

# Sojourner Truth

c. 1797–1883



**WHY SHE MADE HISTORY** An African American evangelist and reformer, Sojourner Truth supported women's rights and the abolition of slavery.



*As you read the biography below, think about Sojourner Truth's beliefs. Why did she speak out against slavery and for women's rights? Why do you think people listened to what she had to say?*



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In the years prior to the Civil War, many people spoke out against slavery. One of the most outspoken supporters of abolition was Sojourner Truth, a former slave. Truth gained her freedom when the state of New York declared slavery illegal. She spent her life working to help slaves.

The daughter of slaves, Sojourner Truth was born Isabella Baumfree in Ulster, New York, around 1797. Her first language was Dutch because her parents spoke this language. She spent much of her childhood living with different slave owners. The most notable was the Dumont family.

About 1815 Baumfree married a fellow slave named Thomas. They had five children. The couple separated some time after 1827, the year that slavery was declared illegal in New York. When a member of the Dumont family illegally sold one of her sons into slavery, Baumfree sued in court and won his return. Around the same time, Baumfree became a born-again Christian. She moved to New York City and supported herself by working as a housekeeper.

Growing up, Baumfree had many visions. She believed these visions came from God. Baumfree was active in the Methodist Church, and became a missionary preaching in the streets.

In 1843 Baumfree began using the name Sojourner Truth, which roughly means someone who travels from place to place telling the truth. She believed she had been called upon by the Holy Spirit to spread the word of God. She traveled to many cities and towns, and often preached to large crowds. She also became an outspoken advocate of women's rights and abolition. She ultimately moved to a utopian community in Northampton, Massachusetts, and became involved in antislavery meetings there.

Her autobiography, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, was published in 1850. Truth supported herself with money from book sales and continued

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Reconstruction**

## **Biography**

to travel the country preaching and advocating for women's rights. She settled in Battle Creek, Michigan, in the 1850s.

During the Civil War, Sojourner Truth helped gather supplies for African American volunteer regiments. In 1864 she went to Washington to help integrate streetcars. She also visited President Abraham Lincoln in the White House. After the war, Truth suggested creating a state for former slaves in the West and helped counsel former enslaved African Americans.

Sojourner Truth retired in 1875 and remained in Battle Creek until her death eight years later.

### **WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

1. **Describe** How did Sojourner Truth help the Civil War effort?

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2. **Analyze** Why did Sojourner Truth preach to people everywhere?

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### **ACTIVITY**

Sojourner Truth advocated for women's rights and the abolition of slavery. How do you view Sojourner Truth? Write a short essay that explains what Sojourner Truth's life and legacy mean to you.