

by Diana Paiz Engle



A Never-Ending SOJOURN



Located in Monument Park, the Sojourner Truth monument is Battle Creek's latest tribute to the noted abolitionist and feminist. Photo Gary Converse.

The old woman had lain in bed for two months, ill with ulcers on her legs. She had seen many doctors—even Dr. John Harvey Kellogg of the Battle Creek Sanitarium—but to no avail. Surrounded by her family in the early morning of November 26, 1883, she used the last of her strength to speak. “Be a follower of the Lord Jesus,” she said.

Sojourner Truth then died.

The great woman's voice, described by some as deep and masculine, by others as "sad, bewitching, mystic," fell silent that day. But Sojourner Truth's words—uneducated but intelligent, simple but eloquent—still ring out. In Battle Creek, the city Sojourner Truth called home for the last twenty-six years of her life, a recently unveiled monument portrays the abolitionist and feminist in an amphitheater setting, ready to preach the holy word and advocate for the poor and disenfranchised. According to one biographer, Sojourner Truth put Battle Creek on the national map decades before anyone had heard of the Kellogg brothers, the Sanitarium or corn flakes. But Truth's road to Michigan was long, painful and often shrouded in mystery.

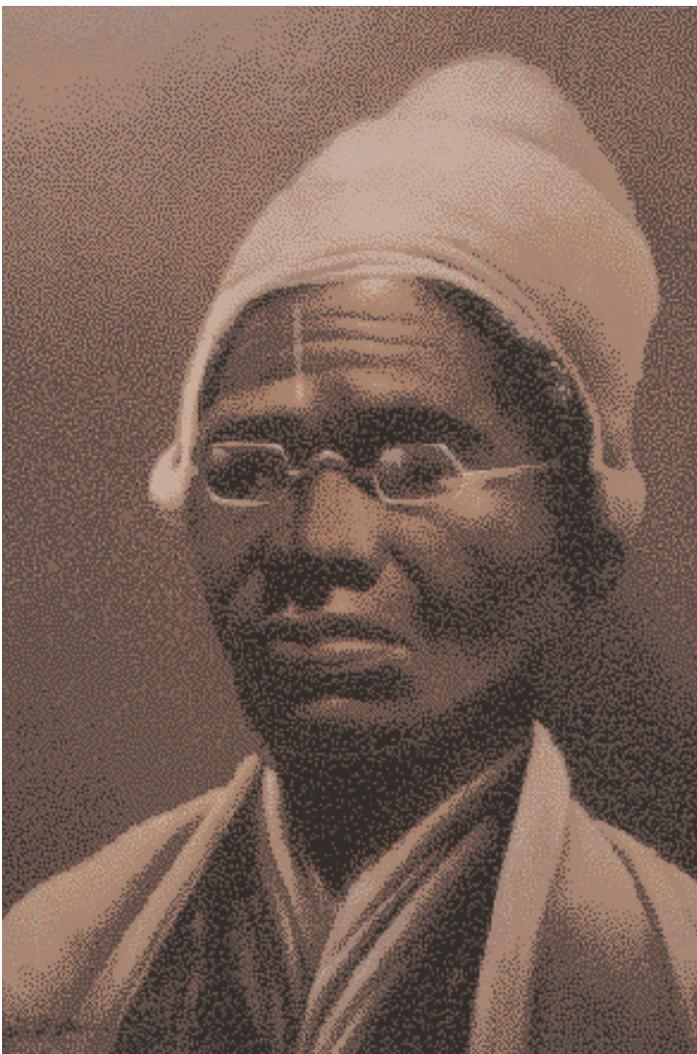
The woman known as Sojourner Truth was born in 1797 and given the name Isabella. She had no last name of her own, because she was a slave. Isabella, her brothers and sisters and their parents belonged to Colonel Johannis Hardenbergh in New York State's Ulster County. Isabella's parents, James and Elizabeth, were "cottagers," slaves who lived in a separate dwelling on a slaveowner's farm. James and Elizabeth grew and harvested tobacco, corn and flax for Hardenbergh, and received a portion of the sales. For slaves, it wasn't the worst possible existence—but it was still slavery. James and Elizabeth suffered the loss of having their young children taken from them and sold.

