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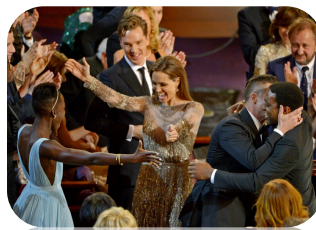
12 Years a Slave Wins Three Academy Awards Including Best Picture



Lupita Nyong'o Accepting



John Ridley



Best Picture Oscar Celebrated

See the review by *Washington Post* film critic Ann Hornaday on page 2.

In the Academy Awards earlier this month, *12 Years a Slave* was named best picture of 2013. The film's Lupita Nyong'o won for best actress in a supporting role, and writer John Ridley for best adapted screenplay. The film was nominated for nine awards.

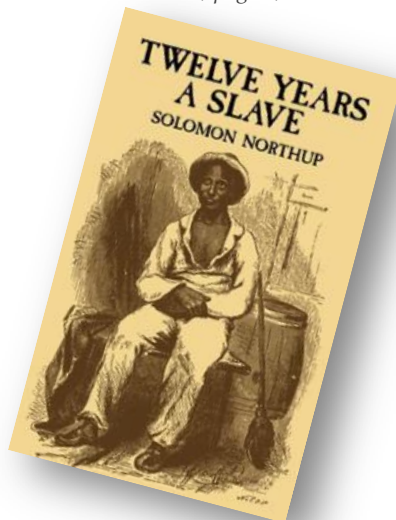
Ridley, Director Steve McQueen and producer Brad Pitt combined to work a masterpiece. Already hailed as an epic film soon after its October release, critics recognized *12 Years a Slave* as the best ever made in the accurate depiction of slavery, and as antidote to the likes of *Gone With the Wind* and other films which pulled a veil over its horrors.

New Republic's David Thompson calls *12 Years a Slave* "a film that necessity and education demand seeing."

"It provokes recognition in us of the very heart of darkness, making the unimaginable imaginable" said *San Francisco Chronicle* critic Mike LaSalle.

Slate's Dana Stevens called the film "overpowering."

12 Years a Slave tells the true story of Solomon Northup (1808-1863), a free black violinist and carpenter from upstate New York, who at 33 was kidnapped, sold south, and enslaved on Louisiana plantations. Freed by court order in 1853, he returned home. Please see *12 Years*, page 4, column 2



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The "best movie ever made on slavery" wins the top film Oscar for 2013.

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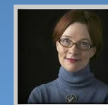
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1



Dred Scott and his landmark 1857 Supreme Court case are memorialized in St. Louis.

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A renowned film critic explains why *12 Years a Slave* is one of the most important ever of best pictures.

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Found after years in a file cabinet, a first-person account tells of a Quaker family's Underground Railroad work in Iowa.

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2014 Free Press Prizes and Survey

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The annual *Free Press* surveys of today's international Underground Railroad community are the window on the knowledge, practices, economics and demographics of Underground Railroad practitioners. Survey results are posted permanently at our website each July and reports provided to top Underground Railroad executives around the country. If you have a question you'd like to see in the 2014 survey, email us at publisher@urrFreePress.com before May 1. The 2014 survey will be conducted in May or June. View or download past survey reports at our website.

The Dred and Harriet Scott Memorial in St. Louis

One of an occasional series on Underground Railroad and related sites

The next time you are near St. Louis, drop in to the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, which includes the St. Louis Arch, and pay a visit to the Dred and Harriet Scott Memorial, and the Old St. Louis Courthouse where began their historic law suit which ended in the United States Supreme Court decision denying them their freedom.

In what is widely regarded as one of the three worst decisions it ever made, the Court held 7-2, in the infamous words of Chief Justice Roger Taney, that "black people have no rights which white people are bound to respect." The decision in *Dred Scott vs. Sandford* rested on Taney's and the Court majority's ruling that slaves were not

United States citizens and therefore had no standing to bring suit. The decision inflamed the north and the by-then-influential abolitionist movement, and was one of the direct causes of the Civil War.

The Scotts had been enslaved by Dr. John Emerson, an Army physician, who died. When the Scotts sued for their freedom, Emerson's estate was handled by his brother-in-law, John Sanford (whose name was misspelled Sandford by the Supreme Court). Following the Supreme Court ruling, the Scotts continued to be enslaved by Emerson's widow Irene, and John Sanford was committed to an insane asylum.

