



0. Life as a Louisiana Slave - Story Preface

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In this still shot from *12 Years a Slave*, we see Solomon Northup (known as "Platt" and portrayed by Chiwetel Ejiofor) with two of his "masters." First he worked for William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch), then he worked for John Tibbeats (Paul Dano) by settlement of a debt Ford owed to Tibbeats (plus a \$400 mortgage which Tibbeats took-out for the excess "value" of his "slave"). Still-shot image online, courtesy Fox Searchlight. Click on it for a better view.

Waiting for the slaves, when they arrived at a New Orleans slave pen, was Theophilus Freeman (a business associate of James Burch). It was he who would convert the chattel into cash.

Washed and prepared for sale, the "slaves" were sold at auction. Despite heartbreaking pleas to keep her family together, Eliza (whose slave name was "Dradey") and her children were split-up forever.

William Ford bought "Dradey" and "Platt" on the 23rd of June, 1841. Together they traveled, with Ford, to his plantation in the parish of Avoyelles (located northwest of New Orleans).

As "masters" go, Ford was a good one, but he "never doubted the moral right of one man holding another in subjection" (as Northup tells us in his narrative). Ford, however, had a reversal of fortune after serving as a guarantor for his brother (Franklin Ford).

As a result of his financial plight, Ford was forced to give-up Solomon. His new "master" was John M. Tibbeats, a harsh man who had built several buildings on the Ford plantation. Because he could not pay Tibbeats all he owed, Ford satisfied his debt by giving Solomon to Tibbeats.

Because Solomon's value was greater than the amount of Ford's debt to Tibbeats, however, the "slave" transaction also included a \$400 mortgage. Tibbeats needed those additional funds in order to fully own "Platt" (Solomon).

While it seems unconscionable that a person could be mortgaged, there is an interesting twist to this part of the story. It was that very mortgage which once saved Northup's life.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Life-as-a-Louisiana-Slave-12-Years-a-Slave)

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Questions 2 Ponder

How Could Anyone Mortgage a Human Being?

Today, when someone buys a home, they can purchase that house by means of a mortgage. In *12 Years a Slave*, we learn that Solomon Northup - just like others in his predicament - could be purchased in the same way (by means of a mortgage).

What does that fact tell you about how "buyers and sellers" of slaves viewed their purchases?

Why Was It Acceptable to Settle Debts by Selling or Trading Human Beings?

William Ford was a slave owner whom Solomon Northup describes in *12 Years a Slave*. He thought nothing of trading people to settle debts.

On what basis did people like Ford - by all accounts a "good master" - believe they could settle their personal debts by selling (or trading) another human being?

If "the law" gives a slave owner that right, is "the law" moral? Explain your answer.

What should we do when laws are not moral?

Media Stream



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