Isabella was more fortunate than at least two of her siblings who, at ages as young as three years old, were sold away from her family. She stayed with her parents until Hardenbergh died and his property—human and otherwise—was distributed among his heirs. This led to Isabella's sale at age nine. During the next two and a half years, she was sold again and again, purchased last by John Dumont for approximately \$175.

Isabella was a versatile slave for the Dumont family, performing agricultural labor for her master and domestic labor for her mistress. John Dumont took pride in her strength and stamina, saying Isabella "could do as much work as half a dozen common [white] people, and do it well, too." Isabella worked hard and endured all the abuse associated with slavery. In *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*, Nell Painter writes that like many abused children, Isabella "found ways to explain and excuse the abuse," believing that "Dumont only beat her when she deserved it." Isabella held an affection for Dumont that "would prove lasting, despite his cruelty." In her late teens, Isabella married Thomas, another Dumont slave, and had five children.

In 1817, New York finally moved to end slavery in that state. On July 4, 1827, slaves born before 1799 would be free; slaves born after 1799 would remain with their masters as indentured servants until age twenty-five for women and age twenty-eight for men. Isabella fell into the first category, but by the mid-1820s she became increasingly impatient

One of the many depictions of Sojourner Truth is this 1988 painting by artist Paul Collins.



Photos Historical Society of Battle Creek, unless otherwise noted

for freedom. Playing out a complex and twisted slave-master relationship, Isabella bargained with Dumont to receive her freedom one year before the New York emancipation took effect. But Dumont didn't keep his promise, and in late 1826 Isabella ran away, leaving behind at least three children and her husband.

Isabella did not travel far, but chose her destination with care. She went to the home of the Van Wagenens, neighbors who attended the same church as the Dumonts but who were firm antislavery advocates. When Dumont found Isabella, he accepted twenty dollars in exchange for her freedom.

Isabella worked for Dumont's neighbors and relatives, and turned to them in 1827 when she needed help. With their financial support, Isabella successfully sued for the return of her five-year-old son, Peter, who had been sold illegally into Alabama. Peter was given his freedom and sent to live with his mother.

Timed closely with Isabella's walk to freedom was her renewal in faith. She became, in today's language, born again, moved by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In 1829, Isabella headed to New York City, where "she undoubtedly sought economic opportunity." According to biographers Erlene Stetson and Linda David, Isabella worked for—and worshiped with—wealthy New Yorkers caught up in religious cults that placed a heavy emphasis on singing, speaking in tongues and preaching. Isabella's preaching and praying were "long and loud . . . remarkable for their influence in converting." The former slave's preaching was so powerful that "even learned and respectable people were running after her." In 1833, she joined the Matthias Kingdom, a cult led by Robert Matthews, who called himself the Prophet Matthias. According to Painter, Isabella was drawn by the power that Matthias held over her. "He was brutal toward her," Painter writes, "but, like John Dumont, he also seemed to care for her." The Matthias Kingdom flourished for a couple of years, but when it fell apart Isabella returned to the Perez Whiting family, her employer before joining the cult.

One day in 1843, something snapped in Isabella. "The Spirit calls me, and I must go," she told Mrs. Whiting one hour before her departure. "When I left the house of bondage," she later told Harriet Beecher Stowe, "I left everything behind," including the name Isabella. God gave her the name Sojourner, she told Stowe, because she "was to travel up an' down the land, showin' the people their sins" and he gave her the name Truth because she "was to declare the truth to the people." At age forty-six, Truth journeyed to New England to start a new life.

FREE LECTURE!

