

ACE WOMEN'S Network™ Michigan

Mentoring Mondays
February 8, 2021



In recognition of Black History Month, we will be sharing information about notable women history makers and historical events in the lives of African Americans during February. This week, we begin with a speech by Sojourner Truth, delivered in 1851 at a women's rights conference held in Akron, Ohio. The historical account of this event begins as follows:

“The event had been dominated by male speakers who spoke eloquently about the delicate nature of women and the superior intellect of men, Eve’s role in committing the “original sin” and Christ’s masculine nature: that is, that if God had desired the equality of women this would be reflected in the birth, life and death of the Savior. Few women dared to speak, the men in the audience were enjoying seeing the arguments for female suffrage demolished and there was consternation when the freed slave and abolitionist campaigner, Sojourner Truth, took the stage, partly because people feared that she would hijack the meeting for the abolitionist cause. In a few short statements, she turned the tables on the self-satisfied men.”

“Ain’t I a Woman?”

[Re-print without the dialect]

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

That man over there said that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helped me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gave me any best place!

And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arms! 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 I could bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne 13 children, and seen most of them 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 do they call it? (*Intellect, whispers someone near her*) That’s it, honey. What’s that got to do with women’s rights or Negro’s 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 say women can’t have as much right as men, because Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? (*Directed at a minister who had made that argument*) 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 are asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner has nothing more to say.”

Biography of Sojourner Truth

A former slave, Sojourner Truth became an outspoken advocate for abolition, temperance, and civil and women's rights in the nineteenth century. Her Civil War work earned her an invitation to meet President Abraham Lincoln in 1864.

Truth was born Isabella Bomfree, a slave in Dutch-speaking Ulster County, New York in 1797. She was bought and sold four times, and subjected to harsh physical labor and violent punishments. In her teens, she was united with another slave with whom she had five children, beginning in 1815. In 1827, a year before New York's law freeing slaves was to take effect, Truth ran away with her infant Sophia to a nearby abolitionist family, the Van Wageners. The family bought her freedom for twenty dollars and helped Truth successfully sue for the return of her five-year-old-son Peter, who was illegally sold into slavery in Alabama.

Truth moved to New York City in 1828, where she worked for a local minister. By the early 1830s, she participated in the religious revivals that were sweeping the state and became a charismatic speaker. In 1843, she declared that the Spirit called on her to preach the truth, renaming herself Sojourner Truth.

As an itinerant preacher, Truth met abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass. Garrison's anti-slavery organization encouraged Truth to give speeches about the evils of slavery. She never learned to read or write. In 1850, she dictated what would become her autobiography, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, to Olive Gilbert, who assisted in its publication. Truth survived on sales of the book, which also brought her national recognition. She met women's rights activists, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, as well as temperance advocates, both causes she quickly championed.

In 1851, Truth began a lecture tour that included a women's rights conference in Akron, Ohio, where she delivered her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech. In it, she challenged prevailing notions of racial and gender inferiority and inequality by reminding listeners of her combined strength (Truth was nearly six feet tall) and female status. Truth ultimately split with Douglass, who believed suffrage for formerly enslaved men should come before women's suffrage; she thought both should occur simultaneously.

During the 1850's, Truth settled in Battle Creek, Michigan, where three of her daughters lived. She continued speaking nationally and helped slaves escape to freedom. When the Civil War started, Truth urged young men to join the Union cause and organized supplies for black troops. After the war, she was honored with an invitation to the White House and became involved with the Freedmen's Bureau, helping freed slaves find jobs and build new lives. While in Washington, DC, she lobbied against segregation, and in the mid-1860s, when a streetcar conductor tried to violently block her from riding, she ensured his arrest and won her subsequent case. In the late 1860s, she collected thousands of signatures on a petition to provide former slaves with land, though Congress never took action. Nearly blind and deaf towards the end of her life, Truth spent her final years in Michigan.