Sojourner Truth
1797-1883
“Who was Sojourner Truth and what was she doing in Florence?”

**Sojourner Truth**

**Introduction**

You stand before a statue that commemorates the life and work of Sojourner Truth and the fact she lived in Florence for fourteen years. Her home, which we visit next, is nearby. Sojourner Truth was born into a life of unspeakable hardship as an enslaved woman. She eventually became a national spokesperson for the abolition of slavery and the rights of women. Her transformative years were living here as a member of the Northampton Association. She “found her voice” here and used it to inspire audiences across the country and become a living symbol of freedom.

**Who was Isabella and how did she become Sojourner?**

—Isabella Baumfree was born a slave about the year 1797. Unlike most enslaved persons, she lived in the North, in New York State. Her owners spoke Dutch, “Belle’s” first language. She was sold away from her parents at age eleven and had five different owners. Isabella’s early life was marked by cold, hunger, hard work, and physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

—New York State abolished slavery in 1827 and Belle’s owners were forced to free her. She moved to New York City where she got a good job that included housing and a savings account. Then she had a religious experience that moved her to leave everything behind in search of a higher calling. Can you describe that experience for us and how she took on the name “Sojourner”? What does the word mean? Describe her life on the road. (Doc. B)

—After months of travelling, winter started closing in. Sojourner heard about the Association and went to visit. What were her first impressions? What changed her mind and made her decide to stay? (Doc. C)

—Sojourner joined the Association and led important meetings and events with her speaking and singing. She also ran the Laundry Department. Do you think this was an easy job? She stayed with the Community until it closed and then remained in Florence another eleven years.

**How did Sojourner Truth change during her years in Florence?**

—Sojourner Truth arrived in Florence as an itinerate preacher who shared the “good news” of religion with small audiences. She left here as a speaker on the national circuit on behalf of enslaved persons’ and women’s rights. Something changed during her years here.

—Sojourner had a transformative experience at a religious meeting held in the woods outside of Florence. Can you describe the scene for us? Do you think an experience like this helped set her on a course toward great achievements? Tell us why. (Doc. D)

—Samuel Hill lent Sojourner his horse and wagon and encouraged her to give abolitionist
lectures in the area. What else did Community members do to help her get started as a professional speaker? Sojourner never went to school and never learned to read or write.

—What could children, like Arthur Hill, do to help? (Doc. E)
—Sojourner met many important abolitionists while she was living at the Association. She made a strong impression on one in particular. Who was that? Do you think they got along? (Doc. F)

What did Sojourner Truth accomplish during her years in Florence?

—When the Association disbanded in 1846, Sojourner moved in with the Benson Family. In 1850, she bought her own house in Florence. Whom did she buy it from? How much did she pay for it? Can you figure out where her house is? (Docs. G,H)
—Sojourner now supported herself by travelling on the lecture circuit. She made money by selling merchandise at her talks. What did she sell? Using this money, she paid off her mortgage on the house in less than five years. (Docs. E,I)
—She now had a home-base to return to after travelling to speaking engagements all over the country. Where did she go? How did she get there? Who did she stay with? (Doc. J)
—Sojourner talked about abolishing slavery and also about women’s rights. What were her reasons for why women and men deserved to be treated as equals? (Doc. K)

NOTES ON SOURCES

A. A short chronology of Sojourner Truth’s life and work.
B. From the Narrative of Sojourner Truth – A Northern Slave (1850).
C. See B.
D. See B.
E. From an account written by Arthur Hill, who grew up in the Community (1912).
F. From “What I Found at the Northampton Association” by Frederick Douglass (1894).
G. Register of deed to house (1850).
H. Early map of Florence (1854).
I. “Carte de Visite” (1860)
J. Letter from Sojourner Truth to Amy Post, May 29, 1851. (The Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, University of Rochester Library)
K. A newspaper account of Truth’s speech given in Akron, Ohio in 1851.
SOJOURNER TRUTH CHRONOLOGY

