

JULY 20: ELIZABETH CADY STANTON, 1902, AMELIA BLOOMER, 1894, SOJOURNER TRUTH, 1883, AND HARRIET ROSS TUBMAN, 1913, *Social Reformers*

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902)

Born on November 12, 1815, into an affluent, strict Calvinist family in Johnstown, New York, Elizabeth, as a young woman, took seriously the Presbyterian doctrines of predestination and human depravity. She became very depressed, but resolved her mental crises through action. She dedicated her life to righting the wrongs perpetrated upon women by the church and society.

She and four other women organized the first Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York, July 19-20, 1848. The event set her political and religious agenda for the next 50 years. She held the Church accountable for oppressing women by using Scripture to enforce the subordination of women in marriage and to prohibit them from ordained ministry. She held society accountable for denying women equal access to professional jobs, property ownership, the vote, and for granting less pay for the same work.

In 1881, the Revised Version of the Bible was published by a committee which included no women scholars. Elizabeth founded her own committee of women to write a commentary on Scripture, and applying the Greek she had learned as a child from her minister, focused on passages used to oppress and discriminate against women.

Although Elizabeth blamed male clergy for women's oppression, she attended Trinity Episcopal Church in Seneca Falls with her friend Amelia Bloomer. As a dissenting prophet, Elizabeth preached hundreds of homilies and political speeches in pulpits throughout the nation. Wherever she visited, she was experienced as a holy presence and a liberator. She never lost her sense of humor, despite years of contending with opposition, even from friends. In a note to Susan B. Anthony, she said: "Do not feel depressed, my dear friend; what is good in us is immortal, and if the sore trials we have endured are sifting out pride and selfishness, we shall not have suffered in vain." Shortly before she died in New York City, on October 26th, 1902, she said: "My only regret is that I have not been braver and bolder and truer in the honest conviction of my soul."

Amelia Jenks Bloomer (1818–1894)

Amelia Jenks, the youngest of six children, was born in New York on May 27th, 1818, to a pious Presbyterian family. Early on she demonstrated a kindness of heart and a strict regard for truth and right. As a young woman, she joined in the temperance, anti-slavery, and women's rights movements.

Amelia Jenks Bloomer never intended to make dress reform a major platform in women's struggle for justice. But, women's fashion of the day prescribed waist-cinching corsets, even for pregnant women, resulting in severe health problems. Faith and fashion collided explosively when she published in her newspaper, *The Lily*, a picture of herself in loose-fitting Turkish trousers, and began wearing them publicly. Clergy, from their pulpits, attacked women who wore them, citing Moses: "Women should not dress like men." Amelia fired back: "It matters not what Moses had to say to the men and women of his time about what they should wear. If clergy really cared about what Moses said about clothes, they would all put fringes and blue ribbons on their garments." Her popularity soared as she engaged clergy in public debate.

She insisted that “certain passages in the Scriptures relating to women had been given a strained and unnatural meaning.” And, of St. Paul she said: “Could he have looked into the future and foreseen all the sorrow and strife, the cruel exactions and oppression on the one hand and the blind submission and cringing fear on the other, that his words have sanctioned and caused, he would never have uttered them.”

And of women’s right to freedom, she wrote: “the same Power that brought the slave out of bondage will, in His own good time and way, bring about the emancipation of woman, and make her the equal in power and dominion that she was in the beginning.”

Later in life, in Council Bluffs, Iowa, a frontier town, she worked to establish churches, libraries, and school houses. She provided hospitality for traveling clergy of all denominations, and for temperance lecturers and reformers. Trinity Episcopal Church, Seneca Falls, New York, where she was baptized, records her as a “faithful Christian missionary all her life.” Amelia Jenks Bloomer died in Council Bluffs on December 30th, 1894.

Sojourner Truth (c.1797-1883)

Sojourner Truth, born Isabella Baumfree to James and Elizabeth Baumfree near the turn of the 19th century, spent the first twenty-eight years of her life as a slave in the state of New York. During that time, she was separated first from her siblings and then from her children as they were sold to various slaveholders. In 1826, when her owner refused to honor his promise to emancipate her ahead of New York’s abolition of slavery, Sojourner took her infant daughter and, in her words, “walked off, believing that to be all right.” She later learned that her young son Peter had been illegally sold by her former master, and was enslaved in Alabama. She filed suit, and in 1828, two years after her escape, she won her case, becoming one of the first black women to ever prevail in an American court over a white man.

