

# Sojourner Truth Speeches Menu

---

 [sojournertruth.org/Library/Speeches/](http://sojournertruth.org/Library/Speeches/)

[Home](#) | [History](#) | [Activities](#) | [Library](#) | [Art About Truth](#) | [Monument Projects](#) | [Test Your Knowledge](#) | [Contact Us](#)

---

## Sojourner Truth Speeches and Commentary

It is often difficult for us to understand the impact that Sojourner Truth had upon her audiences. Perhaps the best way to appreciate her oratorical skills, which were universally recognized, is to read her own words, which still leap powerfully off the page, even though they come to us only through transcriptions.

### ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS (The *Ain't I A Woman* Speech)

*In May 1851 Sojourner Truth attended the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. She delivered a simple but powerful speech recorded in the June 21, 1851, issue of the Anti-Slavery Bugle, edited by Marcus Robinson (with whom Truth worked.) It is this speech which was transformed into the "Ain't I a Woman?" legend by Frances Dana Gage, the organizer of the convention. She published [her version](#) of Truth's speech, complete with crude Southern dialect in the April 23, 1863, issue of the New York Independent.*

*Gage's expanded description of the speech, and the impact it had upon the convention, appeared less than a month after Harriet Beecher Stowe published her article, "[Libyan Sibyl](#)," in the Atlantic Monthly. Together, these two highly romanticized views of Sojourner Truth helped to create the public image of the ex-slave -- an image which still endures today.*

### **The following is the original 1851 report by Marcus Robinson.**

*One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gesture, and listened to her strong and truthful tones. She came forward to the platform and addressing the President said with great simplicity: "May I say a few words?" Receiving an affirmative answer, she proceeded:*

*I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal. I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint, and a man a quart -- why can't she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, -- for we can't take more than our pint'll hold. The poor men seems to be all in confusion, and don't know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's rights, give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they won't be so much trouble. I can't read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well, if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept and Lazarus came forth. And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and the woman who bore him. Man, where was your part? But the women are coming up blessed be God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight*

place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.

## ON THE INJUSTICE OF SLAVERY

Sojourner Truth first came to Michigan to address the Friends of Human Progress Association meeting on October 4-5, 1856. It was soon after this visit to Battle Creek that she returned to southwest Michigan to live until her death in 1883. This text of her address was recorded by the acting secretary of the Association, Thomas Chandler, and published in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* (October 1856).

*As you were speaking this morning of little children, I was looking around and thinking it was most beautiful. But I have had children and yet never owned one, no one ever owned one; and of such there's millions -- who goes to teach them? You have teachers for your children but who will teach the poor slave children?*

*I want to know what has become of the love I ought to have for my children? I did have love for them, but what has become of it? I cannot tell you. I have had two husbands but I never possessed one of my own. I have had five children and never could take one of them up and say, 'My child' or 'My children,' unless it was when no one could see me.*

*I believe in Jesus, and I was forty years a slave but I did not know how dear to me was my posterity. I was so beclouded and crushed. But how good and wise is God, for if the slaves knowed what their true condition was, it would be more than the mind could bear. While the race is sold of all their rights -- what is there on God's footstool to bring them up? Has not God given to all his creatures the same rights? How could I travel and live and speak? When I had not got something to bear me up, when I've been robbed of all my affections for husband and children.*

*Some years ago there appeared to me a form (here the speaker gave a very graphic description of the vision she had). Then I learned that I was a human being. We had been taught that we was a species of monkey, baboon or 'rang-o-tang, and we believed it -- we'd never seen any of these animals. But I believe in the next world. When we gets up yonder, we shall have all of them rights 'stored to us again -- all that love what I've lost -- all going to be 'stored to me again. Oh! How good God is.*

*My mother said when we were sold, we must ask God to make our masters good, and I asked who He was. She told me, He sit up in the sky. When I was sold, I had a severe, hard master, and I was tied up in the barn and whipped. Oh! Till the blood run down the floor and I asked God, why don't you come and relieve me -- if I was you and you'se tied up so, I'd do it for you.*

*(The speaker continued her remarks for some time in a very simple and unsophisticated style, and at the close, by the suggestion of Henry Willis, a collections was taken up for her benefit, which resulted in a liberal contribution and was very gratefully received by her.)*

## ON RACE RELATIONS

*This version of one of Sojourner Truth's addresses is taken from an unidentified newspaper, June 12, 1863, reporting on a meeting held at the state Sabbath School Convention, held in Battle Creek, Michigan.*

After several speakers had spoken, a clear distinct voice came from the head of the stairs, saying, "Is there an opportunity now that I might say a few words?" The moderator seemed for a moment as if hesitating to grant the opportunity, as perhaps, he did not know the speaker. Seeing the dilemma of the moderator and speaker, Rev. T. W. Jones rose, addressing the moderator, and said that the speaker was "Sojourner Truth." This was enough: five hundred persons were instantly on their feet, prepared to give the most earnest and respectful attention to her who was once but a slave. Had Henry Ward Beecher, or any other such renowned man's name been mentioned, it is doubtful whether it would have produced the electrical effect on the audience that her name did.

