



Sojourner Truth

Utopian Vision and Search for Community, 1797–1883

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SOJOURNER TRUTH IS WELL KNOWN as an African-American heroine, abolitionist, and lecturer for woman's rights. Her communal vision and involvement with utopian communities is less familiar to modern feminists and scholars. An examination of Truth's life and work will illustrate both her vision of a new type of life for women and for all African-American people and her personal search for a community. As a woman deeply committed to social reform, she turned her attention to the burning issues of her day: problems of economic inequality, disruption of older social patterns, changing gender roles, and questions of gender and racial equity. Truth combined her desire for a more equitable society with her personal experience in communities that experimented with social change. In the process of her search for a congenial community, Sojourner Truth questioned patriarchal authority by resisting many of the traditional roles assigned to her race and gender. This search took Truth through various utopian communities or experiments. She tried to find answers and new ways of living for herself by recharting familiar paths and attempted to extend what she had learned to other women and black people by her speeches, lectures, and the example of her life. Always, Truth contributed her own ideas and conceptions about the creation of a new world.

Truth was born a slave in Ulster County, New York, in the last years of the eighteenth century. Until early middle age she was owned by a series of masters and often separated from family, friends, and community. She was called Isabella for the first forty-six years of her life; the name Sojourner Truth was divinely inspired and communicated to her in conversations with God.

For the first half of her life, Isabella turned to religion to answer her questions about the reason for the horrors of slavery, the poverty of many free black and white people, and what seemed like the general immorality of the world. Later, she found in religion inspiration and encouragement for her reform work and her search for alternative ways of living. Religion was the framework upon which, once free, she felt able to build a new life.

Isabella's early religious faith was mingled with cherished memories of her mother and father. Whatever secure and happy family life Isabella remembered with her parents was connected with this sense of the religious and the promise of a better life. Religion also had an early utopian cast for Isabella. Early religious instruction had come at her mother's knee. Mau-Mau Bett told her children that God would protect them against the harsh realities of slavery. She also taught them that there was a better world to come in heaven.

The idea of a perfect world or ideal state of being, a world to be wished and hoped for, was part of Isabella's worldview from childhood onward. Like many in slavery, she formed this hoped-for world in terms of her religious experience and her knowledge of Judeo-Christian iconography and of African religious practices learned from parents and other slaves.

When Isabella escaped from her last master, John Dumont, in 1827, she worked for Isaac and Maria Van Wagenen, whom she had known since infancy (Vale 1835, 3). They protected her from Dumont and provided her with secure surroundings. The Van Wagenens were Quakers who were early models for Isabella. During this period she took the name Van Wagenen. While living and working with this pious Quaker family, Isabella attended Methodist camp meetings.

Methodism, with its emphasis on God's concern for all souls, black and white, and on the connection between the individual and God, appealed to many African-American people, both slave and free. At Methodist camp meetings Isabella felt encouraged to speak out concerning her messages from God. In this atmosphere she gained her first experience in speaking publicly of her faith and beliefs. Possibly she spoke before mixed audiences of men and women, blacks and whites. For Isabella, preaching provided not only a release from her condition as slave and former slave but a way to form a new identity, that of "zealous exhorter" (Vale 1835, 21), in her first few months of freedom.

In 1829, two years after Isabella Van Wagenen claimed her freedom, she decided to move to New York City. She correctly believed that employment opportunities for domestic workers in rural communities were diminishing. The U.S. economy was becoming more industrialized. For many rural families, this meant a decline in the amount of time women spent on

household manufactures, both for their families' own use and for market. This did not mean the farm wife labored less, but it did mean that extra female help in the form of a hired girl was not always necessary to the rural household (Kessler-Harris 1982, 27). At the same time, the farm family began to need more cash to pay for the essential household goods it was no longer profitable to produce in individual households. Money now needed for family subsistence could not be spent on extra household help, the kind of work Isabella depended on for her living. A Methodist friend told her of greater opportunities for domestic servants in New York City, and she was convinced that an urban environment would provide more economic and cultural opportunities.

