank. There was one small window, crossed with great iron bars, with an outside shutter, securely fastened. An iron-bound door led into an adjoining cell, or vault, wholly destitute of windows, or any means of admitting light. The furniture of the room in

which I was, consisted of the wooden bench on which I sat, an old-fashioned, dirty box stove, and besides these, in either cell, there was neither bed, nor blanket, nor any other thing whatever. The door, through which Burch and Radburn entered, led through a small passage, up a flight of steps into a yard, surrounded by a brick wall ten or twelve feet high, immediately in rear of a building of the same width as itself."

Burch went to see Northup: "Well, my boy, how do you feel now?" He went on to tell him that he was his slave - that he had bought me, and that he was about to send me to New Orleans. Northup replied: "I asserted, aloud and boldly, that I was a freeman - a resident of Saratoga, where I had a wife and children, who were also free, and that my name was Northup. I complained bitterly of the strange treatment I had received, and threatened, upon my liberation, to have satisfaction for the wrong. He denied that I was free, and with an emphatic oath, declared that I came from Georgia. Again and again I asserted I was no man's slave, and insisted upon his taking off my chains at once. He endeavored to hush me, as if he feared my voice would be overheard. But I would not be silent, and denounced the authors of my imprisonment, whoever they might be, as unmitigated villains. Finding he could not quiet me, he flew into a towering passion. With blasphemous oaths, he called me a black liar, a runaway from Georgia, and every other profane and vulgar epithet that the most indecent fancy could conceive."

Northup was sent to a [Slave Auction](#) to be sold by Theophilus Freeman, of [New Orleans](#). "In the first place we were required to wash thoroughly, and those with beards, to shave. We were then furnished with a new suit each, cheap, but clean. The men had hat, coat, shirt, pants and shoes; the women frocks of calico, and handkerchiefs to bind about their heads. We were now conducted into a large room in the front part of the building to which the yard was attached, in order to be properly trained, before the admission of customers. The men were arranged on one side of the room, the women on the other. The tallest was placed at the head of the row, then the next tallest, and so on in the order of their respective heights. Emily was at the foot of the line of women. Freeman charged us to remember our places; exhorted us to appear smart and lively... After being fed, in the afternoon, we were again paraded and made to dance."

Northup described the selling of Eliza's children, Emily and Randall: "By this time she had become haggard and hollow-eyed with sickness and with sorrow. It would be a relief if I could consistently pass over in silence the scene that now ensued. It recalls memories more mournful and affecting than any language can portray. I have seen mothers kissing for the last time the faces of their dead offspring; I have seen them looking down into the grave, as the earth fell with a dull sound upon their coffins, hiding them from their eyes forever; but never have I seen such an exhibition of intense, unmeasured, and unbounded grief, as when Eliza was parted

from her child. She broke from her place in the line of women, and rushing down where Emily was standing, caught her in her arms. The child, sensible of some impending danger, instinctively fastened her hands around her mother's neck, and nestled her little head upon her bosom. Freeman sternly ordered her to be quiet, but she did not heed him. He caught her by the arm and pulled her rudely, but she only clung the closer to the child.... She besought the man not to buy him, unless he also bought her self and Emily. She promised, in that case, to be the most faithful slave that ever lived. The man answered that he could not afford it, and then Eliza burst into a paroxysm of grief, weeping plaintively. Freeman turned round to her, savagely, with his whip in his uplifted hand, ordering her to stop her noise, or he would flog her.... unless she ceased that minute, he would take her to the yard and give her a hundred lashes. Yes, he would take the nonsense out of her pretty quick - if he didn't, might he be dead. Eliza shrunk before him, and tried to wipe away her tears, but it was all in vain. She wanted to be with her children, she said, the little time she had to live. All the frowns and threats of Freeman, could not wholly silence the afflicted mother. She kept on begging and beseeching them, most piteously not to separate the three. Over and over again she told them how she loved her boy. A great many times she repeated her former promises - how very faithful and obedient she would be; how hard she would labor day and night, to the last

moment of her life, if he would only buy them all together. But it was of no avail; the man could not afford it."

