

The Landmark Society of Western New York's

Walk the Walk: Encounters with Rochester's African American Ancestors

Teacher summary of script.

This script summary is to assist you in preparing your students for the program, and to make sure you are aware of any potential difficult moments for an individual child. Please do not use these descriptions verbatim with your class – they give away plot details.

Captain Sunfish

Captain Sunfish speaks in the present day, brought here from the past. All of the other ancestors speak in their own time period.

Sunfish is dressed in rough frontier clothing, with Seneca ornamentation. He recalls what it was like around the Genesee River Valley in the 1780's, in its "wild state." His scenes are set outside, and in the Thomson Tavern room.

He tells about meeting Asa Dunbar, an African-American who had a farm and tavern on Irondequoit Bay in 1794, and who helped form the town of Tryon.

Sunfish ends by reflecting on all the changes that have taken place over the centuries, and what has not changed: the courage and bravery of people in our area.

Austin Steward.

Mr. Steward will talk to the students as if it is the year 1827.

Mr Steward is 34 years old, dressed in the latest 1827 style. He is in the parlor of his fine home. He tells the students he has been invited to give a speech at the celebration of New York State's Emancipation Day – July 5, 1827 – the day the slavery will end in NYS. He has been asked to speak about the evils of slavery.

Steward tells the students he has not decided whether or not to give the speech, and that he will ask their help in deciding.

Steward then tells the story of his life, including the importance of not giving in to bullies.

He tells about reporting the person bullying him to the police – and asks the students what they think the police did. The police arrested the bully.

He describes coming to NY as a slave, then being freed with the help of Rochester anti-slavery people. He talks about the importance of education, how he went to school with little children, even though he was a grown man, because he wanted to prosper.

Steward tells of opening his meat market in Rochesterville (our name as a village) in 1817, and how he eventually prospered.

(Austin Steward continued) He then returns to the topic of Emancipation Day. Steward reveals that slavery will not really end on that day in New York – that it will be a gradual ending, so there will still be people enslaved in our state. He asks the students whether he should speak, when there are still slaves – and leads them to understand why he will not speak.

He concludes by encouraging students to not give in to bullies, and to avoid being a slave to ignorance.

Frederick Douglass

Students may be familiar with Mr. Douglass' photograph as an older man, with white hair. We will meet him in the year 1852, when he is a young man. He has just completed printing an edition of his newspaper, "Frederick Douglass' Paper" (the name of his second newspaper, after The North Star.)

Mr. Douglass's performance is taken from his own written words, in speeches and letters. Douglass talks about the importance of words in his life, as he uses them in writing and speaking. He tells the story of how he learned to read, when still enslaved.

We start in the printing office, where he has just finished another edition of his newspaper. The scene continues at Brooks Grove Church, where Mr. Douglass demonstrates the art of oratory.

His mistress taught him to read – and the master was very upset. Douglas realized that if it was bad for the master, it was probably good for him, and he became determined to read as much as possible.

Douglass also demonstrates what it means to be an "orator" by giving a fiery example from a speech on what the fourth of July means to a slave.

Douglass ends by reminding us that words are powerful, that the pen is mightier than the sword – and he hopes stronger than the chains of slavery.

Anna Murray Douglass PLEASE NOTE: The 2021 script is NEW, it does not focus on the death of their child Annie. Instead, Mrs. Douglass gives an overview of her life and how she supported her husband's work.

Bessie Hamm

Mrs. Hamm will talk to the students in present day, reflecting on what it was like to be a student in the 1950's.

Mrs. Hamm will tell how she and her husband James opened their house to the neighborhood children, encouraging them to study and learn all that they could.

She will reveal that they discovered in 1955 the African-American students were not being encouraged to take college preparatory classes in high school. They formed an organization called "Parents and Teachers Want to Know" to make sure that ALL students learned about all opportunities open to them in education. They also raised money for college scholarships.

Mrs. Hamm will encourage students to do their very best and think about college when they grow up.

PLEASE NOTE: George Brown will not be presented in the 2021 video performance. You will receive a copy of his portion of the script, if you would like to use it in the classroom.

George Brown is an African-American man in his 90's. He is wearing a cap with "GAR" written on it the front, which stands for Grand Army of the Republic – the Union army of the Civil War. It is the year 1934.

Mr. Brown declares that he is a soldier, and the last surviving Civil War veteran member of his church over on Favor Street.

He tells the story of how he was in the war on both sides – first, as a slave and servant to a Confederate soldier, then later escapes slavery and joins the Union army.

Mr. Brown relates the exciting story of his escape by joining a Union Cavalry group. His escape was made possible because he knew how to read. He had to watch for the group of soldiers with the letter "F" on their hats, to know when it was safe. He ends the story by telling about his family life in Rochester, and invites everyone to his 90th birthday celebration