

Roundtable on TURN: Washington's Spies – Introduction: Truth Versus Accuracy



A Historical Turn for the Better, or Worse?

Scholars of early America have a complicated relationship with historical movies and television shows. While popular dramas with mass audiences have the potential to kindle wide interest in a historical period, Hollywood history productions are often glaringly inaccurate, presenting a glamorized and heavily distorted version of crucial periods such as the Civil War and the American Revolution.

Of course, not all historical dramas are created equal. At one end of the spectrum are unabashed historical fantasies like *Sleepy Hollow* and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*; productions with no expectation of being taken as serious history by anyone. At the opposite end are conscientiously produced "docudramas" like HBO's *John Adams* that stay palpably close to the historical record.

Most historical dramas fall somewhere in the middle of those two extremes,

including AMC's recent television series *Turn: Washington's Spies*.

Historical fiction, for better or worse, can play a huge role in shaping popular historical memory.

Turn, which revolves around British and colonial spycraft during the Revolutionary War, was aggressively promoted as a meticulously researched show before its premiere in April 2014. Advertisements described it as "the true story of America's first spy ring." But as Season 1 unfolded, viewers discovered that *Turn* placed as low a priority on staying true to documented facts as most other historical dramas. It quickly became a prime target in the perennial debate over the importance of accuracy in historical film.

Last February, before the debut of *Turn's* second season, a group of the show's writers, producers, and cast members assembled before a large crowd at the College of William and Mary for a discussion (viewable in its entirety [here](#)) of the differences between academic history and historical drama. There, they argued that the altered history portrayed in *Turn* represented an "authenticity" and even a form of "truth" that transcended factual accuracy.

Do the virtues of inaccurate historical films outweigh their vices? How much weight should accuracy have in our evaluation of historical film? Most importantly, are there historical narrative truths that supersede factual accuracy?

Historical fiction, for better or worse, can play a huge role in shaping popular historical memory, and early American scholars ought to help frame the discussions surrounding shows like *Turn*. In this double review, historian Cole Jones and social studies education professor Jeremy Stoddard weigh in on this new turn in historical interpretation.

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[Redeeming the Almanac: Learning to](#)

Appreciate the iPhone of Early America



With so many uses, the almanac, like an iPhone, was truly interactive.

The Arc of the Moral Universe, and Other Long Things



The Civil War was one great eruption of something immanent in human civilization: an ineradicable cycle of violence, a timeless struggle for democracy and freedom.

[Unveiling the American Actor: The Evolution of Celebrity in the Early American Theater](#)



The actors who clawed their way to fame in the early decades of the American theater labored in an entrepreneurial industry that was far more reminiscent of prospecting for gold or financing merchant ships than it was of modern industrial production.

Two Early American Bestsellers

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN



HARRIET
BEECHER
STOWE

Presented as part of the Special Literature Issue

The prehistory of American bestsellers takes us beyond questions about the content and literary value of bestselling texts and invites us instead to explore just what makes such a phenomenon possible.

[Where All the Trains Ran: Chicago](#)



Presented as part of the special issue “Early Cities of the Americas.”

“In a city increasingly characterized by class and ethnic distinctions, the trip in by train was arguably the one significant personal experience that more Chicagoans had in common than any other.”

[A View from the Parish Jail: New Orleans](#)



Presented as part of the special issue "Early Cities of the Americas."

"It was very hot and damp six months a year, it was one of the least-favored ports in the New World, and huge swarms of insects appeared seasonally with terrifying predictability."

Poems



Dry Creek Valley

On the second

and third

wires over the wire
on which forks the zinfandel vine:
barbed knots
and spirals of old
severed vinetips:
one can flick
these wishbones of waterless
grapewood into
full rotations
on the wire:
some are not wyes,
some have the look of shrew-sized
brainstems into

the knots
 of which I fail
 to not
 project my proprioception
 and the regulation
 and insistence of my breathing here
 in the plutocratic hills,
 while quaked reactors fail
 Japan, and bombs fall
 in Afghanistan
 for purposes of regulation
 and insistence, and
 there's a crow (in an oak with a copy of
 Whitman's beard
 on every limb)
 counting to five
 over and over and a propane truck
 filling the tanks of the vineyard opposite.

Maa laea

Stones half-buried in pulverized star-
 fish, silica, coral, basalt shatter, a waterline-
 threaded
 band of scatter, an-
 agrammatic
 stone notes in a wave sequencer: bright, 'h-
 onest' tones, each
 has 'bend' and 'pitch,'
 has length,
 and some come
 with echo effect: a stone
 turns in the eye into
 a minor model of the cloud-and-
 turbine-
 studded Pu'u
 Kukui, itself
 a scale-
 invariant stone
 in sequence in littoral blue
 isolation as

the eternity-bird's eye view zooms out: Earth-	
stone in sequence,	tonal music
of sphere after	
sphere	broken by
sweetwater, spacewater,	saltwater
dulcimer	hammers into
non-Euclidean	scales, corals, and
liquid iron cores and	pitchblendes and
denser half-life	
ores in	a band of
stellar	
scatter, each with	pitch and
bend	of light
	from Spica blue
to Proxima	
Centauri red	to red
of an open mouth	to benthic blue
back to late childhóod,	
when I lóved you.	

Saugatuck Dunes

I and the others, over the dune hill wall,
 confronted the Great Lake and wandered
 with paper, pens and dying in different
 parents
 directions, and I sat a long time on a beech log and wrote

The Dearth of Rods:

The structure of the retina imposes limitations
 on *homo sapiens sapiens'* powers of observation.