Eliza being sold in the slave-market.



Solomon Northup was sold to William Ford, a man who owned a farm in [Rapides Parish](#) in [Louisiana](#). He later

recalled: "In many northern minds, perhaps, the idea of a man holding his brother man in servitude, and the traffic in human flesh, may seem altogether incompatible with their conceptions of a moral or religious life. From descriptions of such men as Burch and Freeman, and others hereinafter mentioned, they are led to despise and execrate the whole class of slaveholders, indiscriminately. But I was sometime his slave, and had an opportunity of learning well his character and disposition, and it is but simple justice to him when I say, in my opinion, there never was a more kind, noble, candid, Christian man than William Ford. The influences and associations that had always surrounded him, blinded him to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of Slavery. He never doubted the moral right of one man holding another in subjection. Looking through the same medium with his

fathers before him, he saw things in the same light. Brought up under other circumstances and other influences, his notions would undoubtedly have been different. Nevertheless, he was a model master, walking uprightly, according to the light of his understanding, and fortunate was the slave who came to his possession. Were all men such as he, Slavery would be deprived of more than half its bitterness."

Solomon Northup worked on William Ford's looms. "At this time one John M. Tibbeats, a carpenter, came to the opening to do some work on master's house. I was directed to quit the looms and assist him. For two weeks I was in his company, planing and matching boards for ceiling, a plastered room being a rare thing in the parish of Avoyelles. John M. Tibbeats was the opposite of Ford in all respects. He was a small, crabbed, quick-tempered, spiteful man. He had no fixed residence that I ever heard of, but passed from one plantation to another, wherever he could find employment. He was without standing in the community, not esteemed by white men, nor even respected by slaves. He was ignorant, withal, and of a revengeful disposition. He left the parish long before I did, and I know not whether he is at present alive or dead. Certain it is, it was a most unlucky day for me that brought us together. During my residence with Master Ford I had seen only the bright side of slavery. His was no heavy hand crushing us to the earth. He pointed upwards, and with benign and cheering words addressed us as his fellow-mortals, accountable, like himself, to the Maker of us all. I think of him with affection, and had my family been with me, could have borne his gentle servitude, without murmuring, all my days."

In 1842 Northup was sold to Tibbeats: "At the time of my sale to Tibbeats, the price agreed to be given for me being more than the debt, Ford took a chattel mortgage of four hundred dollars. I am indebted for my life, as will hereafter be seen, to that mortgage. I bade farewell to my good friends at the opening, and departed with my new master Tibbeats. We went down to the plantation on Bayou Boeuf, distant twenty-seven miles from the Pine Woods, to complete the unfinished contract. Bayou Boeuf is a sluggish, winding stream - one of those stagnant bodies of water common in that region, setting back from Red River. It stretches from a point not far from Alexandra, in a south-easterly direction, and following its tortuous course, is more than fifty miles in length. Large cotton and sugar plantations line each shore, extending back to the borders of interminable swamps. It is alive with alligators, rendering it unsafe for swine, or unthinking slave children to stroll along its banks."

On his arrival at Bayou Boeuf, near [Marksville, Louisiana](#), he met up with his old friend Eliza: "She had grown feeble and emaciated, and was still mourning for her children. She asked me if I had forgotten them, and a great many times inquired if I still remembered how handsome little Emily was - how much

Randall loved her - and wondered if they were living still, and where the darlings could then be. She had sunk beneath the weight of an excessive grief. Her drooping form and hollow cheeks too plainly indicated that she had well nigh reached the end of her weary road."

