

SOJOURNER TRUTH

SOJOURNER TRUTH

AMERICAN ABOLITIONIST

TERRY W. WHALIN



BARBOUR
PUBLISHING

© 1997 by Terry W. Whalin

Print ISBN 978-1-62029-711-7

eBook Editions:

Adobe Digital Edition (.epub) 978-1-62416-084-4

Kindle and MobiPocket Edition (.prc) 978-1-62416-083-7

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted for commercial purposes, except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without written permission of the publisher.

Churches and other noncommercial interests may reproduce portions of this book without the express written permission of Barbour Publishing, provided that the text does not exceed 500 words and that the text is not material quoted from another publisher. When reproducing text from this book, include the following credit line: "From *Sojourner Truth*, published by Barbour Publishing, Inc. Used by permission."

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*. New Living Translation copyright© 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Cover illustration: Greg Copeland

Cover design: Kirk DouPonce

Published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 719, Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683, www.barbourbooks.com

Our mission is to publish and distribute inspirational products offering exceptional value and biblical encouragement to the masses.



Printed in the United States of America.

DEDICATION

*To Bishop Phillip H. Porter Jr. and Reverend Alfred Baldwin,
men who have taught me about the modern-day journey
toward reconciliation. Through their lives, they continue
to follow the dreams of Sojourner Truth.*

*To readers who from these pages experience
the words of Jesus Christ: “You are truly my disciples if you
remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth,
and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32 NLT).*

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	9
1. BELLE	15
2. SOLD!	29
3. SEEKING FREEDOM	41
4. GOD REVEALS HIMSELF	52
5. THE NAME OF TRUTH	79
6. "GO EAST"	91
7. ABOLITION AND SUFFRAGE	113
8. PROCLAIMING LIBERTY	134
9. ABRAHAM LINCOLN	147
10. THE FINAL BATTLES	175
11. AN ENDURING LEGACY	201

PROLOGUE

The sun was bright that cloudless day in 1851. Hundreds of men and women were settling into their seats in an Akron, Ohio, church. Normally the building was reserved for prayer, but during the next few days, it would serve as the meeting place for an annual convention on women's rights.

Should women have the same political and social rights as men? That question was the burning issue of the day, and people had traveled hundreds of miles to hear the discussion. As they waited for the opening session, a striking black woman entered the auditorium. Wearing a plain gray dress, wire-rimmed glasses, and an oversized sunbonnet, the woman stood over six feet tall and looked over fifty years old.

Seeing no empty seats in the back of the church, the woman walked slowly past the crowd of white people to the front. She stepped in a proud, almost defiant, manner. At the front of the church, the woman sat alone on one of the steps that led to the pulpit.

"Who is that?"

"Where did she come from?" The people craned their heads to see the figure.

“She looks like an abolitionist to me,” someone surmised, familiar with former slaves such as Frederick Douglass, who traveled from town to town and spoke against the injustices of slavery.

At that moment, Frances Gage, who was to preside over the convention, stood on the platform. The crowd’s speculation died down, and Gage introduced the first speaker. Throughout the morning, the audience heard a variety of speakers. Some were in favor of the women’s rights movement, and others were against it.

THE BOOK
HAD BEEN
DICTATED
TO A FRIEND
BECAUSE
SOJOURNER
COULDN’T
READ OR
WRITE.

The black woman with the sun-bonnet sat on the pulpit steps with her face sunk into her hands. Even though she seemed distracted, she listened to every word.

At about midday, Gage called for an intermission. During the break, the black woman stood and walked among the audience. She offered to sell them copies of her book, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. The book had been dictated to a friend because

Sojourner couldn’t read or write. It told how she had been freed from slavery and had committed her life to helping other slaves gain freedom. While working for the freedom of slaves, Sojourner Truth had realized that women also needed liberation and that her cause could be broadened to include them. During the late 1840s, Sojourner joined the fight. At first, the abolitionist and women’s rights movements joined

forces. Then people known as Separatists wanted to split the two movements.

When some of these separatists in Akron learned that Sojourner Truth was attending the women's rights convention, they determined that Sojourner should not speak. Several separatists gathered around Frances Gage during the lunch break and asked her to prevent Sojourner from speaking. "It will ruin our convention in the newspapers," one of them said. "Those reporters will say we are a bunch of agitators."

Gage carefully listened to each person but made no promises. "When the time comes, we'll see," she said. As it turned out, Gage didn't have to make a decision about Sojourner Truth speaking that afternoon because the former slave returned to her place on the pulpit steps and silently continued listening to the speakers. The next morning, she again appeared content to listen to the speakers, several of whom were ministers.