SOJOURNER TRUTH,

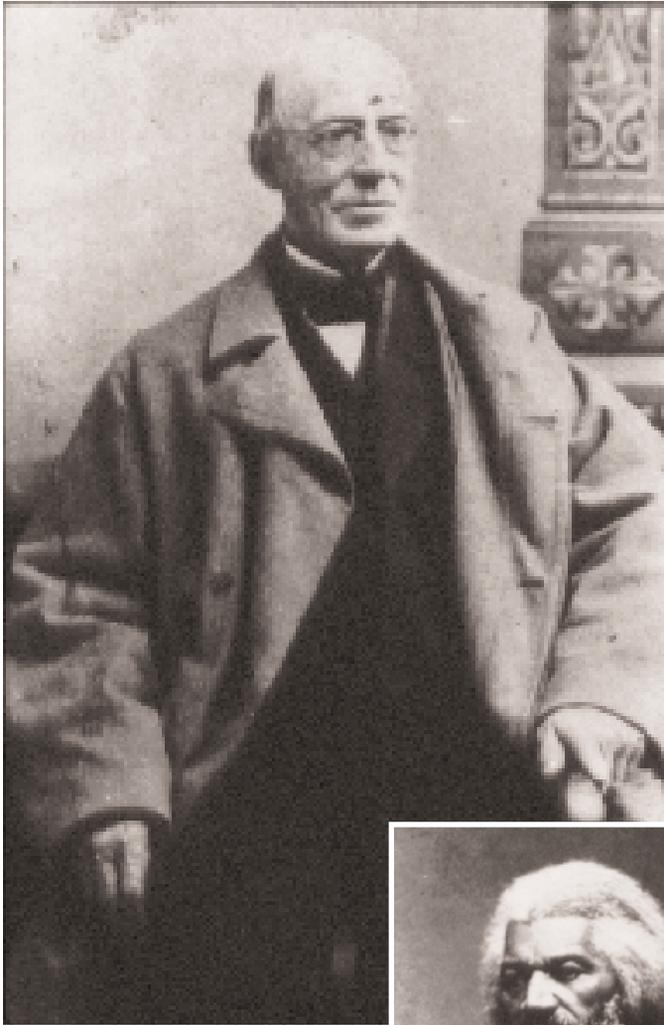
Who has been a slave in the State of New York, and who has been a Lecturer for the last twenty-three years, whose characteristics have been so vividly portrayed by Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, as the African Sybil, will deliver a lecture upon the present issues of the day,

At _____ On _____

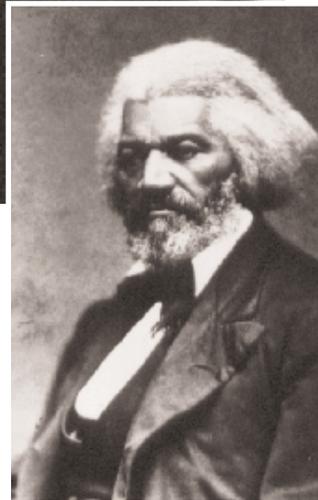
And will give her experience as a Slave mother and religious woman. She comes highly recommended as a public speaker, having the approval of many thousands who have heard her earnest appeals, among whom are Wendell Phillips, Wm. Lloyd Garrison, and other distinguished men of the nation.

At the close of her discourse she will offer for sale her photograph and a few of her choice songs.

In the late 1860s, this poster advertised Truth's lectures. The date and time of each event were filled in by hand.



Photos National Archives



While at the Northampton Institute for Education and Industry, in the mid-1840s, Truth met abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison (above) and Frederick Douglass (right). Although they were fighting for the same cause, Truth and Douglass used different approaches and speaking styles.

Truth's travels took her to Massachusetts and the Northampton Association for Education and Industry. During Truth's almost two years there, the utopian commune boasted more than two hundred members—people who believed in abolition, women's rights, temperance, vegetarianism and other causes. They lived in spartan conditions, and enjoyed lectures and open discussions featuring progressive intellectuals. This is where Truth befriended abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and first sparred with former slave Frederick Douglass. And it is here that Truth's remarkable presence blossomed. One association member recorded that when Truth rose to speak "her commanding figure and dignified manner hushed every trifler." Although Douglass later grumbled that Truth "seemed to please herself and others best when she put her ideas in the oddest forms," another observer claimed Truth's audiences never laughed at her but were "melted into tears by her touching stories."

