

Sojourner Truth

Women's Rights Activist and
Civil Rights Activist
(1797-1883)



Background

- Born into slavery around 1797 in upstate New York. (“Her History”)
- She became a free woman in 1826
- Sojourner Truth is a self-given name; she was originally named Isabella
- In 1843, she felt commanded by God to leave her home in New York and change her name to Sojourner Truth (Dicker 32)
- After leaving New York, she became a prominent abolitionist
- Religion influenced her speeches
- Most popular speech
 - “Ain’t I a Woman?”



“Ain’t I a Woman” background

- Truth’s most famous speech is titled “Ain’t I a Woman,” which she delivered at the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio.
- At the time of the Convention, Truth was already known for her efforts to abolish slavery. Others at the Convention feared that Truth would distract from the focus of gender equality by raising the topic of slavery.
- Some members of the crowd verbally abused Truth as she approached the podium to deliver her speech (Dicker 32).
- Audience members were soon captivated by Truth’s speech; the Convention’s presiding member, Frances Gage, later said that Truth had “taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty.” (Dicker 33)
- Sadly, there is much confusion over the exact wording of Truth’s speech. Frances Gage’s transcription, the most commonly cited, may be flawed because it uses a Southern dialect despite Truth never living in the South. (“Her Words”)

Quote

“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?”

- From Truth’s 1851 “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech (as recounted by Frances Gage)

Context

- Truth's fiery and motivated repetition of the speech's key phrase ("Ain't I a Woman?") can be seen as a response to the negative reception she received from crowd members at the Women's Rights Convention.
- Truth ties together her struggle as a woman with her struggle as a slave, showing an early belief in intersectional feminism.
- Despite audience members' original concerns that Truth would distract from the Convention's focus by bringing up slavery, her impassioned statements were well received. According to all accounts, the audience stood and enthusiastically applauded. ("Her Words")

Quote

“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 are asking to do it, the men better let them.”

- From Truth’s 1851 “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech (as recounted by Frances Gage)

FREE LECTURE!

SOJOURNER TRUTH,

Who has been a slave in the State of New York, and who has been a Lecturer for the last twenty-three years, whose characteristics have been so vividly portrayed by Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, as the African Sybil, will deliver a lecture upon the present issues of the day,

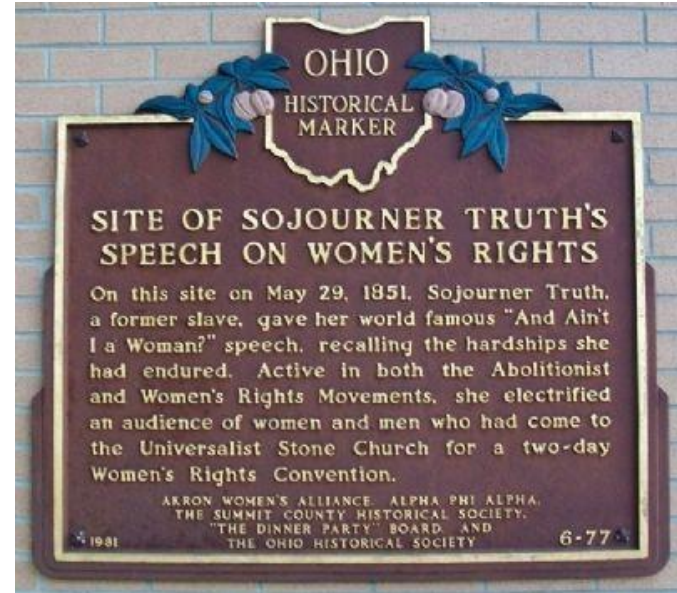
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And will give her experience as a Slave mother and religious woman. She comes highly recommended as a public speaker, having the approval of many thousands who have heard her earnest appeals, among whom are Wendell Phillips, Wm. Lloyd Garrison, and other distinguished men of the nation.

☞ At the close of her discourse she will offer for sale her photograph and a few of her choice songs.

Context

- Truth's Christian beliefs show through in her speeches and serve as inspiration for her feminist thinking.
- In this quote, Truth is referring to the biblical story of Adam and Eve.
- While some feminist thinkers have seen religion (and Christianity in particular) as being unhelpful or even hurtful to gender equality, Truth believed that her Christianity and feminism supported each other.



Elizabeth Cady Stanton

- Abolitionist as well as women's rights activist
- Seneca Falls Convention: July 1848
 - Composed "Declaration of Sentiments"
 - Work with Susan B Anthony
- Uses bible for restriction of Women's Rights
- Challenging legislation



Final Questions

- What do you think about feminists' differing views on Christianity and feminism? Do you agree with Truth's view that Christianity and feminism support each other, or do you agree with Stanton's view that the Bible is a barrier to gender equality?
- How do you think Truth was able to turn a hostile crowd into a supportive one with her "Ain't I a Woman?" speech?
- Do you think Truth's early life as a slave aided in her ability to be an influential figure of First wave feminism? Why or why not?

Works Cited

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