

Sojourner Truth

1797-1883

Sojourner Truth had four major roles in life: mother, abolitionist, suffragist, and spiritualist. Sojourner Truth was born a slave in 1797 on the Johannes Hardenbergh estate in Ulster County. She was the second of thirteen children born to Elizabeth and James Bomefree and started life as Isabella Bomefree. Before Dumont, she had three masters then she was sold to John Dumont of New Paltz, New York. She was his slave for eighteen years. She had five children. Her first language was Dutch but she later learned English. She could not read or write so studied the Bible and other great books by rote. She remained a social, political, and religious activist for all of her life.



Isabella Bomefree was promised her freedom by her last owner John Dumont. At the last minute, he changed his mind and so in 1826 she escaped with her youngest child. She went to live with Issac Van Wageningen who bought her freedom. She adopted his name. She continued to be very proactive in securing her rights. When her son was sold illegally she brought suit against the perpetrators and won. Later when she was accused of being a part of a murder plot she sued for slander and successfully won the suit in 1829.

Isabella had always been actively involved in religion. As a child she claimed to have heard voices and seen visions. In 1827, Isabella had a “Pauline” experience in which she reports that she felt ‘the breath of God.’ This had such a profound effect on her that she changed her name to Sojourner Truth. Later in 1829 when she moved to New York City, she joined the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. She worked as a housekeeper for Elijah Pierson who belonged to the Perfectionist Sect. Even though her relationship with these religious extremists was short lived she continued her zealous commitment to studying the Bible, developing her oratory skills, and reforming the role of Blacks and women in the American society. In 1843 Sojourner Truth became ill and was treated by David Ruggles who was also a Black abolitionist. There she met many other abolitionists. This ushered in a new phase of her life.

In 1846, at age forty nine, Sojourner Truth became fully entrenched as a suffragist and abolitionist. In order to pay her expense as she travelled to propagate her beliefs, she published *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* in 1850. This was written by Olive Gilbert. In 1851 she bought a house in Northhampton. She continued to travel extensively giving anti slavery speeches and championing the rights of women combined with fearless charismatic preaching of the Bible. Her famous “Ain’t I am Woman” speech was delivered in 1851 at the second annual Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in Akron.

During the civil war, Sojourner Truth recruited for Michigan's Black regiment, counseled freedwomen, and set up employment opportunities for freed people. She initiated the desegregation of the streetcars in Washington DC and had an audience with Abraham Lincoln. In 1864 she moved to Michigan and settled in Battle Creek. She died in 1883 attended by the physician John Harvey Kellogg, the breakfast cereal founder.

Works Cited

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