The first minister told the convention that men deserved greater rights and privileges because they were more intelligent than women. When the next minister spoke, he told the audience, "Men should rule over women because Jesus Christ was a man. If God wanted women to be equal with men, then He would have given some sign of His will through the birth, life, and death of the Savior."

Another preacher told the convention that women had a lower status because Eve, the first woman, had committed the original sin in the Garden of Eden. Finally a minister described how women were born inferior to men because

they needed to have a man hold the door open for them. “Women don’t deserve the same rights as men,” the minister proclaimed, “because they are so much weaker.” All of these speakers believed the Bible supported their claims that men were better than women.

A mixture of men and women were in the audience, and many of the women were visibly upset as minister after

ALL OF THESE
SPEAKERS
BELIEVED
THE BIBLE
SUPPORTED
THEIR CLAIMS
THAT MEN
WERE BETTER
THAN WOMEN.

minister spoke against the rights of women. Although upset, none of these women were prepared to argue in public with such well-respected clergymen.

Then Sojourner Truth stood and walked to the pulpit. “Don’t let her speak!” several men cried who sat near Frances Gage. Sojourner removed her sunbonnet and turned toward the moderator for permission to address the audience. For a brief moment, Frances Gage hesitated. Then she introduced the black woman to the audience.

Sojourner was determined to speak against these ministers. Even though she couldn’t read or write, she had memorized a great deal of the Bible. She was certain that the Bible did not say women were less than men—any more than the Bible said that blacks should be slaves. She began to speak in a low, soft voice.

“Well, children, where there is so much racket, there must be something out of kilter.” That “something,” she said, was the domination of blacks and women by white men. “It

will be fixed pretty soon,” she promised the crowd.

First, Sojourner addressed the concerns of the minister who had declared women too weak to have equal rights. She explained how no one had helped her into a carriage or carried her across a mud puddle. In her entire life, no one had ever given her the best place to sit. As she spoke, Sojourner straightened her back. Her tall frame gave her words greater impact. To some people, her voice sounded like rolling thunder.

“And ain’t I a woman? Look at me!” she proclaimed. “Look at my arm.” Then she rolled up the sleeve on her dress. Unlike the plump arms of many women in the audience, Sojourner’s arm was lean from years of hard labor.

“I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could have done as much,” she declared. “And ain’t I a woman?”

She went on to describe the many times she had gone hungry, and she told about bearing children, only to watch them be sold into slavery. When she missed those children, only Jesus had been there to dry her tears.

Sojourner turned to the minister who had argued that women were less intelligent than men and therefore didn’t deserve equal treatment. “What does intelligence have to do with rights?” she asked with a pointed finger and an angry stare.

FIRST, SOJOURNER
ADDRESSED THE
CONCERNS OF THE
MINISTER WHO HAD
DECLARED WOMEN
TOO WEAK TO HAVE
EQUAL RIGHTS.

Next, she addressed the minister who had argued that men should be superior because Jesus Christ was a man. “Where did your Christ come from?” she asked. The minister didn’t answer. Sojourner repeated the question and answered, “From God and a woman. Man had nothing to do with the birth of Jesus Christ.”

FOR YEARS,
SOJOURNER TRUTH
HAD TRAVELED
THE COUNTRY
SPEAKING ON
ISSUES OF
FREEDOM.

Finally, she confronted the minister who had discussed Eve and the origin of sin. In defense of women, Sojourner said, “If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down, all alone, these together—” she motioned toward the women in the audience—“ought to be able to turn it back and get

it right side up again.” Most of the audience broke out in applause. As the noise died down, she concluded, “Now old Sojourner hasn’t got nothing more to say.”

Many people in the audience left their seats to congratulate the black woman. She thanked them for their kind words and encouragement. For years, Sojourner Truth had traveled the country speaking on issues of freedom. And from the beginning, it had often been a long and lonely road.

1 BELLE

Colonel Johannes Hardenbergh made the customary visit to the slave quarters on his farm near the Hudson River in upstate New York. Whenever there was a new birth on his plantation—a calf, a lamb, or a slave—the colonel inspected the new property that increased his wealth. In this case, a daughter had been born to his slaves, James and Betsey. They had named her Isabella, a name Colonel Hardenbergh liked, but in private, James and Betsey called her Belle.