With slavery abolished in the state, Sojourner moved to New York City as a free woman. Having undergone a religious conversion after her escape, she became involved in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded when white members of St. George’s Episcopal Church in Philadelphia would not permit African-Americans to worship alongside them as equals. Heartened by the knowledge that a black woman, Jarena Lee, had been ordained as a minister in the AME tradition, Truth was known to preach and pray and sing with remarkable passion and eloquence. She also worked at a shelter for homeless women, convinced that showing Christ’s love required meeting the material needs of the poor and vulnerable. The next decades of her life would prove tumultuous for Sojourner. She was abused by men in positions of religious authority, and in 1835 was falsely accused of crimes she did not commit. She was acquitted of all charges, and later successfully sued her accusers for slander.

At approximately forty-six years old, Sojourner heard a call from God, telling her to go east and preach the gospel, telling the truth of her experiences as a slave and proclaiming the Christian imperative to support the abolition of slavery. It was at this time that she abandoned the names given to her by her master at birth, taking up for herself the name Sojourner Truth. After over a year of itinerant preaching, she joined an abolitionist co-operative in Northampton, Massachusetts, which had been founded on principles of women’s rights and pacifism in addition to its abolitionist mission. Sojourner became a traveling preacher, approaching white religious meetings and campgrounds and asking to speak. Captivated by her charismatic presence, her wit, and her wisdom, they found her

hard to refuse. She never learned to read or write, but quoted extensive Bible passages from memory in her sermons. Her reputation grew and she became part of the abolitionist and women's rights speakers' network.

During a women's rights convention in Ohio, Sojourner gave the speech for which she is best remembered, now known as "Ain't I a Woman." She had listened for hours to clergy attack women's rights and abolition, using the Bible to support their oppressive logic: God had created women to be weak and blacks to be a subservient race. Speaking extemporaneously, she exposed the hypocrisy of the white male ministers, pointing out the ways in which slavery had forced her to become as strong as any man, and noting that Jesus himself never turned women away or refused to teach them on account of their gender. Until her death, she continued to speak and preach, advocating for the right to vote to be expanded to all women, not only white women. Sojourner passed away at her home in Michigan on November 26th, 1883.

Harriet Ross Tubman (1820-1913)

Slave births were recorded under property, not as persons with names; but we know that Harriet Ross was born sometime during 1820 on a Maryland Chesapeake Bay plantation, was the sixth of eleven children born to Ben Ross and Harriet Green. Although her parents were loving and they enjoyed a cheerful family life inside their cabin, they lived in fear of the children being sold off at any time.

Harriet suffered beatings and a severe injury, but grew up strong and defiant, refusing to appear happy and smiling to her owners. To cope with brutality and oppression, she turned to religion. Her favorite Bible story was about Moses who led the Israelites out of slavery. The slaves prayed for a Moses of their own.

When she was about 24, Harriet escaped to Canada, but could not forget her parents and other slaves she left behind. Working with the Quakers, she made at least 19 trips back to Maryland between 1851 and 1861, freeing over 300 people by leading them into Canada. She was so successful that \$40,000 was offered for her capture.

Guided by God through omens, dreams, warnings, she claimed her struggle against slavery had been commanded by God. She foresaw the Civil War in a vision. When it began, she quickly joined the Union Army, serving as cook and nurse, caring for both Confederate and Union soldiers. She served as a spy and scout. She led 300 black troops on a raid which freed over 750 slaves, making her the first American woman to lead troops into military action.

In 1858 - 9, she moved to upstate New York where she opened her home to African American orphans and to helpless old people. Although she was illiterate, she founded schools for African American children. She joined the fight for women's rights, working with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, but supported African American women in their efforts to found their own organizations to address equality, work, and education. She died on March 10th, 1913, in Auburn, New York.

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I O God, whose Spirit guideth us into all truth and maketh us free: Strengthen and sustain us as thou didst thy servants Elizabeth, Amelia, Sojourner, and Harriet. Give us vision and courage to stand against oppression and injustice and all that worketh against the glorious liberty to which thou dost call all thy children; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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Lessons and Psalm

Judges 9:50-55

Psalm 146

Luke 11:5-10

Preface of Baptism