Perhaps spurred on by the success of Frederick Douglass's 1845 autobiography, the illiterate Truth began dictating her life story to a fellow association member in 1846. Four years later, thanks to Garrison's support, the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* was published. In 1851, Garrison invited Truth to accompany him and George Thompson on a tour of antislavery and women's rights meetings. Although Garrison later backed out of the trip because of poor health, Thompson and Truth set off together. On this tour Truth's circle of influential friends widened, and soon she was traveling with others throughout the Midwest.

In May 1851, Truth spoke before the members of the Ohio Woman's Rights Convention, packed into an Akron church. According to biographers Stetson and David, the former slave's presence made some in the audience uneasy, fearful that "newspapers might . . . submerge the woman's rights cause in abolitionism." That didn't happen—but what did happen remains a source of debate. In *Glorying in Tribulation: The Lifework of Sojourner Truth*,

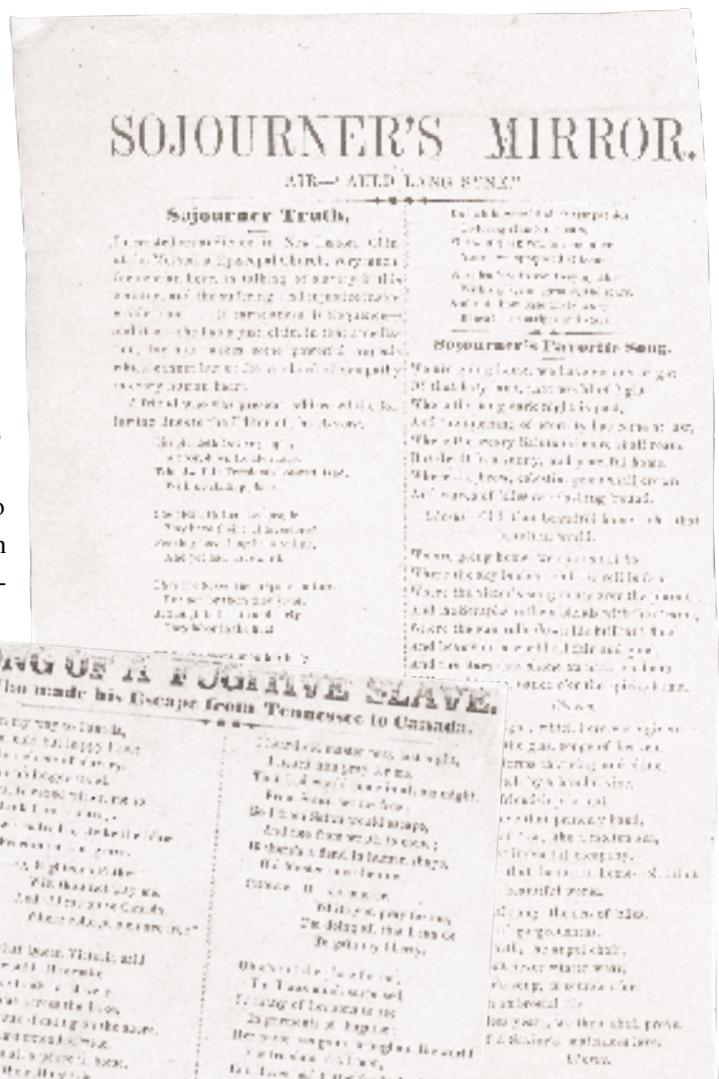
Erlene Stetson and Linda David venture that Truth created "a defining moment" in the woman's rights movement; Painter says no. "A much later report would attribute a dominant role to Sojourner Truth," Painter writes. "Her remarks did not bring the meeting to a halt or even change its course, but they engrossed the audience." The *Anti-Slavery Bugle* reported on Truth's words at the convention, an address that later become known as the "Ain't I a Woman?" speech. "I have as much muscle as any man," she told the feminists in her powerful voice, "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?" Then she switched gears, turning to humor. With slaves seeking freedom and women seeking rights, Truth told the convention, men were "surely between a hawk and a buzzard."

