Sojourner Truth Visited Stowe In Andover In 1853

By Juliet Haines Mofford

Two of the most famous and remarkable women in America met in Andover in the autumn of 1853: one was petite and white, the other tall and black. Both were political activists who wrote and spoke out passionately against slavery, at a time when “ladies” were not supposed to concern themselves with politics nor expected to speak in public.

Sojourner Truth journeyed to Andover for the express purpose of meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe. Mrs. Stowe was an international star, having just returned from her Triumphant Tour through the British Isles, sponsored by the Anti-Slavery Society of Glasgow. Sojourner Truth was 56, with 10 years experience on the lecture circuit by the time she arrived in town with her grandson, Jamie Caldwell.

Both women had been shocked into social action by the Fugitive Slave Act, passed by Congress as part of the Compromise of 1850.

Both women claimed to have experienced divine revelations that compelled them to preach against slavery. Harriet always insisted that the death of “Uncle Tom” had been revealed to her during a church service and that she was “but the humblest of instruments in God’s hand.” Sojourner Truth often greeted audiences with, “Children, I talk to God and God talks to me.” Although she was illiterate, her book, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*, published in 1850, was like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; Or, Life Among the Lowly*, a runaway best-seller. Truth had dictated her memoirs to Olive Gilbert, a white friend and abolitionist.

Sojourner Truth was born as the slave Belle in 1797 in Ulster County, N.Y., the property of Johannes Hardenbergh, a Dutch patroon who owned all her family and sold them off as he pleased. Before she turned 10, she had lost both parents and 10 siblings and at 11, found herself on the auction block. John Neely bought her for $100 because a flock of sheep was included in her price. She got whipped because knowing only Dutch, she could not understand her owners’ demands as English was her second language.

Soon, she became the property of an innkeeper in Kingston, N.Y. and later when she was 13, became the property of John Dumont for $175. She served this household for the next 16 years, during which time she married Tom, another slave, and bore five children. By New York law, all slaves born before 1827 were to be freed on July 4th that year. When the abusive Dumont refused to free Belle, she walked away to freedom knowing she had the state law on her side and forfeited the house and plot of land promised her family. She left a husband and four children behind and took only her nursing daughter. She found refuge with Quakers, then landed in New York City where she became a domestic servant named Isabella Van Wagener. In 1843, claiming to have experienced religious conversion and a revela-
tion from God that directed her to preach against the evils of slavery, she was no longer Belle nor Isabella, but became Sojourner Truth. She then joined an abolitionist commune at Northampton, Massachusetts, began to lecture and sell her Narrative.

Harriet Beecher Stowe had written Uncle Tom's Cabin in Brunswick, Maine, while Calvin Stowe taught at Bowdoin College and its publication coincided with his acceptance of a faculty position at Andover Theological Seminary. It was Harriet's first royalty check for $10,500 that enabled her to renovate the old stone workshop on campus, once used for student manual training, into Andover's decorative showpiece. The famous black orator was one of the Stowe's first house guests (other than family members) at the refurbished home.

Sojourner Truth’s objective in going to Andover in the autumn of 1853, was to get a “puff” from Mrs. Stowe that would push her book sales just as words of praise by well-known writers appear on the covers of new books today. William Lloyd Garrison, editor of The Liberator, the radical abolitionist newspaper, had guided Sojourner Truth’s personal slave narrative into print. He had written the introduction for the first edition himself, and now urged Sojourner to seek out Harriet Beecher Stowe to back the reprint. An occasional visitor to Andover in subsequent years, Garrison was already organizing an anti-slavery lecture series with Stowe.

Harriet was only too glad to oblige her guest and her comments appeared as the introduction to the second edition of Narrative of Sojourner Truth published late in 1853:

“The following narrative may be relied upon as in all respects true and faithful, and it is in some points more remarkable and interesting than many narratives of the kind which have abounded in late years.

“It is the history of a mind of no common energy and power whose struggles with the darkness and ignorance of slavery have a peculiar interest.

“The truths of Christianity seem to have come to her almost by a separate revelation and seem to verify the beautiful words of scripture, ‘I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not. I will make darkness light before them and crooked things straight.’”

Ten years later, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote about Sojourner’s surprise visit for the Atlantic Monthly, (April 1863) in Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sybil. “...our house was filled with company, several eminent clergymen being our guests, when notice was brought up to me that Sojourner Truth was below, and requested an interview. Knowing nothing of her but her singular name, I went down, prepared to make the interview short... When I went into the room, a tall, spare form arose to meet me. She was evidently a full-blooded African, and though now aged and worn with many hardships, still gave the impression of a physical development which in early youth must have been a fine specimen of the torrid zone.”

Stowe was impressed by her “personal presence ... having a strong sphere,” and writes that Truth was “dressed in some grayish stuff, neat and clean, though dusty from travel. On her head she wore a bright Madras handkerchief, arranged as a turban, after the manner of her race. ... She seemed perfectly self-possessed, and at her ease—indeed, there was almost an unconscious superiority, not unmixed with a solemn twinkle of humor, in the odd, composed manner in which she looked down on me ... Sojourner stayed for several days with us, a welcome guest. Her conversation was so strong, simple, shrewd, and with such a droll flavoring of humor, that Professor Stowe was wont to say of an evening, ‘Come, I am dull and bored, can’t you get Sojourner up here to talk a little?’”

Both women would travel to Washington for audiences with President Lincoln. Harriet Beecher Stowe went to plead for a full and prompt Emancipation Proclamation, since by 1862 Lincoln had abolished slavery in the District of Columbia. One of Harriet’s daughters and her twelve-year-old son, accompanied her and later told the story. When they entered the room, the President was seated before the fire, his long legs stretched out in front of him. Then he stood up and bowed down to greet Mrs. Stowe, “So this is the little lady who made the big war!”

Sojourner Truth was determined to meet “this first anti-slavery President,” and campaigned for Lincoln’s re-election as she traveled from Michigan to Washington in 1864:

“Mr. Lincoln, this is Sojourner Truth,” she was introduced, “a woman widely known, not only in our country, but abroad.”

“I never heard tell of you before you became President,” said Sojourner Truth. “Oh, I had heard of you many times before that,” Lincoln replied.

He signed her Book of Life, her collection of autographs, photographs and clippings that she took with her everywhere: “For Aunty, Sojourner Truth, October 29, 1864-A-Lincoln.”

“I am proud to say that I never was treated with more kindness and cordiality than I was by the great and good man Abraham Lincoln, by the grace of God, President of the United States for four years more,” reported Sojourner.

From the 1840s through the late 1870s, Sojourner Truth traveled this nation as an itinerant preacher and captivated audiences. “I cannot read a book, but I can read the people,” she would say. It seemed that everyone wanted to hear her story, listen to her original hymns, and buy her book and song sheets.

Nor was Lincoln the only President Sojourner Truth met. She visited Andrew Johnson and later, Ulysses S. Grant, who also signed her Book of Life. She traveled to the White House, hoping to gain President Grant’s support for her plan of “Twenty Acres and a Mule.” It seemed to her that the government should pay back something for all those years that slaves had to labor without pay. Setting aside a portion of public land grants in the West for freed slaves seemed fair. Sojourner Truth also fought against discrimination in public transportation. Long before the Civil Rights activism of Rosa Parks, Sojourner Truth became the first freedom rider when she desegregated the Washington, D.C. streetcars.