

Twelve Years a Slave

A Black History Month Profile of
Violinist Solomon Northrup



SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE

SOLOMON IN HIS PLANTATION SUIT.

Solomon Northrup

By **Gayle Dixon**

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Had it not been for my beloved violin, I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage. Often at midnight, when sleep had fled . . . and my soul disturbed and troubled with the contemplation of my fate, it would sing me a song of peace.

So wrote Solomon Northrup in his autobiography, *Twelve Years a Slave*, a singular classic among American slave narratives because it is the story of the capture and enslavement of an educated, free man. Born in upstate New York in July of 1808, Northrup's simple life as a violinist, laborer and family man was violently interrupted in 1841, when he was tricked into journeying to Washington, DC, on the ruse of an offer of musical employment. Once there, he was kidnapped and sold into bondage.

Solomon was born in Minerva, Essex County, New York. He was descended from slaves owned by the Northrup family of Rhode Island. One of the Rhode Island Northrups had moved to Rensselaer County, New York, accompanied by his slaves—including Mistus Northrup, who was Solomon's father. Mistus, a farm laborer, was emancipated from slavery through the provisions of his owner's will and married a woman who had been born free. Thus Solomon and his older brother, Joseph, were free citizens entitled to vote.

EDUCATION A PRIORITY

Although few details of Solomon's early years remain, he states in his autobiography that his father considered education a priority. Playing the violin was "the ruling passion of his youth," and he occupied himself with it whenever he was free of farm
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chores. In 1828, he married the former Anne Hampton. After marriage, he worked as a laborer on the Champlain Canal. He saved his wages and purchased a pair of horses and some navigating equipment, which enabled him to contract for the transportation of timber along the canal.

Solomon and Anne purchased a farm in Kingsbury, New York, in 1832. They farmed during the warm months, and in the winter he accepted calls to play the violin for social functions. Solomon became known throughout the surrounding towns for his violin playing. "Wherever the young people assembled to dance, I was almost invariably there," he wrote. With the additional earnings of his wife, who hired herself out to cook for public occasions, the Northrups were soon living rather comfortably. Thinking that opportunities would be even greater for them at Saratoga Springs, the young couple sold their property and moved to the world-renowned spa in 1834.

In Saratoga Springs, Solomon and Anne lived and worked at the United States Hotel and hired themselves out for other social events. During the winters he relied on his violin for income, although he again worked as a laborer when the Troy and Albany Railroad was being built. By 1841 they had three children—daughters Elizabeth and Margaret, ages ten and eight, and a son Alonzo, who was five years old. But life in Saratoga Springs was disappointing for the Northrups. Despite their hard work, they found that they did not prosper as anticipated.

THE GREAT AMERICAN CONFLICT

While Solomon and Anne enjoyed the good fortune of living as free black people in New York State (a hotbed of abolitionist activity where slavery had finally ended in 1827), they could not isolate themselves from the great American conflict—freedom vs. slavery—which grew more heated with each passing year. The contradiction between the ideals of freedom and democracy on which the nation was founded, and the actual practice of racial and economic exploitation of blacks was dividing the country, and it was by no means clear that those who favored emancipation would prevail.

During this period, many black people lived in fear. The availability of plentiful, and therefore cheap, free labor in the North was an important factor in the abolition of slavery there. But in the South, the demand for slave labor had steadily increased since 1808, when it became illegal to import African slaves into the United States. Unscrupulous people were aware that the price of slaves had risen dramatically, and the temptation to capture northern black peo-

ple for sale to the slave traders of Washington, DC, was too much for profiteers to resist. The seizure and sale of free Negroes was a common enough occurrence that the New York State Legislature in 1840 passed "an Act more effectually to protect the free citizens of this State from being kidnapped or reduced to slavery." Unfortunately, the Act of 1840 failed to protect Solomon Northrup.

In March of 1841, Solomon was introduced to two "gentlemen" who identified themselves as Brown and Hamilton. Seemingly impressed by his reputation as a violinist, the men offered him an engagement playing for their circus company, which they said was then performing in Washington, DC. Claiming that they were having trouble finding musicians of Solomon's calibre, they offered to pay him a dollar

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per day—plus three dollars per performance and transportation back to Saratoga—if he would accompany them as far as New York City. They assured him that the job, which required his immediate departure, would last a few days. As fate would have it, Anne had hired herself out for several days and was working about 20 miles away, and the three children were staying with relatives. Tempted by the opportunity to see the big city as much as the high wages, Solomon thought he could be back by the time his family returned. He rushed home for his violin and a change of clothes, and left without a word as to where he was going.

SOLD INTO SLAVERY

The three men drove away from Saratoga Springs in an elegant, covered carriage with driver. Solomon, who was 32 years old at the time, was as happy and excited as he had ever been in his life. The men went straight to Albany, where a performance had been scheduled. Brown performed circus tricks, Solomon provided music and Hamilton collected money at the door. The next morning they continued to New York City, where they took lodgings at a house on the West

Side. By this time, the two men had begun to urge Solomon to continue with them to Washington, tempting him again with the offer of high wages.

