

Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth (/soʊˈdʒɜːrnər ˈtruːθ/; born **Isabella (Belle) Baumfree**; c. 1797 – November 26, 1883) was an African-American abolitionist and women's rights activist. Truth was born into slavery in Swartekill, Ulster County, New York, but escaped with her infant daughter to freedom in 1826. After going to court to recover her son in 1828, she became the first black woman to win such a case against a white man.

She gave herself the name Sojourner Truth in 1843 after she became convinced that God had called her to leave the city and go into the countryside "testifying the hope that was in her".^[1] Her best-known speech was delivered extemporaneously, in 1851, at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. The speech became widely known during the Civil War by the title "Ain't I a Woman?," a variation of the original speech re-written by someone else using a stereotypical Southern dialect; whereas Sojourner Truth was from New York and grew up speaking Dutch as her first language. During the Civil War, Truth helped recruit black troops for the Union Army; after the war, she tried unsuccessfully to secure land grants from the federal government for former slaves (summarized as the promise of Forty acres and a mule).

In 2014, Truth was included in Smithsonian magazine's list of the "100 Most Significant Americans of All Time".^[2]

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Sojourner Truth



An albumen silver print from approximately 1870 by Randall Studios

Born	Isabella Baumfree <div> <div>c. 1797</div> <div>Swartekill, New York, U.S.</div> </div>
Died	November 26, 1883 (aged 86) <div> <div>Battle Creek, Michigan, U.S.</div> </div>
Occupation	Abolitionist, author, human rights activist
Parent(s)	James Baumfree <div> <div>Elizabeth Baumfree</div> </div>

Early years

Truth was one of the ten or twelve^[3] children born to James and Elizabeth Baumfree (or Bomefree). Colonel Hardenbergh bought James and Elizabeth Baumfree from slave traders and kept their family at his estate in a big hilly area called by the Dutch name Swartekill (just north of present-dayRifton), in the town of Esopus, New York, 95 miles (153 km) north of New York City.^[4] Charles

Hardenbergh inherited his father's estate and continued to enslave people as a part of that estate's property^[5]

When Charles Hardenbergh died in 1806, nine-year-old Truth (known as Belle), was sold at an auction with a flock of sheep for \$100 to John Neely, near Kingston, New York. Until that time, Truth spoke only Dutch.^[6] She later described Neely as cruel and harsh, relating how he beat her daily and once even with a bundle of rods. Neely sold her in 1808, for \$105, to Martinus Schryver of Port Ewen, a tavern keeper, who owned her for eighteen months. Schryver sold her in 1810 to John Dumont of West Park, New York.^[7] Although this fourth owner was kindly disposed toward her, considerable tension existed between Truth and Dumont's wife, Elizabeth Waring Dumont, who harassed her and made her life more difficult.^[8]



House of Col. Johannes Hardenbergh

Around 1815, Truth met and fell in love with an enslaved man named Robert from a neighboring farm. Robert's owner (Charles Catton, Jr., a landscape painter) forbade their relationship; he did not want the people he enslaved to have children with people he was not enslaving, because he would not own the children. One day Robert snuck over to see Truth. When Catton and his son found him, they savagely beat Robert until Dumont finally intervened. Truth never saw Robert again after that day and he died a few years later.^[9] – the experience haunted Truth throughout her life. Truth eventually married an older enslaved man named Thomas. She bore five children: James, her firstborn, who died in childhood, Diana (1815), the result of a rape by either Robert or John Dumont, and Peter (1821), Elizabeth (1825), and Sophia (ca. 1826), all born after she and Thomas united.^[10]

Freedom

The state of New York began, in 1799, to legislate the abolition of slavery, although the process of emancipating those people enslaved in New York was not complete until July 4, 1827. Dumont had promised to grant Truth her freedom a year before the state emancipation, "if she would do well and be faithful." However, he changed his mind, claiming a hand injury had made her less productive. She was infuriated but continued working, spinning 100 pounds of wool, to satisfy her sense of obligation to him.

