

Sojourner Truth

Abolitionist and Women's Rights Activist



Sojourner Truth's *carte de visite*, copies of which she sold to make money.

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) was born Isabella Baumfree, enslaved in upstate New York, and she walked to freedom in 1826. Through her grit and determination, fueled by her experiences of cruelty, activist Christianity and the abolitionist movement, she became an outspoken, respected advocate for abolition, civil rights, women's rights and temperance. In 1843 she re-named herself "Sojourner Truth"—a traveler for truth.

Isabella Baumfree was born into slavery on a Dutch man's plantation in Swartekill, New York, but escaped with her infant daughter to freedom in 1826. In 1828, when she learned that her son Peter had been sold illegally to a new owner in Alabama, she successfully sued to get him back—one of the first instances of a Black woman prevailing against a White man in court. This was her first step in an activism that would fuel her life.

She left for New York City with Peter and became involved with religious revivals sweeping the state in the early 1830s. In 1843, she felt a spiritual call to "preach the truth." She re-named herself "Sojourner Truth," and became known as a charismatic preacher and abolitionist. She met fellow abolitionists Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison encouraged Truth to give speeches about her experiences as a slave.

In 1850, Sojourner Truth, who had never learned to read or write, dictated her autobiography to a friend. The *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* provided an income and set her on a national stage. She embraced the causes of women's rights and temperance. In 1851, Truth gave her famous speech, later called "Ain't I A Woman?", at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention. (The speech was later rewritten by someone else, imparting to her a Southern dialect to Truth – far from her own Dutch-accented English.) In her speech, she demanded equal human rights for all women as well as for all Black people. Advocating for women and African Americans was dangerous and challenging enough, but speaking as an African American woman was far more difficult.

Sojourner Truth eventually settled in Battle Creek, Michigan. She continued to speak nationally about the causes dear to her: abolition, women's rights and temperance. During the Civil War she worked diligently for the Union and helped supply African American troops. Afterwards, she was involved with the Freedmen's Bureau, helping formerly enslaved people find work.

In 1871, Truth spoke at the American Woman's Suffrage Association Convention. In her final years, although remaining a staunch supporter of woman's suffrage, she distanced herself from many of the groups because she disagreed with some of their views.

Truth died in 1883 at her home in Battle Creek—a well-respected citizen, known equally for her dedication to women's rights and to civil rights.



Mary Church Terrell: “To Promote the Welfare of My Race”



Mary Church Terrell

Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954) was born in Memphis, Tenn., to a formerly enslaved couple who were among the first Southern African Americans to become millionaires. Her student years were mostly untouched by the vicious reality of racial discrimination and violence. As the only Black student in her class at Oberlin College, she felt compelled to excel academically to prove that African Americans were not intellectually inferior, and earned both bachelor's and master's degrees.

After college, over her father's objections—he wanted her to spend her days in genteel social and cultural pursuits—she joined the faculty of Wilberforce University in Ohio. In 1887, she moved to Washington, D.C., to teach high school Latin. After a two-year tour of Europe—and thoughts of living abroad because European society was far less bigoted—she felt obligated to return to the United States, she later said, to “promote the welfare of my race.” She spent the rest of her life in this pursuit.

Following her marriage to Robert Heberton Terrell in 1891, Terrell devoted her energies to community work. She became the first African American woman to serve on the Board of Education for the District of Columbia, and in 1896 was elected president of the new National Association of Colored Women, a national federation of

Black women's clubs. Her words, “Lifting as We Climb,” became the motto of NACW.

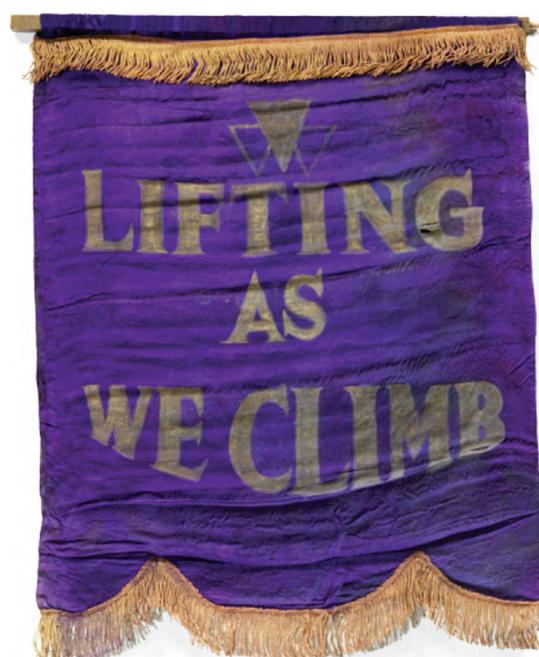
Terrell was a firm believer in the idea that African Americans would help end racial discrimination by advancing themselves and each other through education, work, and community activism. She believed in the power of equal opportunity and the impact of one person's success upon the advancement of the entire race.

