

Northup and the Risk of a Letter

November 2 class reading • Selections A-D. Read these supplied passages. No whole chapter is assigned. Northup, a free Black New Yorker kidnapped in 1841, was enslaved in Louisiana. Epps was his enslaver. Armsby was a prospective messenger.

Original wording is retained; [...] marks omissions. Page references refer to the 1853 book, not this packet. The narrative was prepared with David Wilson and published retrospectively; reported dialogue is not a contemporaneous transcript.

A • Barriers to communication

My great object always was to invent means of getting a letter secretly into the post-office, directed to some of my friends or family at the North. The difficulty of such an achievement cannot be comprehended by one unacquainted with the severe restrictions imposed upon me. In the first place, I was deprived of pen, ink, and paper. In the second place, a slave cannot leave his plantation without a pass, nor will a post-master mail a letter for one without written instructions from his owner. I was in slavery nine years, and always watchful and on the alert, before I met with the good fortune of obtaining a sheet of paper. While Epps was in New-Orleans, one winter, disposing of his cotton, the mistress sent me to Holmesville, with an order for several articles, and among the rest a quantity of foolscap. I appropriated a sheet, concealing it in the cabin, under the board on which I slept.

[Northup, Twelve Years a Slave \(1853\), Chapter XVI, p. 230](#)

B • Making a letter and seeking a messenger

After various experiments I succeeded in making ink, by boiling white maple bark, and with a feather plucked from the wing of a duck, manufactured a pen. When all were asleep in the cabin, by the light of the coals, lying upon my plank couch, I managed to complete a somewhat lengthy epistle. It was directed to an old acquaintance at Sandy Hill, stating my condition, and urging him to take measures to restore me to liberty. This letter I kept a long time, contriving measures by which it could be safely deposited in the post-office. [...]

[Northup, Twelve Years a Slave \(1853\), Chapter XVI, pp. 230-231](#)

C • Testing Armsby's promise

Carefully deliberating on the most proper manner of approaching him on the subject, I concluded finally to ask him simply if he would deposit a letter for me in the Marksville post-office the next time he visited that place, without disclosing to him that the letter was written, or any of the particulars it contained; for I had fears that he might betray me, and knew that some inducement must be held out to him of a pecuniary nature, before it would be safe to confide in him. As late as one o'clock one night I stole noiselessly from my cabin, and, crossing the field to Shaw's, found him sleeping on the piazza. I had but a few picayunes—the proceeds of my fiddling performances, but all I had in the world I promised him if he would do me the favor required. I begged him not to expose me if he could not grant the request. He assured me, upon his honor, he would deposit it in the Marksville post-office, and that he would keep it an inviolable secret forever. [...]

[Northup, Twelve Years a Slave \(1853\), Chapter XVI, pp. 231-232](#)

Between C and D: Northup reports that Armsby told Epps about the proposed letter. Northup denied the accusation; after Epps left, he destroyed it.

D • Destroying the evidence

[...] As soon as he was gone I threw the letter in the fire, and, with a desponding and despairing heart, beheld the epistle which had cost me so much anxiety and thought, and which I fondly hoped would have been my forerunner to the land of freedom, writhe and shrivel on its bed of coals, and dissolve into smoke and ashes. [...]

[Northup, Twelve Years a Slave \(1853\), Chapter XVI, p. 235](#)

Northup Tries Again

Selections E–G. Bass, a Canadian carpenter, agreed to help. Parker and Perry were Northup's contacts in Saratoga Springs. Notice what Northup contributed to the plan as well as what Bass did.

E • Trying again with Bass

After further assurances on his part that I should not be betrayed, I began a relation of the history of my life and misfortunes. He was deeply interested, asking numerous questions in reference to localities and events. Having ended my story I besought him to write to some of my friends at the North, acquainting them with my situation, and begging them to forward free papers, or take such steps as they might consider proper to secure my release. He promised to do so, but dwelt upon the danger of such an act in case of detection, and now impressed upon me the great necessity of strict silence and secrecy. Before we parted our plan of operation was arranged.

We agreed to meet the next night at a specified place among the high weeds on the bank of the bayou, some distance from master's dwelling. There he was to write down on paper the names and address of several persons, old friends in the North, to whom he would direct letters during his next visit to Marksville. It was not deemed prudent to meet in the new house, inasmuch as the light it would be necessary to use might possibly be discovered. In the course of the day I managed to obtain a few matches and a piece of candle, unperceived, from the kitchen, during a temporary absence of Aunt Phebe. Bass had pencil and paper in his tool chest.

[Northup, Twelve Years a Slave \(1853\), Chapter XIX, pp. 271–272](#)

F • The letter that reached the North

The Saturday night subsequent to our interview at the water's edge, Bass went home to Marksville. The next day, being Sunday, he employed himself in his own room writing letters. One he directed to the Collector of Customs at New-York, another to Judge Marvin, and another to Messrs. Parker and Perry jointly. The latter was the one which led to my recovery. He subscribed my true name, but in the postscript intimated I was not the writer. The letter itself shows that he considered himself engaged in a dangerous undertaking—no less than running "the risk of his life, if detected." I did not see the letter before it was mailed, but have since obtained a copy, which is here inserted:

[Northup, Twelve Years a Slave \(1853\), Chapter XIX, pp. 273–274](#)

G • Northup's request, written with Bass's help

"Having been born free, just across the river from you, I am certain you must know me, and I am here now a slave. I wish you to obtain free papers for me, and forward them to me at Marksville, Louisiana, Parish of Avoyelles, and oblige

"Yours, SOLOMON NORTHUP.

[Northup, Twelve Years a Slave \(1853\), Chapter XIX, p. 274](#)

Pause and compare

Identify one action Northup took, one resource he needed, and one risk. Why does Bass's help not erase Northup's initiative? What changed after the failed Armsby attempt?

Discussion and Essay Guide

Class plan

Read A–G for 15–20 minutes, discuss with a partner for 10 minutes, then discuss the class findings and write your notebook response. Write 3–4 sentences answering Question 2 or 3 below; use two specific details and cite XVI or XIX. No separate upload.

Discuss the supplied evidence

1. In A–C, which restrictions made communication dangerous? Identify two actions Northup took himself.
2. Why does destroying the letter in D demonstrate a purposeful response, even though the attempt failed?
3. In E–G, distinguish Northup’s contributions from Bass’s. What depended on cooperation?
4. Compare this strategy with Jacobs’s use of trusted people or misleading letters. Explain one similarity and one meaningful difference.

Keep Jacobs central in the essay

Jacobs was born enslaved; Northup sought restoration of a free status he had possessed before kidnapping. Compare a mechanism such as communication or trust while preserving that difference. Use one or two Northup details briefly to sharpen an argument centered on Jacobs. More reading is optional.

How to cite

First note: Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (Auburn, NY: Derby and Miller, 1853), chap. XVI, 230–232, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45631/45631-h/45631-h.htm#CHAPTER_XVI.

Later note: Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, chap. XIX, 271–272.

Change the chapter and printed pages to match the selection you actually use. Footnote quotations and paraphrases.

Bibliography: Northup, Solomon. *Twelve Years a Slave*. Auburn, NY: Derby and Miller, 1853. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45631/45631-h/45631-h.htm>.

Optional further reading

[Complete book online at Project Gutenberg](#) · [Online guide and Eliza excerpt \(VI, pp. 81–82\)](#).

For more on family separation, use the supplied Eliza passage in the online guide. Eliza’s plea is Northup’s account of her actions, not her own autobiography. For how news reached his family and legal help followed, explore Chapter XXI; this is optional.