She said that "the spirit of the Lord had told her to avail herself of the opportunity of speaking to so many children assembled together, of the great sin of prejudice against color. Children, who made your skin white? Was it not God? Who made mine black? Was it not the same God? Am I to blame, therefore, because my skin is black? Does it not cast a reproach on our Maker to despise a part of His children, because He has been pleased to give them a black skin? Indeed, children, it does; and your teachers ought to tell you so, and root up, if possible, the great sin of prejudice against color from your minds. While Sabbath School Teachers know of this great sin, and not only do not teach their pupils that it is a sin, but too often indulge in it themselves, can they expect God to bless them or the children?"

Does not God love colored children as well as white children? And did not the same Savior die to save the one as well as the other? If so, white children must know that if they go to Heaven, they must go there without their prejudice against color, for in Heaven black and white are one in the love of Jesus. Now children, remember what Sojourner Truth has told you, and thus get rid of your prejudice, and learn to love colored children that you may be all the children of your Father who is in Heaven."

This short speech from Sojourner was, perhaps the most telling anti-slavery speech that was ever delivered at Battle Creek, or in Michigan. Scores of eyes were filled with tears, and it seems as if every individual present sanctioned all she told, and how could anyone help it, for surely if there were any present whose heart had failed to beat in sympathy with her remarks, they must be a good distance from the Kingdom of Heaven, whatever their profession may be.

### THE INTERVIEW WITH LINCOLN

*Truth's account of her meeting with President Abraham Lincoln on October 29, 1864, is taken from a letter dictated by her to Rowland Johnson, reprinted in the Book of Life section of the Narrative, (1875 edition), pages 177-79.*

Freedman's Village, Va., Nov.17, 1864

DEAR FRIEND,

... It was about 8 o'clock A.M., when I called on the president. Upon entering his reception room we found about a dozen persons in waiting, among them two colored women. I had quite a pleasant time waiting until he was disengaged, and enjoying his conversation with others; he showed as much kindness and consideration to the colored persons as to the whites -- if there was any difference, more. One case was that of a colored woman who was sick and likely to be turned out of her house on account of her inability to pay her rent. The president listened to with much attention, and spoke to her with kindness and tenderness. He said he had given so much he could give no more, but told her where to go and get the money, and asked Mrs. C---n to assist her, which she did.



The president was seated at his desk. Mrs. C. said to him, "This is Sojourner Truth, who has come all the way from Michigan to see you." He then arose, gave me his hand, made a bow, and said, "I am pleased to see you."

I said to him, Mr. President, when you first took your seat I feared you would be torn to pieces, for I likened you unto Daniel, who was thrown into the lion's den; and if the lions did not tear you into pieces, I knew that it would be God that had saved you; and I said, if he spared me I would see you before the four years expired, and he has done so, and now I am here to see you for myself.

He then congratulated me upon having been spared. Then I said, I appreciate you, for you are the best president who has ever taken the seat. He replied: 'I expect you have reference to my having emancipated the slaves in my proclamation. But,' said he, mentioning the names of several of his predecessors (and among them emphatically that of Washington), 'they were all just as good, and would have done just as I have done if the time had come. If the people over the river [pointing across the Potomac] had behaved themselves, I could not have done what I have; but they did not, which gave the opportunity to do those things.' I then said, I thank God that you were the instrument selected by him and the people to do it. I told him that I had never heard of him before he was talked of for president. He smilingly replied, 'I had heard of you many times before that.'

He then showed me the Bible presented to him by the colored people of Baltimore, of which you have no doubt seen a description. I have seen it for myself and it is beautiful beyond description. After I had looked it over, I said

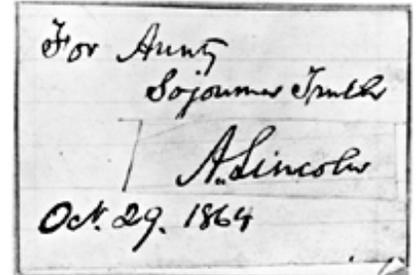
to him, This is beautiful indeed; the colored people have given this to the head of the government, and that government once sanctioned laws that would not permit its people to learn enough to enable them to read this book. And for what? Let them answer who can.

I must say, and I am proud to say, that I never was treated by any one with more kindness and cordiality than were shown to me by that great and good man, Abraham Lincoln, by the grace of God president of the United States for four years more. He took my little book, and with the same hand that signed the death-warrant of slavery, wrote as follows:

For Aunty Sojourner Truth

October 29, 1864

A. LINCOLN



As I was taking my leave, he arose and took my hand, and said he would be pleased to have me call again. I felt that I was in the presence of a friend, and now I thank God from the bottom of my heart that I always have advocated his cause, and have done it openly and boldly. I shall feel still more in duty bound to do so in time to come. May God assist me.