New York City, a rapidly growing population center, embodied all the problems of urbanization in the first four decades of the nineteenth century. Seasonal unemployment for many of the unskilled members of the working class, overcrowded living conditions, poverty, and the failure of the municipal government to keep abreast of the growing population combined to create squalid living quarters, unsanitary conditions, and periodic epidemics.

Similar to the work roles of their rural sisters, the work roles of working-class urban women were changing throughout this period. Centralized production in factories was replacing home-based manufacturing. Some women continued to contribute to the family income by accepting "given-out work" that could be completed in the home (Mohl 1971, 3-13). Many of these industries, whether organized into factory production or supplying "given-out work," often provided only seasonal employment. By the mid-1820s much of the cottage industry of the city and surrounding areas had been replaced with the more profitable factory system, eliminating traditional employment for some women in their family homes. For some working-class women, occasional prostitution became a way to combat homelessness, poverty, and this lack of adequate employment.

African-American women were excluded by their gender from skilled jobs and by their race from available urban manufacturing. White women refused to work alongside their black sisters in factories. Black women filled the urban domestic jobs abandoned by the white women who moved West or entered New England factories (Harley 1978, 8). Free black women and newly freed slaves most often found jobs as cooks, washerwomen, and seamstresses (Kessler-Harris 1982, 47). The washing and sewing work was similar to that done in the factories, but the wages were far lower (Harley 1978, 11). Often seen by white men and white women as workers who competed in the marketplace by accepting low wages, black women were excluded from the antebellum labor movement by reason of their race and gender.

Nevertheless, New York had great attractions for Van Wagenen. We may assume, from the activities in which she became involved, that economic opportunities were not the only reason for her move. The black community in New York was a large and varied one. In the 1830s and 1840s, European visitors noted that African-American inhabitants "constituted an established and accepted ingredient in the city's cosmopolitan society" (Still 1956, 89). This was the New York Van Wagenen and her son Peter faced in 1829.

In New York City religion continued to play a large role in Isabella Van Wagenen's life. Like many other women, Van Wagenen found religious activity gave her a focus and a purpose outside of the daily harsh routine. In her first years in New York City Isabella attended many camp meetings and was well known at Methodist meetings for "her long and loud preaching and praying, remarkable . . . influence in converting; and while amongst [the Methodists] . . . was much respected by them" (Vale 1835, 21).

Van Wagenen was introduced to the Latourettes, a family of white, middle-class Methodists, all of whom were active in the religious moral reform movement. They appreciated her power as a preacher and invited Isabella to meetings held in the Latourette home. The Latourettes asked her to accompany the women of the family and others interested in reform into brothels and homes for prostitutes in attempts to save souls (Titus [1878] 1978, 87). Moral reform of society through religious channels was an idea that appealed to many in this period. The middle-class population of New York began to feel threatened by an ever-growing underclass, fearing the intrusion of urban problems into their homes. Middle-class women believed the home to be their special sphere of power and influence. For many of these women, saving the home from the intrusion of urban chaos became an issue of moral control for both the working class and their own middle-class families.

These women came to believe that their own homes were the places to begin their reform efforts. Uncontrolled sexuality—that is, sexuality outside of marriage—seemed one of the most troubling aspects of city life. These reform-minded women were concerned not only with the fate of their fallen sisters but also with saving middle-class daughters, sons, and husbands from the corruption associated with prostitution. The methods they chose to accomplish these ends were to reform their own families both materially and morally. Women were taught and believed that they had more direct control over their families and households than over society at large. Religion was viewed as an acceptably feminine way to take an active role in protecting homes and families from the corrupting influences of city life.

Some of the middle-class white women Isabella Van Wagenen met in

New York religious reform circles decided a simpler life would lead to a more moral life: plain food, furniture, and clothing replaced ostentation and overabundance in their homes. For these women, the simpler life also came to symbolize a rejection of the expanding materialism that was associated with men and with the dangerous world outside the home. They connected male sexuality and a male business world with a world beyond the control of women. These factors continued to be seen as factors dividing the sexes into separate spheres (Smith-Rosenberg 1985, 109–28).