Late in 1826, Truth escaped to freedom with her infant daughter, Sophia. She had to leave her other children behind because they were not legally freed in the emancipation order until they had served as bound servants into their twenties. She later said "I did not run off, for I thought that wicked, but I walked off, believing that to be all right."^[6]

She found her way to the home of Isaac and Maria van Wagenen in New Paltz, who took her and her baby in. Isaac offered to buy her services for the remainder of the year (until the state's emancipation took effect), which Dumont accepted for \$20.^[6] She lived there until the New York State Emancipation Act was approved a year later

Truth learned that her son Peter, then five years old, had been sold illegally by Dumont to an owner in Alabama. With the help of the Van Wagenens, she took the issue to court and in 1828, after months of legal proceedings, she got back her son, who had been abused by those who were enslaving him.^[5] Truth became one of the first black women to go to court against a white man and win the case.^{[11][12]}

Truth had a life-changing religious experience during her stay with the Van Wagenens, and became a devout Christian. In 1829 she moved with her son Peter to New York City, where she worked as a housekeeper for Elijah Pierson, a Christian Evangelist. While in New York, she befriended Mary Simpson, a grocer on John Street who claimed she had once been enslaved by George Washington. They shared an interest in charity for the poor and became intimate friends. In 1832, she met Robert Matthews, also known as Prophet Matthias, and went to work for him as a housekeeper at the Matthias Kingdom communal colony.^[5] Elijah Pierson died, and Robert Matthews and Truth were accused of stealing from and poisoning him. Both were acquitted of the murder,^[6] though Matthews was convicted of lesser crimes, served time, and moved west.

In 1839, Truth's son Peter took a job on a whaling ship called the *Zone of Nantucket*. From 1840 to 1841, she received three letters from him, though in his third letter he told her he had sent five. Peter said he also never received any of her letters. When the ship returned to port in 1842, Peter was not on board and Truth never heard from him again.^[5]

The Result of Freedom

1843 was a turning point for Truth. She became a Methodist, and on June 1, she changed her name to *Sojourner Truth*. She told friends: "The Spirit calls me, and I must go" and left to make her way traveling and preaching about the abolition of slavery.^[13] At that time, Truth began attending Millerite Adventist campmeetings. However, that did not last since Jesus failed to appear in 1843 and then again in 1844. Like many others disappointed, Truth distanced herself from her Millerite friends for a while.^{[14][15]}

In 1844, she joined the Northampton Association of Education and Industry in Northampton, Massachusetts. Founded by abolitionists, the organization supported women's rights and religious tolerance as well as pacifism. There were, in its four-and-a-half year history, a total of 240 members, though no more than 120 at any one time.^[16] They lived on 470 acres (1.9 km²), raising livestock, running a sawmill, a gristmill, and a silk factory. While there, Truth met William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and David Ruggles. In 1846, the group disbanded, unable to support itself.^[6] In 1845, she joined the household of George Benson, the brother-in-law of William Lloyd Garrison. In 1849, she visited John Dumont before he moved west.^[5]

Truth started dictating her memoirs to her friend Olive Gilbert, and in 1850 William Lloyd Garrison privately published her book, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*.^[6] That same year, she purchased a home in what would become the village of Florence in Northampton for \$300, and spoke at the first National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts. In 1854, with proceeds from sales of the Narrative and cartes-de-visite entitled "I sell the shadow to support the substance," she paid off the mortgage held by her friend from the Community Samuel L. Hill.^{[17][18]}

"Ain't I a Woman?"

In 1851, Truth joined George Thompson, an abolitionist and speaker, on a lecture tour through central and western New York State. In May, she attended the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, where she delivered her famous extemporaneous speech on women's rights, later known as "Ain't I a Woman." Her speech demanded equal human rights for all women as well as for all blacks. Advocating for women and African Americans was dangerous and challenging enough, but being one and doing so was far more difficult. The pressures and severity of her speech did not get to Truth, however. Truth took to the stage with a demanding and composed presence. Audience members were baffled by the way she carried herself and were hesitant to believe that she was even a woman, prompting the name of her speech "Ain't I a Woman?"^[19] The convention was organized by Hannah Tracy and Frances Dana Barker Gage, who both were present when Truth spoke. Different versions of Truth's words have been recorded, with the first one published a month later in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* by Rev. Marius Robinson, the newspaper owner and editor who was in the audience.^[20] Robinson's recounting of the speech included no instance of the question "Ain't I a Woman?" Nor did any of the other newspapers reporting of her speech at the time. Twelve years later, in May 1863, Gage published another, very different, version. In it, Truth's speech pattern had characteristics of Southern slaves, and the speech was vastly different than the one Robinson had reported. Gage's version of the speech became the historic standard version, and is known as "Ain't I a Woman?" because that question was repeated four times.^[21] It is highly unlikely that Truth's own speech pattern was Southern in nature, as she was born and raised in New York, and she spoke only upper New York State low-Dutch until she was nine years old.^[22]

