

Sophia Huggins

Classroom Resource Packet

1. Student Biography of Sophia Huggins
2. Vocabulary List
 - a. Vocabulary words are pulled from the student biography and the Character Information portion of our Guide Script. Words are organized alphabetically.
3. Supplemental Resources (pulled from the Pantagraph)
 - a. “Pone Hollow once name for tumbledown Bloomington neighborhood,” by Bill Kemp (June 25, 2013)
 - b. “Clairvoyant Sophia Huggins once sought by all walks of life in Bloomington,” by Candace Summers (August 25, 2024)

Sophia Huggins (1832-1903)

Sophia Roundtree Huggins was a **fortune teller** and **clairvoyant**. She used her **psychic** powers to earn enough money to support herself, her mother, and two children. A clairvoyant is a person who is “able to see images of people, places and things in their **mind’s eye**” and use their visions to help clients understand events past and even the future. Bloomington citizens found “Aunt Sophie,” as she was called, valuable in providing services to help them deal with their daily lives.

According to interviews published in *The Pantagraph* and *Daily Bulletin*, both Bloomington newspapers, Sophia was born in Kentucky in 1832. Her mother was a Native American and her father a Frenchman. She was the youngest of seven children. She spent her early life near “**Indian Territory**” where many of the inhabitants were French traders. “I speak French even better and easier than my own **tongue**” she said.

By 1851 Sophia was living in Bloomington and in October of that year, she married John Huggins. They had at least two children; a daughter named Sophia born about 1860 and a son named Isaac born in 1865. According to the city directory of 1855, John worked as a laborer and Sophia as a **seamstress**. Unfortunately, the city directory in 1866 lists Sophie as a widow so apparently John died sometime shortly before or after Isaac’s birth.

In the following years Sophia made her living using her psychic powers. In an interview in *The Pantagraph*, Sophia told of receiving her abilities at the age of twelve. But according to a *Daily Bulletin* article in 1899 by feature writer Madame Annette, Sophia claimed to have been “born with a veil over my face, with the power to read lives and see things unknown to other people.” Sophia went on to say that she was consulted by “kings and princes with great success.” She also said that she had gone on fortune telling tours quite often and had visited many states, territories, and other countries “across the big pond”.

Sophie’s customers in Bloomington/Normal included “luckless **swains**, love-sick girls, unhappy husbands and wives, and businessmen in financial distress.” Her fees ranged from one to ten dollars depending on how far she had to “send her mind away to get their past lives.” Sometimes additional sittings with a client were needed, which cost an additional fifty cents each. However, if a person’s life was so bad Sophie could not bear to think of it, she would turn customers away, unwilling to read past, present, or future events. According to Madame Annette of the *Daily Bulletin*, Sophie became a “great curiosity” to the people of Bloomington and many men and women sought her advice. Many residents referred to her as “*The Witch of Endor*,” a reference to the story in the Bible of **King Saul** trying to rouse the spirit of the **prophet Samuel**.

For most of her Bloomington life Sophia lived in a part of town called “**Pone Hollow**.” This was a very poor neighborhood built in a low, marshy area of town. It was located between the German settlement on South Hill and downtown. Pone Hollow was also close to an area of meat packing plants known as **Blood Alley**. Due to the blood and other **slaughter-house** by-products which were dumped in a nearby creek, the area had a terrible smell. Sophie’s home had a little barnyard with a chicken coop, several ducks and geese, and a family dog. As she gained more success in her fortune telling business, Sophie began investing in real estate in Pone Hollow. Perhaps she saw that the growing city’s development would soon spread to her neighborhood and wanted her heirs to profit.

Sophie’s daughter, Sophie, later became Mrs. Marie Clifford of Indianapolis. Apparently, she and her mother became **estranged** as the younger Sophie was left out of Sophie’s will. Her son, Isaac, continued to live in Bloomington. He owned property outside of

town where he raised hogs. He worked for a while collecting garbage for the city, spent some time in jail, and was married several times.

Sophia Huggins died at her home on West Taylor Street on August 8, 1903. Her funeral was held at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church where she had been a member. She left her property to her son Isaac, an adopted daughter, Ruth Hunter, and a friend, David Rogers. She is buried in Evergreen Cemetery next to her son and his last wife, Anna.