On one occasion he got into an argument with Tibbeats: "But he interrupted me with such a flood of curses that I was unable to finish the sentence. At length he ran towards the house, and going to the piazza, took down one of the overseer's whips. The whip had a short wooden stock, braided over with leather, and was loaded at the butt. The lash was three feet long, or thereabouts, and made of raw-hide strands. At first I was somewhat frightened, and my impulse was to run. There was no one about except Rachel, the cook, and Chapin's wife, and neither of them were to be seen. The rest were in the field. I knew he intended to whip me, and it was the first time any one had attempted it since my arrival at Avoyelles. I felt, moreover, that I had been faithful - that I was guilty of no wrong whatever, and deserved commendation rather than punishment. My fear changed to anger, and before he reached me I had made up my mind fully not to be whipped, let the result be life or death. Winding the lash around his hand, and taking hold of the small end of the stock, he walked up to me, and with a malignant look, ordered me to strip."

Solomon Northup refused: "I was about to say something further in justification, but with concentrated vengeance, he sprang upon me, seizing me by the throat with one hand, raising the whip with the other, in the act of striking. Before the blow descended, however, I had caught him by the collar of the coat, and drawn him closely to me. Reaching down, I seized him by the ankle, and pushing him back with the other hand, he fell over on the ground. Putting one arm around his leg, and holding it to my breast, so that his head and shoulders only touched the ground, I placed my foot upon his neck. He was completely in my power. My blood was up. It seemed to course through my veins like fire. In the frenzy of my madness I snatched the whip from his hand. He struggled with all his power; swore that I should not live to see another day; and that he would tear out my heart. But his struggles and his threats were alike in vain. I cannot tell how many times I struck him. Blow after blow fell fast and heavy upon his wriggling form. At length he screamed - cried murder - and at last the blasphemous tyrant called on God for mercy. But he who had never shown mercy did not receive it. The stiff stock of the whip warped round his cringing body until my right arm ached. Until this time I had been too busy to look about me. Desisting for a moment, I saw Mrs. Chapin looking from the window, and Rachel standing in the kitchen door. Their attitudes expressed the utmost excitement and alarm. His screams had been heard in the field. Chapin was coming as fast as he could ride. I struck him a blow or two more, then pushed him from me with such a well-directed kick that he went rolling over on the ground. Rising to his feet, and

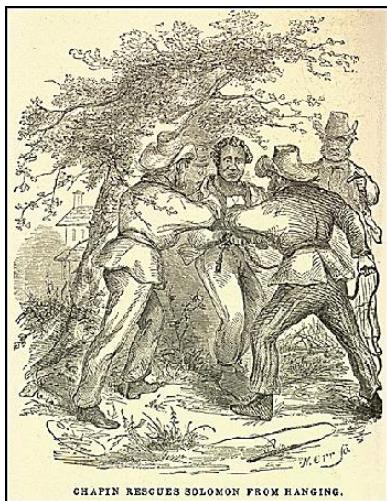
brushing the dirt from his hair, he stood looking at me, pale with rage. We gazed at each other in silence. Not a word was uttered until Chapin galloped up to us."

Chapin asked Northup what was going on: "Master Tibbeats wants to whip me for using the nails you gave me." Chapin confirmed Northup's story: "I am overseer here... I told Platt to take them and use them, and if they were not of the proper size I would get others on returning from the field. It is not his fault. Besides, I shall furnish such nails as I please. I hope you will understand that, Mr. Tibbeats." Northup later recalled: "Tibbeats made no reply, but, grinding his teeth and shaking his fist, swore he would have satisfaction, and that it was not half over yet. Thereupon he walked away, followed by the overseer, and entered the house, the latter talking to him all the while in a suppressed tone, and with earnest gestures."