Spacewise, rods and cones being finite, resolution
 must be finite. So the 17th century invention

of the microscope began the apprehension
 of the infinite space bounded which is that suspension

of reactor stars and matter darkly theorized to be what
 it resembles: something of a universe within a hazelnut

within an Epicurian atom. Timewise, that neuronal

signals pulse discretely means that any visible phenomenon

must last beyond the interval

(during which Lucifer-Icarus falls) of milliseconds

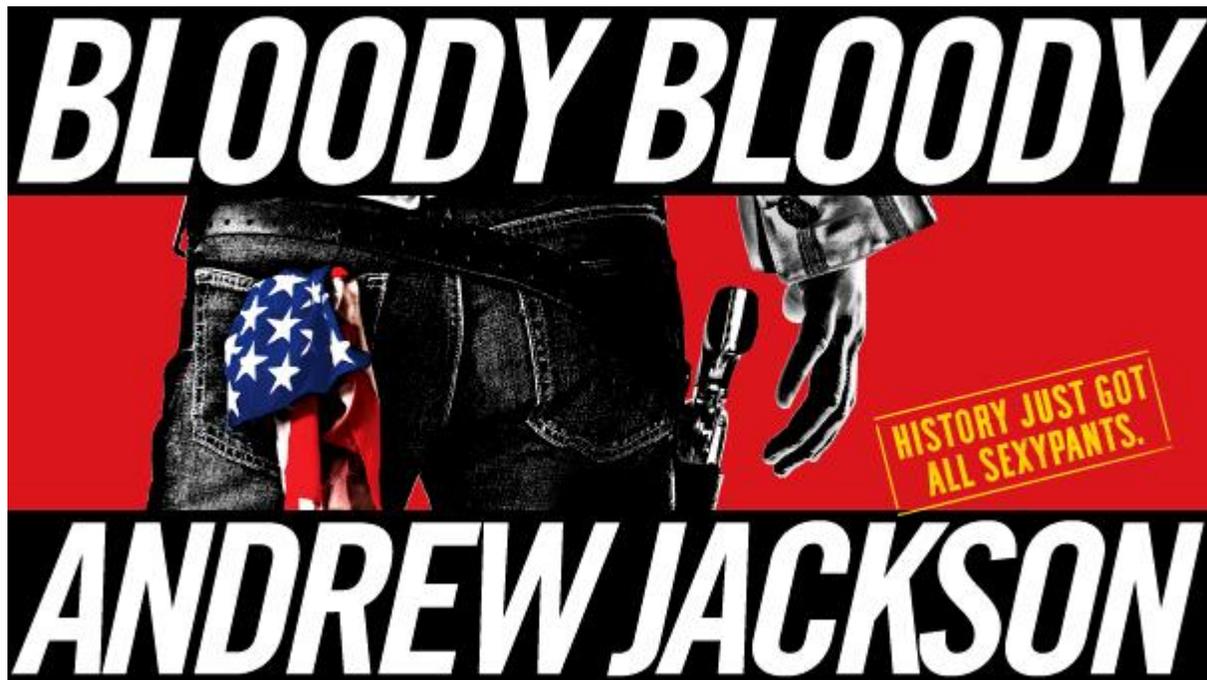
needed by a primate brain to render an experience, hence
the 19th century invention of photography commenced the death birth of God,

until one of the others walked
toward the black dot
that was me
and arrived
and sat, and I felt a pulsation, acute,
a desire to
protect, and felt, too,
protected, but she
sat with me
for less than
a minute in silence, then
asked for more paper and walked off.

Could it be True I Once, Alone Walking, Found

A split tree trunk
with a torn off back
half of a water-
logged *Paradiso*
in its hollow?

Populism! Yeah? Yeah!!



Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson

On a chilly weekend shortly before Christmas, the Stunning Significant Other (hereafter, SSO) and I took a quick trip from snowy, abstemious New England down to New York City. With no Friday night plans in place, as Metro North whisked us toward Grand Central I asked her if there were anything in particular she'd like to do that evening. Any restaurants she'd like to visit? Perhaps we could see what the Metropolitan Opera was performing? Or maybe a Broadway show? I will confess that I was not entirely lacking in ulterior motives in asking these questions. She replied that it would be great to see a show—but what was playing? Well, I cautiously replied, there was a soon-to-close musical that I'd heard was really great. "What's it about?" Well, I ventured, even more cautiously, it's about antebellum politics and Manifest Destiny. "That sounds absolutely awesome," was the response. (A word of caution: I would not try this with just any significant other. It helps if he/she is also a devotee of nineteenth-century Americana. You've been warned.)

The opening number offers the essence of the show's take on Jackson's appeal, and also its less-than-subtle link to current political events.

That's how we found ourselves at the Bernard Jacobs Theatre on West 45th Street later that evening, ready to see "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson." This musical, originally conceived by Les Freres Corbusier, a downtown theatre troupe that is "devoted to aggressively visceral theatre combining historical revisionism, sophomoric humor, and rigorous academic research," had its roots in the downtown theater scene, although it was first performed in Los Angeles. This production was brought to Broadway by the Public Theater in fall 2010. Apparently the audience for a loosely historical musical satire about our seventh president was not as large as the producers had hoped. The show, which cost \$4.5 million to stage, closed on January 2, 2011, after only 120

performances, finishing its run substantially in the red.

"Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson" combines the emo-rock musical stylings that made "Spring Awakening" such a smash earlier in the decade with an irreverent, free-wheeling approach to American history and presidential politics. In this respect, it is reminiscent of the little-seen but highly entertaining "President Harding is a Rock Star," a glam rock musical that got its start on the experimental stages of the East Village before enjoying a run in Washington, D.C., in the run-up to the 2004 presidential election. Indeed, one of the main messages of BBAJ is the importance of media appeal—and particularly sex appeal—in the marketing of presidential candidates: the posters for the show seen on bus shelters around New York showed this image (fig. 1), whose slogan "History Just Got All Sexypants" seemed to be one of the key themes (if not desires) of the show.



