

## The Historical Impact of a Place on a White Black: Saratoga Springs<sup>1</sup>

OZAN SELCİK

School of Foreign Languages  
Recep Tayyip Erdogan University, Rize  
Turkey

### Abstract:

*Saratoga Springs is of the important memory sites in the antebellum American History, and also of great national interest of the United States. It is a landmark where you speak of human freedom and justice. What makes this place important is Solomon Northup, who was an important figure in early nineteenth century; a freeborn then kidnapped and sold into slavery for twelve years.*

*Made into film in the late 2013 and awarded an Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay, Northup's 'Twelve Years a Slave' plays a key role in documenting his account with vivid details to have direct effect on his own identity as a slave, which is also another key element of such an autobiographical novel to support author's intention of achieving autobiographical veracity. His own insight and perfect depiction of the place where he lives contributes much to specialization of Saratoga Springs and the places where he was taken. Northup's account is ironic in many ways that he loses his primary right in the nation's Capitol. The capitol fails to save his freedom, which is the symbol of democracy, but at the same time leads to his corruption.*

**Key words:** Saratoga Springs, Solomon Northup, Memory Site, Slavery, Twelve Years a Slave

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an extended version of the paper presented in 12<sup>th</sup> Conference of European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) in Slovakia, 2014.

## 1. Introduction:

Having been a free citizen of New York, Solomon Northup kidnapped and sold into slavery in a visit in Washington D.C. His exceptional story starts here, in nation's Capitol. Now, he has a new name 'Platt,' by which he would be known for twelve long years during his captivity as a slave.

Before his captivity, Solomon Northup and his family were living in Saratoga Springs. Northup, a free man, was born in Minerva, in Essex County around 1808. After spending his early years working various jobs (Northup used to play fiddle in hotels and work as a carpenter) and farming in Washington County, he was deported to a southern plantation, Louisiana.

Northup stands as an important figure before residents of Saratoga Springs today. His vivid narration of first-person account of slavery institution and perfect depiction of the place make it possible to open insights to Saratogians now. Even, Saratogians take him as a symbol of 'remembering:' remembering of human justice, freedom, slavery and triumph of human spirit. In commemorating his extraordinary experience, a Saratoga resident, Renee Moore founded "Solomon Northup Day – A Celebration of Freedom". What is more, this event has received recognition by the Library of Congress Bicentennial Local Legacies Project in 2000<sup>2</sup>.

The history of Saratoga Springs has an important impact on residents of Saratoga today. On every third Saturday of July, the residents commemorate Northup's history and his fight for civil rights. This memorial site of nineteenth century serves as a bridge between past and the future today. African-Americans once survived inhumane treatments by white

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<sup>2</sup> Saratoga Springs Heritage Area Visitor Centre holds the 'Solomon Northup Day - A Celebration of Freedom' event annually recognized event on every third Saturday of July. For more information: [www.saratogaspringsvisitorcenter.com](http://www.saratogaspringsvisitorcenter.com)

people. Thus, the place is of utmost importance for today's community to remember their forefather's great 'holocaust'<sup>3</sup>.

## **2. The Protagonist - Solomon Northup:**

Let the study of the Old South be undertaken by other scholars [than U. B. Phillips] who have absorbed the viewpoint of modern cultural anthropology, who have a feeling for social psychology (a matter of particular importance in the study of a regime in which status was so vital), who will concentrate upon the neglected rural elements that formed the great majority of the Southern population, who will not rule out the testimony of more critical observers, and who will realize that any history of slavery must be written in large part from the standpoint of the slave—and then the possibilities of the Old South and the slave system as a field of research and historical experience will loom larger than ever (Richard Hofstadter, 1944).

Solomon Northup aims to portray his slavery years in a truthful statement of facts without exaggeration. As Hofstadter signifies, Northup was a freeborn slave who tried to picture his own distinctive experience and slavery institution to a degree that came under his observation.

Then, Northup begins his life story with detailed information about his forebears. In contrast to other slave narratives, for most scholars write in their critiques that he has a continuous family bond for generations, which is free of violent experiences at the time when the racial issue was at its peaks. In his very first statements, Solomon tells of his father's industry and integrity and that his father never seeks employment in unskilled jobs—which seem to be especially allotted to the children of Africa (Northup, 19). He maintains that his and his family's fortunate fate allows them to have an

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<sup>3</sup> David Fiske is co-author of Solomon Northup: The Complete Story of the Author of Twelve Years a Slave. For more information visit:

education from his father that most Black children could never expect. His fortune stems from the kind of place he lives in (DeFord, 2006:81):

The life of enslaved people in urban areas and in trade work brought them into close contact with the world of white people. They were much more likely than plantation workers to find ways to learn to read and write, to hear the messages of Northern abolitionists, and to see some of the changes taking place among African Americans farther north.

