Solomon Northup’s Odyssey (1853)
Source: docsouth.unc.edu.

As far back as I have been able to ascertain, my ancestors on the paternal side were slaves in Rhode Island. They belonged to a family by the name of Northup, one of whom, removing to the State of New York, settled at Hoosic, in Rensselaer county. He brought with him Mintus Northup, my father. On the death of this gentleman, which must have occurred some fifty years ago, my father became free, having been emancipated by a direction in his will.

Sometime after my father’s liberation, he removed to the town of Minerva, Essex county, N.Y., where I was born, in the month of July, 1808. How long he remained in the latter place I have not the means of definitely ascertaining. From thence he removed to Granville, Washington county, near a place known as Slyborough, where, for some years, he labored on the farm of Clark Northup, also a relative of his old master; from thence he removed to the Alden farm, at Moss Street, a short distance north of the village of Sandy Hill; and from thence to the farm now owned by Russel Pratt, situated on the road leading from Fort Edward to Argyle, where he continued to reside until his death, which took place on the 22d day of November, 1829. He left a widow and two children - myself, and Joseph, an elder brother. The latter is still living in the county of Oswego, near the city of that name; my mother died during the period of my captivity.

Though born a slave, and laboring 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 endeavored 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. Up to this period I had been principally engaged with my father in the labors of the farm. The leisure hours allowed me were generally either employed over my books, or playing on the violin - an amusement which was the ruling passion of my youth.

On Christmas day, 1829, I was married to Anne Hampton, a colored girl then living in the vicinity of our residence. The ceremony was performed at Fort Edward, by Timothy Eddy, Esq., a magistrate of that town, and still a prominent citizen of the place. She had resided a long time at Sandy Hill, with Mr. Baird, proprietor of the Eagle Tavern, and also in the family of Rev. Alexander Proudfit, of Salem. This gentleman for many years had presided over the Presbyterian society at the latter place, and was widely distinguished for his learning and piety. Anne still holds in grateful remembrance the exceeding kindness and the excellent counsels of that good man. She is not able to determine the exact line of her descent, but the blood of three races mingles in her veins.

I had just now passed the period of my minority, having reached the age of twenty-one years in the month of July previous. Deprived of the advice and assistance of my father, with a wife dependent upon me for support, I resolved to enter upon a life of industry; and notwithstanding the obstacle of color, and the consciousness of my lowly state, indulged in pleasant dreams of a good time coming, when the possession of some humble habitation, with a few surrounding acres, should reward my labors, and bring me the means of happiness and comfort.

Immediately upon our marriage we commenced house-keeping, in the old yellow building then standing at the southern extremity of Fort Edward village, and which has since been transformed into a modern mansion, and lately occupied by Captain Lathrop. It is known as the Fort House. In this building the courts were sometime held after the organization of the county. It was also occupied by Burgoyne in 1777, being situated near the old Fort on the left bank of the Hudson.

During the winter I was employed with others repairing the Champlain Canal. By the time the canal opened in the spring, I was enabled, from the savings of my wages, to purchase a pair of horses, and other things necessarily
required in the business of navigation. Having hired several efficient hands to assist me, I entered into contracts for
the transportation of large rafts of timber from Lake Champlain to Troy.

In one of my voyages down Lake Champlain, I was induced to make a visit to Canada. Repairing to Montreal, I
visited the cathedral and other places of interest in that city. Having completed my contracts on the canal
satisfactorily to myself and to my employer, and not wishing to remain idle, now that the navigation of the canal
was again suspended, I entered into another contract with Medad Gunn, to cut a large quantity of wood. In this
business I was engaged during the winter of 1831-32.

With the return of spring, Anne and myself conceived the project of taking a farm in the neighborhood. I had
been accustomed from earliest youth to agricultural labors, and it was an occupation congenial to my tastes. I
accordingly entered into arrangements for a part of the old Alden farm, on which my father formerly resided. With
one cow, one swine, a yoke of fine oxen I had lately purchased of Lewis Brown, in Hartford, and other personal
property and effects, we proceeded to our new home in Kingsbury. That year I planted twenty-five acres of corn,
sowed large fields of oats, and commenced farming upon as large a scale as my utmost means would permit. Anne
was diligent about the house affairs, while I toiled laboriously in the field.

On this place we continued to reside until 1834. In the winter season I had numerous calls to play on the violin.
Wherever the young people assembled to dance, I was almost invariably there. Throughout the surrounding villages
my fiddle was notorious. Anne, also, during her long residence at the Eagle Tavern, had become somewhat famous
as a cook. During court weeks, and on public occasions, she was employed at high wages in the kitchen at Sherrill’s
Coffee House. We always returned home from the performance of these services with money in our pockets; so
that, with fiddling, cooking, and farming, we soon found ourselves in the possession of abundance, and, in fact,
leading a happy and prosperous life.

In March, 1834, we removed to Saratoga Springs. We occupied a house belonging to Daniel O’Brien, on the
north side of Washington street. At that time Isaac Taylor kept a large boarding house, known as Washington Hall,
at the north end of Broadway. He employed me to drive a hack, in which capacity I worked for him two years.
After this time I was generally employed through the visiting season, as also was Anne, in the United States Hotel,
and other public houses of the place. In winter seasons I relied upon my violin, though during the construction of
the Troy and Saratoga railroad, I performed many hard days’ labor upon it.

While living at the United States Hotel, I frequently met with slaves, who had accompanied their masters from
the South. They were always well dressed and well provided for, leading apparently an easy life, with but few of its
ordinary troubles to perplex them. Many times they entered into conversation with me on the subject of Slavery.
Almost uniformly I found they cherished a secret desire for liberty. Some of them expressed the most ardent
anxiety to escape, and consulted me on the best method of effecting it. The fear of punishment, however, which
they knew was certain to attend their re-capture and return, in all cases proved sufficient to deter them from the
experiment. Having all my life breathed the free air of the North, and conscious that I possessed the same feelings
and affections that find a place in the white man’s breast; conscious, moreover, of an intelligence equal to that of
some men, at least, with a fairer skin. I was too ignorant, perhaps too independent, to conceive how any one could
be content to live in the abject condition of a slave. I could not comprehend the justice of that law, or that religion,
which upholds or recognizes the principle of Slavery; and never once, I am proud to say, did I fail to counsel any
one who came to me, to watch his opportunity, and strike for freedom.

I continued to reside at Saratoga until the spring of 1841. The flattering anticipations which, seven years before,
had seduced us from the quiet farm house, on the east side of the Hudson, had not been realized. Though always in
comfortable circumstances, we had not prospered. The society and associations at that world-renowned watering
place, were not calculated to preserve the simple habits of industry and economy to which I had been accustomed,
but, on the contrary, to substitute others in their stead, tending to shiftlessness and extravagance.

At this time we were the parents of three children - Elizabeth, Margaret, and Alonzo. Elizabeth, the eldest, was
in her tenth year; Margaret was two years younger, and little Alonzo had just passed his fifth birthday. They filled
our house with gladness. Their young voices were music in our ears. Many an airy castle did their mother and
myself build for the little innocents. When not at labor I was always walking with them, clad in their best attire,
through the streets and groves of Saratoga. Their presence was my delight; and I clasped them to my bosom with as
warm and tender love as if their clouded skins had been as white as snow.