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Washington Post Film Critic Ann Hornaday on Why *12 Years a Slave* Was Destined As Best Picture



Ann Hornaday

The following article appeared in *The Washington Post* on February 28, 2014, two days before awarding of the 2013 Academy Awards. Ann Hornaday is Film Critic for *The Washington Post* where in 2008 she was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Criticism, and previously was film critic for the *Baltimore Sun* and *Austin American-Statesman*. She is a government graduate of Smith College and first worked as assistant to Gloria Steinem at *Ms.* magazine. Reprinted with permission.

The question of what makes a best picture the best picture is a perennial stumper at Oscar time, which is when even the most casual movie fans are known to become re-traumatized remembering the 1977 ceremony, at which "Rocky" beat out "All the President's Men," "Taxi Driver" and "Network," or 1999, when "Shakespeare in Love" took the honor over Steven Spielberg's World War II epic, "Saving Private Ryan."

Sunday's ceremony is unlikely to result in outrage. Put simply, last year's movies and this year's crop of best picture nominees were of such exceptional quality that it's possible to accept almost all of them as finest of 2013, depending on criteria.

"Gravity," a breathtaking technical and commercial achievement, has invested new energy and vision into the simple genre popcorn movie (and made a ton of money to boot). The infectiously exuberant caper "American Hustle" — along with "Gravity," a presumed front-runner in the best picture race — possesses the kind of liberated joie de vivre that sent audiences out of the theater with big smiles on their faces — staking a claim for sheer entertainment value that academy members are within their rights to encourage. Even if "Her" or "Nebraska" "Captain Phillips" were to sneak up from behind to play spoiler, each would do so as an exquisite portrait of our times, when technology, economic collapse and globalism have left so many people isolated and dispossessed.

Still, even in the face of such eminently worthy competition, "12 Years a Slave" deserves to win — as great art, cultural bellwether and historic statement.

There's no question that "12 Years a Slave," British director Steve McQueen's adaptation of a 19th-century autobiographical narrative by Solomon Northup, is a staggering artistic achievement. Working with a script by John Ridley, McQueen smoothly threads viewers through Northup's journey from the freedom he was born into in Upstate New York to being kidnapped and sold into slavery in Louisiana, where he spends several arduous years trying to escape. Eliciting searing, expressive performances from actors Chiwetel Ejiofor, Lupita Nyong'o, Michael Fassbender and Sarah Paulson, McQueen tells the story simply,

following Northup's harrowing chronicle with enough discretion to avoid being exploitative, but with enough intimacy that viewers are immediately invested in Northup's plight, as well as his excruciating, hard-won catharsis.

In many ways, that kind of emotional impact defines what academy voters are looking for in a best picture — not a feel-good movie as much as a *feel-deeply* movie. What's more, recognition of "12 Years a Slave's" achievement would provide fitting recognition of 2013 as an exceptional year for African American films, filmmakers and stories — a year that included such mainstream hits as "42," "Lee Daniels' 'The Butler'" and "The Best Man Holiday," the astonishing debut of "Fruitvale Station" director Ryan Coogler and the stylistic range represented by indies like "Mother of George," "Newlyweds" and "An Oversimplification of Her Beauty."

No one would argue that "12 Years a Slave" should win as a symbol of Black Film (whatever that means anymore). It deserves to win if only because it advances cinematic language in ways that feel daring and new. McQueen, who before making feature films created installations in museums and galleries, approaches his work with thoughtful, even elegant formalism, in the case of "12 Years a Slave" with long, quiet takes during which the audience is invited simply to observe the characters and their environment; he's not one for flashy editing or facile ma-nipu-la-tion. At once lush and austere, his aesthetic is always highly

Please see Hornaday, page 4, column 1

Found Underground Railroad Account Names Conductors, Stations and Routes in Iowa: A Quaker Teen Operates Under John Brown in the 1850s

The following narrative, recorded in 1914 by Darius Bowles Cook, member of a large Quaker family active in the Iowa Underground Railroad, tells the accounts of his cousin, Harmon Cook, who, beginning when he was a teen, worked as an Underground Railroad conductor in Iowa. *Free Press* thanks their descendant, Robert L. Cook, who discovered this rare and important account, for providing it to us.