Isabella Van Wagenen believed in the need for social reform. She had to face daily the effects of urban problems, and she searched for solutions to the poverty, hunger, and exploitation surrounding her. There is no evidence that Van Wagenen adopted the stringent antimaterialistic bent of her reforming acquaintances. However, for the time being she did espouse their methods of reforming society. The women with whom Isabella associated based their philosophy of reform firmly on their religious beliefs. This moral position and the religious basis for reform of society, rather than the material asceticism, attracted Van Wagenen.

She found both white and black religious communities necessary to her. In the black community she located people with life experiences similar to her own; these contacts gave her much-needed support. She joined the African Methodist Episcopal church, which was an important religious focus for the community. Through the Zion church she was reconnected with her sisters and brother, who had been sold away from the family as young children.

Despite an initial reluctance, Isabella became more involved with the reform groups of her white acquaintances. Through her domestic work she met Sarah and Elijah Pierson, a couple who ran the Magdalene Asylum for repentant prostitutes near the Bowery Hill area. The Piersons were part of a loosely formed community of several households. They and their reform-minded neighbors believed in the need for a simpler and more spiritual approach to life.

Frances Folger, a longtime leader of reform in New York City, was also a leader of the Bowery Hill community. She was the author of several religious tracts and a strong influence on women involved in local evangelical churches. In 1829 she founded and led an organization known as the Retrenchment Society, whose women members attempted to rid their lives of excess material possessions. They “disposed of elegant furniture,” ate only plain food, and wore clothing without ornament (Vale 1835, 25). By simplifying their living arrangements, they hoped to add more moral and spiritual meaning to their lives (Stone 1835, 49–51; Vale 1835, 25).

Isabella Van Wagenen was not part of the household on Bowery Hill

while Frances Folger was leader of the community. Her connection with Elijah Pierson began after Pierson started receiving divine messages electing him to leadership of the community. With the death of his wife, it seemed to his friends and relatives that Elijah had become excessive in the religious aspects of his life. He came to believe he was inhabited by the regenerated spirit of Elijah the prophet, and that he was called by God to be a leader amongst his friends on Bowery Hill.

The diversity in background of the members of the communal experiment led by Pierson was attractive to Van Wagenen. Members included several wealthy businessmen, white working-class men and women, a Jewish woman, and two former slaves. Wealth, class, status, and race were not ostensibly the criteria for status within the community. Theoretically, all members pooled their personal goods and put them at the disposal of the group. However, the community was financially supported by the two or three wealthy members and backers. The existence of such a community, believing it could be the basis for the reformation of society and could provide a spiritual example for the rest of the world, was an achievement in and of itself.

Soon after Isabella Van Wagenen went to work at the Pierson house, a white itinerant street preacher named Robert Matthews contacted Pierson. Matthews had also received certain revelations. He claimed God had told him he was to be renamed Matthias and would be God's representative on earth. He would lead the faithful to the coming kingdom of heaven on earth. Pierson welcomed Matthias as a fellow mystic and as the coming Messiah. Isabella, then working as a domestic for Pierson, was present at many of the early conversations between the two men.

Matthias soon became a part of the Pierson household. Several interested people joined them: the wealthy Mr. Mills; Benjamin and Ann Folger and their two daughters; a young widow, Catherine Stimson; and two former slaves, a woman named Katy and Isabella Van Wagenen. Besides the Pierson home in Bowery Hill, the community, now known as The Kingdom, also purchased a farm in Ossining, New York. Many of the Bowery Hill neighbors, once in sympathy with Pierson's reform efforts, dropped away when a more serious form of community was envisioned. Pierson, Benjamin Folger, and other wealthy backers made available to the community, and to Matthias personally, large amounts of property and credit. As a show of faith and confidence in the endurance of the group, Isabella also placed her furniture, belongings, and savings at the disposal of the community.