In contrast to Robinson's report, Gage's 1863 version included Truth saying her 13 children were sold away from her into slavery. Truth is widely believed to have had five children, with one sold away, and was never known to boast more children.^[22] Gage's 1863 recollection of the convention conflicts with her own report directly after the convention: Gage wrote in 1851 that Akron in general and the press in particular were largely friendly to the woman's rights convention, but in 1863 she wrote that the convention leaders were fearful of the "mobbish" opponents.^[22] Other eyewitness reports of Truth's speech told a calm story, one where all faces were "beaming with joyous gladness" at the session where Truth spoke; that not "one discordant note" interrupted the harmony of the proceedings.^[22] In contemporary reports, Truth was warmly received by the convention-goers, the majority of whom were long-standing abolitionists, friendly to progressive ideas of race and civil rights.^[22] In Gage's 1863 version, Truth was met with hisses, with voices calling to prevent her from speaking.^[23]

According to Frances Gage's recount in 1863, Truth argued, "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 helps *me* any best place. *And ain't I a woman?*"^[24] Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" showed the lack of recognition that Black women received during this time and whose lack of recognition will continue to be seen long after her time. "Black women, of course, were virtually invisible within the protracted campaign for woman suffrage" as said by Davis supports Truth's argument that nobody gives her "any best place" but not only her but Black women in general.^[25]

Over the next 10 years, Truth spoke before dozens, perhaps hundreds, of audiences. From 1851 to 1853, Truth worked with Marius Robinson, the editor of the Ohio *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, and traveled around that state speaking. In 1853, she spoke at a suffragist "mob convention" at the Broadway Tabernacle in New York City; that year she also met Harriet Beecher Stowe^[5] In 1856, she traveled to Battle Creek, Michigan, to speak to a group called the "Friends of Human Progress." In 1858, someone interrupted a speech and accused her of being a man; Truth opened her blouse and revealed her breasts.^{[5][6]}

Other speeches

Northampton Camp Meeting— 1844, Northampton, Massachusetts: At a camp meeting where she was participating as an itinerant preacher, a band of "wild young men" disrupted the camp meeting, refused to leave, and threatened to burn down the tents. Truth caught the sense of fear pervading the worshipers and hid behind a trunk in her tent, thinking that since she was the only black person present, the mob would attack her first. However, she reasoned with herself and resolved to do something: as the noise of the mob increased and a female preacher was "trembling on the preachers' stand," Truth went to a small hill and began to sing "in her most fervid manner, with all the strength of her most powerful voice, the hymn on the resurrection of Christ." Her song, "It was Early in the Morning," gathered the rioters to her and quieted them. They urged her to sing, preach, and pray for their entertainment. After singing songs and preaching for about an hour, Truth bargained with them to leave after one final song. The mob agreed and left the camp meeting.^[26]

Abolitionist Convention— 1840s, Boston, Massachusetts: William Lloyd Garrison invited Sojourner Truth to give a speech at an annual antislavery convention. Wendell Phillips was supposed to speak after her, which made her nervous since he was known as such a good orator. So Truth sang a song, "I am Pleading for My people," which was her own original composition sung to the tune of Auld Lang Syne.^[27]

Mob Convention— September 7, 1853: At the convention, young men greeted her with "a perfect storm," hissing and groaning. In response, Truth said, "You may hiss as much as you please, but women will get their rights anyway. You can't stop us, neither!"^[22] Sojourner, like other public speakers, often adapted her speeches to how the audience was responding to her. In her speech, Sojourner speaks out for women's rights. She incorporates religious references in her speech, particularly the story of Esther. She then goes on to say that, just as women in scripture, women today are fighting for their rights. Moreover, Sojourner scolds the crowd for all their hissing and rude behavior, reminding them that God says to "Honor thy father and thy mother"^[28]