“She has strong arms,” the owner told the parents in Low Dutch. “She’ll make a good worker.” Colonel Hardenbergh spoke English when he conducted business with his neighbors, but at home he preferred to speak the language of his Dutch ancestors. Slaves had been bought and sold on farms throughout this area of New York for more than 150 years.

In 1626, Dutch settlers had come to the United States and gathered in a colony they called New Netherland. They began importing slaves from Africa to work their farms. Thirty-eight years later, the British seized the colony, changed the name to New York, and continued to bring slaves into

the area. By 1723, blacks composed about 15 percent of New York's population—making them a critical part of the local economy.

The Hardenbergh estate was in a hilly neighborhood called by the Dutch name *Swartekill* (now just north of Rifton), part of the town of Hurley. It was within sight of the Catskill Mountains and near two small rivers, the Swartekill and the Wallkill, which spilled into the larger Rondout Creek about six miles before it flowed into the Hudson River.

Johannes Hardenbergh, the owner of the infant Isabella,

BELLE'S PARENTS
HAD SERVED
HARDENBERGH
FAITHFULLY FOR
MANY YEARS, AND
BELLE WAS THEIR
ELEVENTH CHILD.

had been a member of the New York Colonial Assembly and a colonel in the Revolutionary War. He operated a gristmill and was a large landowner. His land reached from Swartekill south for several miles along the Wallkill River. Although most of Ulster County did not have slaves, the Hardenberghs

were wealthier than most families and owned seven slaves.

Although Dutch descendants like Colonel Hardenbergh learned English, they clung to their native language. They taught their slaves only Dutch so that they could better control the slaves' behavior. If the slaves couldn't speak English, they couldn't communicate with the majority of the people around them.

Belle's parents had served Hardenbergh faithfully for many years, and Belle was their eleventh child. Belle's father

was a tall, strong man who was proud of his ability to do hard work. James was called Baumfree, a Low Dutch word that meant “tree.” But years of hard work had taken a toll on this big man.

Betsey, Belle’s mother, was a big, stocky woman with large hands. She was called Mau Mau Brett. Mau Mau Brett was much younger than Baumfree, but they loved each other and had a good marriage. Each of their other children had died or been sold into slavery. Belle’s parents worried that she might be sold as well.

Probably all of Belle’s ancestors were African. Later in her life, she heard a rumor that a Mohawk Indian was among her ancestors. This rumor may have emerged to explain how straight she stood and how tall—nearly six feet. Perhaps some white people felt a need to explain Belle’s intelligence by attributing it to Mohawk ancestry. No evidence supported the rumor, however, and Belle herself said, “I’m the pure African. You can see that plain enough.”

The exact date of her birth is unknown because slave births weren’t recorded. Some people claimed she was either born in 1776 or 1777, but it is more likely that she was born about 1797.

Slavery cast a long shadow over the lives of slave parents and their children. They had no control over their families. Often, children were taken and sold from their families. Their parents couldn’t protect them. The best that Baumfree and Mau Mau Brett could do for Belle was to teach her how to handle her life.

If a slave disobeyed, punishment was often harsh, so at

an early age, Belle was taught obedience. Her parents also instilled in Belle the importance of hard work, honesty, and loyalty. Another value they taught was suffering in silence. “Never make a fuss in front of the white folk,” her mother told Belle. “When you’ve got to cry, cry alone.”

WHEN BELLE
WAS ABOUT
THREE YEARS
OLD, COLONEL
HARDENBERGH
DIED.

When Belle was about three years old, Colonel Hardenbergh died. His son Charles had recently built a large limestone house in the nearby hills. He moved his inheritance of livestock and ten slaves, including Belle and her parents, to his new home. The new property had no slave housing, so Charles moved his slaves into the damp cellar of

the stone house to eat and sleep together.

During the day, only a small amount of light came in through the tiny cellar window. At night, the slaves lit a fire in the room and slept on hard wooden pallets. If it rained, water seeped through cracks in the walls and turned the floor into a pool of mud. During the winter, the slaves huddled together around a fire to escape the bitter cold and wrapped worn-out blankets around themselves as they tried to sleep on their pallets. In the summer, the cellar was hot, humid, and smelly; so most of the time, the slaves slept outside.

In spite of the harsh living conditions, Belle’s parents remained obedient to their new master and worked hard at plowing and harvesting the crops in his fields. Consequently,

their master developed some affection for the couple and eventually gave them their own land. Then Baumfree and Mau Mau Brett could raise their own corn, tobacco, and other crops to trade with their neighbors for additional food and clothing.

Soon after Belle and her parents moved to the Hardenbergh farm, her brother Peter was born. Now there was someone else for the little girl to love. One night when both children were still very young, their mother took them outside and told them to sit under a tree.