Gender divided members with status and a public voice in The Kingdom from members who were kept silent. Although Isabella was herself a mystic, a receiver of divine revelations, and an acknowledged preacher,

she was not accorded the same respect or status as Matthias. The women in the community believed Matthias to be the Messiah, but they cannot have been happy with the religious role he expected them to play. Matthias feared the religious power of women and believed them to be the cause of much evil: "They who teach women are of the wicked. . . . [Depart] all females who lecture their husbands, their sentence is the same. Everything that has the smell of woman will be destroyed. Woman is the capsheaf of the abomination of desolation—full of deviltry . . . all women, not obedient, had better become so as soon as possible, and let the wicked spirit depart. (Titus [1878] 1978, 93–94).

All the women in The Kingdom had been part of the very influential and well-organized religious reform circles in New York City. Sarah Pierson and Ann Folger were both members of the Retrenchment Society, the female-headed precursor of The Kingdom (Vale 1835, 24–25). Even after the usurpation of leadership of the Bowery Hill group by Pierson, the women members still "exhorted and gave their experiences" (Vale 1835, 43). Isabella had been quite active in Methodist circles, where she had led class meetings and converted many by her zeal and verbal exhortations at the camp meetings she attended. After the appearance of Matthias the women of the community stopped their public speaking. Certainly, a leader like Isabella Van Wagenen must have found it difficult to remain in a community where the charismatic leader believed the only role for women was an inferior one.

Believing that she had found a new way of life in The Kingdom, Isabella was disappointed to learn that racial and gender stereotypes had a place in the community. Not only were all women relegated to a position of inferiority, Isabella learned that she and the other black member, Katy, were assigned to do the heavier and dirtier domestic work (Pauli 1962, 77).

Van Wagenen's acceptance of the conditions in The Kingdom had several bases: faith in Matthias as God's representative on earth, willingness to experiment in social reform, and personal economic need. Like many others in this period, Van Wagenen believed that communal groups would prove successful economic and social alternatives to the outside world. She entered The Kingdom with the hope that her labors would guarantee a secure and pleasant home for the rest of her life and, at the same time, that she would be an active laborer in the reformation of society, a living example for the rest of society.

Whatever Matthias's expectations of the women in The Kingdom community, both the men and women very quickly etched out their own roles and positions. Matthias, and at the start of the community, Pierson, were recognized as the religious leaders. They did little beyond philosophize about

the coming kingdom of heaven on earth. As Elijah Pierson and other supporters of the community were quite wealthy and willing to support Matthias, the new Messiah, other financial considerations were unnecessary. The women were responsible for all the domestic work for the entire community, with Isabella and Katy performing the heavier work. When the household was moved to Zion Hill in Ossining, the men worked outdoors on the farm; the women remained domestic workers but performed some outdoor tasks as well.

Some of the women, however, did play an active role in community affairs. Isabella often spoke of her religious opinions but for many months was so loyal to Matthias that her views differed little from his. Ann Folger, another community member, began to discuss religious topics with Matthias, much to the astonishment of Isabella, who knew his views on teaching women. At first Ann Folger echoed Matthias's opinions, but soon the conversation between the two turned toward the topic of spiritual mates, those matches made in heaven despite earthly marital connections. Benjamin Folger was convinced to renounce his claims on his wife, and Pierson performed a ceremony that joined Ann Folger and Matthias as husband and wife on earth, as they now believed they had already been joined in heaven.

Charges of insanity, religious fanaticism, and undue influence on unstable (and wealthy) members of the community brought The Kingdom time and again before the New York public. The suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of the community founder, Elijah Pierson, finally brought The Kingdom to an end. Matthias was charged with insanity and with the murder of Pierson. Isabella Van Wagenen was charged with conspiring with Matthias in the Pierson death. Both were found innocent of any wrongdoing, but the facts of sexual impropriety and other aspects of Matthias's misconduct entertained New Yorkers for days and struck the final blow to The Kingdom.

The ending of the community sent Isabella back to private domestic service. With the loss of most of her savings and household goods in the breakup of The Kingdom, she once again needed to support herself. Although she gained some financial reparation from a court battle with the Folgers, she found herself in need of more money. She soon came to the conclusion that the social and economic conditions of New York City were at fault. She had worked as hard as she could but could neither save any money nor gain any security.