American Equal Rights Association— May 9–10, 1867: Her speech was addressed to the American Equal Rights Association, and divided into three sessions. Sojourner was received with loud cheers instead of hisses, now that she had a better-formed reputation established. *The Call* had advertised her name as one of the main convention speakers.^[28] For the first part of her speech, she spoke mainly about the rights of black women. Sojourner argued that because the push for equal rights had led to black men winning new rights, now was the best time to give black women the rights they deserve too. Throughout her speech she kept stressing that "we should keep things going while things are stirring" and fears that once the fight for colored rights settles down, it would take a long time to warm people back up to the idea of colored women's having equal rights.^[28]

In the second sessions of Sojourner's speech, she utilized a story from the Bible to help strengthen her argument for equal rights for women. She ended her argument by accusing men of being self-centered, saying, "man is so selfish that he has got women's rights and his own too, and yet he won't give women their rights. He keeps them all to himself." For the final session of Sojourner's speech, the center of her attention was mainly on women's right to vote. Sojourner told her audience that she owned her own house, as did

other women, and must therefore pay taxes. Nevertheless, they were still unable to vote because they were women. Black women who were enslaved were made to do hard manual work, such as building roads. Sojourner argues that if these women were able to perform such tasks, then they should be allowed to vote because surely voting is easier than building roads.

Eighth Anniversary of Negro Freedom — New Year's Day, 1871: On this occasion the Boston papers related that "...seldom is there an occasion of more attraction or greater general interest. Every available space of sitting and standing room was crowded!"^[28] She starts off her speech by giving a little background about her own life. Sojourner recounts how her mother told her to pray to God that she may have good masters and mistresses. She goes on to retell how her masters were not good to her, about how she was whipped for not understanding English, and how she would question God why he had not made her masters be good to her. Sojourner admits to the audience that she had once hated white people, but she says once she met her final master, Jesus, she was filled with love for everyone. Once enslaved folks were emancipated, she tells the crowd she knew her prayers had been answered. That last part of Sojourner's speech brings in her main focus. Some freed enslaved people were living on government aid at that time, paid for by taxpayers. Sojourner announces that this is not any better for those colored people than it is for the members of her audience. She then proposes that black people are given their own land. Because a portion of the South's population contained rebels that were unhappy with the abolishment of slavery, that region of the United States was not well suited for colored people. She goes on to suggest that colored people be given land out west to build homes and prosper on.

Second Annual Convention of the American Woman Suffrage Association — Boston, 1871: In a brief speech, Truth argued that women's rights were essential, not only to their own well-being, but "for the benefit of the whole creation, not only the women, but all the men on the face of the earth, for they were the mother of them."^[29]

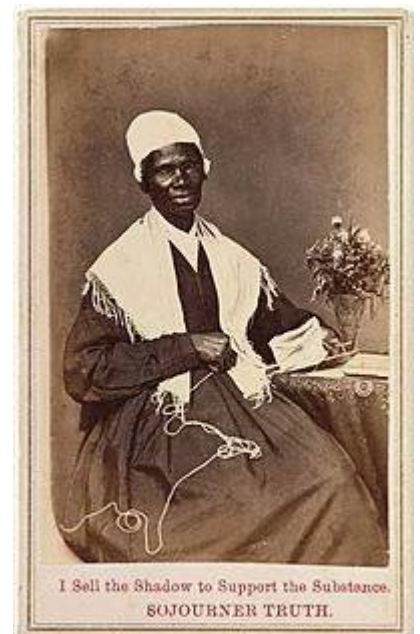
On a mission

In 1856, Truth bought a neighboring lot in Northampton, but she did not keep the new property for long. On September 3, 1857, she sold all her possessions, new and old, to Daniel Ives and moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, where she rejoined former members of the Millerite Movement who had formed the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Antislavery movements had begun early in Michigan and Ohio. Here, she also joined the nucleus of the Michigan abolitionists, the Progressive Friends, some who she had already met at national conventions.^[8] According to the 1860 census, her household in Harmonia included her daughter, Elizabeth Banks (age 35), and her grandsons James Caldwell (misspelled as "Colvin"; age 16) and Sammy Banks (age 8).^[5]