“My children,” she said to them, “there is a God who hears and sees you.” The two small children looked around them, but they couldn’t see God.

“Where does God live?” Belle asked her mother.

“He lives in the sky,” their mother answered, “and when you are beaten or cruelly treated or fall into any trouble, you must ask His help, and He will always hear and help you.”

Clinging to the promise of a powerful guardian in the sky, Belle faced the difficulties in her life with increased confidence. This confidence continued to grow as Belle grew older and learned new things. On Sundays, Belle and the other slaves didn’t have to work in their master’s orchards or fields. Belle learned how to row a boat and ride a horse. Her mother taught her to obey her master, to recite the Lord’s Prayer every day, and never to steal or lie.

SOON AFTER
BELLE AND
HER PARENTS
MOVED TO THE
HARDENBERGH
FARM, HER
BROTHER PETER
WAS BORN.

One night, Belle heard her mother crying. “What’s wrong, Mau Mau?” she gently asked.

“I’m groaning to think of my poor children,” Mau Mau said. “They don’t know where I be, and I don’t know where they be. They look up at the stars, and I look up at the stars, but I can’t tell where they be.”

Later her mother told Belle how—many years earlier—Michael and Nancy, Belle’s older brother and sister, had been snatched from their family. One snowy winter morning, some men in a horse-drawn sled stopped at the cabin where Belle’s family lived. Michael was delighted when the men told him that he was going for a ride on the sled. Quickly the boy jumped onto the sled. Suddenly his joy turned to fear. One of the men walked out of the cabin with a large box containing his sister, Nancy. She was screaming.

Afraid of these men, Michael jumped off the sled, ran inside the cabin, and hid under a bed. The men came into the cabin, dragged Michael outside, put him on the sled, and then drove away. Their master had sold these children. Belle’s parents never saw Michael or Nancy again.

Despite her mother’s fears that Belle would be snatched away and sold to someone else, the family remained together until she was about eleven years old. In 1808, Charles Hardenbergh suddenly died, and his heirs decided to auction off his horses, cattle, and slaves.

The day of the auction, the Stone Ridge Farm was crowded with people. Belle stood trembling beside her mother. “I don’t want to leave you, Mau Mau! What if they beat me?”

Why can't I go free like you and Baumfree?"

"Hush, Belle," her mother said softly in Dutch.

Then Belle's father, Baumfree said, "Nobody would buy a broken-down old horse like me. The law says Old Master's kin have to take care of me, so they're letting me and Mau Mau go free to get rid of us."

Almost thirty years earlier, a New York law had been passed that allowed any slave over fifty years old to be freed. The law also required that the freed slave be able to earn a living. Years of living in the cold, damp cellar had crippled Baumfree's legs and hands with arthritis. He was unable to work.

ALMOST THIRTY YEARS EARLIER, A NEW YORK LAW HAD BEEN PASSED THAT ALLOWED ANY SLAVE OVER FIFTY YEARS OLD TO BE FREED.

Even so, Hardenbergh's heirs decided to free both Baumfree and Mau Mau. Younger and in better health, Mau Mau could support both of them. The couple was allowed to continue living in the dark cellar as long as Mau Mau continued to work for the family. Baumfree and Mau Mau had no choice but to accept the offer and stay in the cellar. They couldn't speak any English, so they could not function in the English-speaking world around them. The couple knew Belle and Peter were headed to the slave auction.

With tears in her eyes, Mau Mau told Belle, "Child, you can't stay with us. All our other children were sold. Now it's your turn and your little brother's."

“Just remember what we’ve taught you, Belle,” Baumfree said. “Obey your master and work hard.”

Mau Mau chimed in, “And if you pray to God, He’ll see that you’re treated right.”

A white man motioned for Belle. It was time for her to be auctioned. “Good-bye, Mau Mau. Good-bye, Baumfree.”

Belle and her brother Peter stood in the auction area. Peter was sold first to a man who didn’t live in the area.

A WHITE MAN
MOTIONED FOR
BELLE. IT WAS
TIME FOR HER TO
BE AUCTIONED.

Although Belle felt like crying, she stood in stony silence. Over and over, she repeated the Lord’s Prayer to herself.

The auctioneer called out, “Hardenbergh’s Belle, age eleven, good strong body.” The girl couldn’t understand the words

since they were in English, but she knew it meant that she was being sold. At first no one in the crowd offered a bid. Belle thought maybe she would be allowed to stay on the farm with her parents. Then the auctioneer ordered Belle to turn to the right. When the girl did not move, the man grabbed her and turned her. “Look how tall she is, even now. She’ll be a big woman in maturity, have lots of children, and be able to do a lot of work.”

