Sojourner Truth:

Speak Up!

by Jackie Churchill

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An Outspoken Woman

Have you ever been impressed when someone stands up and says just what he or she is thinking? It takes a lot of courage to face a crowd and speak your mind, doesn't it?

At the Women's Rights Convention in 1851, a tall African American woman did just that. When she took the stage in Akron, Ohio, her strong words and deep voice captured the crowd's attention. She spoke about the movement to gain rights for white women. She asked whether black women would share those same rights. Then she challenged the audience to say whether black women should have these rights by asking loudly and clearly: "Ain't I a woman?"

That outspoken woman was named Sojourner Truth. She was a woman who was never afraid to speak her mind.

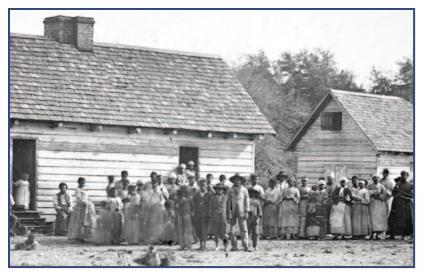
Struggling Under Slavery

Sojourner Truth did not have an easy life. She was born a slave some time around 1797 in New York State. At that time, her name was Isabella. Like many other slaves, Isabella was never given the chance to learn how to read and write.

Isabella and other members of her family were bought and sold by different slave owners. Some owners treated their slaves very badly. Isabella



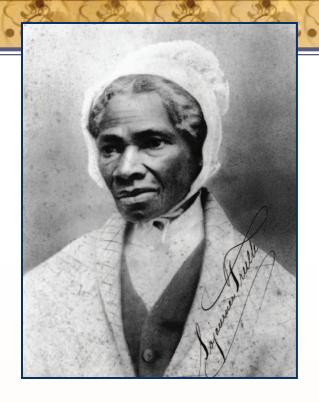
suffered terrible beatings and cruelties. She married another slave, but was later separated from her husband. She never saw her husband again. Most of Isabella's children were also taken from her and sold to other slave owners. Most people would have been inconsolable after these events, but Isabella struggled on.



Slaves were bought and sold by their owners.

In 1826, Isabella and her baby daughter escaped from her master with the help of some kind friends. The following year her freedom was made legitimate when the state of New York made slavery illegal.

By 1829, Isabella had settled in New York City. She worked there as maid. It was during this time that Isabella came to understand what she wanted to do with her life.

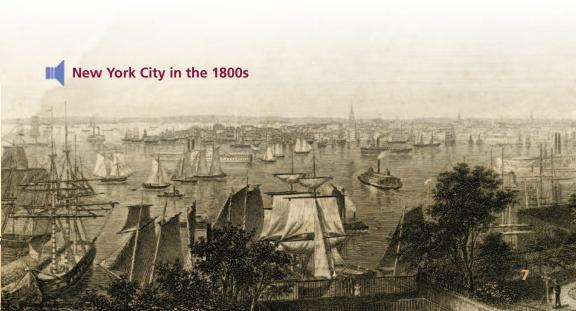


A New Name and Life

In New York City, Isabella was troubled. The inexplicable unfairness that she saw all around her it made her sad. Isabella felt the call to travel and lecture about the things that bothered her. She wanted to preach about hope, faith, and justice. It was at this time that she changed her name to Sojourner Truth. A sojourner is a person who visits many places. Isabella's new name matched her new life as a traveler and searcher for the truth.

With no permanent destination in mind, Sojourner Truth left New York City. She traveled to many towns and villages to speak and listen and learn. She became known for her powerful presence and motivating speeches. These speeches caused many listeners to think about and change their own beliefs.

By 1843, Sojourner Truth had moved to Northampton, Massachusetts. In Northampton, Sojourner Truth found herself among friends who shared her concerns and beliefs. She became part of a group of people that wanted to abolish slavery and support rights for women. But the urge to preach never disappeared, and Sojourner Truth still traveled to share her experiences, ideas, and beliefs.



Sojourner Truth became a very popular speaker. She traveled all around the Midwest to argue against slavery and for the rights of women. She was able to support herself by selling printed copies of a book that a friend helped her to write about her life as a slave in New York.

