

## Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth was a prominent abolitionist and women's rights activist. Born a slave in New York State, she had at least three of her children sold away from her. After escaping slavery, Truth embraced evangelical religion and became involved in moral reform and abolitionist work. She collected supplies for black regiments during the Civil War and immersed herself in advocating for freed people during the Reconstruction period. Truth was a powerful and impassioned speaker whose legacy of feminism and racial equality still resonates today. She is perhaps best known for her stirring "Ain't I a Woman?" speech, delivered at a women's convention in Ohio in 1851. An evangelist, abolitionist, and feminist, Sojourner Truth (c. 1797-1883) is remembered for her remarkable voice raised in support of abolitionism, the freedmen, and women's rights.

Truth was six feet tall, blessed with a powerful voice (she spoke English with a Dutch accent), and driven by deep religious conviction. Harriet Beecher Stowe attested to Truth's personal magnetism, saying that she had never "been conversant with anyone who had more of that silent and subtle power which we call personal presence than this woman." Truth was born of slave parents owned by a wealthy Dutch patron in Ulster County, New York. Details of her early life remain cloudy. What is clear is that her name was Isabella and she served a household in New Paltz, New York, from 1810 to 1827, where she bore some five children by a fellow slave. At least two of her daughters and one son were sold away from her during these years.

Isabella escaped slavery in 1827, one year before mandatory emancipation in New York State, by fleeing to a Quaker family, the Van Wageners, whose name she took. She moved to New York City, worked as a domestic, became involved in moral reform, embraced evangelical religion, started her street-corner preaching career, and eventually joined a utopian community in Sing Sing, New York. Illiterate and a mystic, Isabella

nevertheless acquired a wide knowledge of the Bible and emerged in the 1840s in Massachusetts, working among the Garrisonian abolitionists. A popular platform figure, she told stories and sang gospel songs that instructed and entertained. Adopting the name “Sojourner Truth” in 1843, she became a wandering orator. In the mid-1850s she settled in Battle Creek, Michigan, her base of operations for the rest of her life.

During the Civil War, Truth tramped the roads of Michigan collecting food and clothing for black regiments. She traveled to Washington, D.C., where she met with Abraham Lincoln at the White House, and immersed herself in relief work for the freed people. During Reconstruction, Truth barely supported herself by selling a narrative of her life as well as her “shadows,” photographs of herself. She lent her unique skills to the women’s suffrage movement and initiated a petition drive to obtain land for the freed people. She preached cleanliness and godliness among the freed people and dictated many letters about the land question, which provide rich details about that aspect of Reconstruction.

Truth’s most important legacy is the tone and substance of her language. As an old woman she stumped the country providing emancipation with an eloquent epigraph: “Give ‘em land and an outset, and hab teachers learn ‘em to read. Den they can be somebody.” Few modern activists have better described politicians or the purpose of a petition drive than Truth did: “Send *tons* of paper down to Washington for them spouters to chaw on.” And when she was brutally knocked off of Washington’s segregated streetcars, she denounced racism: “It is hard for the old slaveholding spirit to die, but *die* it must.” She herself died of old age and ulcerated legs in 1883; her funeral and burial in Battle Creek was the largest that town had ever seen, testimony to her hold on America’s historical imagination.