Solomon was impressed and flattered by the unusually good treatment he received from the two white men. They even insisted that, before leaving New York for a slave state, he should procure free papers. Prior to that time, he had traveled no further than the villages of upstate New York and adjacent Canada, and, by his own account, he would not have thought of obtaining the documents. Free papers safely in hand, he left with the two men for Washington.

Upon arriving in the capital, Brown and Hamilton paid Solomon the grand sum of \$43, since in their haste to make the trip they had not stopped for performances. Solomon was moved by their generosity; this amount exceeded the wages he would have earned. He eagerly accompanied the two men as they went about the city; when they stopped several times at saloons for drinks, the two "exceedingly kind" men even poured a glass for him. Although he didn't drink enough to become intoxicated he began to feel ill, but he was not alarmed since he was in the company of his "friends." Upon regaining consciousness after a period of a day or days, however, Solomon found himself in a dimly lit cell, chained to the floor. He had been drugged, robbed of his papers, and sold to a prominent slave-trading firm. Shipped to New Orleans, he spent the next 12 years in Louisiana in abject slavery.

Solomon did not meet anyone he could trust until 1852, when he met a Canadian man who agreed to contact his family. Upon learning of Solomon's plight, the family turned to their former owners for assistance. Armed with a commission from the governor of New York and affidavits attesting to Solomon's true identity, Henry B. Northrup, Esq., rushed to Louisiana and took the necessary legal steps to rescue Solomon. He was returned to his family on January 20, 1853.

MEMOIRS PUBLISHED & VERIFIED

The sensational story of Solomon's abduction appeared in *The New York Times* within days of his release, and he was contacted almost immediately by a local historian who helped arrange the publication of his memoirs. Solomon's account of his ordeal was in print within six months. Eight thousand copies of *Twelve Years a Slave* were sold within one month, and more than 30,000 copies were sold in total.

Interestingly, Solomon's account of his ordeal was verified through the eyewitness account of a northern judge, Thaddeus St. John. After reading Solomon's book, the judge realized that he had en-

Contemporary Editions of Solomon Northrup's Story

TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE, originally published in 1853, is available in three contemporary re-publications:

- Edited by Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, Library of Southern Civilization, 1968;

- Published with a new introduction by Phillip Foner, New York, Dover Publications, 1970; and

- In *Puttin' on Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, Solomon Northrup and William Welles Brown*, Gilbert Osofsy, editor, New York, Harper & Row, 1969.

All are available at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. #

countered the three men en route to Washington, and he was able to identify the kidnapers as Alexander Merrill and Joseph Russell, of New York. With this information, Henry Northrup pressed charges against the pair. They were apprehended by the local authorities but the trial was aborted when the court chose to accept the absurd depositions of Washington slave traders (who happened also to be prominent citizens), asserting that Solomon had participated willingly in the sale, had stated that he was the property of a man from Georgia and had even played for an hour on a borrowed violin to prove his worth. The trial dragged on into 1856, ending in a legal morass over jurisdiction since the crime had not occurred in New York State.

Little is known of Solomon's life after the trial, except that with the \$3,000 he received for the copyright to his memoirs he purchased some property adjoining the home of his married daughter in Glens Falls, New York. Along with a few other black families, they formed a small, segregated community in that town.

Solomon Northrup's slave narrative presents one of the most detailed accounts available of life in the Gulf South during the period preceding the Civil War, and it is considered a classic of the genre. The only account written from the perspective of one who was born free, this poignant story has been verified in every detail. Because of the irrefutable legal documentation amassed by Henry Northrup in Solomon's defense, the case has often been cited by scholars of the period as comprehensive and authentic. #

Gayle Dixon is a member of Local 802's Executive Board.

NY Labor Journalists Convene; *Allegro* Wins Four Awards

THE METRO LABOR PRESS COUNCIL, an association of union journalists from more than 80 labor organizations in the New York area, held its 17th annual convention at New York University on May 1. The agenda included the announcement of winners in Metro's annual labor journalism contest, in which Local 802's *Allegro* won four awards.

Also featured were a panel discussion on "The New Immigrants" with representatives of the city's ethnic press and a reception honoring a veteran labor journalist.

Editors and reporters from *Carib News*, *El Diario*, *Haiti Progres* and the *Black Echo* were on hand for the panel discussion, which focused on challenges facing the new wave of immigrants who have arrived in the New York area during the past decade.

The discussion took place in the immediate wake of civil unrest prompted by the acquittal of four Los Angeles police officers in the videotaped beating of Rodney King. The panelists placed special emphasis on the pressures—psychological, cultural and economic—facing people of color who have been ill-prepared for life in a racially divided society. A question-and-answer session explored how labor journalists and the ethnic press can work together to reach highly ex-

ploited, often undocumented immigrant workers who are fearful of organizing for improved conditions.

After the morning panel, the convention turned to the presentation of Metro's Distinguished Labor Communicator Award to longtime union gadfly Herman Benson, founder of the Association for Union Democracy, which publishes the influential *Union Democracy Review* newsletter.

