“It Was a Mournful Scene Indeed”:
Solomon Northup Remembers the New Orleans Slave Market

The slave auction was one of the most barbaric practices of the harsh system of slavery. The slave trade within the United States destroyed families and tore apart communities, especially after 1840 when slavery was extended into the newer lands of the lower South and Southwest. Planters in the older settled areas of the upper South could realize substantial profits selling enslaved people, and New Orleans became the center of the trade. The resulting forced migration involved hundreds of thousands of African Americans. Some moved with their masters, but the migration also tore apart slave families residing on different plantations. Others were sold on the block, as Solomon Northup described in his Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841.

“. . . Next day many customers called to examine Freeman’s “new lot.” The latter gentleman was very loquacious, dwelling at much length upon our several good points and qualities. He would make us hold up our heads, walk briskly back and forth, while customers would feel of our hands and arms and bodies, turn us about, ask us what we could do, make us open our mouths and show our teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase. Sometimes a man or woman was taken back to the small house in the yard, stripped, and inspected more minutely. Scars upon a slave’s back were considered evidence of a rebellious or unruly spirit, and hurt his sale.

One old gentleman, who said he wanted a coachman, appeared to take a fancy to me. From his conversation with Burch, I learned he was a resident in the city. I very much desired that he would buy me, because I conceived it would not be difficult to make my escape from New-Orleans on some northern vessel. Freeman asked him fifteen hundred dollars for me. The old gentleman insisted it was too much, as times were very hard. Freeman, however, declared that I was sound and healthy, of a good constitution, and intelligent. He made it a point to enlarge upon my musical attainments. The old gentleman argued quite adroitly that there was nothing extraordinary about the [“n” word; racial slur], and finally, to my regret, went out, saying he would call again. During the day, however, a number of sales were made. David and Caroline were purchased together by a Natchez planter. They left us, grinning broadly, and in the most happy state of mind, caused by the fact of their not being separated. Lethe was sold to a planter of Baton Rouge, her eyes flashing with anger as she was led away. The same man also purchased Randall. The little fellow was made to jump, and run across the floor, and perform many other feats, exhibiting his activity and condition. All the time the trade was going on, Eliza was crying aloud, and wringing her hands. She besought the man not to buy him, unless he also bought her self and Emily. She promised, in that case, to be the most faithful slave that ever lived. The man answered that he could not afford it, and then Eliza burst into a paroxysm of grief, weeping plaintively. Freeman turned round to her, savagely, with his whip in his uplifted hand, ordering her to stop her noise, or he would flog her. He would not have such work - such snivelling; and unless she ceased that minute, he would take her to the yard and give her a hundred lashes. Yes, he would take the nonsense out of her pretty quick - if he didn’t, might he be d——d. Eliza shrunk before him, and tried to wipe away her tears, but it was all in vain. She wanted to be with her children, she said, the little time she had to live. All the frowns and threats of Freeman, could not wholly silence the afflicted mother. She kept on begging and beseeching them, most piteously not to separate the three.

Over and over again she told them how she loved her boy. A great many times she repeated her former promises - how very faithful and obedient she would be; how hard she would labor day and night, to the last moment of her life, if he would only buy them all together. But it was of no avail; the man could not afford it. The bargain was agreed upon, and Randall must go alone. Then Eliza ran to him; embraced him passionately; kissed him again and again; told him to remember her - all the while her tears falling in the boy’s face like rain. Freeman damned her, calling her a blubbing, bawling wench, and ordered her to go to her place, and behave herself; and be somebody. He swore he wouldn’t stand such stuff but a little longer. He would soon give her something to cry about, if she was not mighty careful, and that she might depend upon. The planter from Baton Rouge, with his new purchases, was ready to depart. “Don’t cry, mama. I will be a good boy. Don’t cry,” said Randall, looking back, as they passed out of the door. What has become of the lad, God knows. It was a mournful scene indeed. I would have cried myself if I had dared.”