Still no one offered to buy Belle. She continued to pray that she would not be sold. Then the auctioneer threw in a flock of sheep, saying, “They go with the girl.”

John Neely, a shopkeeper from Kingston Landing, New York, stood in the audience and recognized a bargain that he

couldn't pass up. He offered one hundred dollars, and with a crack from the auctioneer's gavel, the sheep and Belle were sold. Belle had a new master.

While Neely thought he had struck a good deal, his wife was not impressed. "This girl can't speak English," she yelled at her husband. "Sure, she looks strong, but what good is she for me? When I ask for a pot, she gives me a spoon. When I ask for a skillet, she hands me a broom." When Belle couldn't understand Mrs. Neely's instructions and responded in Dutch, Mrs. Neely beat Belle. Belle tried to learn English from her new masters, but Mrs. Neely had no patience for teaching. War was declared between Mrs. Neely and her young slave, and Belle had no chance of winning. Mrs. Neely repeatedly slapped Belle. "I told you the word for that thing is broom! Broom! Say broom!"

HE OFFERED
ONE HUNDRED
DOLLARS, AND
WITH A CRACK
FROM THE
AUCTIONEER'S
GAVEL, THE
SHEEP AND BELLE
WERE SOLD.

One day Mrs. Neely's frustrations grew unbearable. That Sunday morning, she sent her slave out to the barn where Mr. Neely was waiting for her. In the barn, Belle found her master heating some metal rods over red-hot coals. Without offering any explanation, Mr. Neely grabbed Belle's hands and tied them together. He tore Belle's shirt off her back and began to beat the girl's back with the rods. Belle pleaded with her master to stop and called out to God for help. Finally she

fainted. Belle lay in the straw, soaked with her own blood, and wept bitterly. It was her first beating, and she determined to do whatever was necessary to avoid another one.

Afterward, Belle crept off into the woods and cried out to God. “Was it right for them to beat me, God? You’ve got to get me a new master. You have to help me, God.” But Belle’s prayers were not instantly answered.

Mrs. Neely continued to scream at her young slave with confusing instructions, but Belle learned how to cope. On her own initiative, Belle scrubbed the floors so clean that

BELLE CREPT OFF
INTO THE WOODS
AND CRIED OUT
TO GOD. “WAS IT
RIGHT FOR THEM
TO BEAT ME, GOD?”

Mrs. Neely had no cause to complain. Slowly, Belle learned to speak some English, but her first language, Dutch, always showed in her accented speech.

As Belle worked for the Neelys, she sometimes wondered, *Will I ever see my family again?* One winter evening,

when Belle had almost lost hope of seeing her family, her father arrived at the Neely home. Baumfree looked old and very sick. He told Belle how a family named Simmons had rented the Big House but permitted her parents to continue living in the cellar. Mau Mau worked hard, but they barely had enough money to buy food or clothing.

Belle listened to her father and didn’t mention her own struggles. Baumfree noticed that despite the deep snow on the ground, his daughter didn’t have warm clothing or shoes. When he asked about it, Belle explained, “I can’t wear Mrs.

Neely's hand-me-downs. They are too small."

As her father prepared to leave, he hugged Belle, but she drew back in pain. Baumfree walked out to the gate of the property. Belle followed her father through the snow by stepping in his large footprints. Once the pair was out of the Neelys' sight, Belle showed him her scarred back. Baumfree was filled with rage at her beating, but even worse was the knowledge that he hadn't been able to protect his daughter. Although Baumfree was old and crippled, he was free. He vowed to use his freedom to help his daughter.

As he left, Baumfree promised Belle that he would try to help her. Unfortunately for Belle, change took time. She continued working for the Neely family.

After about two years with the Neelys, God answered what Belle later called a "desperate prayer." Somehow old Baumfree persuaded Martin Schryver to purchase Belle from the Neelys for \$105. The fisherman didn't own any other slaves but had a farm and a tavern on the Rondout Creek. This new location was only about five miles from the Neely farm.

Belle worked hard for her new owner, partially from gratitude but partially from fear of receiving another beating. The Schryvers were a coarse

BELLE WORKED
HARD FOR HER
NEW OWNER,
PARTIALLY FROM
GRATITUDE BUT
PARTIALLY FROM
FEAR OF RECEIVING
ANOTHER BEATING.