The honoree was introduced by International Brotherhood of Teamsters Vice-President Diana Kilmury, who last year became the first woman ever elected to the union's General Executive Board. Kilmury, a former construction driver from British Columbia, spoke forcefully of the "democratic reforms" being implemented by the newly elected administration of Teamsters President Ron Carey. She recounted the reform movement's 15-year struggle to unseat a corrupt international leadership and noted that the Teamsters represent an increasingly diverse group of workers, nearly one-third of whom are women.

In accepting his award, Benson characterized union reformers like Kilmury as "the patriots of the labor movement." He called for a renaissance of open discussion within the movement to counter the trend toward systematic union-busting by employers. Labor newspapers, he said,

can and should provide the forum for that discussion. Benson pointed out that unions in this country have faced "dire predictions" of their impending demise at various points in history, "but the best and only effective defense for working people ever invented is unions."

The formal presentation of awards in the Metro journalism contest was scheduled to follow Benson's remarks, but the conference ended abruptly in mid-afternoon as businesses and institutions—including NYU—closed their buildings amid fears that the rioting in Los Angeles would spread to New York.

The awards *Allegro* won in its circulation class were: Best Writing for "The War's Over, Now Stop the War," by John Glasel, a commentary on the domestic consequences of the Gulf War (June 1991); Best Single Article for "Twelve Years a Slave," by Gayle Dixon, a Black History Month profile of violinist Solomon Northrup (February 1991); Best Original Illustration for a graphic by Mike Donovan urging Local 802 members to join the labor movement's Solidarity Day march on Washington (July/August 1991); and Unique Performance for "The Politics of Austerity" (June 1991), a special, pull-out section described by the Metro judges as "a dynamic appeal for solidarity with public workers." #



Allegro Award-Winners Hold Forth

As reported in the June issue, *Allegro* won four awards in the annual labor journalism contest of the Metro Labor Press Council, an association of editors representing New York area unions. Shown above with their awards at 802 headquarters are, from left: editor Tim Ledwith (Unique Performance), President John Glasel (Best Writing), Executive Board member Gayle Dixon (Best Single Article) and graphic artist Mi Donovan (Best Original Illustration).

Press Council Honors *Allegro*, Hosts Forum

Local 802's *Allegro* won awards for general excellence and writing at the May 10 annual meeting of the Metro Labor Press Council, an association of labor periodicals in New York City. The meeting also featured workshops on issues facing the labor press at large.

Allegro's honors included the First Award for General Excellence in its circulation class (15,000 to 50,000), which the paper has won in every year that Local 802 has entered the press council competition. The judges called the publication's writing "solid," made note of its special supplements on topics such as health and education, and praised its coverage of cultural issues.

Executive Board Member Gayle Dixon won First Prize for Best Writing for her article, "Blind Tom: A Black Musical Prodigy," which appeared in the February 1990 issue of *Allegro*. The article chronicled the life of Thomas Greene Bethune, an African-American concert pianist who was born a slave in 1849.

Following the presentation of awards to newsletters and newspapers pub-

lished by local unions, the press council devoted the rest of its conference to a panel discussion, organizational matters and its annual Journalist of the Year Award.

The panel, entitled "Censorship in the Mass Media and the Labor Press," featured Franklin Siegel, staff attorney at the Center for Constitutional Rights, David Elsila of *Solidarity*, the United Auto Workers national publication, and Jonathan Tassini of the National Writers Guild.

Siegel, who was the plaintiff's counsel in a federal lawsuit filed by several news organizations and journalists to protest military censorship in the Gulf war, traced the history of such press restrictions. He noted their increasing severity during post-Vietnam U.S. operations such as those in Grenada and Panama. The First Amendment issues raised by the lawsuit had been declared moot due to the lifting of restrictions at the end of the ground war, Siegel reported. In deferring the issues, however, the U.S. District Court acknowledged that the press has the right to cover U.S. military operations

abroad and report them without undue restrictions, he said.

Elsila maintained that censorship also exists in the labor press, pointing out a number of subjects, such as the AIDS crisis, that most of the labor press has "blacked out." He suggested that union newspapers become the sponsors of debates on both labor issues and broader political issues, including electoral campaigns.

Tassini, along with the other panelists, fielded questions on the potential of the labor press to become an alternative medium of mass communication in the 1990s.

After the panel discussion concluded, the press council gave its Journalist of the Year Award to Juan Gonzalez, columnist at the *Daily News* and head of the strike committee during the recent, successful labor action there. Gonzalez summarized the events of the strike and credited the workers' victory in part to widespread support from the labor movement.

Gonzalez went on to characterize the labor press in general as "ossified" and asserted that labor editors should



Executive Board member and *Allegro* contributor Gayle Dixon, who won a Metro Labor Press Council award for best writing.

enjoy greater freedom of expression. He called for a pooling of resources to develop a national labor newspaper that would counter anti-union bias in much of the mass media. Based on the experience of distributing a million-circulation alternative paper, the *Real News*, during the *Daily News* strike, Gonzalez said he believed a national labor publication could reach a wide readership. #