

# SOJOURNER TRUTH

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## BASIC BIOGRAPHY

Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) was born Isabella Van Wageren into slavery in New York. Truth escaped slavery in 1826 and moved to New York City until 1843 when she adopted the name “Sojourner Truth” in anticipation of her new career: traveling to preach what she saw as God’s truth about the status of women and slavery. Although illiterate and uneducated, Truth was a skilled public speaker and best known for her impromptu speeches delivered on the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, and other social issues of the day. Resourceful and devoted to her cause, Truth supported herself through sales of her dictated 1850 biography, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth, A Northern Slave*, as well as portraits of herself known as carte vistas, which resemble modern baseball cards. Just one year after her biography was published, Truth delivered her most well-known speech, “Ain’t I A Woman,” to a Women’s Rights Convention in Ohio, arguing against the injustice of the overlooked subordinate status of women in American life. During the Civil War, Truth collected food and supplies for U.S. Colored Troop Regiments and continued to fight for racial equality during Reconstruction when she fought for freedmen’s rights. During this time, she never stopped advocating for women’s equality.

## KEY EVENTS

“Ain’t I A Woman?” Speech (1851), Civil War, Freedmen’s Bureau (1865–1872)

## KEY PEOPLE

William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Cady Stanton

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Abolitionist leaders in the 1840s, fueled by the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening, included those on the forefront of women’s suffrage such as Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Mott and Stanton both experienced gender discrimination at the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London and organized the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention in response. Abolitionists advocated the immediate end to slavery on moral grounds, but split over the issue of extending equal rights to women. It was in the context of this moment that Truth delivered her “Ain’t I A Woman?” speech to forcefully remind abolitionists and suffragists alike that America faced challenges of both racism and gender discrimination.



Sojourner Truth, *Library of Congress (JK1881.N357)*, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbcmil.scrp1000203>

## DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Make and distribute one copy of the speech to each student.
- Preview the speech, clarifying difficult vocabulary as needed for students.
- Divide students into pairs and give each partner a different color highlighter.
- Ask one student to read and annotate the document for Truth’s religious arguments against gender inequality.
- Ask the other student to read and annotate the document for Truth’s arguments against gender inequality that cite her life experience.
- Make students trade papers and annotate their partner’s paper for the reasons they found in a different color.
- Ask partners to use their annotations to fill out the t-chart on the document together.



A. Lincoln showing Sojourner Truth the Bible presented by colored people of Baltimore, Executive Mansion, Washington, D.C., Oct. 29, 1864, c. 1893, Library of Congress (LC-USZ62-16225), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a18453/>

## LEARNING ACTIVITY

- Ask each student to think of an issue of importance to their identity today (race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, nationality, etc.).
  - » *Teacher Tip: Students could also choose a political issue not related to their identity, such as taking the perspective of an iceberg for a poem about global warming.*
- Instruct students to write a poem arguing in favor of the improvement of their status using reasons for why they deserve recognition just as Truth did in her speech.
- Ask students to include a question that they repeat after each reason where they ask, “Ain’t I A ...?”
- Invite students to share their poems with their partners and then select a few students to share out with the class.

## FUN FACT

Truth’s “Ain’t I A Woman?” speech was delivered off-the-cuff and thus was only recorded in newspapers of the time. To promote Truth’s status as a former slave, Frances Dana Gage rewrote and published the speech in the style of someone with a southern dialect from that period. To read Gage’s 1863 version of the speech, visit <http://www.sojournertruth.org/Library/Speeches/AintiAWoman.htm>.

## LOCAL CONNECTION

You can visit the site of Truth’s speech in Akron, Ohio, at the Sojourner Truth Building (<https://www.theclio.com/web/entry?id=52523>) as well as a monument dedicated to Sojourner Truth in her longtime home of Battle Creek, Michigan, at the Kimball House Historical Museum. To learn more visit: [https://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/mhc\\_mitten\\_sojourner-truth\\_308425\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/mhc_mitten_sojourner-truth_308425_7.pdf).

## LEARN MORE

### PRIMARY SOURCES

Sojourner Truth: Online Resources  
Library of Congress  
<https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/truth/>

### SECONDARY SOURCES

Heritage Battle Creek Research Center  
Sojourner Truth Institute  
<http://www.sojournertruth.org/>

Sojourner Truth  
National Women’s History Museum  
<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/sojourner-truth>

## SOJOURNER TRUTH, “AIN’T I A WOMAN?”

“Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that ‘twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all this here talking about?”

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what’s this they call it? [member of audience whispers, “intellect”] That’s it, honey. What’s that got to do with women’s rights or negroes’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain’t got nothing more to say.”

*Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I A Woman?,” 1851, Modern History Sourcebook, Fordham University, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>*

RELIGIOUS REASONS	LIFE EXPERIENCE REASONS