

Name _____ Date _____

Sojourner Truth

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

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Notes

New York, where Sojourner Truth grew up, abolished slavery very gradually. The Gradual Emancipation Law of 1799 mandated freedom for all enslaved people born after July 4, 1799 but not until they were at least in their twenties.

For enslaved people who, like Truth, were born prior to July 4, 1799, things were even more dire, as there was initially no hope of freedom at all. Finally, in 1817, New York passed another law, stating that this latter group would also be granted freedom but not until July 4, 1827.

Truth's enslaver, John Dumont, told her that he would give Truth her free papers one year before the new law was to go into effect. But when the time arrived for Dumont to fulfill this promise, he rescinded it. A few months later, Truth left on her own, taking her young daughter with her. She found shelter with Maria and Isaac Van Wagenen, abolitionists who viewed slavery as morally repugnant.

Shortly thereafter, Dumont showed up at the Van Wagenen's home to reclaim what was, in the eyes of the law, his property. But the Van Wagenens paid Dumont \$25, and he relinquished his claim.

When Sojourner Truth learned that her enslaved son, Peter, had been sent to Alabama a violation of New York law she engaged in a lengthy legal battle for justice. This required a great deal of bravery and persistence on Truth's part, but she was ultimately victorious. Peter's enslaver was forced to deliver him to his mother's custody in New York.

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Truth's court case holds a prominent role in legal history, as she is believed to be the first Black woman to successfully sue a White man for the freedom of an enslaved family member.

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But for generations, the primary sources for this important case the court documents were lost. Then, in 2022, author Jim Folts was examining papers at the New York State Archives. Folts wasn't researching Sojourner Truth, but documents bearing her former name, Isabella Van Wagenen, caught his attention. The papers turned out to be the missing court records. It was an incredible discovery that has enriched both the field of American history and the preservation of Truth's legacy.

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Excerpt of Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave by Sojourner Truth

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In 1850, Truth published an account of her life. Because she could not write, she told her story orally to Olive Gilbert. Gilbert presented Truth's account from the third person perspective and also included some of her own views. The following excerpt discusses Truth's experience with the utopian community that she ultimately joined.

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She did not fall in love at first sight with the Northampton Association, for she arrived there at a time when appearances did not correspond with the ideas of associationists, as they had been spread out in their writings; for their phalanx was a factory, and they were wanting in means to carry out their ideas of beauty and elegance, as they would have done in different circumstances. But she thought she would make an effort to tarry with them one night, though that seemed to her no desirable affair.

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But as soon as she saw that accomplished, literary, and refined persons were living in that plain and simple manner, and submitting to the labors and privations incident to such an infant institution, she said, "Well, if these can live here, / can." Afterwards, she gradually became pleased with, and attached to, the place and the people, as well she might; for 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, she could not have before met with, to the same extent, in any of her wanderings.

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In 1851, Truth delivered a spontaneous address at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention. Two versions of this speech were published, one which portrayed Truth as speaking in a stereotypical dialect, and the other which did not. The account without the stereotyping is considered by historians to be more accurate in both speech and content. Read an excerpt from that version below.

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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.

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As for intellect, all I can say is, if women have a pint and 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.

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The poor men seem 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.

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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.

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