1797  Born Isabella Baumfree in Ulster County, New York
1827  Freed from slavery as part of New York State emancipation
1829  Successfully sued for her son Peter’s freedom / Moved to New York City
1842  Peter was confirmed lost at sea
1843  Followed her calling to leave the city and change her name to Sojourner Truth
1844  Joined the Northampton Association
1846  Northampton Association disbanded
1847  Lived with the Benson Family on Nonotuck Street
1850  Granted a mortgage for her house on Pine Street
1850  Published her Narrative and became a travelling public speaker
1851  Gave her famous “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” speech in Akron, Ohio
1857  Moved to Battle Creek, Michigan
1864  Began work with the Freedman’s Bureau in Washington, D.C.
1883  Died in Battle Creek
Her next decision was, that she must leave the city; it was no place for her; yea, she felt called in spirit to leave it, and to travel east and lecture. She had never been further east than the city, neither had she any friends there of whom she had particular reason to expect any thing; yet to her it was plain that her mission lay in the east, and that she would find friends there. She determined on leaving; but these determinations and convictions she kept close locked in her own breast, knowing that if her children and friends were aware of it, they would make such an ado about it as would render it very unpleasant, if not distressing to all parties. Having made what preparations for leaving she deemed necessary, which was, to put up a few articles of clothing in a pillow-case, all else being deemed an unnecessary incumbrance, about an hour before she left, she informed Mrs. Whiting, the woman of the house where she was stopping, that her name was no longer Isabella, but SOJOURNER; and that she was going east. And to her inquiry, 'What are you going east for?' her answer was, 'The Spirit calls me there, and I must go.'

She left the city on the morning of the 1st of June, 1843, crossing over to Brooklyn, L.I.; and taking the rising sun for her only compass and guide, she 'remembered Lot's wife,' and hoping to avoid her fate, she resolved not to look back till she felt sure the wicked city from which she was fleeing was left too far behind to be visible in the distance; and when she first ventured to look back, she could just discern the blue cloud of smoke that hung over it, and she thanked 'the Lord that she was thus far removed from what seemed to her a second Sodom.

She was now fairly started on her pilgrimage; her bundle in one hand, and a little basket of provisions in the other, and two York shillings in her purse—her heart strong in the faith that her true work lay before her, and that the Lord was her director; and she doubted not he would provide for and protect her, and that it would be very censurable in her to burden herself with anything more than a moderate supply for her then present needs. Her mission was not merely to travel east, but to 'lecture,' as she designated it; 'testifying of the hope that was in her'-exhorting the people to embrace Jesus, and refrain from sin, the nature and origin of which she explained to them in accordance with her own most curious and original views. Through her life, and all its chequered changes, she has ever clung fast to her first permanent impressions on religious subjects.

Wherever night overtook her, there she sought for lodgings—free, if she might—if not, she paid; at a tavern, if she chanced to be at one—if not, at a private dwelling; with the rich, if they would receive her—if not, with the poor.

But she soon discovered that the largest houses were nearly always full; if not quite full, company was soon expected; and that it was much easier to find an unoccupied corner in a small house than in a large one; and if a person possessed but a miserable roof over his head, you might be sure of a welcome to part of it.
She did not fall in love at first sight with the Northampton Association, for she arrived there at a time when appearances did not correspond with the ideas of associationists, as they had been spread out in their writings; for their phalanx was a factory, and they were wanting in means to carry out their ideas of beauty and elegance, as they would have done in different circumstances. But she thought she would make an effort to tarry with them one night, though that seemed to her no desirable affair. But as soon as she saw that accomplished, literary, and refined persons were living in that plain and simple manner, and submitting to the labors and privations incident to such an infant institution, she said, 'Well, if these can live here, I can.' Afterwards, she gradually became pleased with, and attached to, the place and the people, as well she might; for it must have been no small thing to have found a home in a 'Community composed of some of the choicest spirits of the age,' where all was characterized by an equality of feeling, a liberty of thought and speech, and a largeness of soul, she could not have before met with, to the same extent, in any of her wanderings.

Sojourner Truth supervised the laundry department at the NAEI. She is shown at work in a later pencil sketch by Charles Burleigh, Jr. (courtesy Historic Northampton).
ANOTHER CAMP MEETING.

When Sojourner had been at Northampton a few months, she attended another camp-meeting, at which she performed a very important part.

A party of wild young men, with no motive but that of entertaining themselves by annoying and injuring the feelings of others, had assembled at the meeting, hooting and yelling, and in various ways interrupting the services, and causing much disturbance. Those who had the charge of the meeting, having tried their persuasive powers in vain, grew impatient and tried threatening.