Vocabulary

Affluent (adjective): having an abundance of goods or riches

Blood Alley (noun): an area of meat packing plants near Pone Hollow, a very poor neighborhood built in a low, marshy area of town in Bloomington

Clairvoyant (adjective): able to see beyond the range of ordinary perception

Conducted (verb): Conducted

Estranged (noun): having lost former closeness and affection: in a state of alienation from a previous close or familial relationship

Flocked (verb): a group under the guidance of a leader

Fortune teller (noun): someone or something with the supposed ability to foretell future events and especially the details of a person's future

Indian Territory (noun): an evolving land area set aside by the United States government for the relocation of Native Americans who held original Indian title to their land as an independent nation-state

King Saul (noun): a monarch of ancient Israel and Judah and the first king of the United Monarchy, according to the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament

Mind's eye (noun): the mental ability to create or recall images based on visual experiences, such as imaginary or remembered scenes

Pone Hollow (noun): a very poor neighborhood built in a low, marshy area of town located between the German settlement on South Hill and downtown Bloomington

Prophet Samuel (noun): a figure who, in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, plays a key role in the transition from the biblical judges to the United Kingdom of Israel under Saul, and again in the monarchy's transition from Saul to David

Psychic (adjective): a person apparently sensitive to nonphysical forces

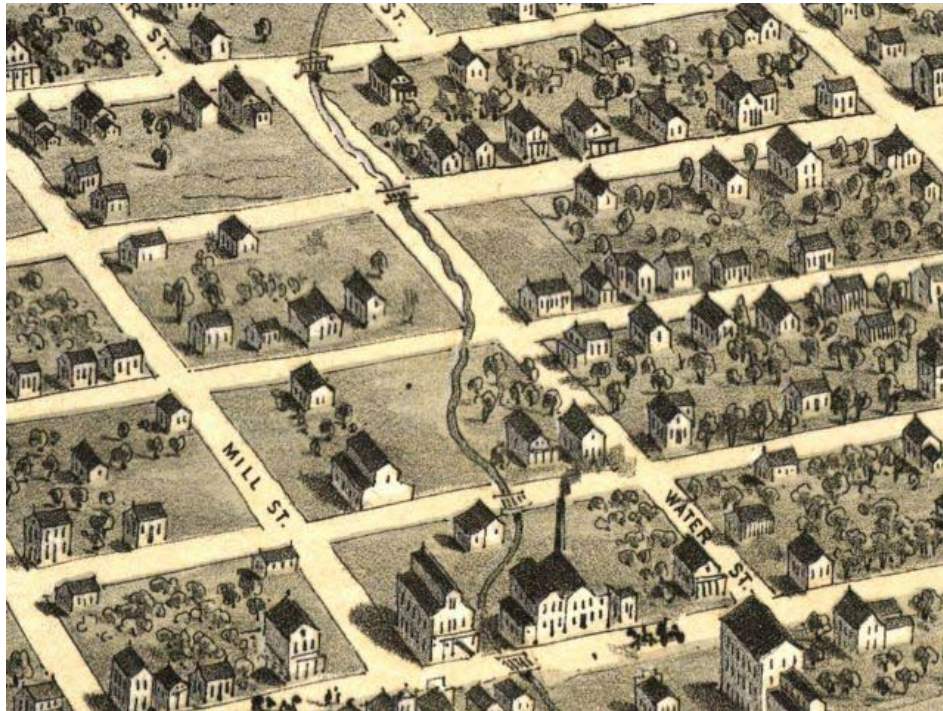
Slaughter-house (noun): an establishment where animals are butchered

Swains (noun): male admirers or suitors

Tongue (noun): a spoken language

Pone Hollow once name for tumbledown Bloomington neighborhood

By: Bill Kemp, June 25, 2013



This partial of an 1867 “bird’s eye” view of Bloomington shows a stretch of Pone Hollow. Note the creek or slough, which was later driven underground to serve as a city sewer. The street in the immediate foreground is Main, and the two railroads which would follow the creek wouldn’t be built until the early 1870s. It’s unlikely Pone Hollow ever looked this orderly or well-scrubbed. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Before two railroads and a municipal sewer tamed the creek and drained the marshy ground, the area several blocks south of downtown Bloomington was a colorful jumble of early mills interspersed with shacks, shanties and other like abodes, giving the neighborhood the appearance of an unruly mining camp.

Locals called it Pone Hollow, a somewhat fitting name given that the low-lying area was situated between the high ground of downtown and the emerging German neighborhood of South Hill. Snaking through the heart of this “hollow” was a tributary of Sugar Creek that’s of interest today if only for the fact that it’s no longer there.

It’s hard to capture in the mind’s eye what Bloomington and its immediate environs looked like before the early residents chopped down the wooded groves, plowed under the prairie, laid out streets and built homes and businesses.

