



SOJOURNER TRUTH

A LIFE AND LEGACY OF FAITH



Sojourner Truth was perhaps the most famous African-American woman in 19th century America. For over forty years she traveled the country as a forceful and passionate advocate for the dispossessed, using her quick wit and fearless tongue to fight for human rights.

Sojourner Truth was born into slavery about 1797 in Ulster County, New York. Known as Isabella, her parents were James and Betsey, the property of Colonel Johannes Hardenbergh. As a child she spoke only low Dutch and, like most slaves, never learned to read or write.

About 1815 Isabella married Thomas, a fellow slave, and bore five children -- Diana (b. 1815), Peter (b. 1821), Elizabeth (b.1825), Sophia (b. 1826) and a fifth child who may have died in infancy.

Isabella was sold to four more owners, until she finally walked to freedom in 1826, carrying her infant daughter, Sophia.

She settled in New York City until 1843, when she changed her name to Sojourner Truth, announcing she would travel the land as an itinerant preacher, telling the truth and working against injustice.

During the next several years, Truth lived in Northampton, Massachusetts, where she purchased a home, and in Ohio. She traveled around the east and midwest preaching for human rights. This illiterate ex-slave was a powerful figure in several national social movements, speaking forcefully for the abolition of slavery, women's rights and suffrage, the rights of freedmen, temperance, prison reform and the termination of capital punishment

In the course of her travels, she befriended many of the leading reformers and abolitionists of the day, including Amy Post, Parker Pillsbury, Frances Dana Gage, Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Laura Haviland, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Truth supported herself by selling portraits, captioned "I sell the Shadow to support the Substance." She also received income from the sale of her biography, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth, A Northern Slave*, written in 1850 by her friend, Olive Gilbert.

Her grandson, Sammy Banks, accompanied Sojourner on many of her lecture tours. He could read and write for her and was an invaluable companion until he died in 1875, at the age of twenty-four.



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Sojourner first came to Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1856 when she was invited to address the radical Quaker group, the Friends of Human Progress. The next year she moved to Michigan, buying a home in the nearby settlement of Harmonia

Ten years later, Sojourner moved into Battle Creek, converting a small barn on College Street into her home. She lived there with her daughters, Diana and Elizabeth, until her death.

While she lived in Michigan, Truth continued her national human rights crusade. In the 1860s thousands of freedmen and former slaves fled to Washington, D.C., seeking safety and jobs. However, the federal government was totally unprepared for this influx. There was no place for the ex-slaves to live, very little food and no employment. Sojourner worked at Freedman's Village and for the Freedman's Bureau trying to improve their living conditions.

Maryland residents frequently came into Freedman's Village to steal children. If the parents complained, they were put into the guardhouse. Truth learned of these kidnappings and she encouraged the parents to protest. When the camp commanders threatened to imprison her also, Sojourner replied that, if they tried, she would "make this nation rock like a cradle."

She was very active in relocating the former slaves to western states like Kansas. Sojourner lobbied the government to give them free land and to pay their transportation costs to their new homes. She carried petitions with her, urging people to sign them, asking, "Why don't some of you stir 'em [the government] up as though an old body like myself could do all the stirring."

Sojourner Truth died at her home on College Street on November 26, 1883. Her funeral service, reportedly attended by 1,000 people, was held at the Congregational-Presbyterian Church. She is buried at Oak Hill Cemetery in Battle Creek.

The words inscribed on her tombstone, "Is God Dead?" came from an 1852 encounter between Truth and another noted ex-slave abolitionist, Frederick Douglass. They were both attending a meeting in Salem, Ohio, and Douglass had been speaking very despondently. A hush came over the audience as Sojourner rose and admonished Douglass, asking, "Frederick, is God gone?"

Her tombstone gives her age as 105. Truth herself encouraged speculation about her age, enjoying the added notoriety it gave her to be called the "world's oldest lecturer." According to the few available records, she was 86 when she died.