

The Case That Made Sojourner Truth: How a formerly enslaved woman beat the establishment

Maggie McCann: In 1826, a young Black woman enslaved in New York escapes to freedom with her infant daughter, a full year before slavery would be abolished in the state.

At least two of her children remained enslaved. She found refuge with family in New Paltz who ultimately purchased the balance of her term of service and that of her infant daughter until the date of formal abolition. After that date, she learned the devastating news that her son Peter had been illegally sold to a plantation in Alabama, in violation of the New York state law.

Poor, illiterate, and newly freed in a world designed to deny her justice, she did something almost unimaginable. She walked into the Ulster County Courthouse in Kingston, New York and demanded her son back. Her name was Isabella, the woman the world would come to know as Sojourner Truth.

And she became the first Black woman in the United States to successfully sue a white man and win. Her courage, and the unlikely decision of a grand jury of all white men changed the course of history.

Now nearly 200 years later, the legacy of that jury and their choice to do what was right rather than what was expected lives on in the work of Ulster County Commissioner of Jurors Paul O'Neill, a historian who has made it part of his mission as Commissioner of Jurors to ensure Sojourner Truth's bravery is never forgotten.

Welcome to Amici, news and insights from the New York Courts. I'm Maggie McCann.

Today, we're talking about the life and legacy of Sojourner Truth and the impact that a jury can have not only on a trial, but on the course of history.

Let's start at the beginning. Before you became Commissioner of Jurors, how much did you know about Sojourner Truth's story?

Paul O'Neill: I knew a little. I knew she was an abolitionist, but I probably didn't know too much beyond that. And it wasn't until later when I became first an attorney in the Ulster County Courthouse, and then later when I became Commissioner of Jurors here, that I began to learn more about her story and its significance.

Maggie McCann: Did you have any idea that Sojourner Truth's story would become such a meaningful part of your work as Commissioner of Jurors?

Paul O'Neill: I did, because her story is such an inspirational story because it really illustrates the ideal that we strive for each and every day in the justice system. It's lady justice, scales in hand, blindfolded to anything but truth, where wealth, power, social standing mean nothing. I mean, really think about that.

Here's a newly freed, formerly enslaved woman with no wealth, no social standing, no power to speak of seeking justice against a white man with all those things, and she prevails.

It's a wonderful story, and it also illustrates the role that we all play in our communities. For example, the grand jury that really started her case - 23 members of the community who came here that day to do a job. They had no idea when they appeared here that day that they would be making history, but that's exactly what they did.

It goes to show that we never know, and we may never know, how our actions will resonate, but our voice does matter - if we want to. And that's something I think we need to remember.

Maggie McCann: Given Sojourner Truth's social standing at the time - like you said poor, illiterate, Black woman in the 1800s - how did she know to come to the Court for justice and how did she know that your courthouse might be the place you would find it?

Paul O'Neill: Well, she learned about the courthouse from a local Quaker community in the area, and they had told her that to get her son back, she needed to go to the Ulster County Courthouse, and she needed to find the grand jury.

Whether she knew anything about the courthouse prior to this or whether she knew anything about the court system, that's probably unlikely. But she knew that these people, people she trusted, believed that justice could be found here, and that was good enough for her. So she came.

Maggie McCann: You've spoken earlier in our conversations that when she walked into the courthouse, she was actually looking for an individual person who she thought was grand jury. How did she find her way to the actual grand jury when she walked into the court building?

Paul O'Neill: The wonderful thing about her story is the courage that she displayed and everything that she did, but it's also the little roles played by so many nameless people that, you take out any one of them, the story might change. And two of them are the first people that she encountered when she came to the courthouse.

So, she's told that she has to find the grand jury. She goes into the courthouse and she goes into kind of a foyer outside of the courtrooms, where the attorneys are waiting for their case to be called much as they are today. And she goes up to the most impressively dressed man she can find, presuming he must be the grand jury. And when she does, first, he's kind of laughing a little bit the situation, but she tells him why she's there and he recognizes immediately the significance of that.

He tells her she needs to go upstairs where the grand jury meets. So, she goes up the stairs, and when she gets up to the top of the stairs, she then approaches the most impressively dressed man that she finds up there. He too does the same thing. And he's the one who actually brings her into the grand jury where she testifies and the grand jury believes what she's saying and that she has recourse to the law.

So it's really, it's an amazing story. What would've happened if either of those individuals said, "You can't be here." They didn't. They helped her. They brought her to where she needed to be, and they helped justice move forward. And that's what we all can do.

Maggie McCann: There is another individual involved in this case, Solomon Gedney, the man who illegally sold Sojourner Truth's son, Peter. Can you tell me a little bit more about him?

Paul O'Neill: Yes. Solomon Gedney, he was a landowner in Ulster County. He was from a prominent family. He was very connected by blood and marriage to most of the other prominent families in the area. So, he was a very established figure.

Maggie McCann: So we've talked about the fact that Sojourner Truth was the first Black woman in the United States to successfully sue a white man and win. But what did winning actually look like? Did Peter come home?

Paul O'Neill: Yes. Peter came home, and that was what she wanted. So, she won. But beyond that, I think that winning here was much bigger because in every sense of the word, we all won on the day that she prevailed in the Ulster County Courthouse. This case transforms Isabella, which is her name when she appears here, into the Sojourner Truth that we know today. It's the defining moment of her life.