During the Civil War, Truth helped recruit black troops for the Union Army. Her grandson, James Caldwell, enlisted in the 54th Massachusetts Regiment. In 1864, Truth was employed by the National Freedman's Relief Association in Washington, D.C., where she worked diligently to improve conditions for African-Americans. In October of that year, she met President Abraham Lincoln.^[5] In 1865, while working at the Freedman's Hospital in Washington, Truth rode in the streetcars to help force their desegregation.^[5]

Truth is credited with writing a song, "The Valiant Soldiers", for the 1st Michigan Colored Regiment; it was said to be composed during the war and sung by her in Detroit and Washington, D.C. It is sung to the tune of "John Brown's Body" or "The Battle Hymn of the Republic".^[30] Although Truth claimed to have written the words, it has been disputed (see "Marching Song of the First Arkansas").

In 1867, Truth moved from Harmonia to Battle Creek. In 1868, she traveled to western New York and visited with Amy Post, and continued traveling all over the East Coast. At a speaking engagement in Florence, Massachusetts after she had just returned from a very tiring trip, when Truth was called upon to speak she stood up and said "Children, I have come here like the rest of you, to hear what I have to say."^[31]



Truth's carte de visite, which she sold to raise money (see inscription).

In 1870, Truth tried to secure land grants from the federal government to former enslaved people, a project she pursued for seven years without success. While in Washington, D.C., she had a meeting with President Ulysses S. Grant in the White House. In 1872, she returned to Battle Creek, became active in Grant's presidential re-election campaign, and even tried to vote on Election Day, but was turned away at the polling place.^[29]

Truth spoke about abolition, women's rights, prison reform, and preached to the Michigan Legislature against capital punishment. Not everyone welcomed her preaching and lectures, but she had many friends and staunch support among many influential people at the time, including Amy Post, Parker Pillsbury, Frances Gage, Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Laura Smith Haviland, Lucretia Mott, Ellen G. White, and Susan B. Anthony.^[31]

Death and legacy

Several days before Sojourner Truth died, a reporter came from the *Grand Rapids Eagle* to interview her. "Her face was drawn and emaciated and she was apparently suffering great pain. Her eyes were very bright and mind alert although it was difficult for her to talk."^[5] Truth died at her Battle Creek home on November 26, 1883.^[32] On November 28 her funeral was held at the Congregational-Presbyterian Church officiated by its pastor, the Reverend Reed Stuart. Some of the prominent citizens of Battle Creek acted as pall-bearers. Truth was buried in the city's Oak Hill Cemetery^[33]

The calendar of saints of the Episcopal Church remembers Sojourner Truth annually, together with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer and Harriet Ross Tubman on July 20. The calendar of saints of the Lutheran Church remembers Sojourner Truth together with Harriet Tubman on March 10.

A larger-than-life sculpture of Sojourner Truth^[34] by Tina Allen was dedicated in 1999, which is the estimated bicentennial of Sojourner's birth, in Battlecreek's Monument Park. The 12-foot tall Sojourner monument is cast bronze.^[35] There is also a statue of Sojourner Truth in Florence, Massachusetts.

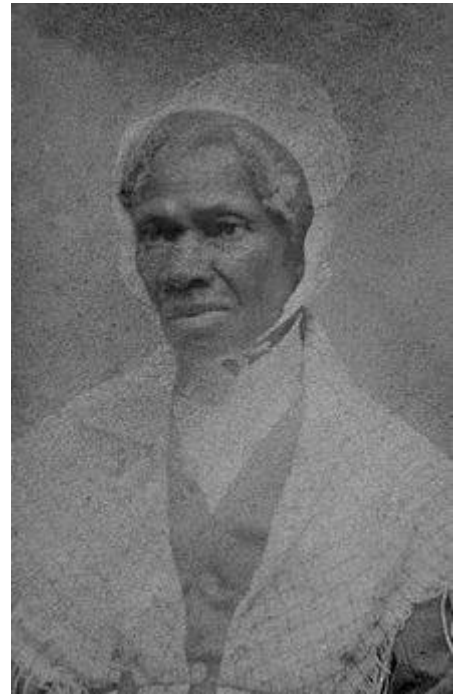
The U.S. Treasury Department announced in 2016 that an image of Sojourner Truth will appear on the back of a newly designed \$10 bill along with Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Alice Paul and the 1913 Woman Suffrage Procession. Designs for new \$5, \$10 and \$20 bills will be unveiled in 2020 in conjunction with the 100th anniversary of American women winning the right to vote via the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.^[36]