Fig. 1. Publicity image from "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson." Courtesy of the show's Website, www.bloodybloodyandrewjackson.com

The interior of the Jacobs Theatre was a welter of old-timey bric-a-brac, taxidermy, velvet swagged curtains, portraits of nineteenth-century political figures, duct tape, strings of lights, piles of empty beer cans and liquor bottles: picture Peale's Museum, trashed by the Delta Tau Chis. Suspended from the ceiling was a stuffed horse, its legs trussed together by a chain. I waited all evening for it to burst open and shower something—Confetti? Whiskey? Worthless currency from the pet banks?—over the audience, to no avail.

Much of the press that BBAJ received related to the undeniable charisma and appeal of the show's star, Benjamin Walker (fig. 2). He swaggered onstage at the outset of the show in tight jeans and a military jacket, a holstered pistol at his side, surveyed the audience, and declared, "You guys are sexy as shit!" After some additional prefatory patter, he declared "I'm Andrew Jackson! I'm your president! Let's go!" And the night was off to the races with the show's opening full-cast number, "[Populism, Yea, Yea!](#)" (A song that I was singing to myself on the way over to the theater—the SS0 thought I had made it up.) The opening number offers the essence of the show's take on Jackson's appeal, and also its less-than-subtle link to current political events, describing populism as a movement that is

*For people like us,
Who don't just think about things—
People who make things happen.
Sometimes with guns,
Sometimes with speeches too,
And also other things.*



Fig 2. Benjamin Walker as Andrew Jackson. Courtesy of the media gallery at www.bloodybloodyandrewjackson.com

The ironic, winking connection to contemporary politics runs throughout the musical, and can at times verge into the self-satisfied (as many reviews of the show noted, this tone did not translate well from smaller downtown venues to the scale of a Broadway production). The musical offers a loose—very loose—outline of Jackson's upbringing on the Tennessee frontier (his family is depicted as being killed by Indians, cementing young Andrew's remorseless hatred of the people whom he would as president persecute so thoroughly), and offering an explanation of his later populist politics in his father's rants against the urban elites of the East who don't give a damn about the needs of citizens in the West. The show races to put Jackson in action, in the War of 1812. It is in the wake of his stunning victory at the Battle of New Orleans that Jackson the public figure—the real subject of the musical—comes to the fore, in a song titled "I'm Not That Guy." Jackson struggles with the implications of life in the public eye, including the exposure that a career in politics would bring to his marriage to his wife, Rachel, whose lack of an official divorce from her first husband before marrying Jackson would dog him throughout his career. Walker as Jackson quickly reconciles these misgivings, however, and at the end of the song declares what the rest of the musical will show to be the primary tenet of Jackson's political beliefs: "Who am I? I'm Andrew Fucking Jackson!"

A ninety-minute musical that is primarily being played for laughs can't be expected to offer much in the way of historical detail, and BBAJ makes no claim to fidelity to the facts (although the show's Website does offer a link to additional resources for those who are interested in learning more about Jackson and his era). Most of the historical context that is present in the show is offered by the Storyteller (Broadway veteran Kristine Nielsen), supposedly a retired history teacher and admitted Jackson aficionado who periodically rolls onstage in a motorized wheelchair accessorized with an American flag. The central section of the musical deals with the high points of Jackson's career: the election of 1824, and the "corrupt bargain" that put John Quincy Adams in the White House; Jackson's decision to run again in 1828; and his first term in office. Through this portion of the show Jackson shares the stage with the main political players in those events: John Quincy Adams, John Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Martin Van Buren. It is in the depiction of these figures that many readers of *Common-placemight* find the most to enjoy.

Darren Goldstein plays Calhoun as a slick backroom wheeler-dealer, with a voice seemingly lifted from the cartoon chicken Foghorn Leghorn. Lucas Near-Verbrugge's Van Buren is a fawning, two-faced petty bureaucrat, interested in nothing more than feathering his own nest. The show's version of John Quincy Adams is a far cry from Anthony Hopkins' incorruptible idealist in the film "Amistad." Here, Jeff Hiller plays the sixth president as a stupefied, incompetent, adenoidal lummo; when the deal is consummated that hands Adams victory in the 1824 presidential election, he clumps offstage and yelps, "This is exciting! I never win anything!" Most notable, however, is Bryce Pinkham's performance as Henry Clay, who speaks in a near-incomprehensible shriek, may or may not have a hunchback, has hair that appears to have been styled by a

mid-80s Robert Smith, and is continually stroking some sort of rodent—too sleek for a marmot, too big for a weasel. Perhaps a mink (fig. 3).

For theatre-goers who are familiar with the historical context, all of this is very entertaining. And the key message of this central section—that the qualities that it takes to get elected president are very different from those that are required to govern effectively—is one that has obvious connections to more contemporary periods. Yet many members of the audience seemed a bit baffled. The show's satirical humor seemed to have difficulty connecting with the audience in a venue of this size, and its music and choreography are not as polished as many visitors to New York likely expect to see on a Broadway stage (especially if they paid the full price of over \$100 a ticket).



