

Sojourner Truth (1797?-1883)

The Narrative of Sojourner Truth

Biographical Introduction by Amy Holwerda

"Sojourner Truth (birth name Isabella Baumfree) is an iconic symbol for the civil rights movements of women and African-Americans across the United States. During her years as a slavery abolitionist and activist, Truth published her narratives, met with American Presidents, and recruited black troops to fight against the Confederate Army during the Civil War. Truth championed the idea of becoming a "self-made woman," as friend and former slave Frederick Douglass had championed making "self-made men."

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"The freed slave, Isabella Baumfree changed her name to Sojourner Truth on June 1, 1843 when she packed up her few belongings, became a Methodist, and supported herself traveling through New York as a street preacher, prophesying her beliefs about Christianity and the abolition of slavery. The name Sojourner is derived from the verb "to sojourn" or "to travel." Truth stated that her self-chosen name was inspired by one of her favorite verses of scripture, 1 Chronicles 29: 15, "For we are strangers before God, and sojourners, as were all our fathers. Our days on the Earth are as shadows." Truth adamantly believed that all humans are sojourners waiting for the second-coming of the Lord who will welcome us all into eternal life. She took her responsibility as a Christian disciple and prophet seriously, dedicating her life to spreading the word of the gospel alongside her messages of racial equality and

women's rights. The surname Truth is somewhat self-explanatory for a born-again Christian and street preacher, but Truth has published various accounts of how she chose her last name. One account was published in a New York newspaper that quoted Truth as saying she was stopped in the street by a Quaker woman who asked her name. When Sojourner was unable to provide a surname, the woman mocked her. That night, Sojourner prayed for the Lord to give her a surname "with a handle to it." The idea of calling herself Sojourner Truth "liberated" her. In another printed version of the story, Truth said that she already chosen her full name when she met the Quaker woman, and that she told the woman how as a slave, her surname had always been the name of her master. Now that she served only God, she served the Truth, and took that as her last name.

Truth became a well-known and beloved singer and speaker against racial inequalities in the emancipated United States. She was a powerful speaker with a low, booming voice and a stage presence that towered authoritatively over her audience. A large following grew, and so did the mythology surrounding Truth's character. But Truth was not all talk; she backed up her powerful speeches with equally powerful actions that earned the respect and congratulations of three separate American Presidents. During the Civil War, Truth actively sought to engage young, black soldiers to fight against the Confederate Army for the freedom of their fellow black Americans, the slaves. She diligently collected gifts and donations for the black volunteer regiments –a dedication that earned her a prized meeting with President Abraham Lincoln in the White House. Truth encouraged the US government to set aside allotments of land for the slaves that would eventually be emancipated, and traveled extensively around the United States with her petition for allotment, gaining hundreds, if not thousands, of signatures of support. Although Truth's petition never reached Congress as she hoped, she never stopped advocating for resettlement. Additionally, after the war, Truth was an integral force helping to find legitimate work for freed slaves, and to fight for their racial equality. While in Washington D.C., Truth

staged sit-ins on the local streetcars as a political statement against the city's discriminatory segregation policies. Although Truth was befriended by many civil rights activists and suffragists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, she was weary to align her message with the often violent and racist language of other political movement groups.”

“Truth remained active in the civil rights movement until 1875 when her grandson Sammy fell ill. She returned to Battle Creek, Michigan, but her attempts to nurse Sammy back to health failed. The loss of her grandson, one of Truth's dearest companions, devastated her. In the years following Sammy's death, Truth's own health began to fail and she made only limited appearances around Michigan speaking against capital punishment. During this time she also attempted to vote in the Presidential election –she attempted to vote for Grant –but was turned away at the polling station. Her health continued to deteriorate until she was admitted into a Michigan sanitarium for infected ulcers of the legs. Contemporary mythology claims that her doctor, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, grafted patches of his own skin onto Truth's legs in an attempt to heal her infections. Truth passed away from health complications in November 26, 1883. She was buried two days later next to her grandson Sammy in the family plot in Battle Creek, Michigan.”

Truth is best known for her years as a speaker and street preacher in the 1850' s and 60' s when she befriended fellow abolitionists Olive Gilbert and William Lloyd Garrison. Gilbert and Garrison helped the illiterate Truth pen and publish her memoirs, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave* (1850). Gilbert"