An equally significant though less visible change to the natural landscape involved the disruption and ultimate transformation of drainage patterns. For instance, as Bloomington grew two smaller branches (or “sloughs”) of Sugar Creek, the Pone Hollow one and another running three blocks

north of the County Courthouse, were driven underground and unceremoniously transformed into brick-lined sewers.

The creek through Pone Hollow came into the city from the southeast, curling around the northern edge of what's today Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. It took a westerly course across Center and Main before running straight down the aptly named Water Street. The creek then merged with the previously mentioned northern branch at Allin Street between Monroe and Jefferson, and from there headed due west to the city limits and beyond.

According to a 1900 reminiscence by longtime Bloomington resident Dr. John Miller, the name Pone Hollow originated with a wager between two sawmill men by the names of Dodge and Rankin over who could eat the most cornpone (a type of cornbread) in one sitting.

In mid-July 1858, The Pantagraph printed a poem titled "Pone Hollow," a wink-and-a-nod tribute to "a vale delightsome," albeit one with "abundant stenchful odors" and the bleached bones "of many an o'erworked horse." The anonymous versifier captured the spirit of the place with stanzas such as this:

Choice spot there for a residence—
Such charming scenery!
Stuck wagons, mud holes, sloughs, log-fence,
In grand variety!

If the appellation Pone Hollow didn't help property values, at least it was better than "Blood Alley," which was the name of a meatpacking area to the immediate east. It was here that blood, offal, and other byproducts of the slaughterhouse were dumped into the creek, which then flowed through Pone Hollow and helped give the neighborhood its distinctive odor.

More often than not, Pone Hollow was the kind of place that would only rate a mention in the local press for the likes of playing host to a "grand dog fight," as was the case in late August 1862.

Yet change was less than a decade away with the laying of two east-west rail lines. By 1872, the Indianapolis, Bloomington & Western (IB&W) and the Lafayette, Bloomington & Mississippi (LB&M) railways followed parallel courses through the southern end of downtown Bloomington, generally following the course of the fetid Bloody Alley / Pone Hollow slough.

On October 10, 1872, The Pantagraph reported that the two railroads had helped create a district "among the busiest in the city." The formerly free-flowing creek was "covered up and hampered on all sides," wending its way westward "as if ashamed of its own existence." Pone Hollow was now home to depots, a roundhouse, factories, a hotel, and a bustling grain elevator. The area continued to grow, and several of the multistory brick warehouses that one sees today date to the early 20th century.

Notwithstanding the progress, Pone Hollow remained an eccentric corner of the city, and no resident was more peculiar than fortuneteller Sophia Huggins. According to an intrepid

Pantagraph reporter who visited the clairvoyant's ramshackle domicile in 1881, Madame Huggins "told fortunes to luckless swains, lovesick girls, unhappy husbands and wives, and businessmen in financial distress." Her family compound on 500 block of West Taylor Street was located "in a low, marshy spot, which was originally an almost impassible slough. As you walk toward [her residence] from Lee Street, the eye is greeted by a few tumbledown shanties in various stages of dilapidation and decay."

Sophia Huggins passed away in 1903 at the age of 69 (or thereabouts—accounts vary), having lived her last 40 or so years in Pone Hollow.



Leola Bellamy portrays clairvoyant Sophia Huggins with Gwen DeVeer as Daily Bulletin columnist Madame Annette in the 2012 Evergreen Cemetery Walk in Bloomington

Sophia Huggin's powers as a clairvoyant sought by all walks of life in Bloomington

By Candace Summers, August 25, 2024

Over the course of the last 30 years, the Evergreen Cemetery Walk has featured the stories of 211 individuals from all walks of life. Some of the stories that have been shared are ones that we are very familiar with, like that of Adlai E. Stevenson II (Governor of Illinois and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations), German opera singer Marie Litta, 19th century baseball player Charles "Old Hoss" Radbourn (who still holds a pitching record that will never be broken), or Eva Jones, (the first Black individual elected to the Bloomington Board of Education and Bloomington City Council). But countless others that have been featured on the Cemetery Walk may have been lost to history had it not been for this innovative event that combines live theater and history on the hallowed grounds of the City of Bloomington's oldest and most historic cemetery.

One of those individuals is Sophia Roundtree Huggins, who was a popular clairvoyant in Bloomington-Normal from 1870-1903. She was born in Kentucky in 1832, and according to Huggins her mother was Native American, and her father was a Frenchman named Captain Roundtree.

