

# 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.

