

0. Life as the Slave of John Tibeats - Story Preface

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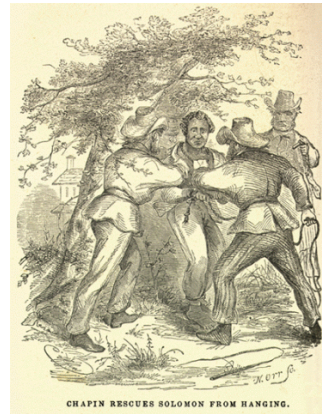
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John Tibeats, in a fit of rage, hangs Solomon Northup ("Platt") from a tree, allowing his feet to barely touch the ground. This image, from Northup's book *12 Years a Slave*, depicts the scene which took place on William Ford's plantation. Chapin was Ford's overseer. The image is positioned between pages 114 and 115 of Northup's original book. [Image online](#), courtesy "Documenting the American South," via University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In *12 Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup tells us that William Ford was a kind master. John Tibeats, however, could not have been more different.

Solomon describes his legal relationship with Tibeats:

He was my master, entitled by law to my flesh and blood. (*12 Years a Slave*, [page 109](#) of an online version of Solomon Northup's book.)

Resentful of Solomon, who had once helped Ford to better transport harvested wood down the river, Tibeats consistently looked for ways to humiliate "his slave." Once, while constructing a building at the Ford plantation, he strung-up Solomon after the slave had defended himself (thereby avoiding a beating).

Tibeats left Solomon hanging from a tree with his feet barely able to touch the ground.

Hours later, William Ford's overseer, a man named Chapin, came to Northup's aid. He prevented further harm to Solomon with these words which he addressed to Tibeats and his collaborators:

...I have been overseer on this plantation for 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 anyway. There is a law for the slave as well as for the white man. You are no better than a murderer. (*12 Years a Slave*, [pages 115-116](#) of an online version of Northup's book.)

Chapin, however, did not cut-down Solomon. Northup was not set-free, from the tree-hanging episode, until William Ford, returning to his plantation, cut him down.

Solomon was still in danger, however. No matter how grandly Chapin spoke of laws protecting slaves, application of those laws required witness testimony in the event of a murder. As Solomon notes:

Had he [Tibeats] stabbed me to the heart in the presence of a hundred slaves, not one of them, by the laws of Louisiana, could have given evidence against him. (*12 Years a Slave*, at [page 90](#) of an online version of Northup's book.)

That's because black people were not allowed to testify against white people at the time, no matter how heinous the witnessed crime.

To protect himself, from Tibeats' revenge, Solomon ran away to the [great Cocodrie Swamp](#) (likely misreferenced, in the *Narrative*, as *Pacoudrie Swamp*). There he would face dangers of a different sort, including alligators (until he found his way through the bayou).

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Life-as-the-Slave-of-John-Tibeats-12-Years-a-Slave>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Life-as-the-Slave-of-John-Tibeats-12-Years-a-Slave>

Questions 2 Ponder

Why Were Blacks not Allowed to Testify against Whites?

When Solomon Northup was owned by an extremely hard “master,” named John Tibeats, American law allowed Tibeats to mistreat all of his slaves, including Northup.

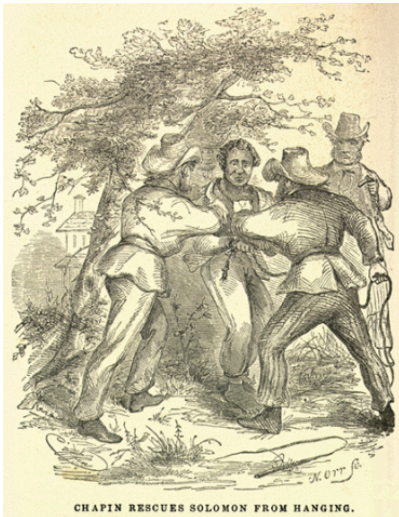
What does Solomon Northup mean when he says: “He [Tibeats] was my master, entitled by law to my flesh and blood?”

Does Northup’s statement mean that if he felt like it, Tibeats could even kill Solomon, without legal consequences? If so, isn’t that the same thing as “getting away with murder?”

Why did American laws not allow slaves to testify against someone who was white, even if that white person were a murderer?

Although Chapin, William Ford’s overseer, saved Northup's life, he did not cut him down from the tree. Why not?

Media Stream



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