

Sojourner Truth Biography

Sojourner Truth

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Biography

Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797-1883) was a black American freedom fighter and orator. She believed herself chosen by God to preach His word and to help with the abolitionist effort to free her people.

Sojourner Truth was born Isabella Baumfree in Ulster County, N.Y., the daughter of an African named Baumfree (after his Dutch owner) and a woman called Elizabeth. About the age of 9 she was auctioned off to an Englishman named John Nealy. The Nealys understood very little of her Dutch jargon and, as a result, she was often brutally punished for no real reason.

Eventually Nealy sold her to a fisherman who owned a tavern in Kingston, N.Y. Here she acquired the idiomatic expressions which came to mark her speech. John J. Dumont, a nearby plantation owner, purchased her next. During her tenure with his family she married and had five children. In 1827, after New York had passed an emancipation act freeing its slaves, she prepared to take her family away. But Dumont began to show reluctance to this, so she ran away with only her youngest child.

She finally wound up in New York City. She worked at a menial job and through some friends came under the sway of a religious fanatic named Mathias. Eventually disillusioned by her life in New York and by Mathias, in 1843 she left on what she termed a pilgrimage to spread the truth of God's word. She assumed the name Sojourner Truth, which she believed God had given her as a symbolic representation of her mission in life. Soon her reputation as an orator spread, and large crowds greeted her wherever she spoke.

A controversial figure for most of the rest of her life, Truth engaged the courts in two rather unusual cases, winning them both and establishing precedents. Thus, she became the first black to win a slander suit against prominent whites, and the first black woman to test the legality of segregation of Washington, D.C., streetcars.

During the Civil War, Truth bought gifts for the soldiers with money raised from her lectures and helped fugitive slaves find work and housing. After the war she continued her tirade for the Lord and against racial injustice, even when old age and ill health restricted her activities to the confines of a Battle Creek, Mich., sanatorium. She died there on Nov. 26, 1883.