

# Letters About Sojourner Truth's Life

*By Jean, 1/11/04*

My name is Ruth Cooper, and I'm nine years old. I have an aunt living in Albany, New York, whom I call Aunt Abigail. Ever since my family moved away from the little cottage next door to Aunt Abigail in New York, she and I have been pen pals. One of the most exciting things we wrote about was my new next-door neighbor who is a black woman named Sojourner Truth. I found out that she is a pretty famous lady. Even though she is aged, she is kind and caring for all kinds of people. At first, it was strange having her around, but in the end, I was friends with her.

Dear Aunt Abigail,

February 20, 1870

Yesterday, an elderly black woman moved in the empty little brick house I mentioned last month. I saw her while she was planting roses. The woman is about six feet tall and has a powerful presence when she stands up. She looks around seventy years of age. I'm kind of scared of her, but I'll try my best to find out about her.

Love,  
Ruth

Dear Aunt Abigail,

February 29, 1870

Today the old lady invited me for milk and homemade chocolate chip cookies. Her name is Sojourner Truth. Sojourner was born into slavery and was a slave for thirty years. In 1828, when she was thirty years old, she was set free because of a New York law that frees male slaves above the age of twenty eight and female slaves above the age of twenty one. Sojourner also told me she had been going around the northeast part of the United States making speeches about slavery and women's rights. I asked her how old she was, and she said she didn't know. She also added that most slave owners didn't keep records of their slaves' birth. I think she may be born in 1797 or so, since she looks around seventy.

Your niece,  
Ruth

P.S. Sojourner told me that I could go over to her house anytime if I would like to, since she rarely leaves her house besides going to the store. So, I plan to go there tomorrow.

Dear Ruth,

March 8, 1870

Sojourner sounds like a nice person. She is actually well known around New York since she made a few of her antislavery speeches here before. Did you know that her real name is Isabella? "Sojourner Truth" is her made up name. I will tell you why she made up that name for herself. Sojourner Truth had been hearing voices that she believed was from God's ever since she was little. One day the voice told her to choose a name and start preaching, and then, she did exactly what the voice said. It must be exciting to meet her in person.

Best wishes,  
Aunt Abigail

Dear Aunt Abigail,

March 18, 1870

Today I went to Sojourner's house to confirm if she was really named Isabella. Then I asked her why she was named Isabella. She said that she was named after a queen in Spain. Sojourner also told me that she was often called Belle by her parents when she was a girl, and I could call her Belle if I wanted to.

Can you try and do some "research" about her? I want to look at her life in a different point of view, too.

Your niece,  
Ruth

Dear Ruth,

March 31, 1870

Well, yesterday my neighbor Sarah, who knew Sojourner, told me that she was never educated. As you might know, most slaves were never educated except those whose masters cared about their education. Also, do you know something that's funny Sarah told me? She told me that Mr. and Mrs. Van Wagner, a Quaker couple, took Sojourner in when she was running away from Mr. Dumont, her fourth master. She was running away because Mr. Dumont broke his promise. Two year just before her freedom, he promised her that he would set her free one year earlier if she worked extra hard, but he did not keep his promise.

After running away from Mr. Dumont, Sojourner moved in the Van Wagner's house with her daughter, Sophie, and Mr. and Mrs. Van Wagner gave her and her daughter a bed to

sleep in. That night, Sojourner never thought to sleep in that bed, so she camped under the bed. In the morning, when the Van Wagners came in to ask her if she had slept well, they saw that she was never in the bed.

I would really like to know something about her personality, and I really wish I could meet her too.

Love,  
Aunt Abigail

Dear Aunt Abigail,

April 8, 1870

Today it was raining dogs and cats. I was extremely bored at my house, so I decided to visit Sojourner. When I met her, I asked her what her job was. Sojourner said that she was a street preacher and also a lecturer. She said that while she was lecturing, she often made her audience cry and shout out in terror with her speeches. One of her speeches contains the phrase, "Ain't I a woman?" She gave that speech at Akron, Ohio. A surprising thing happened after that speech. Sojourner recalled that right after that speech, a chubby man walked toward her, and said that he didn't care for her speeches "more than a fleabite." Most people would have turned away in that case, but Sojourner replied calmly, "Then I hope I'll keep you scratching!!!"

If you really want to meet her, you can take a train and come here to stay with us for a little while, if you want. Then, you can come with me to meet Sojourner. If you can't do that, you can probably go by yourself to the Hardenburgs' house in Ulster County, New York. Ulster County was her birthplace, so you can see how she lived in her early years. I hope you can come visit!

Love,  
Ruth

Dear Ruth,

April 19, 1870

Yesterday I just came home from my little trip to Isabella's birthplace. I'm sorry for choosing to go there instead of visiting you. I thought it would save your mother the trouble of feeding another mouth. But anyways, when I went to the Hardenburgs' old house, I saw it had been deserted. I found out from the neighbors that Mr. and Mrs. Hardenburg had moved to another house. I went in and found an old scrap of paper that was fading away on the floor.

The old scrap of the paper I found is enclosed for you to read.

*Isabella, about nine years old, sold with a flock of sheep to John Neely for \$100.*

Would you please ask Isabella how her days were at the Neely's. I have a feeling that they were not too good.

Your aunt,  
Aunt Abigail

Dear Aunt Abigail,

April 22, 1870

Isabella said that her days at the Neely's were just horrible. The Neely's spoke English, but Isabella knew only Dutch. She learned Dutch from her first master and her parents, who spoke Dutch. She could not understand her new Master's orders. Therefore, Mr. Neely thought Isabella was just too lazy to work. So, in a cold morning he took Isabella to the barnyard and beat her severely with hot metal rods until his arms could not raise the rod one more time. Mr. Neely really shouldn't have done that to Belle.