After Chapin left Tibbeats returned with two of his friends, Cook and Ramsay, who were overseers from neighboring plantations. "One of his companions then stepped forward, swearing if I made the least resistance he would break my head - he would tear me limb from limb - he would cut my black throat - and giving wide scope to other similar expressions. Perceiving any importance altogether vain, I crossed my hands, submitting humbly to whatever disposition they might please to make of me. Thereupon Tibbeats tied my wrists, drawing the rope around them with his utmost strength. Then he bound my ankles in the same manner. In the meantime the other two had slipped a cord within my elbows, running it across my back, and tying it firmly. It was utterly impossible to move hand or foot. With a remaining piece of rope Tibbeats made an awkward noose, and placed it about my neck." They then discussed hanging Northup. "One proposed such a limb, extending from the body of a peach tree, near the spot where we were standing. His comrade objected to it, alleging it would break, and proposed another. Finally they fixed upon the latter. During this conversation, and all the time they were binding me, I uttered not a word. Overseer Chapin, during the progress of the scene, was walking hastily back and forth on the piazza. Rachel was crying by the kitchen door, and Mrs. Chapin was still looking from the window. Hope died within my heart. Surely my time had come. I should never behold the light of another day - never behold the faces of my children - the sweet anticipation I had cherished with such fondness. I should that hour struggle through the fearful agonies of death! None would mourn for me - none revenge me. Soon my form would be mouldering in that distant soil, or, perhaps, be cast to the slimy reptiles that filled the stagnant waters of the bayou! Tears flowed down my cheeks, but they only afforded a subject of insulting comment for my executioners."

Chapin eventually arrived on the scene. "Gentlemen, I have a few words to say. You had better listen to them. Whoever moves that slave another foot from where he stands is a dead man. In the first place, he does not deserve this treatment. It

is a shame to murder him in this manner. I never knew a more faithful boy than Platt (Northup). You, Tibbeats, are in the fault yourself. You are pretty much of a scoundrel, and I know it, and you richly deserve the flogging you have received. In the next place, I have been overseer on this plantation seven years, and, in the absence of William Ford, am master here. My duty is to protect his interests, and that duty I shall perform. You are not responsible - you are a worthless fellow. Ford holds a mortgage on Platt of four hundred dollars. If you hang him he loses his debt. Until that is canceled you have no right to take his life. You have no right to take it any way. There is a law for the slave as well as for the white man. You are no better than a murderer. As for you (addressing Cook and Ramsay) - begone! If you have any regard for your own safety, I say, begone."



John M. Tibbeats trying to hang Solomon Northup

Tibbeats continued to treat Northup badly and eventually decided to [runaway](#) back to his former owner, William Ford: "Presently, looking up the bayou, I saw Tibbeats and two others on horse-back, coming at a fast gait, followed by a

troop of dogs. There were as many as eight or ten. Distant as I was, I knew them. They belonged on the adjoining plantation. The dogs used on Bayou Boeuf for hunting slaves are a kind of blood-hound, but a far more savage breed than is found in the Northern States. They will attack a negro, at their master's bidding, and cling to him as the common bull-dog will cling to a four footed animal. Frequently their loud bay is heard in the swamps, and then there is speculation as to what point the runaway will be overhauled - the same as a New York hunter stops to listen to the hounds coursing along the hillsides, and suggests to his companion that the fox will be taken at such a place. I never knew a slave escaping with his life from Bayou Bouef. One reason is, they are not allowed to learn the art of swimming, and are incapable of crossing the most inconsiderable stream. In their flight they can go in no direction but a little way without coming to a bayou, when the inevitable alternative is presented, of being drowned or overtaken by the dogs. In youth I had practiced in the clear streams that flow through my native district, until I had become an expert swimmer, and felt at home in the watery element."