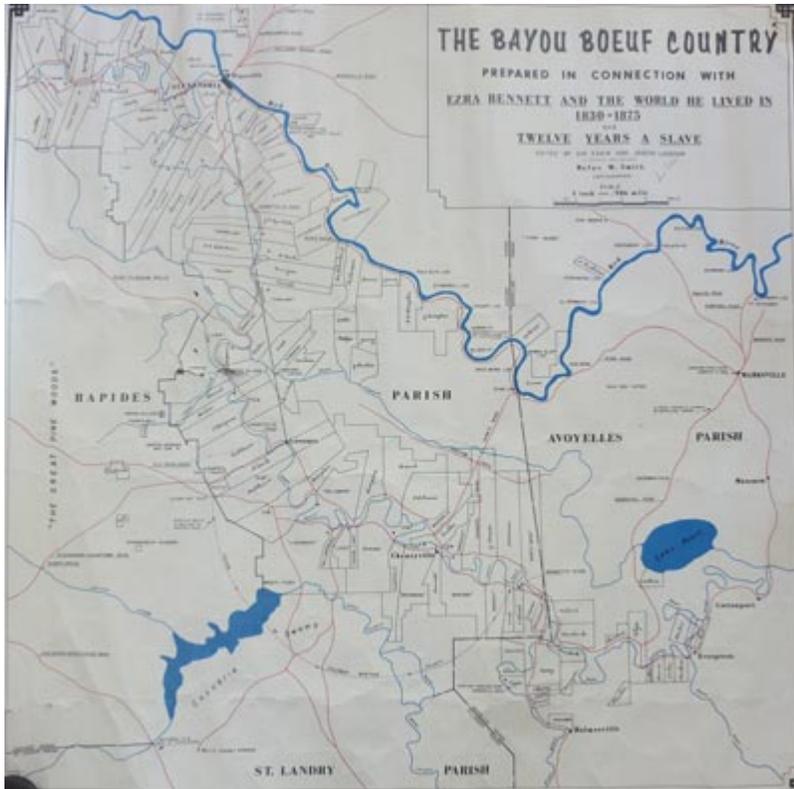
Fig 3. Darren Goldstein as Calhoun, Bryce Pinkham as Clay, Ben Steinfeld as Monroe, Jeff Hiller as John Quincy Adams and Lucas Near-Verbrugge as Van Buren. Courtesy of the media gallery at www.bloodybloodyandrewjackson.com

Perhaps more perplexing was the show's shift in tone in its final third, where things turned somber as the focus swung to the one historical event that most members of the audience probably associated with Jackson: the Trail of Tears. A Native American leader named "Black Fox" is depicted as being a close confidante of Jackson, aiding his policies of Indian removal by betraying numerous tribes in his role as Jackson's chief negotiator (the character was called Black Hawk in the show's first run at the Public Theater, but the name was changed after Native Americans who saw the show objected that the character's negative portrayal could lead audiences to think that it referred to the real Black Hawk, the Sauk and Fox war leader of the early nineteenth century). But at the end of the show, Black Fox's own people stand in the way of Jackson's expansionist vision, and Black Fox is forced to take leave of Washington to lead his tribe in what he knows will be a futile war against U.S. troops. Jackson explains that the conflict between Indians and white settlers hungry for land was foreordained from the moment Europeans first set foot on the continent, and that even if he wanted to stop what he refers to as the "genocide" that is underway, he is powerless in the face of historical forces he can't control.

The show concluded with a rousing version of "[The Hunters of Kentucky](#)," an 1821 song that Jackson used as his campaign anthem in 1824 and 1828. Yet despite ending on this energetic note, the underlying theme of the show left one feeling somewhat uneasy. As BBAJ showed, the United States as it is presently constituted is the result of a long list of bad (if not downright immoral) decisions throughout history—decisions that modern voters might regret, but that have also made us who we are. We have been the material beneficiaries of Jackson's power-mad, bloodthirsty streak, and even if we could right these wrongs, the musical asks us whether we would want to. BBAJ's combination of history and satire was likely not well suited for the Broadway stage—it simply isn't commercial enough to fill that many seats night after night. A smaller

venue, and an even sharper edge, would have helped this entertaining historical mash-up enjoy a longer run.

All Things Were Working Together for My Deliverance



By the time the Union army reached Bayou Boeuf—the neighborhood where Solomon Northup, a free black man kidnapped from upstate New York, had been enslaved for twelve years—it had become a tourist destination. The federals accompanying General Nathaniel P. Banks on the march to Port Hudson, Louisiana, who had read Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) made a point of seeking out the plantation of Edwin Epps, the last, longest, and most notoriously brutal owner of Solomon Northup before he regained his freedom (fig. 1). On May 19, 1863, 2nd Lt. William H. Root of the 75th New York Volunteers, wrote the following in his diary: “We are in the district that formed the theater of Solomon Northup’s bondage”:

Old Epp’s plantation is a few miles down the Bayou and Epps himself is on the plantation, a noted man made famous of his owning Solomon Northup. Plenty of negroes are found about here who say that they knew Platt [Northup’s name while enslaved] well and have danced to the music of his fiddle often. Some who

remember when he was taken out of the lot by the “Northern gemman.” Bayou Boeuf was then the witness of quite a scene which made a lasting impression on the minds of the poor darkies who saw the affair.

The story of Northup did linger, both on the bayou and in the memories of soldiers who traveled in those parts during the war. S. E. Chandler, a sergeant with the 24th New York Cavalry, wrote to the *National Tribune* in 1894 about Northup and his story, noting that “the book is now out of print, cannot be procured of any regular dealer.” However, he had found a copy of *Twelve Years* in a secondhand bookshop in Albany. Chandler recalled meeting “a number of returned soldiers who were with Banks on his Red River expedition who told me of having read the book at the time it was published (1854[sic]) and who visited the plantation of Edwin Epps, where Northup ... passed years of his life. They told of seeing and talking with his former slave comrades, whose names were Uncle Abram, Wiley, Aunt Phoebe, Patsy, Bob, Henry, and Edward.” Chandler hoped that others who had visited Bayou Boeuf during the war might also write to the *National Tribune* with “a brief account of what they learned” about the world and the people that Solomon Northup had left behind.

