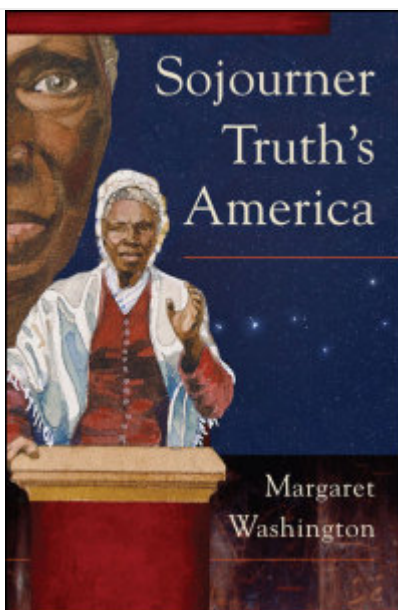


# {essays in history}

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## Sojourner Truth's America



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### Reviewed Work(s)

*Sojourner Truth's America*. By Margaret Washington (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009). Pp. 478. Hardcover, \$34.95.

Sojourner Truth is arguably one of the most prominent figures of African American women's history. Her life has been the subject of

countless books and articles in a variety of fields, including history, literature, and religion. During the 1960s and 1970s, feminist activists turned to Truth as a symbol of solidarity, employing her “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” speech as a reminder that all women—regardless of race, economic status, or educational background—needed to work together to advance the cause of women’s rights in the United States. In fact, Truth has even been credited for coining the phrase, “women’s rights” during a nineteenth-century conference (4).

Margaret Washington’s *Sojourner Truth’s America* examines Truth’s remarkable life and legacy. “While historians excavate and investigate to find the most trustworthy accounts” Washington argues, “ultimately, Sojourner’s deeds remain the central ‘truths’ of her life and influence”(4). Thus, Washington relies heavily on newspaper accounts, letters, and diary entries in which others describe Sojourner Truth or recount her words. Skillfully weaving together Truth’s “own words” within the text, Washington presents a rich monograph that details Truth’s life as a slave in the North and her work as an abolitionist and women’s rights activist. In so doing, she paints a vivid picture of Truth’s life experiences, and more importantly, how Truth may have seen the world around her and the people with whom she worked.

In the first section of the book, Washington provides a detailed overview of Truth’s early life on the Dumont plantation in upstate New York (as Isabella). Here, Washington emphasizes the examples of African cultural retention on nineteenth-century slave plantations by drawing connections between Truth’s spirituality and that of her African-born parents. For example, she credits Truth’s African heritage for her charisma and powerful public speaking ability: “Isabella’s verbal gifts and remarkable recall were reminiscent of an African griot (an oral historian and storyteller) and symbolic of her leadership” (12). As Washington demonstrates, Truth recognized these connections and proudly upheld her African heritage, and in one instance, described herself as “African” before a predominantly white audience (9). In this section, Washington also shares her own perspective on Truth’s alleged sexual encounter with plantation master, John Dumont. While there has been much speculation about the nature of Truth’s relationship with Dumont, Washington argues that the two *likely* were “lovers” during Truth’s teenage years (40).

[1]

In the second part of the book, “Isabella Van Wageningen: A Preaching Woman,” Washington charts the trajectory of Truth’s religious experience. She argues that although Truth believed in God at a young age, she did not come to a full spiritual awakening until she began attending Methodist camp meetings with the Van Wageningen family. Not long after, Truth had a visionary encounter with God, which launched her career as a “preaching woman.” Joining the ranks of other African American female preachers such as Rebecca Cox Jackson and Jarena Lee, Truth embraced the call to become a “mouthpiece for God” (80). While she now felt this new sense of spirituality, Washington argues that Truth’s religious faith was also syncretic, combining the African spirituality of her ancestors and her Christian faith. In the remaining few chapters of this section, Washington describes Truth’s complicated relationship with cult leader Prophet Matthias. Despite his quick temper and unconventional religious beliefs and practices, Washington argues that Truth remained loyal to Matthias during the early 1830s. In that devotion, however, Washington astutely points out that Truth “was no more gullible than other, better-educated spiritually minded individuals in that era of religious enthusiasm” (113).