Isabella believed she had been insensible to the conditions of the city that kept the poor impoverished. Although her attempt to remake society began with participation in religious reform efforts and continued with her

role in *The Kingdom*, this was the first indication that Van Wagenen recognized the greater social forces at work in the large urban areas during the 1840s. She began to make plans to leave New York, the source of her troubled spirit, and to attempt to create a better kind of life for herself and others in the smaller towns and rural areas of the northeast. Like many other utopian experimenters of the period, Isabella came to believe that reformation of society could only take place in a pastoral setting.

Isabella Van Wagenen's next reform effort began with a personal transformation. In 1843, several years after the breakup of *The Kingdom*, Isabella received communications from God, who directed her to leave the city and travel east, preaching as she went: "The Spirit calls me there and I must go" (Titus [1878] 1978, 98). For Van Wagenen her own spiritual purification seemed the way to begin helping other people and creating a better and less selfish world. In the same message God also gave Isabella Van Wagenen a new name: *Sojourner* to indicate her traveling and *Truth* to tell of her message.

Sojourner Truth had attended camp meetings and had exhorted the crowds many times before. Now, however, preaching was her primary work and the way Truth hoped to spend the rest of her working life. Throughout her travels Truth searched for a place in which she could settle. Although she had experienced great difficulties and disappointment in *The Kingdom* community, Truth knew that a community that was experimenting with new social relationships might give greater scope to an African-American woman. She was looking for a congenial community in which a woman of her abilities would be accepted. Friends in Springfield, Massachusetts, suggested various experimental communities that might suit Truth and her work. She intended to visit the Shaker village in Enfield, Massachusetts, but was convinced to try the Transcendentalist Northampton Association instead.

The Northampton Association of Education and Industry, located in Florence, Massachusetts, was an intentional community based on some of the social philosophies of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier. The founders were New England men and women interested in translating their interest in Transcendentalism into social reality. The principles of Northampton were far different from what Truth had experienced during her participation in *The Kingdom*. The constitution of the Massachusetts community comprised seven basic by-laws that the originators of Northampton believed could make life more equitable for all members (Sheffield 1894, 69-72).

At the Northampton Association Truth would theoretically have the same rights and opportunities as any white, male member of the community and would live in an atmosphere of mutual respect and morality. The

founders of the community believed they had designed a community that would “establish equality of rights and interests, to secure . . . freedom from care, anxiety, dependence, and oppression—to recognize the perfect brotherhood of the human race” (Gove Nichols 1844, 275). Unlike The Kingdom, there would be no self-appointed leader or restrictions beyond the ones necessary to the by-laws and the maintenance of the community.

Economically, Northampton seemed assured of a sound financial future. The original members of the community purchased an abandoned silk mill and refurbished the factory. All the members of the community were required to buy stock or shares in the Association. In return for their investment, stockholders would receive all food, clothing, shelter, education, a small wage, and a financial return on their investment from the silk mill. The original sum thought necessary for the maintenance of the community was never raised, however, and this lack added to the many problems that plagued the Northampton Association. Community members believed dissent and economic troubles caused the collapse of Northampton: “Many troubles were constantly growing out of the pecuniary difficulties in which the Community was involved. Many sacrifices were demanded, and much hard labor was required. . . . Some spoke of the want of that harmony and brotherly feeling which were indispensable to the success of such an enterprise. . . . So the Association ceased to exist” (Noyes [1870] 1966, 158–60).

Sojourner Truth was one of the people who left Northampton before its final collapse. She had sought out the community in hopes of finding a congenial home where she could work on reform efforts and where her basic needs would be supplied. She found the community overcrowded and so unorganized that it was difficult to live at all comfortably. Nevertheless, Truth was able to overcome her initial distress over the living conditions of Northampton and to gain a real affection for the community: “She gradually became pleased with, and attached to, the place and the people. . . . It must have been no small thing to have found a home in a ‘Community composed of some of the choicest spirits of the age,’ where all was characterized by an equality of feeling, a liberty of thought and speech, and a largeness of soul” (Titus [1878] 1978, 120). Truth, often named a community favorite for her hard work, cheerful spirit, wisdom, and religious faith, came to be regarded as one of the “choicest spirits of the age.”