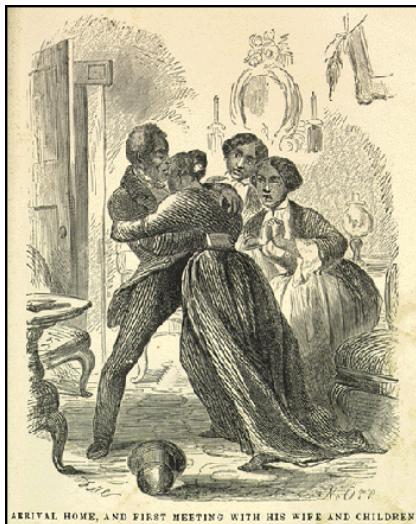
Solomon Northup was eventually sold to Edwin Epps: "Master Epps was a large, portly, heavybodied man with light hair, high cheek bones, and a Roman nose of extraordinary dimensions. He has blue eyes, a fair complexion, and is a full

six feet high. He has the sharp, inquisitive expression of a jockey. His manners are repulsive and coarse, and his language gives speedy and unequivocal evidence that he has never enjoyed the advantages of an education. He has the faculty of saying most provoking things, in that respect even excelling old Peter Tanner. At the time I came into his possession, Edwin Epps was fond of the bottle, his 'sprees' sometimes extending over the space of two whole weeks... He had been a driver and overseer in his younger years, but at this time was in possession of a plantation on Bayou Huff Power, two and a half miles from Holmesville, eighteen from Marksville, and twelve from Cheneyville. It belonged to Joseph B. Roberts, his wife's uncle, and was leased by Epps. His principal business was raising cotton."

Northup worked for Edwin Epps on his [cotton plantation](#): "In the latter part of August begins the cotton picking season. At this time each slave is presented with a sack. A strap is fastened to it, which goes over the neck, holding the mouth of the sack breast high, while the bottom reaches nearly to the ground. Each one is also presented with a large basket that will hold about two barrels. This is to put the cotton in when the sack is filled. The baskets are carried to the field and placed at the beginning of the rows. When a new hand, one unaccustomed to the business, is sent for the first time into the field, he is whipped up smartly, and made for that day to pick as fast as he can possibly. At night it is weighed, so that his capability in cotton picking is known. He must bring in the same weight each night following. If it falls short, it is considered evidence that he has been laggard, and a greater or less number of lashes is the penalty. An ordinary day's work is two hundred pounds. A slave who is accustomed to picking, is punished, if he or she brings in a less quantity than that."

Solomon Northup eventually met a carpenter named Samuel Bass. He had previously lived in Canada and was a strong opponent of [slavery](#) and promised Northup he would help him to obtain freedom. In 1840 the Governor of New York, [Washington Hunt](#) had passed a law to provide legal and financial assistance in order to recover any African-American residents who were kidnapped and sold into slavery. The message eventually reached the lawyer Henry B. Northup, who was part of the family from which Solomon took his name. He now travelled to [Louisiana](#) and managed to get him released in early 1853.

Please Return To:
Mrs. Mueller
4930 – 138th Circle
Apple Valley, MN
55124



Solomon Northup meets his wife and children.

Solomon Northup published an account of his time as a slave, *Twelve Years a Slave* in 1853. He became very involved in the campaign against slavery and gave a large number of lectures about his experiences as a slave. He also

worked with the [Underground Railroad](#) in helping those fleeing slavery to reach [Canada](#). He later disappeared from public life and is thought to have died around 1863.



Michael Fassbender (Edwin Epps), Lupita Nyong'o (Patsey), and Chiwetel Ejiofor (Solomon Northup) in *12 Years a Slave*.

In 2012 Steve McQueen made a film, *12 Years a Slave*, based on the book written by Solomon Northup. Written by [John Ridley](#) and starring [Chiwetel Ejiofor](#) (Solomon Northup), [Benedict Cumberbatch](#) (William Ford), [Paul Dano](#) (John Tibbeats), [Michael Fassbender](#) (Edwin Epps), [Brad Pitt](#) (Samuel Bass), [Paul Giamatti](#) (Theophilus Freeman), [Sarah Paulson](#) (Mary Epps) and [Quvenzhané Wallis](#) (Margaret Northup). The film premiered at the Telluride Film Festival on 30th August, 2013. The film began its release in the US on 18th October, 2013, and the UK on 10th January, 2014.

