

1. Why did you put your passion and energy into establishing SNDay?

My first knowledge of the ordeal of Solomon Northup came through filmmaker Gordon Parks in 1984, as a PBS docudrama, The Odyssey of Solomon Northup. When I saw that film and later the 1999 exhibition at Nott Memorial, Union College, I knew then something had to be done to bring this history to focus. Especially, when I discovered Solomon had history in my little town of Saratoga Springs, NY. From there, I kept pushing forward. I couldn't see far down the road but I kept moving forward with more and more ideas each year. Another incentive was running into visitors/ tourists downtown in the City of Saratoga Springs, who would ask me "where are you visiting from" –. It was then, I knew I had do something to bring focus to his story but to bring focus to the largely invisible Black community – a community I recognized as valuable to telling the whole story of life in the North Country.

Later it grew into much more than a day, it became a weekend. Then it became the week before the third Saturday in July. I lobbied and acquired additional venues besides the Visitor Center which, at that time, was the most underused building in the City. There was initially disinterest and resistance behavior on many levels.

Along the way a few faithful individuals were willing to put their time and energy into supporting me through their own dedication to the cause. Though not a grant writer, I was able to keep it going on a shoestring budget each year. *[special thanks to the Mastrianni Family of Lake George and Saratoga]*.

And, I think in many ways, it was my way of creating purpose in the face of what was largely a xenophobic environment. Although I was a Skidmore graduate, I could not obtain steady work in which to support myself and maintain my family house. So in some ways my story is similar to Solomon's – leaving home to work.

So before, I knew it 15 years had gone by. And, then with the FoxSearchlight/Plan B production of the Oscar winning, film 12 Years a Slave in 2013, with descendants in attendance, the event, which started in 1999; became even more well-known.

For those who want to see and hear more about the annual event they can go to, www.solomonnorthupday.org.

2. Is there a particular passage in Solomon Northup writing that you'd like to share with an on-line audience?

Solomon's words:

"My narrative is at an end. I have no comments to make upon the subject of Slavery. Those who read this book may form their own opinions of the "peculiar institution." What it may be in other States, I do not profess to know; what it is in the region of Red River, is truly and faithfully delineated in these pages. This is no fiction, no exaggeration. If I have failed in anything, it has been in presenting to the reader too prominently the bright side of the picture. I doubt not hundreds have been as unfortunate as myself; that hundreds of free citizens have been kidnapped and sold into slavery, and are at this moment wearing out their lives on plantations in Texas and Louisiana. But I forbear. Chastened and subdued in spirit by the sufferings I have borne, and thankful to that good Being through whose mercy I have been restored to happiness and liberty, I hope henceforward to lead an upright though lowly life, and rest at last in the church yard where my father sleeps"

Unfortunately, he was not able to join his Father – his father is buried in Bakers Cemetery Hudson Falls but we have not been able to find Solomon. We don't know what happened to him – where is final resting place is.

There are many slave narratives and though the film received an Oscar I would encourage everyone to read the autobiography for the complete story.

[[Taken from the autobiographical narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853). By Renee Moore, www.solomonnorthupday.org, Founding Director, Solomon Northup Day 1999-]]

3. Solomon's life offers us a window into slavery. What can you say to readers today to urge them to hear his voice?

I believe his story represents the courageous struggle of our ancestors who survived a great Holocaust; one that begins and continues over a more than (200+200 more) 400 year struggle with at least 4 million enslaved in North America, *on Turtle Island*, alone not to mention enslaved Africans in Central, South America and the Caribbean. And I would tell people that;

- His ordeal represented the courage and strength of character of those who came before him and of those who came after.
- He reminds us of the love for family and the enduring connectedness of a people however torn apart.
- There are two separate stories of slavery in America. One story is of the harsh cruel institution of slavery itself -- the other is the slave life and survival amongst themselves – how they worshiped, relationships, the important of their songs, their music/dance, such as Ring Shout, how they maintained what they could of their culture, the sacrifices they made for one another, what they ate, and how they celebrated. How they buried their own, attempted to remain together as family units, freeing themselves and each other; that story has yet to be told.

This is a story of joy, hardship, celebration, struggle, perseverance, loss and grace that surrounded their daily lives. These are the moments when they were alone and together as full human beings.

4. What do you imagine Solomon would say to today's Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters?

I think in many ways, he would be proud and see these ambitious young people as modern-day abolitionists forging the way and pushing us all toward freedom in a country built by former slaves. And BLM is not just about songs and protests. They have very clear policy changes that could be endorsed.

After all, Solomon lived a comfortable life in Saratoga Springs, NY with his wife and three(3) children. It wasn't until his abduction that he saw the injustices his brethren faced.