Frederick Douglass, whom Truth had met at the Northampton Association for Education and Industry, felt Truth's sharp words. He called her a "strange compound of wit and wisdom, wild enthusiasm and flint-like common sense." In 1852, Truth and Douglass matched up in a Salem, Ohio, abolitionist meeting. When Douglass told the assembly that he thought the slaves' fight for freedom "must come to blood," Truth stood up. "Is God gone?" she asked him pointedly. Douglass stood "demolished and silent," one observer noted. Years later, Douglass recalled that the crowd was stunned into silence, as if "someone had thrown a brick through the window." Truth, he complained years later, liked to "trip me up in my speeches."

By the time Truth traveled to Battle Creek in 1856 to attend a meeting of the Michigan Friends of Human Progress, the second edition of the *Narrative* had been published, this time featuring an introduction by Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. For the first time, Michiganders felt the power of Truth's words. "My mother said when we were sold, we must ask God to make our masters good," she told the assembly. But Truth added, she was sold to "a severe, hard master" who tied her in the barn and whipped her until "the blood run down the floor."

Truth was interested in the spiritualist Quaker beliefs of the Progressive Friends and one year later, at age sixty, the former slave moved to the group's new community of Harmonia, six miles west of Battle Creek. She eventually moved to Battle Creek and, although she was more often out of town than in her residence, she never called any other place home. In the words of one Battle Creek historian, Truth was "a local tourist attraction" when she was in town. Battle Creek residents with out-of-town guests often included a visit to Truth's home on their excursions to show off the town's attractions. The "old traveler," a local newspaper later reported, was "ever ready to chat."

Among Truth's friends in Battle Creek was the Merritt family. Years later, William Merritt remembered that Truth would disappear on a trip, then reappear just as suddenly. When she returned from her travels, Truth visited the Merritts. Seated around a table with friends, Truth was "taller and straighter than anyone else," William's sister, Minnie, recalled. "We loved to hear her talk, her wonderful voice was so deep and smooth."



To help fund her lectures, Sojourner Truth sold song sheets at the end of her presentations. These two songs were owned by Katherine Moulton, the great-granddaughter of Frances Titus.

Brother Richard remembered Truth rocking him to sleep while she sang “quaint Negro lullabies.”

Truth’s visits in town were not all social. On June 12, 1863, she spoke in Battle Creek at a state convention of sabbath schools. She urged the teachers to “root up . . . the great sin of prejudice against color.” She asked the assembly of five hundred,