The film serves to remind us what the war accomplished: the dismantling of the institution that cost Northup twelve years of his life.

As the soldiers who went looking for Edwin Epps well understood, to remember the Civil War was also to recall its antecedents and its outcomes—that is, the South and the nation as they existed before, during, and after the bloody conflict. The recent film version of Northup’s story, appearing in the midst of the Civil War’s sesquicentennial, exemplifies this broader understanding of war memory. Like the book before it, Steve McQueen’s *Twelve Years a Slave* points directly to the bitter roots of the conflict. The film also serves to remind us what the war accomplished: the dismantling of the institution that cost Northup twelve years of his life.



1. Title page of an original edition of Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*, published in 1853. Courtesy of the UNC University Libraries, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina.



2. Advertisement that appeared in *New Orleans Item*, April 22, 1922, p. 4. Courtesy of GenealogyBank.com, a division of NewsBank, Inc.

Recently, I began researching the editorial backstory to the first modern republication of *Twelve Years a Slave*, in 1968, and that edition’s translation

into a feature film. It soon became clear that much of the press coverage of the film—which has focused on the film’s level of historical accuracy, and on how true it is to Solomon Northup’s account—has ignored the subsequent history of the story Northup told. Northup came to believe, when looking back at his escape from the bayou, that “all things were working together for my deliverance.” Little could he imagine that his published narrative would also experience redemption more than once in subsequent years.

Northup’s account reached the big screen after traveling the same hard ground of racial conflict that the nation as a whole crossed from the 1850s to the present. The book fell out of print after the Civil War and remained so through the nadir of race relations in the South and the rise of Jim Crow. It was not republished until 1968, in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, when historians had begun to reflect on the African American past in search of antecedents for the radical politics of the present. Now that the Civil War has once again become present in American popular culture due to the sesquicentennial, *Twelve Years a Slave* has resurfaced, this time in cinematic form.

That such a searing film would appear now seems fitting. While most contemporary textbooks discuss the role that slavery played in disunion, antebellum southern slavery is not often integrated into the popular memory of the war. Although important films about slavery and the Civil War have appeared since the 1960s—from *Roots* to *Glory* to *Lincoln*—none of these are so closely tied to the testimony of one person’s daily experience of slavery. It is the particularity of Northup’s story, as many historians have noted, that allowed him to so keenly reflect antebellum society at large and especially slavery’s hold over daily life in the South before the war.

The film’s attention to violence (a focus it shares with the original text) and to the plantation landscape in which such routine brutality occurred, de-sanitizes slick political justifications for the Civil War. Like Alexander Gardner’s grisly photographs of Antietam in 1862, *Twelve Years* shocks its intended audience with horrors that have largely been kept from the public eye.

As a work of both memory and memorialization, the film version of *Twelve Years a Slave* is perhaps the most powerful answer yet to the movie that became the archetype of the Civil War epic from its debut in 1939, David O. Selznick’s production of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*. The inverse of that unforgettable monument to a fictional yet fiercely remembered “Old South,” *Twelve Years a Slave* reminds us of what the Civil War really swept from American society.

The resulting film is clear-eyed and painful to watch, closely following the experience of its protagonist and taking relatively few liberties with the original text. Countless critics, writers, and historians have hailed it as cinema’s first honest look at the South’s “peculiar institution.” Writing in the *New Yorker*, David Denby declared it “easily the greatest feature film ever

made about American slavery." Were it not for the collaboration of two historians in Louisiana, however, McQueen's film could not have become such a testament to what enslaved people endured before the Civil War.

In the spring of 1966, Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon contracted with Louisiana State University Press to republish what seemed to be an improbable story. Solomon Northup was a free black man living in Saratoga Springs, New York, in 1841 when he was lured to Washington, D.C., by two men posing as performers in need of Northup's skill as a violinist. Awakening to find himself chained in a slave pen, Northup was quickly sent south to the New Orleans slave market, sold under the name of "Platt" to a man named William Ford, and carried to the Bayou Boeuf region of central Louisiana. There he remained in bondage for twelve years, much of that time to a cruel master named Edwin Epps, before he was able to reclaim his freedom.

On his return to New York, Northup arranged to tell his story to a lawyer named David O. Wilson. Like most slave narratives of this period, *Twelve Years a Slave* was both a condemnation of slavery and a much-needed source of income for its ex-slave narrator. Wilson does not seem to have had serious abolitionist leanings, but he was an aspiring writer and recognized a good publishing prospect in Northup's story. Harriet Beecher Stowe had published her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the year previous, and it met with unprecedented success. The original 1853 edition of *Twelve Years a Slave* was dedicated to Stowe, who had been pleased to see Northup's experience come to light. She noted the similarities between Northup's ordeal and *Uncle Tom's*, particularly the fact that Northup had been enslaved to a sadistic master (Epps) in central Louisiana, very near to where Tom suffered the abuses of Simon Legree.

Although Eakin and Logsdon became interested in the narrative independent of one another, Eakin saw it first. She recalled that she was about twelve years old when she first read *Twelve Years a Slave*. She had accompanied her father to Oak Hall Plantation (near Alexandria, Louisiana), where he had some business with its owner, Dr. W. D. Haas. Haas was the grandson of Douglass Marshall, mentioned in Northup's account, who owned fifty slaves at Oak Hall in 1860. To keep the young girl occupied, Haas gave her the family's copy of Northup's story. She recalled being struck by the familiar names and places in the narrative.

Despite her avid interest in *Twelve Years a Slave*, Eakin had a difficult time obtaining a copy of her own. The book had long been out of print, as a clipping in the *New Orleans Item* from 1922 attests. Someone from Eakin's hometown of Bunkie with the initials "L.C.E." placed an advertisement in search of a copy of the book and was told none could be had, even in local libraries (fig. 2). Eakin eventually found a copy in a secondhand bookshop in Baton Rouge. As a college student at LSU in the 1940s, she began tracing the life of Northup and apparently never stopped.

