

MOSES ROPER'S ANTI-SLAVERY ACTIVISM

TEACHER TOOL 1 & STUDENT HANDOUT 1

(BELOW ACTIONS ROPER TOOK TO RESIST AND FIGHT SLAVERY ARE UNDERSCORED. IN HANDOUTS 2-4, STUDENTS WILL UNDERSCORE THE ACTIONS.)

Moses Roper (1815–1891) was born into slavery in Caswell County, NC and sold away when he was only six years old. After at least 15 failed escape attempts from various enslavers, Roper successfully reached New York, a free state. When he learned slave catchers were on his trail, he gained passage on a ship to England. In London, he became acquainted with abolitionists. They helped him to get an education, enabling him to learn to read and write. During breaks from his studies, he began giving antislavery lectures. In 1837 *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery* was published in London and the following year it was published in Philadelphia, PA.¹ Between 1838 and 1848, Roper's narrative sold 38,000 copies in England and 5,000 copies in Wales. It was a best seller on both sides of the Atlantic. Additional editions were printed in 1846 and 1848 in England.

At first press reviews of Roper's narrative were favorable. Critics admired its simplicity and eloquence and considered it to be a hard-hitting "no holds barred" depiction of American slavery and demand for its immediate end. Roper sent hundreds of copies of it to American enslavers, including those mentioned in the narrative. He also presented the narrative to an Englishman who sold chains and manacles to enslavers in the U.S, hoping that when he learned of the physical torture his weapons were used for, he would stop selling the weapons to Americans.

Between 1837 and 1844, Roper gave thousands of antislavery lectures across Britain and Ireland. Two thousand have been documented, yet there were certainly more. He often displayed weapons of torture to expose the different kinds of physical punishment he received or witnessed. There was a backlash to Roper's descriptions of physical violence. Some newspapers claimed he was lying. Even some former abolitionist supporters turned against him. "I shall tell the truth" was his response.

In 1844 Roper left England for Canada. Details of his life after 1844 are scarce. After Emancipation in 1865, his marriage to a British woman appears to have broken down. He moved back to the U.S. There is evidence he was lecturing in Vermont in the 1880s. In 1891 he was found dead at the Boston train station with his faithful dog by his side. There was a crumpled handbill in his pocket, evidence he was still speaking out against racial injustice at the age of 78. Descendants tell the family story that he was en route to North Carolina to die and to be buried with his mother and siblings when he passed away at the station.

¹ *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery* was published first in London in 1837 by a Quaker publisher Harvey and Darton, and later in Philadelphia by Merrihew and Gunn in 1838.