The final section of the book is, in Washington’s words, “the heart of the book,” where she lays out her main arguments and provides a glimpse of nineteenth-century America exclusively through the lens of Sojourner Truth. While she highlights Truth’s political activism and involvement in the abolitionist movement, Washington also highlights the stories of other influential nineteenth-century African Americans such as Maria Stewart, Frederick Douglass and his lesser-known compatriot William Wells Brown (139-40). She effectively demonstrates how Truth collaborated with a variety of abolitionists, regardless of educational, economic, or racial differences. Washington also describes, in great detail, Truth’s preaching ministry, and uses newspaper articles to highlight the various places where Truth preached and the positive feedback that she received. In 1850, with the help of white abolitionist Olive Gilbert, Truth was able to publish her biography, the *Narrative*. Its publication marked a pivotal moment in her life as she had the opportunity to share her story, earn an income, and advance the abolitionist cause. But, as Washington points out, Truth’s *Narrative* may have also served as a painful reminder of her illiteracy “because she could not read her own story” (190).

Despite these possible anxieties, Truth persisted in her fight against slavery, and accepted every invitation and opportunity to speak. Immediately following the publication of the *Narrative*, she also became an important figure in the early women's movement. But, Washington argues that it was only a matter of time: "For Sojourner Truth, combining race and gender was consistent with her lived experience, and her speeches often reflected this duality" (201). In 1850 Truth would be credited for the well-known question, "Ar'n't I a Woman?" at the national women's convention. After explaining, in great detail, the various arguments for and against the content of, or even delivery of, Truth's alleged speech, Washington ultimately concludes that the speech remains a mystery: "History will never know Sojourner Truth's exact refrain." (229). This fact, Washington argues, should not detract from Truth's legacy and her impact on the early women's rights movement.

In the concluding chapters of the text, Washington describes Truth's continued activism and collaboration with famed women's rights activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. At the same time, Washington also acknowledges the racial prejudices that often limited Truth's work with white activists during this period. But, in the same way that Truth overcame a life of slavery, she once again overcame racism, refusing to let it hinder her commitment to women's rights and abolition. In June 1881, more than thirty years after her first sermon, Truth delivered her last major speech to the Michigan State legislature in Lansing. Two years later, on November 26, 1883, Truth passed away at the age of 86 in Battle Creek, Michigan. Ultimately, as Washington so clearly demonstrates, Truth had become a legend and a significant figure in the abolitionist and women's rights movement—with or without the "Ar'n't I a Woman?" speech.

*Sojourner Truth's America* is a welcome addition to the historiography. This is, by far, one of the most comprehensive and detailed biographies on Truth to date. The book is meticulously researched, deftly argued, and carefully organized. While the author certainly builds on the work of other scholars such as Nell Irvin Painter, she brings a fresh perspective and revises older interpretations of Truth's life and legacy. Her detailed discussion of Truth's religious convictions is one of the most significant parts of the book because it addresses an aspect of Truth's life that many have overlooked. Indeed, Truth was not only an ardent abolitionist and

women's rights activist, but also a preacher, whose faith directed much of her personal and professional activities. *Sojourner Truth's America* is also impressive because it provides a glimpse into the lives of other nineteenth-century activists who collaborated with Truth to combat sexism and racism.

Since the book's publication, Washington has won numerous awards including the 2010 Darlene Clark Hine Award of the Organization of American Historians. She certainly deserves to be commended and awarded for bringing Sojourner Truth to center stage and unveiling the life and experiences of this extraordinary woman (and her associates). Her book will be of great interest to scholars in a variety of fields including history and religion.

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[1]. Nell Irvin Painter argues that Truth may have been sexually abused by Dumont's wife, Sally (See Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life and Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 16).



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