Darius Bowles Cook

In days before the war, when Guthrie and Dallas counties were on the frontier, there were many incidents taking place that should be kept in memory green. Slavery was recognized as a product of Missouri. Iowa being a free state naturally proved a highway for the Underground Railroad. After John Brown came through Iowa, stations were known and accounted for. The train started from Tabor, Fremont county, and crossed Adair county diagonally striking Summit Grove where Stuart is now located. From here, one line went east down Quaker Divide and the other crossed Coon River near Redfield, then went through Adel, both coming together in Des Moines. From here it ran to Grinnell, then to Muscatine, and so on to Canada. Many times have I seen colored men and women crossing the prairie from Middle River to Summit Grove--slaves running away to freedom. In the winter of 1859-60, I was going to school to Darius Bowles, and one Friday evening was told if I wanted to go to Bear Creek, I would not have to walk, if I would drive a carriage and return it Monday morning. I drove the carriage and in it were two young colored women. They were sisters and from the west border of Missouri. Their master was their father, and they had both been reared in the family. War was apparent, and their master decided to sell them "down south." They heard the plotting, found out that they were to go on the

auction block, and made a run for the North Star. They had been on the road seven weeks when they arrived at A. W. L.'s at Summit Grove. Before daylight Saturday morning, they were housed at Uncle Martin's. One Monday afternoon, one of the sisters who had been out in the yard came running in and told grandmother, "Master is coming up the road." Grandfather went out in front and sat down in his chair against the side of the door. By this time a number of men had ridden up and asked him if he had seen any slaves around. He told them slaves were not known in Iowa. Then one of them said, "I am told that you are an old Quaker and have been suspected of harboring black folks as they run away to Canada. I have traced two girls across the country, and have reasons to believe they have been here." Grandfather said: "I never turn anyone away who wants lodging, but I keep no slaves." "Then I'll come in and see," said the man, and jumped off his horse and started for the house. Grandfather stood up with his cane in his hand, and stepped into the door when the man attempted to enter, and said, "Has thee a warrant to search my house?" "No, I have not." "Then thee cannot do so." "But I will show you," said the man. "I will search for my girls." While this parley was going on, and loud words were coming thick and fast, grandmother came up and said, "Father, if the man wants to look through the house, let him do so. Thee ought to know he won't find any slaves here." Grandfather turned and stared at her a minute, then turning to the men, said, "I ask thy forgiveness for speaking so harshly. Thee can go through the house, if mother says so." Grandfather showed him through all the rooms but stayed close to him all the time. After satisfying himself that they were not there, he begged the old man forgiveness, mounted his horse and rode away. When the coast was clear, it was found that when Maggie had rushed in and said, "Master is coming," grandmother hastily snatched off the large feather bed, telling both the girls to get in and lie perfectly still. She took the feather bed, spread it over them, put on the covers and pillows, patted out the wrinkles and no slaves were seen.

One evening some months after I was returning from Adel on horseback and

when opposite Mr. Murray's farm, east of Redfield, I saw old man Murray and a stranger back of the barn. I was motioned to come over, which I did, and was met by an old man rather stooped-shouldered and of stern aspect. Mr. Murray said, "Here is the

Please see Iowa, page 4, column 3

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Hornaday



A Scene from *12 Years a Slave*

disciplined, each shot carefully staged, selected and juxtaposed with another to create a level of sensory communication altogether separate from but complementary to the explicit plot. Like *"Gravity,"* McQueen's film has also created its own singular grammar, merging the straight-forward storytelling of classical film narrative with bold, almost abstract, experimentation to create a "third space" between past and present.

In one of the film's most wrenching sequences, Northup is hanged as a punishment, his toes barely touching the muddy ground while he fights for his life; gradually, we see life on the plantation go on behind him, a wordless tableau that forces the audience to confront and sit with brutality that was so common at the time as to be not worth an idle glance.

Later, when Northup realizes he might have a possibility of getting a letter out to his family in New York, McQueen pauses, resting the camera on Ejiofor's face, his expression one of fear, cautious hope, and determination not to succumb to heartbreaking self-deception. Juxtaposing the historical images of *"12 Years a Slave"* with a haunting electronic score by Hans Zimmer, McQueen isn't just content with telling the story; he creates, with sound and image, a whole other layer of sensory experience, as potent and expressive as Ejiofor and his cast-mates are in their commitment to realism.

