

Sojourner Truth

Preacher, abolitionist, women's rights worker (1797-1883)

Sojourner Truth was born a slave in upstate New York around the year 1797. She labored for a succession of five masters until the Fourth of July, 1827, when slavery was finally abolished in New York State. Then Isabella Baumfree, as she had been named at birth, became legally free.

After prevailing in a courageous court action demanding the return of her youngest son Peter, who had been illegally sold away from her to a slave owner in Alabama, Isabella moved to New York City. There she worked as a housekeeper and became deeply involved in religion. Isabella had always been very spiritual, and soon after being emancipated, had a vision which affected her profoundly, leading her --as she later described it--to develop a "perfect trust" in God and prayer.

After fifteen years in New York, Isabella felt a call to become a traveling preacher. She took her

new name, Sojourner Truth, and with little more than the clothes on her back, began walking through Long Island and Connecticut, speaking to people in the countryside about her life and her relationship with God. She was a powerful speaker and singer. When she rose to speak, wrote one observer, "her commanding figure and dignified manner hushed every trifler to silence." Audiences were "melted into tears by her touching stories."

After several months of traveling, Truth was encouraged by friends to go to the Northampton Association, which had been founded in 1841 as a cooperative community dedicated to abolitionism, pacifism, equality, and the betterment of human life. There, she met progressive thinkers like William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass and David Ruggles, and the local abolitionists Samuel Hill, George Benson and, Olive Gilbert. Douglass described her at the time as "a strange compound of wit and wisdom, of

wild enthusiasm and flintlike common sense."

When the association disbanded in 1846, Truth remained in Northampton, Mass, moving for the first time into her own home, on Park Street in Florence, with a loan from Samuel Hill. Although Truth never learned to read or write, she dictated her memoirs to Olive Gilbert and they were published in 1850 as *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*. This book, and her presence as a speaker, made her a sought-after figure on the anti-slavery woman's rights lecture circuit.

Over the next decade she traveled and spoke widely. She is particularly remembered for the famous "Ain't I A Woman?" speech she gave at the woman's rights convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851.

Truth moved to Michigan in 1857 and continued her advocacy. After the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, she moved to Washington, D.C., where, in her late 60's, she began working with former slaves in

the newly created Freedman's Village. Though it is rarely discussed, Sojourner fought for the desegregation of public transportation in Washington, D.C. during the Civil War. She refused to face the indignities of Jim Crow segregation on street cars and had the Jim Crow car removed from the Washington D.C. system. Sojourner Truth brought a local street to a standstill when a driver refused her passage. With the support of the crowd she forced the driver to carry her.

After the Civil War, she set out on a final crusade to gain support for her dream of a land distribution program for former slaves -- an idea which, despite her lobbying, Congress refused to enact. Finally she returned to her home in Battle Creek, Michigan, where, surrounded by her family and friends, she died in 1883.

Some thoughts from Sojourner Truth:

"The rich rob the poor, and the poor rob one another."

- Sojourner Truth, speech (1851), in Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1878)

"Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him."

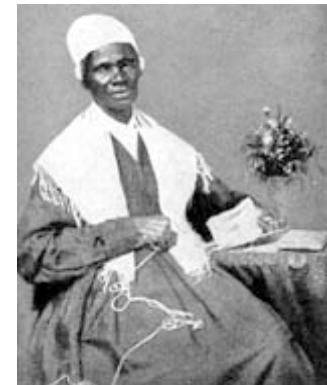
- Sojourner Truth, speech (1851), in Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1878)

"Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped over carriages, and lifted ober dicthes and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober muddpuddles, or bigs me any best place. And ain't I a woman? Look at me Looka at me arm. I have ploughes and planted and gathered into barns, and no mand could head me! And ain't I a woman."

- Sojourner Truth, speech (1851)

Whole Woman's Health
Women's History Project

Sojourner Truth



"I am above eighty years old; it is about time for me to be going. I have been forty years a slave and forty years free and would be here forty years more to have equal rights for all."

Whole Woman's Health of Austin
8401 N. IH 35, Ste. 200 * Austin, TX 78753
(512) 250-1005
www.wholewomanshealth.com