

# Her Story: Sojourner Truth

by Sojourner Truth and Olive Gilbert *from Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave*

*Sojourner Truth was born into slavery in New York around 1797. Her birth name was Isabella Baumfree. She changed it to Sojourner Truth in 1843. She suffered under several owners before she finally escaped to freedom in 1825. She became a widely admired abolitionist and feminist. Below is a passage from her autobiography from 1850.*

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Having seen the sad end of her parents, so far as it relates to this earthly life, we will return with Isabella to that memorable auction which threatened to separate her father and mother. A slave auction is a terrible affair to its victims, and its incidents and consequences are graven on their hearts as with a pen of burning steel.

At this memorable time, Isabella was struck off, for the sum of one hundred dollars, to one John Nealy, of Ulster County, New York; and she has an impression that in this sale she was connected with a lot of sheep. She was now nine years of age, and her trials in life may be dated from this period. She says, with emphasis, "Now the war begun."

She could only talk Dutch and the Nealys could only talk English. Mr. Nealy could understand Dutch, but Isabel and her mistress could neither of them understand the language of the other-and this, of itself, was a formidable obstacle in the way of a good understanding between them, and for some time was a fruitful source of dissatisfaction to the mistress, and of punishment and suffering to Isabella. She says, "If they sent me for a frying-pan, not knowing what they meant, perhaps I carried them pot-hooks and trammels. Then, oh! how angry mistress would be with me!"

Then she suffered "terribly-terribly," with the cold. During the winter her feet were badly frozen, for want of proper covering. They gave her a plenty to eat, and also a plenty of whippings. One Sunday morning, in particular, she was told to go to the barn; on going there, she found her master with a bundle of rods, prepared in the embers, and bound together with cords. When he had tied her hands together before her, he gave her the most cruel whipping she was ever tortured with. He whipped her till the flesh was deeply lacerated, and the blood streamed from her wounds-and the scars remain to the present day, to testify to the fact. "And now," she says, when I hear 'em tell of whipping women on the bare flesh, it makes my flesh crawl, and my very hair rise on my head! Oh! my God!" she continues, "what a way is this of treating human beings?"

**Questions**

1. What does it mean “Isabella was struck off ”?
2. How old was Isabella when she was bought by John Nealy?
3. What was one cruel incident Isabella suffered?
4. Why did Isabella’s feet freeze?