Sojourner Truth's intention was to spread her ideas across the land. She wanted to make others believe in truth and fairness. Because she could not read or write, Sojourner Truth did not write her speeches. Her words came directly from her heart.

By the 1850s, Sojourner Truth had settled in Battle Creek, Michigan. That city became her home for the rest of her life. By this time, she attracted huge crowds wherever she spoke. Everywhere she spoke, she touched the hearts and minds of listeners.

Frances Dana Gage helped to organize the Women's Rights Convention, where Sojourner Truth asked the famous question, "Ain't I a woman?" Here's how Mrs. Gage described the crowd's reaction to that speech: "Amid roars of applause, she returned to her corner, leaving more than one of us with streaming eyes, and hearts beating with gratitude."

Many of the people who came to hear Sojourner Truth speak may have shared her opinions. But she wanted her audience to think about—and question—their beliefs more deeply. This kind of challenge is clear in this excerpt from a speech she made to the American Equal Rights Association in 1867:

"There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again."



A painting made in the 1890s showed President Lincoln meeting with Sojourner Truth.

Fighting to End Slavery

During the Civil War, Sojourner Truth began to get involved in politics. She worked to enlist black soldiers to fight for the Union. She convinced even greater numbers of followers to join her in working to bring slavery to an end. Her travels took her to Washington, D.C. There, Sojourner Truth met President Abraham Lincoln at the White House.

- Sojourner Truth was very impressed with her meeting with the President. She described it this way:
- "I must say, and I am proud to say, that I never was treated by any one with more kindness and cordiality than were shown to me by that great and good man, Abraham Lincoln, by the grace of God president of the United States for four years more. He took my little book, and with the same hand that signed the death-warrant of slavery, wrote as follows:"

For Aunty Sojourner Truth

October 29, 1864

A.Linick

Honoring a Remarkable Woman

Sojourner Truth became one of the best-known African American women of her time. She continued her travels throughout her life, giving talks and remaining active until she was 75. She died in 1883, in Battle Creek. Her funeral there attracted crowds of people. They all came to pay their respects to this remarkable woman.



A monument to Sojourner Truth keeps her message alive for future generations.

Sojourner Truth's life and work has influenced countless others. Many have sought to honor her life and work by building memorials in places like Battle Creek, Michigan, and Northampton, Massachusetts. Sojourner Truth was named to the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1981. In 1986, the United States Postal Service issued a special postage stamp to honor her. The stamp had the image of Sojourner Truth on it.

- Sojourner Truth has become an example for our people in our country. In 2008, she became the first black woman to be honored with a statue at the U.S. Capitol. At the unveiling of the statue, First Lady Michelle Obama remarked that "now many young boys and girls, like my own daughters, will come to Emancipation Hall and see the face of a woman who looks like them."
- Sojourner Truth's influence has even carried beyond Earth! A Mars Rover was named in her honor, and in 1997, the Mars probe explored the surface of the red planet. It seems right that the memory of this remarkable woman continues to travel, doesn't it?

III A Mars Rover was named for Sojourner Truth.



THE WORDS OF SOJOURNER TRUTH LIVE ON

- "Those are the same stars, and that is the same moon, that look down upon your brothers and sisters, and which they see as they look up to them, though they are ever so far away from us, and each other."
- "If women wants more rights than they got, why don't they just take them, and not be talking about it."
- "I'm not going to die, I'm going home like a shooting star."
- "I feel safe in the midst of my enemies, for the truth is all powerful and will prevail."

Responding

TARGET SKILL Author's Purpose This

book informs people about the life of an important person in U.S. history. That was the author's purpose. Copy the chart below. Add two reasons why the author believes this person was important.

Sojourner
Truth
fought for
the rights
of women.

To tell about an important person in U.S. History

Write About It

Text to Text Sojourner Truth helped change history. Think of a person you read about who also changed history. Make a list of how he or she did it. Then write a paragraph explaining how he or she changed history.

TARGET VOCABULARY

destination inexplicable
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guttural legitimate
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- TARGET STRATEGY Question Ask questions about a selection before you read, as you read, and after you read.
- GENRE Literary Nonfiction gives factual information by telling a true story.

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