- He would encourage BLM to stay the course and not give up. After all he never gave up wanting to return to his family and escape the plantation.
- He would remind them of the significance of Faith as an integral part of a people's survival and perseverance in the face of uncertainty both now and in the future.
- Though enslaved Africans, for the most part, did not come here as Christians, they created out of the Christianity that was thrust upon them, a way of worship amongst themselves so that they could survive a horrendous holocaust, an ordeal like no other in the world.
- His story stands as a symbol of the historical struggle for more than just himself, but in a way he spoke for others who had a similar ordeal and who could not speak out for themselves. Isn't that what justice and freedom is all about standing in for others less powerful.

5. In your opinion what is the best way to use Reparation funds for racial equality?

First let me begin by stating that the conversation around Reparations is not a new one. A resident of Bethany, NY Ms. Hawkes petitioned Congress to

compensate Solomon for his 12-yr ordeal. Cited in the *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, dated **April 28, 1854**.

Certainly with 200 years or more of free labor, there is a debt owed enslaved Africans not only on this Continent but world-wide. Some countries have already started to address the issue of 'repairing' – which is what reparations is all about. There would be no Americas without the Africans. Slavery was founded on the money game and with the help of *cognitive dissonance*, as Dr. Joy DeGruys speaks about, and the myth of inferiority, the practice of slavery continued for centuries.

Let me be clear, Reparations is for DOS, descendants of slaves, those that were actual descendants of people who were here for generations rather than any one who came after and reaped the benefits.

Reparations is to close the economic equality gap that exists between white and DOS household incomes. Economics is a special interest of mine. I feel like when you spend money there should be a Return On Investment and if not, you shouldn't spend it. To that end, a part voucher, part cash compensation seems reasonable. That could be used for homeownership, educational advancement, pay off disabling student debt, jobs training programs, perhaps something like the WPA, paying off old mortgage debt, entrepreneurial programs as entry into new technologies. Reparations is not just for slavery, but for all the injustices that have transpired since, the Black Codes, Jim Crow, Mass Incarceration, extra-judicial killings by police; which I think are a violation of the 14th amendment, rights.

6. As we think about the challenges that Solomon Northup faced in his efforts to obtain justice, can you discuss in general how the legal system has improved, but where it still falls short today?

I think certainly we have to acknowledge the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution aka the Reconstruction Amendments, adopted between 1865 and 1870, the five years immediately following the Civil War, as progress – my personal favorite the 14th which makes the enslaved African full citizens of the United States and with the 15th amendment, the vote.

I personally believe extrajudicial killings by police is a violation of the Constitution under **Section 1 of the 14th amendment, the Due Process Clause**. However, with Mass incarceration and the militarization of the police departments throughout the United States, and more recently the mistreatment of protesters –I think that would give him pause; and with the use of **Qualified Immunity, which began** under Johnson, 1967, immediately comes to mind as a modern-day flaw in the justice system.

Race is a social construct and very political. Racial injustice within the judicial system such as **unequal sentencing**, stands out in particular as a lack of morality. I think Solomon would agree with *King and now with Rev. Barber, carrying forward the work of Dr. King, when he states, “we are in need of a moral revival.”* The United States failure in the area of justice holds us back in so many ways but primarily in the loss of respect around the world. Every time there is an extrajudicial killing by police, the rest of the world is watching and questions America’s ability to lead.

7. What do you think Northrup would say to people who have been raised in an environment with racist views?

I think he would try to appeal to their better nature – after all, he was a believer in God and want us to see each other’s humanity.

- He would tell them they have been misled – he would urge racists to listen to what DOS are saying and not discount what is being shared.
- Solomon would urge whites to read his autobiography, which is an accounting not only of his story but that of other enslaved Africans and listen to the experiences of black people.
- Slavery was/is about money and profit. As in all three great books, the Bible, Torah and Quran, you cannot worship God and man. You must choose.
- Racism is a white problem – whites invented it through the myth of inferiority. Whites are living in denial and actively practice *willful ignorance*. To refuse to acknowledge Africans priceless contribution

worldwide – is to remain willfully ignorant of their history. It is not until they face the truth of the entire story that they will free themselves.

- I encourage whites to create and continue discourse among themselves – those who are ‘woke’ are responsible for those who are not. It is not the responsibility of black folks to educate them.

Whites should/could recognize that they are not only related by history but by birth. All of our fore-fathers own slaves and gave birth to slave children; our history is intertwined.

And, today, we see a black America that is fragmented and has lost its connectedness. Hopefully knowing the whole history, we can, not only see our connection to each other as DOS, but to recognize what they owe each other.

America, as Dr. Cornell West states, must learn “self-interrogation and social transformation.”

Whites must reexamine not only the actions of their ancestors but the actions of their daily lives, their institutions, and their laws to reshape the future of America.

Renee Moore 7/2020