Perhaps it is not surprising that Sue Eakin's is not the face most associated

with the recent film adaptation of *Twelve Years a Slave* (fig. 3). In fact, most people would be hard pressed to consider the woman in her author's photo (white, grandmotherly, with her hair set and a chain on her eye glasses) on the cutting edge of anything, much less that of African American history. Although it was clearly Eakin who did most of the sleuthing, with Logsdon's help she brought the remarkable narrative of freeborn Solomon Northup's ordeal in slavery back into print.

Just as Lt. Root penned his letter from a South soon to be free of slavery, Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon revived Northup's narrative during another upheaval in American race relations. The political movements of the late 1960s brought with them a rising interest in African American history. At that critical point in a long racial struggle, in an age before digital archives put original nineteenth-century books at readers' fingertips, Eakin and Logsdon made *Twelve Years a Slave* accessible to two generations of scholars and their students.



3. Dr. Sue Eakin, professor of history, from the yearbook of Louisiana State University at Alexandria, *Sauce Picante* (1978). Courtesy of University Archives and Central Louisiana Collection, James C. Bolton Library, Louisiana State University at Alexandria.



4. Illustration from original edition of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, published in 1853. Courtesy of the UNC University Libraries, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

In doing so they became part of a long history of slave narrative publication and re-publication in American letters. With the rise of anti-slavery activism in the 1830s, the publication of slave narratives burgeoned. White abolitionists typically penned an introduction to the former slave's account; many ex-slaves also relied on amanuenses (who often had heavy-handed editorial intent) to transcribe their stories. Some literary critics have seen this as an unequal relationship, and others see this same inequality in modern editions: the words of a former slave, so this critique goes, are never allowed to stand on their own, without the support of an editor to authenticate them.

In the case of Northup's story, however, the process of authentication was always something of a communal one, and it began almost from the moment of Northup's liberation. Given the illegal nature of Solomon Northup's enslavement, the effort to retrieve evidence of his sale and to retrace his steps commenced once he was redeemed. After a failed attempt to send a letter to New York and a near lynching (fig. 4), Northup found an ally in Samuel Bass, an itinerant carpenter with antislavery sympathies who got word to those in New York who could vouch for Northup's status as a free man. A descendent of his father's owner, Henry B. Northup, traveled to Louisiana to retrieve him, with

endorsements and aid from Louisiana Senator Pierre Soulé and the governor of New York.

Both Northups then traveled to New Orleans, where they visited the slave pen where he had been held and the room in which William Ford had purchased him. According to the *New York Daily Times*, they also visited the office of a notary to “trace the titles of the colored man from Tibaut [Tibeats] to Eppes [sic], from Ford to Tibaut, and from Freedman [the New Orleans trader] to Ford—all the titles being recorded in the proper books kept for that purpose.” The elaborate system of notarial record keeping in New Orleans, which today fills an archive like no other in the country, helped Northup corroborate his own memory of events.

In later years, the accounts of Lt. Root and Sgt. Chandler, too, served to authenticate Northup’s story. And Chandler’s list of people who remembered Northup and his sudden liberation suggests that those who were enslaved with him also were willing to affirm both his story and its strangeness. The inclusion of a woman named “Patsy” on that list is significant since in Northup’s telling she had been the main object of abuse in the Epps household, caught between the sexual coercion of Edwin Epps and the violent jealousies of his wife. That Patsy may have been there still, with Epps, means the war could not have come soon enough.

White members of the Bayou Boeuf community—contemporaries and immediate descendants of those Northup had encountered—also chimed in regarding the accuracy of Northup’s memories. There is evidence that white planter families from the Bayou Boeuf community kept copies of the 1853 edition of *Twelve Years a Slave* in their libraries. According to Eakin, a family named Townsend “undoubtedly was one of those who owned one of the original editions of which there were a number still preserved.” Apparently the people of Bayou Boeuf were eager to see their community recognized in print, even if it appeared in the context of a truthful account of the brutality of slavery and the slave trade.

In the footnotes to the 1968 edition, Eakin reprinted parts of an annotation Dr. Haas had written on the flyleaf of the book in 1930, around the time Eakin first read the narrative. Dr. Haas’s inscription reflected the grudging admission of residents of the area that Northup’s narrative was accurate in its recounting of people and places in Bayou Boeuf: “This story is remarkable in many respects [–] that an uneducated negro after twelve years spent in slavery under a drunken overbearing Master could give so correct a narrative of his experiences is remarkable.”

By 1966, Eakin had completed years of research on Northup’s narrative, but convincing the editors at LSU Press that she was the right person for the editing job was not easy and, ultimately, not entirely successful. When she first approached the press about publishing *Twelve Years a Slave*, she was a married woman with children, a master’s degree, and an instructor’s position at a small regional state university. Eakin did not receive a PhD until 1978.

“(Mrs.) Sue L. Eakin,” as she signed her letters, was not the highly credentialed male historian university presses preferred.



5. Dr. Joseph Logsdon teaching at the University of New Orleans, ca. 1970. Courtesy Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana.



6. Northup Trail, stop 2: Bayou Boeuf and image of Mary McCoy and her house, top right. McCoy was the original owner of the 1853 edition of Northup's narrative that was brought to Joseph Logsdon by a student in 1966. From *Backtracking Twelve Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup Trail Guide, p. 4-5, vertical file. Courtesy of the Ethel and Herman Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies, New Orleans, Louisiana.