Cultural references and commemorations

Other honors and commemorations include (by year):

- 1862 – William Wetmore Story's statue, *The Libyan Sibyl*, inspired by Sojourner Truth, won an award at the London World Exhibition.
- 1892 – Albion artist Frank Courter is commissioned to paint the meeting between Truth and President Abraham Lincoln.^[5]
- 1969 – The leftist group the Sojourner Truth Organization is named after her. The group folded in 1985.
- 1971 – Sojourner Truth Library at New Paltz State University of New York is named in Truth's honor.^[37]
- 1976 – Interstate 194 is named for her in Michigan.
- 1979 – Judy Chicago's artwork *The Dinner Party* features a place setting for Truth.
- 1980 – The Inter Cooperative Council at the University of Michigan and the residents of the then Lenny Bruce House rename it as Sojourner Truth House^[38] in her honor.
- 1981 – Truth is inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York.^[5]
- 1981 – Feminist theorist and author bell hooks titles her first major work after Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" speech.
- 1983 – Truth is in the first group of women inducted into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame in Lansing.^[5]
- 1986 – The U.S. Postal Service issues a commemorative postage stamp honoring Sojourner Truth.^{[5][39]}
- 1987 – Truth is commemorated in a monument of "Michigan Legal Milestones" erected by the State Bar of Michigan.^[40]
- 1997 – The NASA Mars Pathfinder mission's robotic rover is named "Sojourner" after her.^[41]
- 1998 – S.T. Writes Home^[42] appears on the web offering "Letters to Mom from Sojourner Truth," in which the Mars Pathfinder Rover at times echoes its namesake.

- 1999 – A 12-foot-high monument is built to honor her in Battle Creek, Michigan.^[43]
- 1999 – The Broadway musical *The Civil War* includes an abridged version of Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" speech as a spoken-word segment. On the 1999 cast recording, the track was performed by Maya Angelou.
- 2002 – Scholar Molefi Kete Asante lists Sojourner Truth on his list of 100 Greatest African Americans^[44]
- 2002 – A statue was installed in Florence Massachusetts to honor Sojourner Truth in a small park located on Pine Street and Park Street, on which she lived for 10 years.^[45]
- 2004 – The King's College, located inside the Empire State Building in New York City, names one of their houses The House of Sojourner Truth.
- 2009 – Truth becomes the first black woman honored with a bust in the U.S. Capitol.^[46] The bust was sculpted by noted artist Artis Lane. It is in Emancipation Hall of the Capitol Visitor Center.
- 2014 – Truth was included in the Smithsonian Institution's list of the "100 Most Significant Americans"^[2]
- 2014 – The asteroid 249521 Truth is named in her honor.^[47]
- 2015 – A statue of Sojourner Truth is unveiled at the University of California, San Diego. The statue resides in Marshall College.^[48]
- 2017 – Rutgers University renamed its College Avenue Apartments to the Sojourner Truth Apartments to honor Sojourner Truth; Sojourner Truth and her parents were owned as slaves by people related to the first president of Rutgers University.^{[49][50]}
- 2019 – A Google Doodle was featured in honor of Sojourner Truth. The doodle was showcased in Canada, United States, United Kingdom, Switzerland, Israel, Ireland and Germany.^[51]



Sojourner Truth, circa 1864

As of March 2015, K-12 schools in several states, including California, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York and Oregon, are named after her, as is Sojourner–Douglass College in Baltimore.

Writings

- *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave* (1850).
 - Dover Publications 1997 edition: ISBN 0-486-29899-X
 - Penguin Classics 1998 edition: ISBN 0-14-043678-2 Introduction & notes by Nell Irvin Painter
 - University of Pennsylvania online edition (html format, one chapter per page)
 - University of Virginia online edition (HTML format, 207 kB, entire book on one page)

See also

- Elizabeth Freeman
- Elizabeth Key Grinstead
- List of women's rights activists
- List of enslaved people

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