



Photo: Smithsonian Institution

Sojourner Truth

1797 – November 26, 1883

Born Isabella Baumfree, Sojourner Truth was a former slave and well-known advocate for abolition, temperance, and civil and women's rights. She became free in 1827 under New York's gradual emancipation law. After becoming Methodist that same year, she later changed her name to Sojourner Truth in 1848 and became a travelling preacher. Her most famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?" was first given in 1851 at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio.

She traveled to Silver Lake in Kosciusko County in 1858 on her first visit to northeastern Indiana. By setting foot in Indiana, she broke the law because Article 13 of the Indiana Constitution of 1851 provided that "No negro or mulatto shall come into or settle in the State, after the adoption of this Constitution." While there, she was met by a hostile crowd insisting she was a man in disguise. Challenged to prove she was a woman by showing the women in the audience in a side room, she unbuttoned her blouse for the entire audience to confirm that she was indeed a woman.

In 1861 at the beginning of the Civil War, she returned to Indiana to speak in support of the war. This time, she spoke at the Angola Courthouse in Steuben County, where an overwhelming majority had rejected Article 13 when the Constitution was passed. However, her appearance was disrupted by a drunken mob which threatened to tar and feather her. Local residents were divided on her right to speak. She was arrested, tried before a friendly justice of the peace, and set free. Dissatisfied by the outcome, other residents had her arrested again and taken before a less-friendly justice. After her supporters won a change of venue to Jamestown, she was called six times to appear before the courts, but was never convicted. Despite being intimidated, threatened, arrested, and put on trial, Sojourner Truth spoke publicly several times in Steuben County. Her visit emphasized how divided public opinion was in Indiana in 1861 as the Civil War broke out.

After the war, she was invited to the White House and became involved with the Freedmen's Bureau, which helped freed slaves find jobs and build new lives; and, she continued to lobby against segregation. Nearly blind and deaf, she spent her final years in Battle Creek, Michigan, where she passed away on November 26, 1883.

References available at the end of Women's History Month

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