

Peace Road 2020 Northampton, MA USA: First Interracial Commune in America

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Sojourner Truth

On Thursday June 30, the tour stopped at Northampton, MA to visit the Northampton Association of Education and Industry. Here's the historical context:

It only lasted about four-and-a-half years, but building a completely interracial community in 1842 was unheard of, and is worthy of a stop for the riders on Peace Road 2020.

The Northampton Association of Education and Industry was called simply "the Community" by the ten families who found a piece of land in Northampton upon which to build their abolitionist community. Their principles of full equality and citizenship for black Americans, interacting and sharing everything in daily life was unheard of at that time, even in relatively progressive Massachusetts. The founding families declared that the rights of all should be "equal without distinction of sex, color or condition, sect or religion."

The goal was "a better and purer form of society" and the lifestyle was communal, sharing everything. Nobody received wages. They owned a four-story silk mill and some farmland. Most of them lived together on the top floors of the mill, all the families in close quarters.

The Community attracted the best of the best among abolitionist activists, including African Americans Sojourner Truth and David Ruggles. The writer and editor, Lydia Maria Child was associated with the Community and published *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called African*. It was a stunning, ground-breaking depiction of slave conditions that most northerners had not taken time to consider deeply. Her shocking images of chains and shackles and living conditions were too much for people to handle, and the book did not do well for a long time. In 1861, she edited and wrote the introduction to Harriet Jacob's compelling autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Northampton settlement (later renamed Florence) was a major stop on the underground railroad. Numerous former slaves and families settled in and around The Community. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 complicated the settlement of runaways, but the place still remained active as a railroad station.