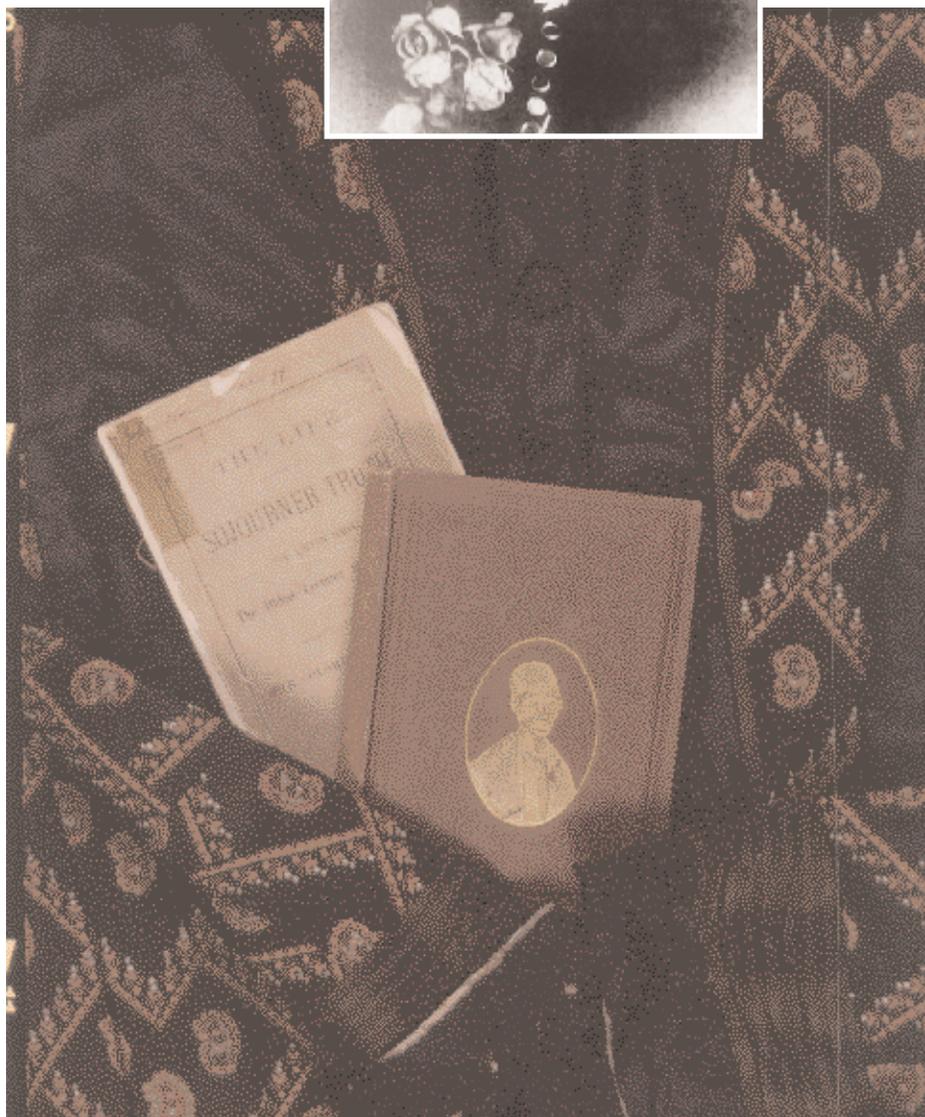
“Does not God love colored children as well as white children? And did not the same Savior die to save the one as well as the other?” An observer noted that “scores of eyes were filled with tears.”

In late 1863, Truth traveled throughout Battle Creek to solicit food and other Thanksgiving donations for the First Michigan Colored Infantry at Camp Ward in Detroit. A year later, Isabella went to Washington, D.C., where she worked at the Freedman’s Hospital. On the morning of October 29, Truth visited the White House to meet President

Abraham Lincoln. She waited patiently in line, “enjoying his conversation with others.” When Truth was introduced, the president extended his hand and bowed. Truth remarked that no one had ever treated her “with more kindness and cordiality than . . . that great and good man.” Lincoln signed Truth’s “Book of Life,” a scrapbook of letters, articles and autographs.

The end of the Civil War did not mean the end of Truth’s work. In 1870 she began advocating free land for freed slaves. Now in her seventies, Truth traveled as much as ever. After the 1875 death of her teenaged grandson who often accompanied her, Truth set out across the country with her Battle Creek friend, Frances Titus. A Quaker activist, Titus had known Truth for well over a decade and became Truth’s “corresponding secretary, tour director, confidante [and] financial manager.” Titus edited the 1875 edition of the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, which included Truth’s *Book of Life*. According to Battle Creek historian Martin L. Ashley, Titus “made significant changes” to this third edition of the

Truth’s friend Frances Titus (right) edited four different editions of *Sojourner’s Narrative*. Two are shown here cradled in the arms of a dress that was reportedly given to Truth by Queen Victoria in the early 1870s.