Harriet Jacobs



Harriet Jacobs was born a slave in [Edenton, North Carolina](#) in 1813. Harriet's mother, Delilah, was the slave of John Horniblow, a tavern-keeper, and her father, Daniel Jacobs, a white slave owned by Dr. Andrew Knox. She later recorded: "I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away. My father was a carpenter, and considered so intelligent and skillful in his trade, that, when buildings out of the common line were to be erected, he was sent for from long distances, to be head workman. On condition of paying his mistress two hundred dollars a year, and supporting himself, he was allowed to work at his trade, and manage his own affairs. His strongest wish was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded. In complexion my parents were a light shade of brownish yellow, and were termed mulattoes. They lived together in a comfortable home; and, though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment." Delilah died when Harriet was six years old and was brought up by her grandmother.

In 1825 Harriet was sold to Dr. James Norcom. She became a [house-slave](#): "Mrs. Norcom, like many southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash. She was a member of the church; but partaking of the Lord's supper did not seem to put her in a Christian frame of mind. If dinner was not served at the exact time on that particular Sunday, she would station herself in the kitchen, and wait till it was dished, and then spit in all the kettles and pans that had been used for cooking. She did this to prevent the cook and her children from eking out their meager fare with the remains of the gravy and other scrapings. The slaves could get nothing to eat except what she chose to give them."

In her book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet described a [slave-market](#) she observed in [North Carolina](#). "On one of these sale days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her; but they took all. The children were sold to a slave-trader, and their mother was bought

by a man in her own town. Before night her children were all far away. She begged the trader to tell her where he intended to take them; this he refused to do. How could he, when he knew he would sell them, one by one, wherever he could command the highest price? I met that mother in the street, and her wild, haggard face lives today in my mind. She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed, *Gone! All gone! Why don't God kill me?* I had no words wherewith to comfort her. Instances of this kind are of daily, yea, of hourly occurrence."

Harriet's brother Benjamin attempted to escape. However, like most *runaways* he was captured: "That day seems but as yesterday, so well do I remember it. I saw him led through the streets in chains, to jail. His face was ghastly pale, yet full of determination. He had begged one of the sailors to go to his mother's house and ask her not to meet him. He said the sight of her distress would take from him all self-control. She yearned to see him, and she went; but she screened herself in the crowd, that it might be as her child had said."

When she reached the age of fifteen Dr. James Norcom attempted to have "relations" with her. She managed to evade his demands. Several of the other young slaves gave into his demands. According to Harriet: "My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves." This upset Mrs. Norcom: "The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage... She listens to violent outbreaks of jealous passion, and cannot help understanding what is the cause. She will become prematurely knowing in evil things. Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master's footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse."

Dr. James Norcom continued to make inappropriate advances towards her. When rebuffed, Norcom refused her permission to marry. Jacobs began a relationship with Samuel Sawyer, a lawyer, and she had two children by him. Dr. Norcom continued to sexually harass Harriet and threatened to sell her children to a *slave-dealer*.

By 1835 her domestic situation had become unbearable, and Harriet deftly managed to escape. Jacobs hid in the home of a slaveowner in Edenton to keep an eye on her children. After a short stay, she took refuge in a swamp called Cabarrus Pocosin. She then hid in a crawl space above a shack in her grandmother Molly's home.

Jacobs lived for seven years in her grandmother's attic before escaping in 1842 to the North by boat

to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Sawyer had purchased their two children from Norcom, and they moved in with Jacobs' grandmother but he did not free them. The state had made manumissions difficult. While in hiding, Jacobs had glimpses of her children from the attic and could hear their voices.

After reaching the North in 1842, Jacobs was taken in by anti-slavery friends from the Philadelphia Vigilant Committee. They helped her get to New York in September 1845. There she found work as a nursemaid in the home of Nathaniel Parker Willis and made a new life. She was also able to reunite with her daughter, Louisa, who had been sent to New York at a young age to work as a "waiting-maid".