In 1910, she cofounded the College Alumnae Club, which later became the National Association of University Women. She was also a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and worked vigorously to end lynching and discrimination, unafraid to take her protests to the highest levels of government.

Terrell also embarked upon a public-speaking career. She lectured about women's rights and wrote newspaper and magazine articles on African American history and life. She fought for both women's suffrage and civil rights because she knew she was, in her words, part of “the only group in this country that has two such huge obstacles to surmount ... both sex and race.” She picketed the White House along with other suffragists – starting with the 1913 Women's Parade -- to demand women's right to vote.

To the end of her life, Terrell strove to combat racial injustice. In 1950, at the age of eighty-seven, she led sit-ins and picket lines to end segregation in Washington, D.C. coffee shops. In 1953, the Supreme Court ruled that segregated eating places in Washington were unconstitutional.

Mary Church Terrell died on July 24, 1954. With dignity and determination, she fought for justice and better opportunities for all African Americans and for women.



Florence Spearing Randolph:

A Life Committed to Gender and Racial Equality



Florence Spearing Randolph 1919

Florence Spearing Randolph (1866-1951) was a suffragist, minister, missionary and African American women's club leader. Her achievements spanned a wide range of religious and social activism, yet this accomplished woman is little known.

Florence Randolph was born in Charleston, S.C., to a prosperous family. Her parents and grandparents had escaped the horrors of being enslaved and grew up as free Blacks. She graduated from a Charleston teacher training school, but chose to become a dressmaker. In 1885, she joined her sisters in Jersey City, N.J., where she could command higher wages and escape the repression of the Jim Crow South. In Jersey City, she met and married Hugh Randolph, a Pullman Company cook. They had one daughter, Leah Viola.

Active at her local African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church, Randolph became interested in the ministry, embarking on an intensive study of the Bible under the guidance of a Greek and Hebrew scholar.

During the late 1880s and 1890s, she found her political voice by joining the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). After she watched the police haul a drunken young man from a saloon, she recalled, an encounter with a White WCTU member *"marked the beginning of fourteen years of real missionary work among those who suffer from strong drink and from poverty."*

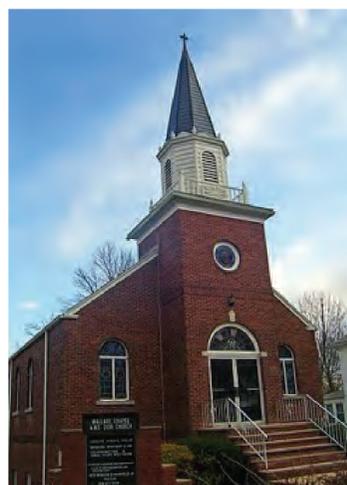
As an organizer and public speaker for the WCTU, she was zealous in her opposition to racism and sexism. She promoted women's suffrage and also dedicated herself to missionary work.

Her reputation as a compelling public speaker spread and Randolph was invited to address both Black and White congregations. In 1898, she was admitted to the New Jersey Conference of the AME Zion Church, though the presiding bishop and other ministers were opposed to appointing a woman.

Equally important was her leadership in the African American women's club movement, a potent force for helping Black women improve their lives and communities. In 1915, Rev. Randolph helped to organize the New Jersey Federation of Colored Women's Clubs (NJFCWC). On behalf of the federation, she appealed directly to President Woodrow Wilson, asking him to address the issues of race rioting, the sexual assault of Black women, and lynching, which took the lives of more than 4,000 African Americans across twenty states between 1877 and 1950.

She imbued the federation with a commitment to improve Black lives. Politically savvy and resourceful, she urged club members to find ways to help shape more equitable policies. She also urged federation members to reach out to White women and work with them on issues of concern to all women.

An ardent suffragist, Rev. Randolph was a member of the executive board of the New Jersey State Suffrage Association and spoke before the state legislature in 1915 on behalf of the 19th Amendment.



Wallace Chapel, Summit, NJ

In 1925, she was appointed pastor of Wallace Chapel in Summit, N.J., and became the first African American woman to study theology at Drew University.

Rev. Randolph also advocated for greater scholarship and knowledge of African American history. She supported the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and under her

tenure the NJFCWC was one of the first organizations to proclaim the significance of African American history.

Florence Spearing Randolph died in 1951. Throughout her long and remarkable life, she used the bully pulpit and her energy, commitment, and organizational skills to combat racism and sexism and help those in need.