In one telling, Eakin approached the press and was rejected. When she tried again, the editors expressed mild interest. Unbeknownst to her, however, a young scholar at LSU-New Orleans (later, the University of New Orleans) with a BA and MA from the University of Chicago and a PhD from the University of Wisconsin, had discovered his own copy of *Twelve Years a Slave*, and had decided that it should be reprinted.

Joseph Logsdon first read Northup's narrative when one of his students brought the book to class (fig. 5). The woman was a friend of the McCoy family, some of whom were mentioned in Northup's account, and it was their copy she had brought for Logsdon to see. According to Northup, the young plantation mistress Mary McCoy was “the beauty and the glory of Bayou Boeuf” and a benevolent slave owner who held “about a hundred working hands, besides a great many house servants, yard boys, and young children” (fig. 6). In his first letter to her, Logsdon told Eakin: “The work came to my attention last fall when one of my students ... brought me the family's treasured (and humorously edited) copy of the narrative. After reading the fascinating book, I realized that it should be edited and republished.”

Both historians had gone to the press, within weeks of one another—Eakin with years of research in hand, and Logsdon with an interest in the subject matter and well-placed contacts in the field. After meeting Eakin and discussing a possible collaboration, Logsdon wrote to the director of LSU Press: “Her knowledge of the Bayou Boef [sic] region is truly impressive. There is no question in my mind that, working together, we shall write a much better book.” For Eakin, however, the decision to collaborate with Logsdon was not much of a decision at all, since she had little choice if she wanted to be an editor on the project.

They divided the work between them: Logsdon worked on the New York parts of the account as well as the introduction, and Eakin continued to research and write footnotes to the Louisiana portion. Together, they verified nearly every name,

date, and landmark Northup mentioned in his narrative. John Ridley, who wrote the script of the film, told the *New York Times* that he relied upon the extensive notes in the Eakin and Logsdon edition to write the screenplay.

Logsdon's most significant contribution, however, may have been his efforts to put Northup's narrative in a larger context. Logsdon was aware that African American history was of increasing interest to publishers and within the academy. In his "Northup" file, he saved a clipping from the *National Observer* dated March 21, 1966 (fig. 7), with the headline "A New Boom as Negroes Seek a Place in History." The writer noted "the depth and diversity of the current Negro information explosion, a phenomenon that is inundating libraries and schools, spawning new businesses, and creating a sense of pride in heritage among thousands of American Negroes." The Civil Rights movement and its fight for school integration, as well as "the emergence of Africa" in the popular consciousness, had created an "insatiable public appetite for information on Negro Life."



7. "A New Boom as Negroes Seek a Place in History," *National Observer*, March 21, 1966. Joseph Logsdon Papers, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans. Click image to enlarge in new window.



8. Cover, *Backtracking Twelve Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup Trail Guide, n.d., vertical file. Courtesy of the Ethel and Herman Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies, New Orleans, Louisiana.

In the same article, John Hope Franklin, then teaching at the University of Chicago, argued that "the Negroes' contributions to the nation have been obscured by history, and deliberately so. The traditional view of the Negro that depicts him as irresponsible and shiftless was part of the apparatus used to uphold his degraded status, and justify the institution of slavery." A "reexamination" of that view was underway, but not all of this new work was genuine. Pointing to the efforts of publishers and writers to turn a profit by quickly filling the void in black history, Franklin said: "There are people slapping anything at all to do with Negroes between two covers and making a profit on it."

Logsdon must have seen the Northup project as one that would address Franklin's concerns. The experience of enslavement narrated by one of the enslaved, a dramatic story filled with detail that could be verified and used by scholars and teachers, was the antithesis of the slapdash productions to which Franklin alluded. In light of Northup's obvious intelligence, remarkable survival, and industrious frame of mind even under slavery (in addition to playing the violin at plantation parties, he saved his first master, William Ford, both time and money by devising a means for transporting timber down the bayou instead of

over land), *Twelve Years a Slave* would contribute meaningfully to a rebirth of research and writing in African American history.

Logsdon also worked to promote the new edition among prominent historians. He enlisted the help of Kenneth Stampp, eminent historian of American slavery at the University of California-Berkeley, who agreed to write a blurb for the book (though it does not seem to have ever been used). Stampp called the narrative a "priceless document," asserting that while Frederick Douglass's narrative was the "superior" of the two, "in some respects Northup's narrative is more valuable to the historian." Because he had been born a free man, Northup (perhaps more so than Douglass) "tasted the bitterness of slavery."

When the 1968 edition appeared—doubling the accepted canon of nineteenth-century slave narratives to two—it was as if Northup had offered up his story again, in another tumultuous era for race relations in America. A review for the *Florida Historical Quarterly* (whose blurb, strangely, still appears on the cover of the 2010 LSU Press edition) insisted that the book "should be must reading for every young Southerner. Only in accounts such as this can they understand the true nature of the curse which, more than a hundred years later, still hangs like a millstone around the neck of the South, hampering final emancipation for white and black alike." Such a directive reflects the time and place in which Eakin and Logsdon reintroduced Northup's remarkable story, delivering his account to an eager new generation.

If Logsdon provided the larger framework for Northup's narrative, it was Eakin who reconstructed "the world of Solomon Northup," to quote Logsdon himself. But in truth, Eakin's relationship to her subject was not entirely academic—nor was it always objective. She seems to have been drawn to *Twelve Years a Slave* in large part because while it narrated Northup's trials, the text also recorded a detailed history of her beloved Bayou Boeuf. In the early 1970s, for instance, she secured funding for a brochure called *Backtracking: Twelve Years a Slave*, which numbers the various sites of Northup's enslavement and provides brief commentary on the people and places he encountered (fig. 8). This text serves as a (now mostly outdated) travel guide through the community where Northup was enslaved for so long.