The issue of woman’s rights was considered important at the Northampton Association. One female community member remembered equality of the sexes “was accepted as one of our fundamental principles” (Sheffield 1894, 117). However, the same woman also commented that the issue was never discussed at the Association. Some of the women and men who would go on to become leaders in the woman’s rights movement were directly or

indirectly involved with the Northampton Association. The abolitionists and feminists Sojourner Truth met and heard speak at the community played a part in her decision to work in the radical reform movement.

The Northampton community made an effort to bring new social relationships to the family. Men and women had equal economic shares in the corporation, and all adults worked for a wage. Some women worked in the domestic department, others taught community children in the classroom, and a large number of women worked in the silk factory. Some of the work burdens that the housewife experienced in an isolated nuclear family were alleviated in the community. Cleaning, laundry, and cooking were done by workers from the domestic department. However, all the workers in this department were women. Each family was also responsible for its own sewing. This meant that the women in each family had the task of making and mending clothing as well as working a twelve-hour day in the factory or domestic department.

Although the founders of the community believed in a stock company in which the adult members would all have shares, they failed to take into account the economic inequalities this could generate within the Association. Nuclear families that joined the Association together certainly had larger economic benefits from the community. However, half the members were single men and women or women with children (Sheffield 1894, 103–5). These members were at a disadvantage as they could rely on only their own share in the community wealth, rather than on a part of a family's portion.

Few women became community leaders, but several were especially respected for their abilities. Truth was mentioned by several community members, who remembered her fine speeches and clever repartee. Although Truth's work was in the domestic department of the community, where she was chief laundress of the association, her intellectual gifts were also well respected (Sheffield 1894, 96, 121).

The collapse of the Northampton Association once again left Sojourner Truth without funds and a home, so in 1856 she moved her headquarters to Battle Creek, Michigan. Truth's connection with the spiritualist Quaker seminary and community near Battle Creek was possibly her third experiment with an alternative living situation. Harmonia no longer exists, but records show that the village was built around a community and private seminary begun by a group of Quakers turned spiritualists (Lowe 1956, 132). The seminary was managed and taught by Reynolds Cornell and his son Hiram. Although not much is known about the Cornells, it is certain they had connections with the antislavery movement. An antislavery worker, J. W. Walker, visited the school in 1852; and the following year Parker Pillsbury also toured the institution. The school was successful for several years but

definitely had been abandoned by 1873 (Lowe 1976, 55–56). For ten years, from 1857 to 1867, Sojourner Truth owned the house on the lot next to the seminary. It is possible that Truth never joined the spiritualist community, but we do know that she rested there between her many trips away from the Battle Creek area (Pauli 1962, 187). Truth's grandson, Sammy Banks, attended the seminary in 1859.

We may speculate, however, that Sojourner Truth would have found great value in the spiritualist philosophy of communication with the supernatural, and the promise of a better life in the next world. Truth may have found connections between her own mysticism and communication with the divine, and the practices of spiritualists. Spiritualistic mediums underwent trance states in which they received messages from a source beyond the reality in which most people lived. These messages were usually sought as answers, inspiration, and aid for the questions and problems that a rapidly changing world presented (Moore 1985, 6–7).

The bond between spiritualists and antebellum reformers was a close one. Many abolitionists and feminists were involved to one degree or another with spiritualism. Truth herself had encountered an early aspect of spiritualist theory at The Kingdom. Matthias's doctrine of spiritual mates, the belief that each person had a perfect mate either on earth or in heaven, was a tenet in which many later spiritualists also believed. Truth probably knew of the connection between spiritualism and the reformers who were her friends and colleagues (Moore 1985, 71–76, 83–84). Many reformers were attracted to spiritualism because it combined "the push for the immediate purification of the nation's morals" and the "betterment of social conditions of humanity" (Moore 1985, 72–73).

Whether Truth attempted to join the Harmonia community or only found friends there during her visits home is not known. By 1860 Truth was still living in Harmonia with her daughter Elizabeth and two grandsons (Lowe 1976, 152).