Northup's personal history continues to give us critical details regarding his bond to another important aspect, the American Dream on this exceptional memorial site. At this juncture, Cox points out, "He is an American citizen." Why does Cox use the term, an "American citizen" for Solomon although he knows that even Solomon's ancestors are slaves? There are a variety of causes why Cox calls him an American citizen. First and foremost, to go back to the beginning of Solomon's personal history, he specifically states that his father was a successful farmer who had acquired enough property to have the right to vote. Secondly, Solomon's father had also provided his children with a sense of morality, and an exemplary education. Northup's "stable and comfortable" life and firm family relations contribute to his being claimed to be an American citizen. Thirdly, his employment in Champlain Canal enabled him to have "a complex network of relationships" outside his family life (Cox, 2005: 87). As well as his extended family relations -Henry Northup, a family friend; Anne Hampton, his wife- Solomon's involvement and his connections in the community -William Van Nortwick and David McEachron, his superintendents; Dyer Beckwith and Mr. Bartemy, assisting hands of Solomon and so many other named individuals- prove that he can represent an American citizen, a white black. Worley proposes an explanatory theory to Cox's views of

Solomon's being an American citizen. The fact that Worley points out is, "he moves into a building which had played a role in the Revolutionary War, thereby further implying his connection to American life and history. Similarly, when he tells us that he worked on the construction of the Champlain Canal, he implies a connection between his personal labour and success and the national prosperity" (Worley, 247). Fourthly, Solomon earns his own wages, so does his spouse. Furthermore, his official marriage with Anne supports the idea of being a full citizen. Solomon is not alienated from the society. However, Cox argues, he is deeply immersed in the community. Such causes and connections he has contributed to the idea of an American citizen. Regardless of such causes and connections, this dream would not last anymore.

Northup struggles also to retrieve his true identity: 'Northup's struggle for freedom, then, becomes a struggle to be recognized legally as Solomon Northup, rather than as Platt' (Cox, 2005: 83). In the end, he acquires his real identity with his family and friends. Although claimed to be 'not a strong-willed individual man fighting alone to free himself from slavery' (Cox, 2005: 85), he is an exceptional slave. His uncompromising narration contributes much to portray slavery life. What is more, his narration, although not a propagandistic one, is about black Americans. His narration is 'a more biting critique of American society as a whole' (Cox, 2005: 85). One should admit blacks' presence in American society. This primary aim of Northup straightforwardly recalls Morrison's notorious novel, *Beloved* where she begins the book with the following statement, which is related to Northup's purpose: 'I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery...' (Morrison, 1992: 3).

### 3. The Place - Saratoga Springs:

Saratoga Springs is known as “the Queen of the Spas.” It has a rich heritage as a health resort and gambling centre for much of the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1831, thanks to the construction of railroad, in which Northup had also worked, touristic activities were on the rise. At the time of slavery, Saratoga Springs was also a free state that black people with their papers stating their free citizenry could live freely. Even, these people could work, and have their own money and property. Our hero, Northup and his father were of those citizens in the turn of the nineteenth century (Northup, 19-20):

Though born a slave, and labouring 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 endeavoured 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.

Northup and his family lived the blessings of the free life in Washington street in Saratoga. The place is important in that sense. Being a literate man, Northup was abducted in Washington City (today Washington D.C.), drugged and sold into slavery in Louisiana for twelve harsh years. After those

years, Henry Northup, a citizen of Saratoga Springs, arranged Solomon's rescue, and made him return to Saratoga again. It is believed that he became an abolitionist after his bondage years in Saratoga.

Today, Saratoga Springs is important for African-Americans in terms of civil rights history and the fight they did two centuries ago. The legacy Northup left reborn in the words of Moore:

I thought, this community, why not provide a platform bridging the past and the future. The past - the Solomon Northup history, his representation on the presence of African Americans right here in Saratoga, and the present-day community, which they have a story as well... It's all a part of history. We need to relive it again so that we remember that African Americans built this county. We built it off the backs of slaves and free people. And African Americans need to remember that they're survivors of a great holocaust.

As a result, with great contribution of Moore, every year on the third Saturday of July, Saratogians celebrate the freedom of Northup and commemorate their forefathers' quest for free life, to prove that blacks deserve a life like whites; this was not an institution allotted for African-Americans nor any other race around the world. Solomon Northup and Saratoga Springs are two key elements of American history in terms of irony of freedom.

#### **4. Conclusion:**

It should be conclusively specified that his utilization of imaginative manner could be verified by independent sources, which are already discussed in detail. To achieve such an effect, Northup uses half pictorial but mostly powerful imaginative tradition. In an architectural manner, he vividly describes the buildings he enters or lives in. This gives readers a feeling of being involved in the nineteenth century life. Identity, on the

other hand, plays an important role in the novel as well as imaginative tradition. Not only does it serve as a basis for slaves' cry to be regarded as human but also as a basis for the perspective of slaves to become fully participating members in American society. Furthermore, Northup mingles the plot with existing names of places and people but does it in a natural way so that this manner contributes much to novel's authenticity and reliability as an autobiographical novel.

Solomon Northup utilizes several devices and literary techniques to give us a clue that the book is totally based on the story of his own life - which in fact - makes it an autobiographical slave narrative. Firstly, he uses a first-person narration that inevitably evokes identification of the writer - Solomon Northup - and as a protagonist. Moreover, many of Northup's experiences are employed as a basis for his daily life for example background, place where he grew up. In addition, he pictures the plantation life and labor and encompasses his direct observation of slavery and a daily life of an ordinary slave.

The perfect depiction of the autobiographical account of *Twelve Years a Slave* by bringing forward his experience of race and slavery, "the very characteristics that have kept *Twelve Years* from receiving the attention given to better-known narratives are, in fact, signs of its greatest distinction" (Worley, 257). This distinction remains as a significant moment in American history. Saratoga Springs will serve a bridge between past (Northup's history) and the future. Northup will be the representative of African-Americans in Saratoga Springs.

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