Perhaps nothing so well illustrates Eakin's familiarity with the world in which Northup found himself, however, than the map of "The Bayou Boeuf Country" she created with the help of a local cartographer named Rufus Smith (fig. 9). The names and property lines of plantation owners cluster on either side of the bayou, and the cleared land is ringed by swamps and mostly impassable forests. Like Northup's narrative, the map is full of names and places, topographic notations, and marked routes between plantations. Eakin did her best to highlight Bayou Boeuf, its landmarks, and Northup's journeys through it. But she was unable to render that same landscape from Northup's perspective, that is, from the perspective of a free man who suddenly found himself enslaved in plantation country, far from a port or a coastline that might have afforded him swift passage home.

9. A map commissioned by Sue Eakin from local cartographer and surveyor Rufus Smith (1970). Signed by Eakin. Courtesy of Ethel and Herman Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Sue Eakin's mapping of Solomon Northup's "world" and his journeys through it has been translated into three dimensions in Steve McQueen's film. With the camera, he tracks Northup through what historian Walter Johnson describes as the "carceral landscape" of the mid-nineteenth century Lower Mississippi Valley, a vast territory of cotton and cane with few opportunities for escape. In Northup's recollection, it was as though even the sun was beyond the reach of the bayou's inmates: "In the edge of the swamp, not a half mile from Epps' house was a large space, thousands of acres in extent, thickly covered with palmetto. Tall trees, whose long arms interlocked each other, formed a canopy above them, so dense as to exclude the beams of the sun. It was like twilight always, even in the middle of the brightest day."

10. Photograph of the Edwin Epps house in its original location along the banks of the Bayou Boeuf. Sue Eakins located it there in 1976 and helped to orchestrate its first move, to the nearby town of Bunkie, Louisiana. Courtesy of University Archives and Central Louisiana Collection, James C. Bolton Library, Louisiana State University at Alexandria.

In McQueen's film, elements of the landscape become characters in the story. He filmed oak trees, for instance, in long, watery shots of gnarled branches draped with Spanish moss and, at two points in the story, with the bodies of black men. In one scene, when Northup considers escape, the sweating indecision he suffers in the maze of scrub brush is frightening. When he then stumbles on a lynching—through which McQueen also evokes a more recent reign of terror in the South—the impassability of that space for a black man in the 1840s becomes plain.

Given how closely McQueen's film hews to Northup's account, Eakin would probably have been pleased with the film. But there is one important point on which Sue Eakin would have taken issue with McQueen's version. It concerns the house where Epps lived—the very house where Lt. Root made a stop on his way to Port Hudson. Eakin exerted much effort to help preserve the Edwin Epps house, built with the help of Northup in 1852 (figs. 10 and 11). Since 1976, the structure has been moved twice and now sits, restored, on the campus of LSU-Alexandria. Eakin had found the house herself, after considerable searching: "I had a time documenting the house," she wrote, "because I had mistaken it for another of the hundreds of thousands of old slave cabins which had once lined the Bayou Boeuf." Eakin rightly pointed out that the house, a modest one, was "far more typical of plantation houses as known within the miles of plantations

in the lower Red River Valley than the columned mansions 'restored' mostly with oil money after World War II."

Much of the movie, in fact, was filmed on the grounds of the sorts of "columned mansions" to which Eakin alluded. The Felicity Plantation in Vacherie, Louisiana, plays the part of the Epps house in Steve McQueen's movie and such a house, Eakin might have argued, would have been entirely too extravagant for a man who began his career as an overseer. In her *Backtracking* guide, she included a photograph of the P.L. Shaw House, a neighboring plantation to the Epps place with a nearly identical structure. The Shaw house was still in good repair at the time the photo was taken and probably offers something close to what Lt. Root and his companions found on Epps's property in 1863 (fig. 12).



11. The Edwin Epps house as it now stands on the campus of Louisiana State University at Alexandria, where it serves as a museum dedicated to Northup's time in the region. Courtesy of University Archives and Central Louisiana Collection, James C. Bolton Library, Louisiana State University at Alexandria.



12. Photograph of the plantation house of Edwin Epps's neighbor, P.L. Shaw. As the text notes, this house most closely resembled the Epps house at the time of the Civil War. From *Backtracking Twelve Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup Trail Guide, n.d, p. 11, vertical file. Courtesy of the Ethel and Herman Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Eakin would have also appreciated the film's high-profile release during the Civil War's sesquicentennial. But she would have continued to point to our garbled understanding of the slave South and our even more confused attempts to remember the society that the Civil War upended. "It was here," she seemed to say, "and here, and here." The peeling houses and the bloodlines that persisted in Bayou Boeuf were also remains of the war and the last physical evidence of the antebellum society it (rightly) destroyed.

Further Reading

Two editions of Northup's narrative have been published in advance of the film: Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York, 2013); Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave, Enhanced Edition*, ed. Sue Eakin (Longboat Key, Fla., 2013). The 1968 edition is Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, eds. (Baton Rouge, La., 1968).

On the history of slave narratives, see Marion Wilson Starling's *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (New Haven, Conn., 1981).

For critiques of *Twelve Years a Slave* as a book and a film, see David Denby, "Fighting to Survive: *Twelve Years a Slave* and *All is Lost*," *The New Yorker*

(October 21, 2013); Noah Berlotsky, "How *Twelve Years a Slave* Gets History Right: By Getting It Wrong," *The Atlantic.com* (October 28, 2013); Jimmy So, "The '*12 Years a Slave*' Book Shows Slavery As Even More Appalling Than In the Film," *The Daily Beast.com* (October 18, 2013); and Forrest Wickman, "How Accurate is *Twelve Years a Slave*?" *Slate.com* Culture Blog (October 17, 2013).

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