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Paul Gaffney of Florence, a history professor at Landmark College in Putney, Vt., and an expert on Florence history, speaks about the community's role in the abolition movement to an afterschool group run by the Hampshire Community Action Commission.

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# Florence field trip a 'way better' lesson in local civil-rights history

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**NORTHAMPTON** — A cold drizzle fell one afternoon last week as a couple dozen children crunched their way through the snow and icy puddles of Park Street Cemetery in Florence to gather around several stained marble headstones.

The children, kindergartners through eighth-graders in after-school programs at Florence Heights and Hampshire Heights, were on a field trip Thursday to honor the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and to learn about Florence's history in the civil-rights movement.

Led by Florence historian Paul Gaffney, the children got a close look at some of the local spots that played a role in the anti-slavery movement and the growth of civil rights, including the house of famed abolitionist Sojourner Truth and the farm that housed a utopian community of black and white people in the 1840s.

The field trip was organized by Linda Desmond, director of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program at the Hampshire Community Action Commission. Teachers from the after-school programs and volunteers accompanied the children.

"It's very appropriate to recognize the historical significance of our own community," said Desmond, as the group climbed from the school bus into the Florence Civic Center parking lot and headed for the cemetery across the street. "We have played such an important part in the whole freedom movement."

In the cemetery, one of Gaffney's first tasks was to set the record straight on the Underground Railroad, after a child asked if it had passed under the graves where they stood.

"It's not underground and it's not really a railroad," said Gaffney. It was a network of homes and other safe havens, he said, including some in Florence and Northampton that helped southern slaves en route to freedom in the North.

Gaffney pointed to the grave of Basil Dorsey, a Maryland slave who fled north, eventually settling in Florence, where he raised 12 children. Gaffney told how Dorsey, on a train trip through New York, refused to give up his seat to move to the "blacks-only" section, telling the conductor he'd rather be thrown from the window of the moving train.

"He became a local hero," said Gaffney. "He was a strong man." Dorsey died in 1872, he said.

A small boy looked at the stone marking Dorsey's grave,

then turned to the woman standing next to him.

"Do you know why people died?" he asked.

Pointing to another set of gravestones, Gaffney told the group that some black people who lived in Florence in the 1800s had never been slaves, including members of the Askins family, who moved here from Pittsfield and are buried in the cemetery.

As Gaffney talked, one young girl walked over to pat the gravestone of Sarah A. Askin, the mother of the family.

The children had their share of questions.

Why, one asked, if Massachusetts had no slavery in the mid-1800s, did the Underground Railroad exist here? Gaffney explained that people had to hide runaway slaves even here because not turning them in to authorities was a federal crime.

Penalties for harboring slaves stiffened after the Fugitive Slave Bill of 1850, said Gaffney, making staying in urban areas in the North even more dangerous for runaways. Many escaped slaves continued on to Canada or went south to the Caribbean after the bill was enacted.

Many slaves walked long distances following established, if secret, routes, such as along the Appalachian Trail or the Mississippi River.

Back on the bus, the students peered from fogged-up windows as they drove past the white clapboard home at 35 Park St. where Sojourner Truth lived and at the triangular park at Park and Pine streets, where the city will erect a statue of her.

They viewed the house and barn at 123 Meadow St., the site of the 1840-era utopian community of blacks and whites called the Northampton Association of Education and Industry.

Spotting a large tree growing in the front yard, Besnik Bakui, 11, a student at Jackson Street School, asked, "Was that tree here when the slaves were here?"

"May well have been," answered Gaffney. "It looks pretty old."

Jaime Correa, 13, a JFK middle schooler, said he enjoyed learning local history in an active way, rather than reading about it in textbooks.

"It's cool," he said. "It's way better to learn about what's happened."

Another JFK student, Luis Flores, 13, of Florence Heights, said he liked finding out about Truth's life, especially her escape from slavery and her years in Florence.

"I think she was a very interesting woman," said Luis.