Although after moving from Harmonia Truth did not search for a communal experiment in which she could live, she did not retreat from her beliefs in social reform. Just the opposite—her work in abolition, woman's rights, and later the rights of freed slaves seemed to take up all of her energies and time. Perhaps Truth had come to believe that the work she did in convincing others of her program for social reform as she traveled across the country had become more important than her search for personal perfection.

While she lived at Northampton, Truth had met people famous for their work in the abolitionist movement who would become the moving spirits in the woman's rights movement. Already experienced as a speaker at religious gatherings and at Northampton community meetings, Truth found

lecturing another field for her talents. Working for the abolition of slavery and for the rights of women proved to be powerful incentives. Friends who recognized Truth's talent and understood the propaganda value of an eloquent former slave speaking for the cause of abolition helped convince Truth to embark on her lecturing career.

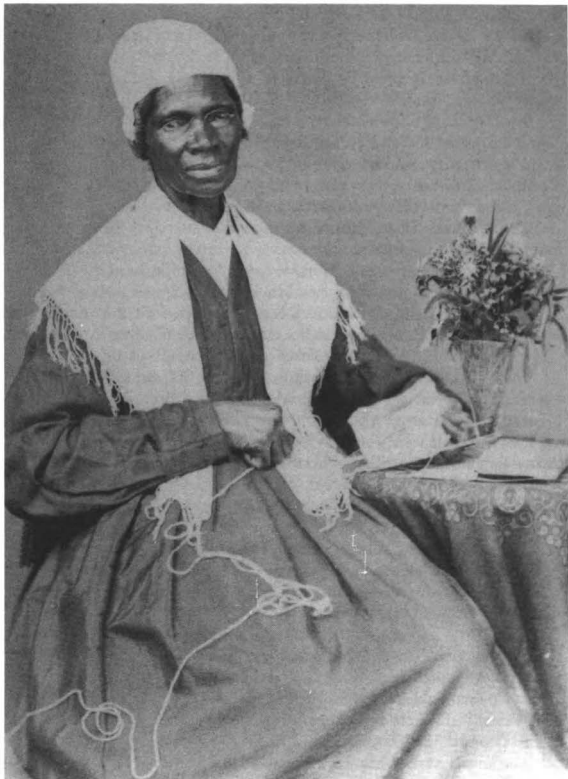
Truth spoke at reform conventions, camp meetings, and churches. Between the years 1850 and 1875 she traveled thousands of miles by herself, attending meetings and lecturing in twenty-one states and the District of Columbia. Truth traveled not only in the northeast, but as far west as Minnesota, and through the border states and upper South.

The two causes nearest Truth's heart, and the two she believed the most important for the reformation of society, were abolition and woman's rights. The years between leaving the Northampton Association and the Civil War Truth spent lecturing on these two issues. As in her speeches and lectures on rights for women, she was eloquent on the need for the abolition of slavery and on the rights owed to her race. Without freedom for all people the golden future that Truth believed possible could not be created.

During the last thirty-three years of her life, Sojourner Truth became a nationally known figure and heroine to many people. In 1863 Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote an article about Truth for the *Atlantic Monthly*, extolling her piety, religiosity, and mysticism. During the Civil War, Truth was invited to the White House to meet Abraham Lincoln (Colman 1891, 50). Her work with the freedmen and -women in Washington, D.C., and her political work attempting to gain land for former slaves during Reconstruction did much to expand her fame among people of her own race. Even before the war years, workers in the abolitionist cause and the woman's rights movement had claimed Truth as their own. Truth's appearances at various reform conventions were extolled in the radical press and in correspondence between reformers.

During the last year of the Civil War, Truth traveled to Washington, D.C., to work with the various agencies that were aiding the newly freed slaves pouring into the nation's capital. While there, Truth raised money for the Colored Soldiers' Aid Society and for black soldiers from Battle Creek and worked at the Freedmen's Hospital and at the Orphan's Home in Georgetown (Titus [1878] 1978, 173, 177, 183).