The young men, considering themselves insulted, collected their friends, to the number of a hundred or more, dispersed themselves through the grounds, making the most frightful noises, and threatening to fire the tents. It was said the authorities of the meeting sat in grave consultation, decided to have the ring-leaders arrested, and sent for the constable, to the great displeasure of some of the company, who were opposed to such an appeal to force and arms. Be that as it may, Sojourner, seeing great consternation depicted in every countenance, caught the contagion, and, ere she was aware, found herself quaking with fear.

Under the impulse of this sudden emotion, she fled to the most retired corner of a tent, and secreted herself behind a trunk. saying to herself, ‘I am the only colored person here, and on me, probably, their wicked mischief will fall first, and perhaps fatally.’ But feeling how great was her insecurity even there, as the very tent began to shake from its foundations, she began to soliloquise as follows:-

‘Shall I run away and hide from the Devil? Me, a servant of the living God? Have I not faith enough to go out and quell that mob, when I know it is written—’One shall chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight?’ I know there are not a thousand here; and I know I am a servant of the living God. I’ll go to the rescue, and the Lord shall go with and protect me.

‘Oh,’ said she, ‘I felt as if I had three hearts! and that they were so large, my body could hardly hold them!’

She now came forth from her hiding-place, and invited several to go with her and see what they could do to still the raging of the moral elements. They declined, and considered her wild to think of it.

The meeting was in the open fields—the full moon shed its saddened light over all—and the woman who was that evening to address them was trembling on the preachers’ stand. The noise and confusion were now terrific. Sojourner left the tent alone and unaided, and walking some thirty rods to the top of a small rise of ground, commenced to sing, in her most fervid manner, with all the strength of her most powerful voice, the hymn on the resurrection of Christ—

It was early in the morning—it was early in the morning, Just at the break of day— When he rose—when he rose—when he rose, And went to heaven on a cloud.’

All who have ever heard her sing this hymn will probably remember it as long as they remember her. The hymn, the tune, the style, are each too closely associated with to be easily separated from herself, and when sung in one of her most animated moods, in the open air, with the utmost strength of her most powerful voice, must have been truly thrilling.

As she commenced to sing, the young men made a rush towards her, and she was immediately encircled by a dense body of the rioters, many of them armed with sticks or clubs as their weapons of defence, if not of attack. As the circle narrowed around her, she ceased singing, and after a short pause, inquired, in a gentle but firm tone, ‘Why do you come about me with clubs and sticks? I am not doing harm to any one.’ ‘We ar’n’t a going to hurt you, old woman; we came to hear you sing,’ cried many voices, simultaneously. ‘Sing to us, old woman,’ cries one. ‘Talk to us, old woman,’ says another. ‘Pray, old woman,’ says a third. ‘Tell us your experience,’ says a fourth. ‘You stand and smoke so near me, I cannot sing or talk,’ she answered.

‘Stand back,’ said several authoritative voices, with not the most gentle or courteous accompaniments, raising their rude weapons in the air. The crowd suddenly gave back, the circle became larger, as many voices again called for singing, talking, or praying, backed by assurances that no one should be allowed to hurt her—the speakers declaring with an oath, that they would ‘knock down’ any person who should offer her the least indignity.
FLORENCE THE MECCA OF THE COLORED RACE

By Arthur Hill

Sojourner could neither write nor read but had an unusual mind and voice and could speak with great force and power of the wrongs and sufferings endured by members of her race. She was deeply religious and seemed to be divinely inspired in prayer when over-powered by her emotions. She often lectured here and in surrounding towns, breaking suddenly into singing the negro songs. She finally reached a national reputation by her lectures in Boston and other large places. While yet I was a boy, arrangements were made with my father for one to write for her. Memoranda of her life struggles and incidents jotted down from her lips by a kind lady in another town were copied and put into shape by me for the printing of a little pamphlet. This little pamphlet had her full-length picture on the cover with the motto “I sell the shadow to support the substance”. It was sold in great numbers at her lectures at twenty-five cents each. She was frequently referred to in the newspapers as the “African Sibyl”. She was over six feet in height, gaunt and somber looking. The house on Park Street, now occupied by Mr. Waits, was built for her. About the time of the war for secession she was invited to spend her last days with a wealthy lady of Battle Creek, Michigan. She claimed to have lived 112 years, but probably 100 years or nearly would be nearer right.

