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# Historians: Truth's true home still stands

By CATHERINE M. SNYDER  
Staff Writer

**FLORENCE** — As a historian researching one of Florence's most famous residents, Steve Strimer has gotten to know a little about the personal side of Sojourner Truth, the former slave and abolitionist leader.

That research has led him and others to dispute a long-held belief about just where she lived in Florence from 1850 to 1857.

"I've been told many times by many people her house was torn down, burned down or moved, then torn down," said Strimer.

But he and the Florence History Project kept following leads until he came up with a trail that led to a different conclusion.

The group hopes to prove that Truth lived at 35 Park St., a house that still stands, rather than at 67 Park St., as some current history books claim, which was destroyed.

Strimer's dossier on Truth is thick and organized, holding documents

that take a reader back to earlier times in Florence. They include deeds from the 1850s hand-penned in elegant script, maps of the period that show land plots and their owners' names, and pictures of Truth.

If 35 Park St. was indeed her home, the house is a living link to Truth, as most of the original structure still exists.

"When I started asking what happened to Sojourner's house — nothing happened to it, it's still there," said Strimer.

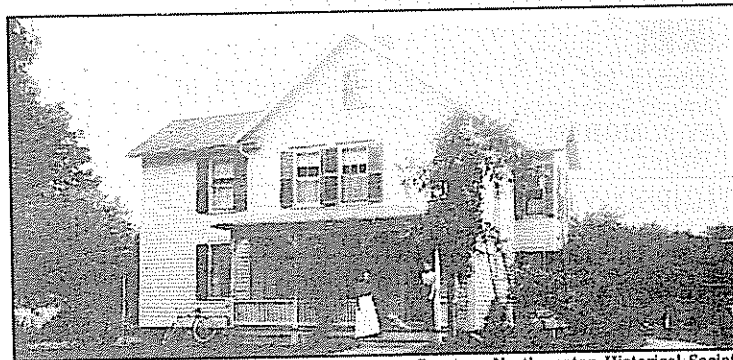
According to Robert Paynter, a professor of architectural anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, Truth bought the structure in 1850.

Strimer and Paynter are scheduled to speak tonight at the Florence Civic Center next to Lilly Library at 7:30 p.m. to present the case for the house at 35 Park St.

Several clues led historians to the new theory. First, Strimer was reading Arthur G. Hill's unpublished manu-

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Courtesy Northampton Historical Society

This house at 35 Park St. in Florence may have been the home of abolitionist leader and former slave Sojourner Truth from 1850 to 1857.

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script from around 1910 called "Anti-Slavery Days." Hill, the son of Samuel L. Hill, the second mayor of Northampton, identifies Truth's home as one "now occupied by Mrs. Lyman Abbott." When the historians checked an 1895 atlas, the house marked "L. Abbott" indeed stood on Park Street. A cross check with a 1916 map revealed the L. Abbott house in the same location and oriented in the same direction, only this time marked No. 35.

"A.G. Hill continued to knock and make a public point that Sojourner lived there," Strimer said. "After that, the trail was gone."

An 1873 map shows conflicting information, but Strimer said he learned from James Avery Smith, former town engineer of Amherst and "surveyor extraordinaire," that the map's publisher was known for inaccuracies.

Next, an 1879 aerial "bird's eye" map of Florence has Truth's house on the corner of Park and West Center streets, with space between the house and the corner. Truth bought two lots from Samuel L. Hill in 1850, known as lots 10 and 11. Lot 10 was on the corner, and was purchased second. Lot 11 contained the house. As for how the house's location got obscured in the passage of years, Strimer said times were different.

"I'm not trying to diss Florence, but African-American history was not given a priority like it has been since the 1960s," he said. "It's not completely mystifying that the trail was lost around 1926." A photograph may be the only modern tie to the house, now owned by Kimball and Ann Howes.

The photo is undated and shows the house painted white, as it is today. It was taken by one of the Howes brothers, Ashfield photographers who traveled the Connecticut River Valley more than 100 years ago capturing

houses on film. Kimball Howes is a grandson of one of the brothers.

Two women stand out front and a dog lazes on the porch. While the picture was undated, historians at Historic Northampton place it between 1899 and 1901, when Mrs. Abbott lived there. The house looks almost exactly as it does today.

After Paynter evaluated the house, he said he believed the timber-framed house was built in the 1840s.

As the Florence History Project sees the current lay of the land, lot 11 is 35 Park St. and lot 10 was split into 31 and 27 Park St. On a recent fall day, Strimer showed a reporter the homes and rattled off the names of long-dead prominent Florence founders now buried in the Park Street Cemetery. It's his dream that, as the Sojourner Truth statue is put into place, research about her can be made available at the Lilly Library.

Strimer said his research into Truth's personal side also contradicts some commonly held beliefs about her.

"She wasn't this saintly figure. She had a temper and she would moralize about card-playing and dancing," she said.

He also has a theory about why she left Florence in 1857 for Battle Creek, Mich. While she had to work as a launderer while living in Florence, by the time she left for Michigan, she was well-known for her work as an abolitionist and feminist.

"She was a launderer here," he said. "The fact that she was respected, that she was thought of as a prophet, is not known in her own country. Here in town she was washing clothes for other folks."

Proving that 35 Park St. was Truth's house would go a long way toward bringing Florence its due glory, he said.

"A lot of research went into this," he said. "As best as we can prove, this is her house. I'm totally convinced of it myself."