Duane Brenner

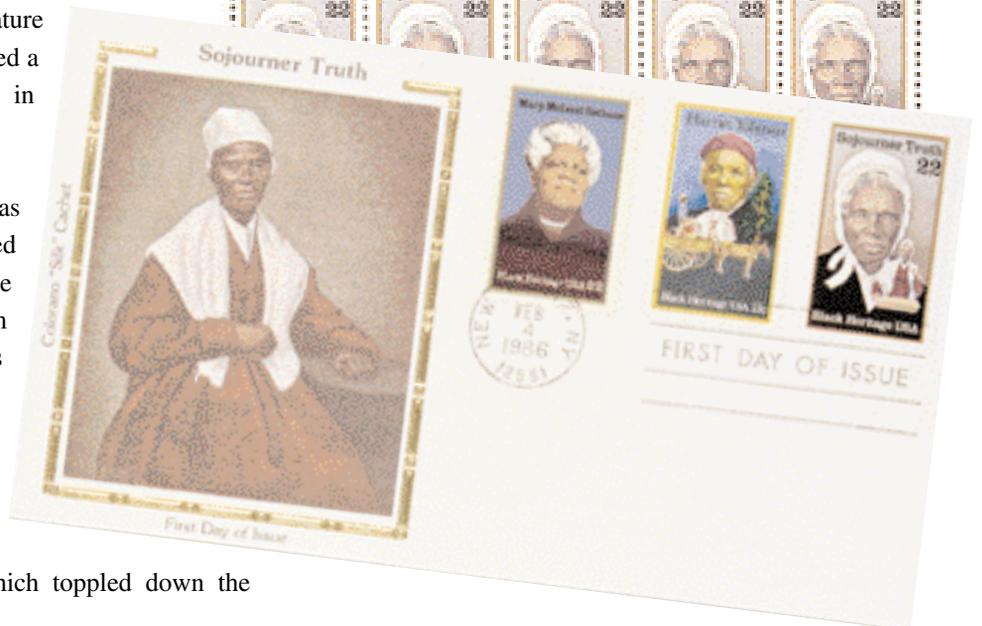
Narrative. Stetson and David bluntly term these changes as “myth-making rhetoric.”

In the final years of her life, Truth cut back her out-of-state travel. She continued to make appearances close to home and received recognition as Battle Creek’s “distinguished townswoman.” The Battle Creek Red Ribbon Club invited her to speak at a March 1880 temperance meeting, and later praised her for drawing such a large crowd and inspiring so many people to take a temperance pledge. On November 17, 1881, the *Battle Creek Nightly Moon* reported that Truth’s appearance at a local county fair “drew a larger crowd” than former president Ulysses S. Grant who spoke there a year earlier. The eighty-four-year-old Truth, “drawn about in a miniature carriage by a pair of Shetland ponies.” led a small parade of “a band and citizens in carriages.”

Two days after Truth’s death in 1883, as many as one thousand mourners turned out for one of the largest funerals in Battle Creek history. Tributes poured in from across the country. Frederick Douglass called Truth “distinguished for [her] insight into human nature . . . [and] an object of respect and admiration to social reformers everywhere.” Feminist Lucy Stone praised Truth’s “wonderful power of expression and the logic which toppled down the defences built on lies.”

In January 1885, Frances Titus told friends, “Sojourner is gone, but my work for her is not yet finished.” She raised money for a grave stone for the former slave and commissioned Lincoln artist Frank C. Courter of Albion to paint an image recreating Truth’s 1864 visit to the White House. The painting was included in the Michigan pavilion at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair and then was placed on exhibit at the Battle Creek Sanitarium, where it was lost in a 1902 fire.

