

Dear Parents,

This year the summer reading for A.P. U.S. History is Twelve Years A Slave, a book about Solomon Northup, a free man in New York who was kidnapped and sold to slave traders in 1841. Solomon then lived in Louisiana as a slave for 12 years before he was rescued in 1853. His account stands out among the other slave narratives in the historical record because Solomon was **not** born into slavery. Unlike most slave narratives, Solomon Northup was born free and given an education and happily married at the time of his abduction. He thought he was being hired to play the violin in Washington, D.C., but instead he was taken there to be sold to slave traders. The next twelve years of his life was a nightmare. In his account, Northup described the slave's family life, social life, work life, dreams, coping skills, faith and hope. Solomon Northup explained how to grow and harvest cotton and sugar cane. He described the terrain of Louisiana in the 1840s and the Chickasaw tribe who lived nearby. He described his first master as a good and kind man. The story reveals though, how precarious a good moment was in the life of a slave, as Northup was sold and then experienced life with cruel masters. The account is at its most disturbing when discussing the vulnerability of slave women and the brutal punishment meted out to slaves. Although writing in 1853 Northup uses euphemisms to discuss rape, like "lewd intentions" or being accused of "seducing" the master, the violence endemic in slave society is graphic and just as heart-wrenching.

You may read the book from this link on the Gutenberg website: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/45631.

I am aware that there is a 2013 movie by the same name of the book, but I would like to ask you to emphasize to your daughter or son not take the movie shortcut. I am asking the students to take notes on subjects in the book that are not addressed as thoroughly in the movie. Certainly the movie has been a powerful tool to bring people to an emotional confrontation with the institution of slavery. However, in the book there is plenty of opportunity to reflect on slavery both emotionally and intellectually because of Northup's frequent commentary. Furthermore, the movie is rated "R" and early on injects into the narrative a fabricated sex scene between Solomon and another slave. Historians have objected to the inaccuracy of this fiction because Solomon is always a faithful Christian husband who writes lovingly about his wife throughout the autobiography.

If there are any other questions you may have concerning this book, please contact me at bmcmillan@behs.com.

Thank you, Betsy McMillan