Slave Pens in Washington



0. Slave Pens in Washington - Story Preface

1. Slave Pens in Washington

2. Platt's Journey to Slavery in Louisiana

3. Life as a Louisiana Slave

4. Life as the Slave of John Tibeats

5. Life as a Slave of Edwin Epps

6. The Beating of Patsey, the Slave

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8. Bass Helps Platt (Solomon Northup)

9. A Plan for Freedom

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Solomon Northup included this illustration in his book, *12 Years a Slave*, between pages 44 and 45. It depicts his treatment in a Washington City slave pen, at the hands of slave-traders, in April of 1841. Online, courtesy "Documenting the American South," University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Despite their promises and assurances to Solomon Northup, that a job awaited him as a violinist, Alexander Merrill and Joseph Russell had a far-different motive for befriending the freeman from Saratoga Springs, New York. To further their nefarious plan, they identified themselves with fake names: Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton.

All along, Merrill (about aged 40) and Russell (about aged 25) planned to sell Solomon to slave traders in Washington. They just had to find a way to get the unsuspecting man to America's capital city.

The two plotters suggested that Solomon obtain papers proving his freeman status (which he did) before they made the trip from Saratoga to Washington. Criminals like to make sure things appear copecetic. It helps to keep their real motives hidden.

Arriving in Washington, the three men stayed at the Gadsby (later called the National) Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue. Although he was a freeman, Northup was black (which meant he had to stay in the back of the hotel).

Washington was buzzing with activity. William Henry Harrison, the sitting President, had just died in office (on April 4, 1841), and his funeral procession took place the day after Solomon arrived. Northup watched the goings-on, with Brown and Hamilton, who later plied their new "friend" with food and alcoholic beverages (likely laced with some type of debilitating drug).

Recovering from the effects of his illness, Solomon woke up in another part of Washington City. Still in sight of the Capitol Building, he was chained to the floor of a slave pen. His papers, confirming that he was a freeman, had vanished.

The Robey and Williams slave pens, located in the heart of Washington—likely at (or near) where the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) building now stands—caused foreign observers to wonder how the capital of American democracy could prominently feature such places. Northup wondered the same thing, once he realized where he was.

The freeman learned, quickly, what could happen by claiming some misunderstanding had landed him in the wrong place. He also discovered the damage which a paddle and cat-o'-ninetails could do to a person's bare skin.

Solomon wasn't the only freeman to be kidnapped and sold into slavery by Northerners. And he wasn't the only "slave" in the Williams pen. Randall, a young boy of about 10 years, was also there.

Soon Randall's mother (Eliza) and half-sister (Emily) joined the young lad in the slave pen. Eliza had fallen on hard times. Believing she was about to be freed, she was instead sold to James H. Burch, a well-known slave dealer.

Because Eliza couldn't read, she didn't realize the document she believed confirmed her freedom was, in fact, a Bill of Sale. Selling people in America, including very young children, was legal at the time.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Slave-Pens-in-Washington-12-Years-a-Slave

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Slave-Pens-in-Washington-12-Years-a-Slave

Questions 2 Ponder

Are Slave Narratives an Important Part of History?

If Solomon Northup had not written *12 Years a Slave*, how would anyone today know about his story? Is it important for people today to know what happened to him? Why, or why not?

Is it more or less valuable to learn Solomon's story from his personal narrative? Could an author who did not experience what Northup experienced write an equally compelling, believable account?

Are Autobiographies More or Less Reliable than Biographies?

Who can be more objective about telling a narrative like *12 Years a Slave*—the person who went through the experience or an author who did not? Explain your answer.

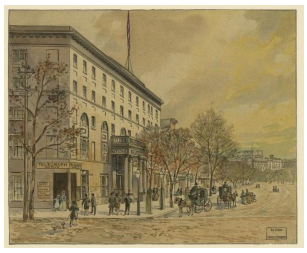
Which is more meaningful to you ... reading a personal account of slavery or reading someone else's interpretation of what it was like to be a slave? Why?

If you had something unbelievable happen to you, would you want to tell the story yourself or have someone else write it for you? Explain your answer.

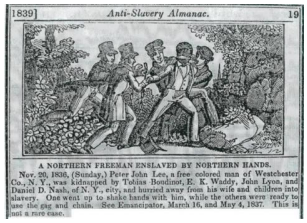
Media Stream



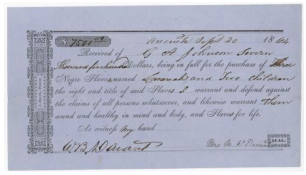
Saratoga Springs, New York - 19th Century
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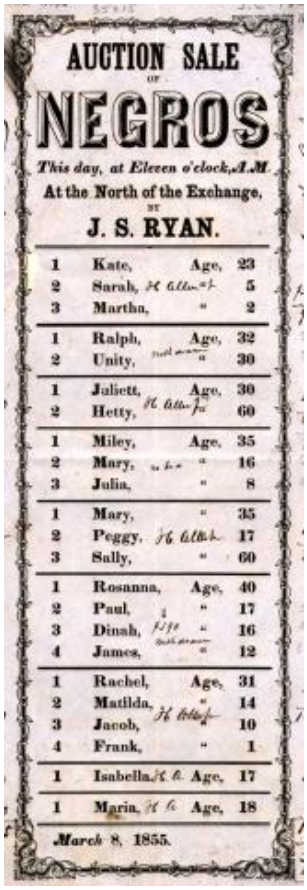
Gadsby Hotel - Where Solomon Northup was Drugged and Kidnapped
Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.
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Northern Black Freemen Enslaved by White Northerners
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Receipt for Purchase of Slave
Receipt for the Purchase of Slaves, dated September 20, 1864; Records of District Courts of the United States.
Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.
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AUCTION SALE
OF
NEGROS
This day, at Eleven o'clock, A.M.
At the North of the Exchange,
BY
J. S. RYAN.

1	Kate,	Age,	23
2	Sarah,	"	5
3	Martha,	"	2
1	Ralph,	Age,	32
2	Unity,	"	30
1	Juliett,	Age,	30
2	Hetty,	"	60
1	Miley,	Age,	35
2	Mary,	"	16
3	Julia,	"	8
1	Mary,	"	35
2	Peggy,	"	17
3	Sally,	"	60
1	Rosanna,	Age,	40
2	Paul,	"	17
3	Dinah,	"	16
4	James,	"	12
1	Rachel,	Age,	31
2	Matilda,	"	14
3	Jacob,	"	10
4	Frank,	"	1
1	Isabella,	Age,	17
1	Maria,	Age,	18

March 8, 1855.

Auction Notice - Slaves Sold by Name

Image online, courtesy Duke University Libraries, Digital Collection.

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SCENE IN THE SLAVE PEN AT WASHINGTON.

Slave Pens in Washington

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