

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • LEGEND

Ain't I a Woman?

Sojourner Truth and a Speech Rewritten Twelve Years Later

Prepared for the Two Americas Archive

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Contribution Track • ERA III • Ulster County, New York

Who She Is

Sojourner Truth was born Isabella Baumfree around 1797, enslaved in a Dutch-speaking household in Ulster County, New York — Dutch, not English, was her first language, and she spoke with a Dutch accent her entire life. Sold away from her parents around age nine, sold at least once more, and eventually held by John Dumont, she walked away from bondage in late 1826 after Dumont broke a promise to free her ahead of New York's scheduled emancipation. "I did not run off, for I thought that was wicked," she said, "but I walked off, believing that to be all right."

A Court Case Won

After her escape, her former enslaver illegally sold her young son Peter into slavery in Alabama, violating New York law. Truth pursued the case in Ulster County and won, securing Peter's return — one of the first instances of a Black woman successfully suing a white man in an American court. In 1843, after a religious conversion, she renamed herself Sojourner Truth, explaining that she was "to travel up and down the land, showing people their sins... and Truth, because I was to declare the truth unto the people."

Ain't I a Woman?

Truth delivered a speech at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron on May 29, 1851, that became one of the most quoted texts of American reform oratory — but the version everyone knows is not the version anyone recorded at the time. A contemporary transcription by Rev. Marius Robinson, published about a month later in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, is written in plain standard English and does not contain the phrase "Ain't I a woman" at all. The famous version, written down twelve years later by Frances Gage in 1863 for wartime effect, renders Truth in a heavy Southern-slave dialect — despite the fact that she was a lifelong New Yorker who had never lived in the South and spoke with a Dutch accent, not a Southern one. This entry treats the Gage version as a contested, later reconstruction rather than Truth's verified words, and presents the Robinson transcription as the more historically reliable record.

War Work and a Streetcar

During the Civil War Truth recruited Black soldiers, worked with the National Freedmen's Relief Association aiding formerly enslaved people resettling in Washington, and met President Lincoln at the White House in 1864. She personally forced the arrest of a Washington streetcar conductor who violently barred her from riding, and in 1872 attempted to vote in Battle Creek, Michigan, and was turned away. She died there November 26, 1883.

NC Local Lens

No documented North Carolina connection exists for Sojourner Truth, and none is claimed here. Her lecture circuit ran almost entirely through the North and Midwest — a Black abolitionist woman speaking publicly in an antebellum Southern slave state would have faced legal prohibition and mortal danger, and no source documents a Southern tour stop at any point in her life. A community space in Charlotte, NC bearing her name is a modern namesake, not evidence of a historical visit, and this entry does not treat it as one.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

The Gage transcription: this entry treats the dialect version as contested rather than authentic; any quotation from it should be labeled as the 1863 Gage rendering, not verified verbatim speech.

Birth year: estimated as c. 1797; her own tombstone reportedly claims age 105 at death, an unresolved discrepancy.

The 1828 court case defendant: named inconsistently across secondary sources; verify against the New York State Archives' rediscovered court documents before stating specifics.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Sojourner Truth," National Park Service, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/people/sojourner-truth.htm>.
2. "Sojourner Truth: Ain't I A Woman?," National Park Service, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/sojourner-truth.htm>.
3. "Sojourner Truth," Library of Congress, African American Odyssey, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/odyssey/educate/truth.html>.
4. "Compare the Speeches," The Sojourner Truth Project (Robinson 1851 vs. Gage 1863 transcriptions, side by side), accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.thesojournertruthproject.com/compare-the-speeches>.
5. "Sojourner Truth: New documents reveal abolitionist's court case to free her child from slavery," CNN, February 27, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/27/us/sojourner-truth-court-battle-ny-archives/index.html>.
6. "Sojourner Truth," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sojourner-Truth>.

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