Your niece,  
Ruth

Dear Ruth,

May 5, 1870

Mr. Neely was horrible, wasn't he? I agree that he shouldn't have beaten Belle. I heard that Mr. Neely whipped Belle after he found out that the breakfast's potatoes were always black. But, it turned out that Kate, the hired white kitchen girl, put ashes into the pot with the potatoes. Can you guess who solved the mystery of the dirty potatoes? It was Gertrude, the Neely's daughter, who solved the mystery. She hid behind the door and saw Kate scooping up ashes from the fireplace. After she sighted Kate scooping up the ashes, she ran to tell her parents. At the beginning, her parents didn't believe her, so Gertrude grabbed Kate's hands and showed Mr. and Mrs. Neely the soot.

I'm surprised that the Neely's didn't do anything about Kate. I guess some people just think whites are better than blacks. On the other hand, some white people, like Gertrude, respect black people as well as white people. But even now, after the North won the War

Between the States, there are still some prejudiced people who put up “Whites Only” signs. Do you think people should do that?

Yours truly,  
Aunt Abigail

Dear Aunt Abigail,

May 19,1870

Of course I think that people shouldn't put up “White Only” signs. Well, guess what? Today a lady moved in the house beside Sojourner's. When I went to her house she introduced me to the other lady, Diana Corbin. Diana is Sojourner's daughter, and she moved here with her family to be closer to her mother. I asked Sojourner if she had any other children, and she said yes. There was Peter, Sophie, and Elizabeth. Diana is the oldest child. Peter, who was lost at sea, was a bit younger than Diana. Elizabeth is the third child, and Diana said Elizabeth and her family might move here soon too. Sophie is the youngest. Now I'll get to meet Sojourner's children! Sadly, I will never get to see Peter because he drowned at sea. Sojourner once won a lawsuit to get Peter back. He was illegally sold out of New York State to Alabama. Luckily, the judge returned Peter back to Sojourner. That was very nice of the judge. But still, it's exciting to meet Sojourner's children, don't you think?  
Hooray for Sojourner's Children!

Your loving niece,  
Ruth

P.S. Speaking of the War Between the States, Sojourner once told me that she worked during the war collecting supplies for black soldiers.

Dear Ruth,

May 28,1870

I'm glad that you get to meet Sojourner's children as well as Sojourner Truth herself. Do you know Sojourner Truth once met Abraham Lincoln? She met him in 1864. Abraham Lincoln signed a book Sojourner carried around with her that she called her “Book Of Life.” Abraham wrote in Sojourner's book:

*To Aunty Sojourner Truth,  
- A. Lincoln*

It must have been fun to meet President Abraham Lincoln, but it is also a pleasure to meet Sojourner Truth, isn't it? I think I will visit you sometime this year, not only to see Sojourner Truth, but how much you've grown!

Love,  
Aunt Abigail

Dear Aunt Abigail,

June 11, 1870

Today I finished my homework and mother said, "Why don't you go to Sojourner's for awhile. I'll call you when it's dinnertime." I wanted to know what Sojourner's childhood was like. Sojourner told me that when she was little, she would often wake up finding her mother sobbing. When she asked her mother what was wrong, she would reply that she was mourning for her lost children. Then, she would tell Sojourner the story of how her brother, Michael, and sister, Nancy, had been sold. It goes like this:

One winter day two white men, who were slave traders, came on a sled and told Michael that they were going on a sleigh ride. Michael was delighted and jumped on, but he became frightened when he heard Nancy screaming. He turned just in time to see the men put Nancy in a box and close the lid. Michael then became frightened and ran into the owner's house. The slave traders followed him and caught him. Then they dropped him in the sleigh and went off. Elizabeth, Isabella's mother, never saw Michael and Nancy again.

Isn't that such a sad story? Imagine if you never saw Mother again! I bet that Isabella feels really bad about that. I feel really sorry for her. Do you?

Love,  
Ruth

Dear Ruth,

June 25, 1870

I agree with you, it is such a sad story. I found out that she always looked up at the stars and the moon when she missed her mother and father. Her mother had told her to do that before she was sold. She said, "I know you are going to be sold soon. But, wherever you are and whenever you can, look up at those stars and remember that I'm looking at those stars too." Sojourner was humiliated plenty of times during her life. People, especially men, were always suspicious that she was actually a man dressed like a woman. Sojourner put an end

to that when she opened her sweater at a meeting and showed everyone her breasts. Sojourner was also humiliated when groups of people would throw sticks and stones at her for no reason whatsoever. She just walked on and pretended not to notice the debris whooshing past her. I must have taken courage to do that. Somebody else in Sojourner's place might have punched the throwers in the nose!

Love,  
Aunt Abigail

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Sojourner lived to a ripe old age in her little house sitting in Battle Creek, Michigan. She died in November 1884 with her friends and family by her side. I'm sure Ruth and her Aunt Abigail would have been by her bedside if they were real. The letters they wrote to each other contain facts, although some minor parts are fictional." Her quick wit, strong determination, and inspiring faith will be remembered throughout the centuries. Below is a picture of her and part of her famous speech, "Ain't I a woman?" ~ Jean



Source: Abraham Lincoln: The War Years  
Vol. 2, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc (circa  
1862) © www.arttoday.com

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about? That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne four children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

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