In an interview with a reporter from *The Pantagraph*, Huggins was described later in her life as a woman of color, "large and heavy set, has a broad face, square jaws, a rather prominent nose and small black eyes...She looks more like an Indian squaw than one of Africa's daughters." However, Huggins was always very vocal with the fact that there was "not a drop of Negro blood flowing through her veins," though most documents list her as either Black or mixed race.

It is not known exactly when and why Sophia came to Bloomington. Prior to moving to Bloomington, she lived in Springfield, IL around 1850. By the next year, she was in

Bloomington and married John H. Huggins. The couple had at least two children; a daughter named Sophia, and a son named Isaac.

After her husband passed away in 1864, Sophia Huggins made a living as a clairvoyant so that she could care for her two children and aged mother.

clairvoyant is a person who is “able to see images of people, places or things in their mind’s eye” and then described their vision during the reading using senses other than the known human senses. A good clairvoyant will validate things that have happened in the past and things that are happening in the present. They do this by asking the person who is receiving the reading questions that encourage that person to offer information about themselves. The clairvoyant will use that information to give the person seeking information the answer they are looking for.

In an 1899 interview with Madame Annette from the *Daily Bulletin* newspaper, “Aunt Sophia” (as she was known to many) claimed to have received her psychic powers when she was born. She asserted that she was “born with a veil over my face, with the power to read lives and see things unknown to other people.” However, in an earlier interview with *The Pantagraph*, she stated that she received her psychic powers at the age of 12. In any case, she touted the fact that she was consulted by “kings and princes with great success.” She also said that she would go on fortune telling tours quite often and had been to “27 of the states and territories, and out of this country, either into Canada or across the big pond 20 times.” When asked to show proof of these boasts, she produced an undated circular about her talents as a clairvoyant.

Her clientele in Bloomington-Normal included “luckless swains, love-sick girls, unhappy husbands and wives, and businessmen in financial distress.” She was called upon to find missing items, lost fortunes, or missing persons. Her prices ranged from one to ten dollars depending on how far she had to “send her mind away to get their past lives.” She also stated that it cost “a half dollar extra for each sitting after two [had been] given, and sometimes, it takes a good many!” Also, if she was not in the right frame of mind, the “day was too cloudy,” or if the person’s life was so bad that she could not bear to think of them, she would turn customers away, unwilling to read them. She became a great curiosity to the people of Bloomington and many men and women sought her advice. Many residents referred to her as the “Witch of Endor” (a medium called upon by King Saul to raise the spirit of Samuel to seek guidance in battle, in defiance to God).

For most of her life in Bloomington, Huggins resided in an area of town known as “Pone Hollow,” an economically depressed area situated on the far southwest side. This was a low-lying area situated between the high ground of downtown and the emerging German neighborhood of South Hill. Through the heart of the neighborhood ran a tributary of Sugar Creek (which was turned into a major underground sewer). The neighborhood suffered from pollution produced by the meatpacking plants to the east (known as “Blood Alley”) which dumped blood, offal, and other slaughterhouse byproducts into Sugar Creek. This gave the neighborhood a distinctive smell. Huggins’ home was located at 529 West Water Street (later renamed Taylor Street) on the south side of the Indianapolis, Bloomington and Western Railroad “in a low, marshy spot, which was originally an almost impassible slough.” Many of the homes in her neighborhood were not well kept. Sophia’s home included a little barnyard with a wagon,

chicken coop, several ducks and geese, a couple of horses, and a family dog, though neighbors occasionally complained about the smell emanating from her property and how she treated her animals.

As Huggins continued her fortune telling business, she began investing in real estate. This included a great deal of land in Pone Hollow. Perhaps she foresaw the city's development of that land and wanted her heirs to benefit. Madame Annette commented that "Aunt Sophia" owned a good deal of Pone Hollow. However, Annette wondered why she owned so much land in such a run-down area. She surmised that while the properties did not look "financially desirable," the land at least was worth something good and "is a financial credit to the woman who has made it all by the reading of people's lives."

Sophia Huggins died at her home on West Taylor Street on August 8, 1903. Before her death she had set aside \$100 (which in 2023 would be \$3,750) for the erection of a tombstone at her gravesite in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. In her obituary, she was remembered as the "sage of her neighborhood and was respected by every colored resident of town."

Sophia Huggins is one of nine individuals that will be featured on the 30th and final Evergreen Cemetery Walk. The Walk will be held on Saturdays and Sundays, October 5-6 and 12-13 with performances at 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. each day. Ticket sales begin on September 10. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit mchistory.org.