In 1845, Jacobs' employer Mary Stace Willis died. Jacobs continued to care for Mary's daughter Imogen and to assist the widower Nathaniel Willis. In January she traveled to England with him and his daughter. In letters home, Jacobs claimed there was no prejudice against people of color in England. After returning from England, Jacobs left her employment with the Willises. She moved to Boston to visit with her daughter, son, and brother for ten months. Her brother, John S. Jacobs, who had also escaped and was part of the anti-slavery movement, in 1849 decided to open an anti-slavery reading room in Rochester, New York.

John Jacobs found a school for Louisa and by November 1849, she was attending the Young Ladies Domestic Seminary School located in Clinton, New York. The school was founded by abolitionist Hiram Huntington Kellogg in 1832. In 1849 Jacobs joined her brother in Rochester, where she met Quaker Amy Post. Amy and her husband Isaac were staunch abolitionists. As Jacobs became part of the Anti-Slavery Society, she became very politicized. She helped support the Anti-Slavery Reading Room by speaking to audiences in Rochester to educate people and to raise money.

Following Congressional passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, both John Jacobs and Harriet Jacobs feared for each other's safety, as the new law increased pressure to capture escaped slaves and required cooperation from officials and citizens of free states. They left Rochester and returned to New York City. John, furious about the act, wanted to leave the country. When he heard that the new state of California did not enforce the act, he decided to go there. He worked in the gold mines during the Gold Rush, where he was joined in 1852 by his nephew Joseph Jacobs, Harriet's son.

On February 29, 1852, Harriet Jacobs was informed that Daniel Messmore, the husband of her young legal mistress,

had checked into a hotel in New York. To avert the risk of Jacobs being kidnapped, Cornelia Grinnell Willis (Willis' second wife) took Harriet and the Willis baby to a friend's house where they hid. Cornelia Willis encouraged Jacobs to take the baby and go to Willis relatives in Massachusetts. Without Jacobs' knowledge, Cornelia Willis paid \$300 to Messmore for the rights to Harriet and gave Jacobs her freedom. Jacobs returned to New York with the Willis child.

In late 1852 or early 1853, Amy Post suggested that Jacobs should write her life story. She also suggested that Jacobs contact the author Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was working on *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When Stowe wanted to use Jacobs' history in her own book, Jacobs decided to write her own account. She wrote secretly at night, in a nursery in the Willis' Idlewild estate.

Over the next several years, Jacobs continued to write her memoir as well as letters to newspapers. In 1854, as Nathaniel Parker Willis was downstairs writing *Out-doors at Idlewild; Or, The Shaping of a Home on the Banks of the Hudson*, Jacobs was upstairs completing her own manuscript. Jacobs changed the names of all the people she depicted, including her own, to conceal their true identities and protect them from any adverse reaction. The villainous slave owner "Dr. Flint" was based on Jacobs' former master, Dr. James Norcom.

In 1856, Jacobs' daughter Louisa became a governess in the home of James and Sara Payson Willis Parton (She was the sister of Nathaniel Parker Willis and became known as the writer, Fanny Fern).

In 1860 Jacobs signed an agreement with the Thayer and Eldridge publishing house, which requested a preface by Lydia Maria Child. Child also became involved in editing the manuscript, and the company introduced her to Jacobs. The two women remained in contact for much of their lives. Thayer and Eldridge published the book in 1861.

During the [American Civil War](#) Jacobs worked as a nurse in [Virginia](#). When the [Emancipation Proclamation](#) was issued in 1863 Jacobs wrote to [Lydia Maria Child](#) that: "I have lived to hear the Proclamation of Freedom for my suffering people. All my wrongs are forgiven. I am more than repaid for all I have endured."

Harriet Jacobs became less active in her later years but supported her daughter and others in working for education of African Americans. She died 7th March, 1897 in Washington, DC. She was buried at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts; her headstone reads: "Patient in tribulation, fervent in spirit serving the Lord".