That realism plays an important role that extends beyond Northup's compelling story and into Hollywood's history itself. In explicit and subtle ways, *"12 Years a Slave"* does its part to dismantle — or at least puncture — a century of toxic misrepresentations of the slavery-era South that, drenched in moonlight, magnolias and various degrees of revisionism, have helped distort a racial history that America still finds challenging to process. From the deprived freed slaves of *"The Birth of a Nation"* to the infantilized mammies

and house servants of 1940 best picture winner *"Gone With the Wind,"* Hollywood has helped perpetuate some of the most toxic lies about Old Dixie as a world of romance, gentility and benign white privilege.

McQueen's *"12 Years a Slave"* offers an elegant retort, inviting viewers to luxuriate in the verdant lushness and well-appointed homes of the sugar and cotton plantations where Northup is forced to work, but all the while exposing the physical and psychological torture that made such beauty possible. What's more, the film captures the psycho-cultural nuances of the relationships that our "peculiar institution" so deeply distorted, especially the lengths to which white slave owners had to disassociate from their own humanity to dehumanize others.

Of course, *"12 Years a Slave"* isn't the first feature film to de-romanticize slavery. Steven Spielberg's *"Amistad,"* Jonathan Demme's *"Beloved"* and even Quentin Tarantino's *"Django Unchained,"* with varying degrees of success, used their own vernaculars to tell particular truths about slavery.

"Django Unchained" was even nominated for best picture last year, despite the fact that it ultimately succumbed to Tarantino's own fatal self-indulgence and pulp narcissism. But McQueen stays the distance, exemplifying cinematic art at its most sensitive and sophisticated, and beginning to undo decades of conscious and unconscious mythmaking. If *"12 Years a Slave"* shows us anything, it's that history is mutable, always open to rigorous, honest reassessment. The same goes for Hollywood's own history. If the oddsmakers are correct and *"12 Years a Slave"* manages to take the big prize on Sunday, its victory will be deserved on artistic merit alone. But it may also mark the night Hollywood began to live Old Dixie down.

12 Years

and vanished mysteriously in 1863. The film is based on Northup's autobiography of the same name.

12 Years a Slave was as multinational an effort as probably any film ever made. Lead actor Chiwetel Ejiofor is Nigerian with British citizenship, lead actress Lupita Nyong'o holds dual Kenyan and Mexican citizenship, German actor Michael Fassbender is an Irish citizen, and actor Benedict Cumberbatch and film director McQueen are British. Pitt, Ridley and actress Sarah Paulsen are American.

Dred Scott

Only weeks after the ruling, the Scotts gained their freedom through a strange twist of fate. The widow Emerson had married Calvin Chaffee, an abolitionist Member of Congress from Massachusetts, but had hidden from him that she owned the nation's best known slave. When he found out during the Supreme Court case, he returned the Scotts to their original owners, the Blow family, who by then had renounced slavery. Henry Blow freed the Scotts and their two daughters on May 26, 1857, less than three months after the Supreme Court ruling.

Dred Scott knew freedom for only 16 months. After finding work as a hotel porter in St. Louis, he died on September 17, 1858, of tuberculosis. Harriet Scott outlived her husband by 18 years, dying June 17, 1876. He is buried in Calvary Cemetery, St. Louis, she in Greenwood Cemetery, Hillsdale, Missouri.

Iowa

youngster who came so near getting caught going to Des Moines." The stern man with his shaggy eyebrows almost in my face said, "Young man, when you are out on the Lord's business you must be more discreet. You must always listen backwards, as you are always followed. I am responsible for that track of the Underground Railroad, and I want my conductors to be more careful in the future, as things are coming to a head, and somebody is going to get hurt." I was dismissed with this admonition, "Young man, never do so rash a thing again as to talk and laugh out loud on the way!" A few months later, when Harper's Ferry was known to fame, I remembered John Brown as the old man at Murray's. When I enlisted in Company C, 46th Iowa Infantry and arrived at Tennessee, in 1864, I first saw a regiment of colored soldiers. They were in camp and the first opportunity, I was over to see how they looked as soldiers.

When I had spoken, a strapping fellow in blue uniform came rushing up to me shouting, "I know you. You belong to Quaker Divide in Iowa. You drove me one night when we were trying to get into town and were followed by our masters, and you drove off into the woods and we got out and hid." It was Henry, who had been one of the party in that wild midnight ride. He never got to Canada, but stopped in Wisconsin, and when the war came on he enlisted. He was lieutenant of the colored regiment, and a trusted scout for the general of our division.