### ON WOMAN'S DRESS

*This short excerpt from an unidentified speech was printed in the Book of Life section of the Narrative, page 243, and is an excellent example of Truth's mockery of pretension, where ever she found it.*

I'm awful hard on dress, you know. Women, you forget that you are the mothers of creation; you forget that your sons were cut off like grass by the war, and that the land was covered by their blood; you rig yourselves up in panniers and Grecian bend-backs and flummeries; yes and mothers and gray-haired grandmothers wear highheeled shoes and humps on their heads, and put them on their babies, and stuff them out so that they keel over when the wind blows. O mothers, I am ashamed of ye! What will such lives as you live do for humanity? When I saw them women on the stage at the Woman's Suffrage Convention, the other day, I thought, What kind of reformers be you, with goose-wings on your heads, as if you were going to fly, and dressed in such ridiculous fashion, talking about reform and women's rights? 'Pears to me, you had better reform yourselves first. But Sojourner is an old body, and will soon get out of this world into another, and wants to say when she gets there, Lord, I have done my duty, and I have told the whole truth and kept nothing back.

### ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

*In early June 1881, Truth addressed the members of the state legislature of Michigan, which was considering a measure to institute capital punishment in the state. A reporter's version of her remarks was printed in the Battle Creek Nightly Moon newspaper on June 8, 1881.*

I have come here tonight to see about a thing that fairly shocked me. It shocked me worse than slavery. I've heard that you are going to have hanging again in this state. Before God only think of it. When I had thought for so many years that I lived in the most blessed state in the union, and then to think of its being made the awful scene of hanging people by the neck until they are dead. Where is the man or woman who can sanction such a thing as that? We are the makers of murderers if we do it.

Where do we get this stupid spirit from? Years ago I found that the religion of Jesus was forgiveness. When I prayed, "Father forgive me as I forgive those who trespass against me," I found that I was against hanging. When a man kills another in cold blood and you hang him, then you murder in cold blood also. When a prisoner is put into jail to be hung, the ministers go to convert him and they pray that God will forgive him. When he is converted, they put a rope around his neck and swing him off, but that is not Jesus' law.

But they tell me that we must abide by the public laws. I won't sanction any law in my heart that upholds murder. I am against it! I am against it! In olden times, it was "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," but the Savior taught us better things than these and commanded us to love one another. I talk to a great many people, but

none older than myself. I hate to see these younger people, who have every advantage to learn, keep traveling the road of life and filling their minds with nonsense and foolishness. When I was a child and heard about Jesus Christ, I thought he was some big man like Napoleon Bonaparte or George Washington, living off in some part of the country; but as I grew up the truth came to me, and I found out that there was a Jesus who was between me and God.

See the progression that has been made in temporal things. When I was growing up, all the way that we could travel was with oxen, horses and sloops. These things have all come for our benefit, but don't give God any glory, or you would not want to go back to the awful system of hanging. The advocates of such a barbarous thing have murder in their hearts.

Remember the things I say to you in this capitol tonight will never die. He who sanctions the crime of hanging will have to answer for it. I believe that God has spared me to do good to this white population, which has done so much good to the black race. How wonderful God turns things.

... Sojourner closed her remarks by an allusion to the great progress in temporal things, such as the electric telegraph, the locomotive, the telephone, etc., and regretted that there had been no one in this age and generation to write a bible which should discard all Mosaic laws which teach "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Spiritual doctrines should keep pace with all the wonderful inventions for the benefit of mankind. She exhorted her listeners to acts of kindness, and when told that the Wyckoff hanging bill had been defeated, she shouted for joy, and declared Michigan to be the most blessed state in the union.

She then sang a hymn in strong musical tones and the audience dispersed.

### ON TEMPERANCE

*This paragraph is taken from the address to the Michigan state legislature in June 1881.*

I should like to see you make a law that would hang whiskey out of the United States, for I believe that it is at the bottom of a great many crimes. In a great many cases it is not the man that murders, but the whiskey. There is one trouble about this temperance work. You get a man to sign the pledge and that is all there is of it, when you ought to get him to work, and carry food and clothing to his poor starving wife and children. Treat them as human beings should be treated and fewer temperance converts would backslide.

### ON HEAVEN AND HELL

*This paragraph is taken from the address to the Michigan state legislature in June 1881.*

The newspapers of my childhood used to have pictures of hell. I bought one once in New York, and there was one whole side covered with such a picture. On one side there was a narrow stair leading to heaven and the rest of the picture was a terrible abyss, with smoke rising up out of it, and numberless human beings swimming around in the flames. Then there was the old Evil One, with a long snout and a tail, stirring the others up with a pitchfork and I gazed upon that picture, I said, "My God, that is hell, sure 'nuff." There are probably persons here who can remember these things. As I got older I found out that there wasn't no such thing as hell, and that the narrow stairs only showed the narrowness of the mind that conceived the picture. I have found out and know that God's brightness and goodness and glory is hot enough to scorch all the sinners in the world.

---