

SOLOMON NORTHUP, BORN IN 1808 TO FREE BLACK PARENTS in Minerva, N.Y., was kidnapped into slavery while on a visit to Washington at the age of 33. He endured 12 years of bondage in Louisiana before New York State officials, along with Solomon's wife, helped win his freedom. He published a memoir of this period, *Twelve Years A Slave*, in 1853. The following excerpt describes a New Orleans slave auction:

"Mr. Theophilus Freeman bustled about in a very industrious manner, getting his property ready for the salesroom, intending, no doubt, to do that day a rousing business.

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 hats, coats, shirts, pants, and shoes; the women frocks of calico, and handkerchiefs to bind about their heads.

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.

He would make us four hold up our heads, and walk briskly back and forth, while customers would feel our hands and arms and bodies, turn us about, ask us what we could do, make us open our mouths and show our teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase."

Another excerpt:

"During the day ... several sales were made. ... Lethe was sold to a planter of Baton Rouge, her eyes flashing with anger as she was led away. The same man also purchased Randall. The little fellow was made to jump, and run across the floor, and perform many other feats, exhibiting his activity and condition. All the time the trade was going on, Eliza was crying aloud, and wringing her hands.

She besought the man not to buy [her son], unless he also bought herself and Emily [her daughter]. 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 ... 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. He would not have such work—such sniveling; and unless she ceased that minute, he would take her to the yard and give her a hundred lashes."