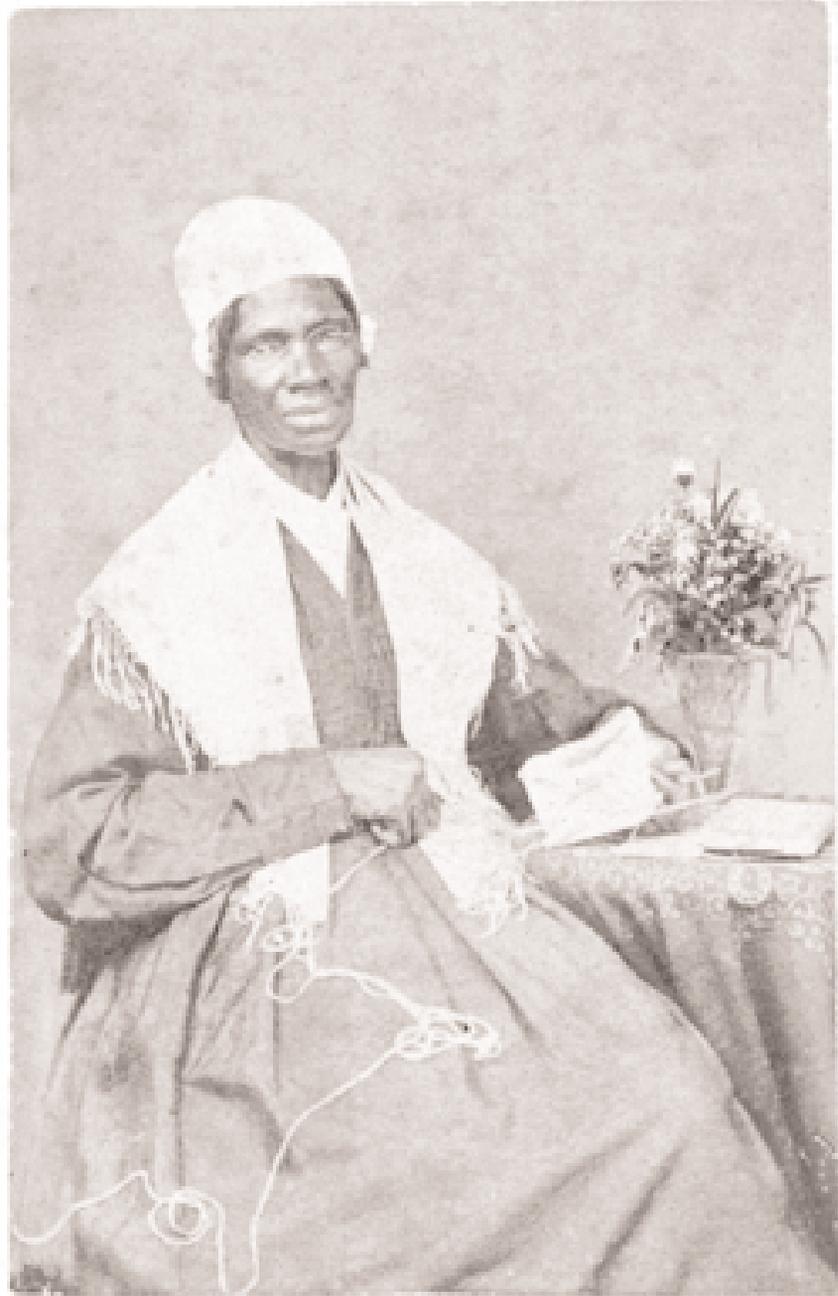
More recently, Battle Creek commemorated Truth’s life and work by naming a portion of M-66 the Sojourner Truth Memorial Parkway. In September 1999, the city crowned its celebration of Truth by unveiling the Sojourner Truth monument. California artist Tina Allen sculpted the statue that stands in Battle Creek’s newly created Monument Park. The park is landscaped like an amphitheater and the twelve-foot-tall statue of Sojourner Truth seems to beckon passersby to sit and listen to her words. ■



Actress Alice McGill represented Sojourner Truth on these commemorative stamps, issued in February 1986.

Diana Paiz Engle is associate editor at *Michigan History Magazine*. Special thanks to Mary G. Butler and Martin Ashley of the Historical Society of Battle Creek Archives for providing much of the illustration used in this article.

The Faces and



I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance.
SOJOURNER TRUTH.

Words of Truth

SOJOURNER TRUTH was illiterate. Her words were recorded by writers who either “cleaned up” her unique way of speaking, or who tried to make her sound like a stereotypical southern slave. Regardless of their presentation, the meaning and purpose of Truth’s words shine through.

On Women’s Rights (1851)

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. . . . 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 little pint’ll hold. . . . I have heard the Bible and 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.





On Abraham Lincoln (1864)

Then I said, I appreciate you, for you are the best president who has ever taken the seat. . . . 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. . . . 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 me by that great and good man, Abraham Lincoln.



On Capital Punishment (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. . . . 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 were 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.

On Slavery (1856)

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 sat 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.

