

A Report From The Sojourner Truth Statue Unveiling

By [Olivia Twine](#) on [September 24, 2013](#)



The unveiling of the Sojourner Truth statue in the town of Esopus, NY where the abolitionist preacher was held a slave as a child, was a remarkable experience. I've lived in the Hudson Valley County of Ulster all my life and have never witnessed the "owning" of the shameful past of slavery before. Truth's statue in the Esopus hamlet of Port Ewen represents the only statue in the world of a child slave at work, according to Ulster County Historian Anne Gordon.

Although Truth was well known in her time, her status as an emblem of northern slavery is coming to light on a broad scale. That the people of Port Ewen honor a former slave who left Ulster County and never looked back, that children run their hands over her bronzed back to feel the welts of the beatings she endured here, that the town supervisor proudly describes her as "a child of Esopus," suggests that we as a people are ready to move to the healing phase of a sordid aspect of our history.

Nancy Giles, the award winning television journalist at *CBS News Sunday Morning*, was the featured speaker at the unveiling ceremony. She noted that as a child in Queens, she was unaware that slavery existed in the north. Giles was moved that "our sometimes bizarre history" is being discussed now in this small town. "African Americans are the only American immigrants who were property. That's what distinguishes us from all other immigrant groups," she said.

Truth was part of the suffrage movement of the 19th century and understood the relationship between abolition, women's suffrage and the life of the spirit. She would have been surprised at the African American sorority members of Delta Sigma Theta who turned out by the thousands last March to commemorate the centennial of the 1913 suffrage parade organized by Alice Paul and others in Washington D.C.

Giles offered an interesting update on the "melting pot" metaphor. "I've always had a problem with the melting pot, this idea that Americans come together and are melted down into a kind of American stew. I think we're more like a salad, our diversities tossed together in a delicious dish of individual flavors," she said.

The unveiling revealed more than a bronze likeness of a thirteen-year-old. Beautifully rendered by sculptor Trina Green of New Paltz, this fine piece of public art unabashedly features the welts on the child's back that resulted from a particularly cruel beating she received at the hands of her second master, John Neely. (Neely became furious when the child misunderstood his orders. At that point in her young life, Truth spoke only Dutch and didn't understand English.) Born Isabella Baumfree in 1797, Truth overcame the extreme challenges that faced her and developed into an charismatic speaker who stood more than six feet tall and belted out her point of view in English with a Dutch accent.

She withstood the challenges of her enslavement, which included physical torture and deprivation—her feet froze in the winter— and the trauma of being separated from first her parents and then from her children. Far from succumbing to helplessness, Truth fought and won a case in Ulster County Court in 1828 to free her son who had been sold into slavery in Alabama. She summoned her courage and developed her character known around the country as Sojourner Truth, a name she adopted in the 1840s. She is best known for her speech: “..I have borne five children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. Ain't I a woman?”

Truth's parents were enslaved in Africa and purchased by Colonel Johannes Hardenburgh. Isabella was one of 13 children and lived about 30 years in Ulster County as a slave. She was sold several times before New York State enacted the Emancipation Act in the late 1820s. According the “The Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave,” told by Truth in 1850, she was first sold at an auction with a flock of sheep to the cruel Neely when she was nine years old. She was sold again in 1808, this time to a tavern keeper in Port Ewen, Martinus Schryver. Her duties included hauling heavy loads of molasses or liquor by foot over long distances daily. Schryver was said to be crude but honest and kind. Truth was sold again and finally escaped with her infant daughter to the home of Isaac and Maria Van Wagner, who paid her owner for her services until the Emancipation Act went into effect.

The Mid- Hudson River county where Truth endured an unimaginable childhood welcomes her back as a bronze statue. If only the statue would come to life and give us her view of America today. I would tell her the idea of a slave being honored in Port Ewen's public square was unimaginable when I was a teenager in the 1960's.

Editor's Note: This is the first installment of Olivia's Cradle of the Women's Rights Movement Blogging Tour. You can sign up to receive regular updates on her progress at LetsRockTheCradle.com.



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[<http://newyorkhistoryblog.org/2013/09/24/a-report-from-the-sojourner-truth-statue-unveiling/>] by Olivia Twine.

About Olivia Twine

Olivia Twine is a freelance writer specializing in cultural issues whose work appears in regional and local publications in the Hudson Valley. She also edits the website WomensSuffrage.org. She has an M.A. in Theatre Education from Teachers College, Columbia University, and lives in Woodstock.

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2 thoughts on “A Report From The Sojourner Truth Statue Unveiling”



Anne Gordon

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Thank you so much for this wonderful write-up of our event. I hope it will draw many visitors to see Isabella.

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