“David Ruggles was not the only colored person who found refuge in this Community. I met here for the first time that strange compound of wit and wisdom, of wild enthusiasm and flint-like common sense, who seemed to feel it her duty to trip me up in my speeches and to ridicule my efforts to speak and act like a person of cultivation and refinement. I allude to Sojourner Truth. She was a genuine specimen of the uncultured negro. She cared very little for elegance of speech or refinement manners. She seemed to please herself and others best when she put her ideas in the oddest forms. She was much respected at Florence, for she was honest, industrious, and amiable. Her quaint speeches easily gave her an audience, and she was one of the most useful members of the Community in its day of small things.”
Know all men by these presents, that I, Samuel S. Hill, of Northampton, in the County of Hampshire and Commonwealth of Massachusetts, in consideration of the sum of three hundred dollars paid by Abigail Knowles of said Northampton, and sometimes called "Humphrey Abigail Knowles Youth", the receipt whereof, I do hereby acknowledge to have given, granted, bargain, sell and convey unto the said Abigail Knowles, her heirs and assigns, a certain lot of land, with dwelling house, cellar, and barn, situated near Stonyville, in said Northampton, being lot numbered eight on a plan of Eaton's Village Lots, which is recorded in Hampshire Records, Book 146, and Page 186, reference to which may be had to find its particular location and boundaries; it being on the easterly side of the old Mill road, so called, and bounded on the west side by fifteen links, and extending from said road nearly at right angles and of lands with meads, containing nearly sixty square rods of land more or less. The above described lot was conveyed to the said Hill by deed from Edwin Eaton August 12, 1849.

To have and to hold the before-mentioned premises, with the privileges and appurtenances thereto belonging, to the said Abigail Knowles, her heirs and assigns, their heirs and assigns, forever; and I, for myself, my heirs, executors, and administrators, co-tenant with the said Abigail Knowles, her heirs and assigns, that I am lawfully seized in fee of the before-mentioned premises, that they are free of all incumbrances that I have good right to sell and convey the same to the said Abigail Knowles, and that I will warrant and defend the same premises to the said Abigail Knowles her heirs and assigns forever against the lawful claims and demands of all persons, but with right of use, I, the said Hill, have hereunto set my hand and seal, this twentieth day of April, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and fifty, \[Signature: Samuel S. Hill Seal\]
named, in presence of

Harvey Kirkland
Notary Public
April 20, 1850. Then the above-named Hill acknowledged the above instrument to be his free act and deed, before me.

Harvey Kirkland, Justice of the Peace
Hampshire County, April 20, 1850, at the time of executing the foregoing, is true copy of the original, received, recorded, and compared by.
I sell the shadow to support the substance.

Sojourner Truth.
Letter from Sojourner Truth to Amy Post

Dear Mrs. Post

I have arrived safe in Ohio. I got to Buffalo on the evening of the same day I left you. I left Buffalo Friday night and arrived in Cleaveland on Saturday. Had a beautiful passage up the lake. Stopped among the colored friends and was treated with great kindness until Tuesday. Attended a meeting and sold three dollars worth of books. And on Tuesday went to Akron to the Convention where I found plenty of kind friends just like you & they gave me so many kind invitations I hardly knew which to accept of first. But I left Akron this morning and got to Hudson in time to take the cars for Ravenna where I came to the house of Mrs Skinner who was at the convention and invited me to her house to remain until Mrs Treat comes to make arrangement for me. The Lord has directed me to this quiet family, and here I shall probably remain some days. If there are any letters there for me direct them to Mrs Mary Ann B. Skinner Ravenna Portage Co. Ohio I sold a good many books at the Convention and have thus far been greatly prospered—Tell dear Abby Fair [i. e., Thayer] I wish she was here and she must come in the fall with Garrison and friends

With love you and all kind friends Abby especially and her dear mother and sister I remember all your kindness

This from your friend Sojourner Truth

To Mr Post I would say I have found some kind spirits like you. Dear Edmund I remember you still bathing you with water spiritually.

Sojourner

(The Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, University of Rochester Library)

I am a woman's rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal. I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. (Anti-Slavery Bugle)