While it's not literally true, figuratively, it's a valid statement that she walked into the Ulster County courthouse that day as Isabella and that she walked out as Sojourner Truth. She walked into the courthouse hoping to get her son back, and she walked out with the understanding that she could make a difference, and she did that for the rest of her life.

Maggie McCann: How did we come to know more about Sojourner Truth's story? I understand that there were some documents that were found a few years ago that shed some light on this. Can you tell me more about that?

Paul O'Neill: Yes, and it's a wonderful story. Now, in Ulster County, we have had what we call a recognizance, which was issued by the grand jury. We've had this document in our records since 1828, but we knew that there had to be more documents. We could never find any. And then a few years ago, in a truly needle in a haystack story, an excellent archivist up in the New York State Archives in Albany named Jim Foults came upon these documents.

He was doing unrelated research. And while he's doing that, he comes across the documents, but there was nothing immediately recognizable about them for this case. It was just a tri-folded packet of papers probably indistinguishable from the thousands of others. And it said on the caption, "People v. Solomon Gedney," Jim recognized that and looked further, and what a gift for all of us that is because there's probably a handful of people in the country who would've recognized based upon what he saw, what this was. Fortunately for us, Jim was one of those handful of people.

So, once we found that, it really gave us a lot more insight into what had happened and some of the people involved. And so, it's a found treasure, a wonderful story.

Maggie McCann: And it's another testament to the importance of teaching history because there's going to be someone like Jim in other archives and other places where knowing history is going to unlock those pieces of information that we might've lost otherwise.

Paul O'Neill: That's right. And it's a reminder to us that our records are important. Our records are the story of our future. It's so critical. We always have to be aware of that.

Maggie McCann: Bringing the past into the present. This court case happened 200 years ago. Surely things have changed since then. So why do you think Sojourner Truth's story is still so important today?

Paul O'Neill: Well, it's timeless. I mean, the concept of justice is a timeless concept, and that's why her case is as relevant today as it was 200 years ago, and it's going to be as relevant 200 years from now.

There are some ideas, there are some concepts, there are some things, some beliefs that transcend time. This is one of those.

Maggie McCann: And I want to talk a little bit about the makeup of Ulster County and the juries that come into your courthouse today. I understand that Ulster County's population is nearly 86% white and only 7% Black according to the most recent census. How does that demographic reality show up in your juries and the people that come through your court?

Paul O'Neill: Well, I mean, representation is critical. After all, it's a jury of our peers. That's what we're looking for. So, we work very, very hard to ensure that all groups are represented fairly. And I think we do a good job in that. This courthouse, and every courthouse belongs to all of us. Everyone should feel welcome, and everybody should feel represented. Nothing is more important to what we do. Nothing.

Maggie McCann: You have this fantastic story to tell your jurors, but how can other counties and jury commissioners use history to inspire their juries?

Paul O'Neill: Well, the Sojourner Truth case is an exceptional case, but it's not an isolated case. And all of our courthouses have stories to tell, and all of our courthouses have stories that should be told from the events that took place - and take place - within the halls of the courthouse to the people who've walked through them - judges, attorneys, litigants. Our courthouses can be treasure troves of inspiration.

Everyone could find instances of these in their courthouse and should, because what better way to get the message out than through stories like these? We learn best, we teach best when people don't even know that it's a lesson.

So, I think that there are stories in every courthouse, and I hope that people do tell them. And it doesn't have to just be Commissioner of Jurors, it can be everybody who works in our Court System. We are all public servants. We're all here to serve that mission.

Maggie McCann: And I think that's the best quality of history and learning about history is that it feels like a story, but this is real. And you've used it to hopefully make a lot of change in the people that come in for jury service in Ulster County.

Paul O'Neill: Yeah, I think it's a good way for people to see that they're part of something bigger. Sometimes through these people, through these events, people can intuitively grasp and understand that when they're here, they're part of something bigger.

This isn't just a Monday, this isn't a Tuesday or Wednesday. They're part of something bigger, something that is bigger than ourselves that goes back ages. We all want to be part of something. We all want to know that what we're doing has meaning. What a great way for people to see that.

Maggie McCann: If there's one thing that listeners can remember about Sojourner Truth's case, what do you hope it is?

Paul O'Neill: That each of us plays a role and that each of us can make a difference. If you want to change the world, it's easy. Change the world. And if there's a better lesson than that, I have yet to come across it.

There's this view that the justice system is not there to protect you out there. We have to show them that it is. The way you change ideas is when the people are here. It's an invaluable legacy, and I think it's one that we can all take from. And I hope that we all do take from this and spread it around.

None of us owns history. History belongs to all of us. The stories of those that came before us are going to help lay the path for us today and for those who

come after. I think it's incumbent on all of us to try and make that path a little smoother.

Maggie McCann: Well, thank you for sharing Sojourner Truth's story. I appreciate you talking to us today about it.

Paul O'Neill: Thank you for having me. And thank you for what you do. What you're doing is exactly what we're talking about, it's bringing the message to other people. Our court systems are so important, and when people learn about it, people believe in it when they participate. What you do makes it easier. So, thank you.