The largest part of her work was with the creation of the Freedmen's Village in Arlington, Virginia, just across the Potomac from Washington. The village was an encampment for those who had escaped from southern states after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Located on a tract of land that George W. P. Custis had deeded to his slave daughter, Maria Syphax, the village was a model camp that became self-supporting soon after the



1. Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883), “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance.” Truth sold copies of this photograph at antislavery and woman’s rights conventions to support herself. *Courtesy of Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.*

war (Federal Writers' Project 1937, 75, 88). It included a hospital, an industrial school, shops, a church, and a home for the aged. The men worked on the abandoned Confederate farms in the area, or as blacksmiths, wheelwrights, carpenters, tailors, or shoemakers (Leech 1941, 251-52). The women also worked on the land.

Sojourner Truth was appointed a counselor to the village by the National Freedmen's Relief Association. She was to promote "their intellectual, moral, and religious instruction" (Titus [1878] 1978, 182). Truth reported that most of her work in the village consisted of teaching the women household duties, as they all wanted to learn "the way we live in the North" (Titus [1878] 1978, 179). She also served as a preacher to large audiences at Sunday meetings.

Although not planned as a communal society where all goods were shared, Freedmen's Village was a community where the inhabitants worked and learned together. Truth was an important asset for the community. The women of the village thought a great deal of her, and she helped them make the transition to freedom: "Her electrifying words seemed to inspire them with new life. The manhood and womanhood of these crushed people now asserted itself" (Titus [1878] 1978, 183). Truth was a woman of heroic proportions to the inhabitants of Freedmen's Village. A former slave herself, she proved that an African-American woman could begin her life in bondage and yet become well respected by both blacks and whites.

Her experiences with the newly freed people in Washington, D.C., convinced Truth of the need for black people to become self-reliant and self-supporting. After the Civil War she began to find employment in the North for various freedmen. She soon realized, however, that her efforts could not reach enough people. Like many other reformers Truth set her sights on the public lands in the West for the former slaves. She believed that the federal government should set aside specific land for the freed people and financially support their settlement. Under this plan former slaves could become self-sufficient as soon as possible, using farming skills they had learned on the plantations and farms of the South.

The Freedmen's Bureau, established in 1863 to aid newly freed slaves all over the South, had attempted to have certain public lands there set aside for homesteading. However, a combination of poor planning, mismanagement, corruption, inconsistent support from the federal government, and opposition from southern whites combined to prevent the establishment of a large, permanent, black farm-owning class (Oubre 1978, xiv-xv). Soon after the dismantling of the Freedmen's Bureau in 1869, Sojourner Truth began traveling around the country gathering signatures for a petition to

Congress that would grant land and financial support for a "Negro State" in the West.

Throughout the 1870s, Truth traveled in the Northeast and Midwest lecturing on the plight of the freed people. She tried to get individuals to sign her petitions, which she hoped would convince Congress to vote for the land and money. She could not believe that a nation that had fought a war to free the slaves would turn its backs on the freed people.

In 1879 Truth traveled to Kansas where a large number of black immigrants had arrived from the South. She hoped that these settlers would be able to form at least a shadow of the great community she had envisioned for the people of her race. Truth had great faith in the ability of former slaves to create the future: "There will be, child, a great glory come out of that. I don't expect I will live to see it. But before this generation has passed away, there will be a grand change. This colored people is going to be a people" (Bernard 1967, 248). Her vision of a western "Negro State" where self-sufficient black families could become landowners and respected citizens never materialized.

Truth worked for many years to create a world in which all women and black people would be able to live in freedom and equality. She attempted to live her vision of a new world. Like many other reformers of the antebellum period, she believed she had to reorganize her own life as an example for the rest of the world. She never found a community that could satisfy her varied needs, a lack that drove her back out into the world to work even harder to create a world that would contain places for all people.

Sojourner Truth often claimed that she would not be ready to go to heaven until she had been able to vote at least once. She never got her wish. The Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, while granting the franchise to black men, specifically denied her and all other women the right to vote because of their gender. Many other women carried on the fight for the rights of their sex, but with the death of Sojourner Truth in 1883, the movement lost a fighter with great boldness of vision.

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