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Sojourner Truth: A Video Essay

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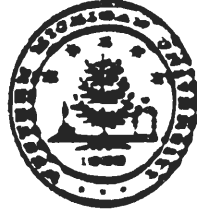
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THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE

CERTIFICATE OF ORAL EXAMINATION

Christina Laemers, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in Fall 1997 successfully presented the Lee Honors College Thesis on April 24, 2002.

The title of the paper is:

"Sojourner Truth: A Video Essay"

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Nancy C. Cornwell", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Nancy C. Cornwell, Communication

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Steve Lipkin", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Steve Lipkin, Communication

"... and Truth shall be
my abiding name."



SOJOURNER TRUTH
... lecturer and
... who championed
... every. Rights of
... and the Freedmen.
... re. Beside her
... of her five

... Banks Boyd
Jan. 6, 1893
... orbin
Oct. 25, 1904
... grandsons:
... anks
Feb. 24, 1875

SOJOURNER
TRUTH
BATTLE OF
MOUNT



Reflection/Self Evaluation

My experience while working on this project was extremely varied, as one some days I was heartbroken, tired, and emotionally wrought, and on others, I beamed with pride when an edit would work out just right. This is by far the most difficult project I have ever endeavored to complete, and though it is far from perfect, I must stand behind my efforts and believe in its worth.

In a perfect world, I would have had a lot more video, as opposed to the stills, to represent my points. I would have also liked a smoother finish, as some of the edits feel rushed or slightly out of sync. In a perfect world, I would have had my own editor at home, where I could spend all hours of the night getting exactly what I wanted to see from my original vision for this project. Then again, as a perfectionist, I'm not sure I would have ever been completely satisfied.

As my first attempt in a full feature production, I can say that the learning experience has been invaluable. I have learned a lot about humility, and have gained a great deal of confidence in the endeavor of asking others for help. When I first started asking people to do these interviews, I was very timid – I was afraid I was bothering them. I quickly learned that bothering them is the best way to get what you want – the more you bug them, the more they just want to get it over with.

Working with these organizations has also been a great experience, and has given a depth to my project that I could not have achieved through books. To hear people talk about Sojourner in a real context, with real stories from her days in Battle Creek gives the story the human element that eluded me for quite a time. Though my story changed its focus several times, the meaning of the project was always in the back of my mind. I really had to struggle to keep it in focus as time went on and the project began to grow exponentially.

Overall, the final project is not exactly what I envisioned, but a close call. I think big dreams overshadowed many realities for me, like available lab time, camera limitations, and my own limitations as to what I could truly be capable of in only 6 months.

I truly believe that this project is the labor of my best efforts, and for that I can be very proud. There are few times I can remember during the semester that I did not spend at least a few minutes, to the most of fourteen hours delved deep into the folds of this documentary, in addition to three other classes and a ten hour work schedule. That alone has taught me more about balance than I ever wanted to know.

The idea of a thesis is to create a higher level of thought and/or endeavor based on a curriculum of study. This for me is definitely a full-fledged example of that. I would not trade the experience for the world, but I will remember it as a victory after a very turbulent battle. I suppose there is not greater learning experience than one that comes from this.

Montage of back, sides, and hands
Of statue

In history, what often defines character is how we deal with adversity. To overcome adversity is a step towards greatness, to move beyond and fight for others that might encounter adversity is a step toward greatness.

Show front of statue

There are few more poignant examples than that of Sojourner Truth. An African American woman whose vision scoped well beyond her years, she spent her life speaking out against slavery and fought for equality among women and men, blacks and whites alike.

Montage of entire monument

Sojourner is now revered for her work, and celebrated as an important figure in American History, but her fight was long and hard, with sometimes seemingly impossible hardships to overcome. Still, her legend lives on in the minds and hearts of those who know her battle, and she stands as a source of inspiration for all people who encounter adversity. This is her story.

Farm sequence

Sojourner's life began in 1797 in Ulster County, New York, where she was born on the farm of Colonel Johannes Hardenburgh. From her earliest days Sojourner was taught the life of a slave, a person whose very brothers and sisters had been sold away. It wouldn't be long before Sojourner would share that same fate.

Slave selling

Small cabin

In Truth's Autobiography she described her childhood in terms of the cold cellar floor they slept on, with as many as 12 other slaves and no ventilation. Still, Sojourner recalled those days as bearable because she had not been separated from her parents as many slaves, including her own brother and sister, had.

Working in the field

Slave auction

Interview about sojourner's early life

Slave auction papers sequence

Interview about Sojourner's parents

Farm in New Paltz

Fields

"Tom" representation

Another representation

Law

Sojourner sweeping

Dumont and Isabella

Sojourner washing

Interview about Dumont's promise and Sojourner's running away

INTERVIEW

In the year 1808, Charles Hardenbergh died, and his heirs auctioned off all of his property, including his slaves. At this time, Sojourner's mother and father were turned out, as they could no longer fetch a price at the auction block.

INTERVIEW

Sojourner was sold 4 times before ending up at the farm of John Dumont in new Paltz, New York.

She would then stay on the Dumont farm into her adulthood, and eventually, was forced to marry. Her husband, Tom, was chosen for her by Dumont, and though there was no love between them, they shared a mutual respect for another. However, Sojourner could never forget her first love, a man named Robert, whom she was forbidden to see.

INTERVIEW

In the year 1817, a new law was passed in New York stating that all slaves born before the year 1799 were to be set free in 10 years time. In reward for her years of service, Sojourner's master John Dumont struck a deal with her: If she would continue to work hard for him during the next nine years, he would set her free a year early.

Sojourner did her best to keep her side of the bargain, all with the hopes that Dumont would keep his promise.

INTERVIEW

Sojourner portrait
Van Wageners
Dumont and Van Wagener
CU Van Wagener
CU Dumont

Still Sojourner's fight for freedom did not end. Dumont had found Sojourner while staying with the VanWageners, and demanded she return back with him. She refused to leave, according to the agreement they had made. Dumont then made a claim for Isabella's child, Sophia. Isaac Van Wagener was the only one who could help.

INTERVIEW

Dutch settlement
Dumont's farm
Peter
Slave auction

Finally Sojourner had gained her freedom, but her hardships would still continue. Sojourner had found sanctuary at the Van Wageners, but back on the Dumont's farm, Sojourner's only son peter had been sold away. Peter had been purchased by a man named Solomon Gedney, who had plans to take him back to England as his manservant.

Alabama

In a worse turn of events, Gedney changed his plans and sold to his brother in law in Alabama, where if taken peter could expect to remain a slave for life.

Sojourner in court
Courthouse

Sojourner knew her only choice was to fight back for her son in court. It was illegal to sell slaves out of state, so sojourner took her case to the courthouse in the county seat of Kingston, New York.

Interview about Kingston Trial

Kingston community
Tom
Tom disappears

After the trial, Sojourner stayed on in Kingston with friends of the Van Wageners. Sojourner's husband Tom had been freed, but the distance between them made it impossible to sustain their relationship. They respectfully agreed to separate, and he died before the year's end.

New York

Wrong crowd

Harbor

Peter at harbor

Soon, Sojourner's son Peter started getting into trouble. She took the boy to New York City, where she hoped that they could find work and Peter's time might become better occupied. His behavior only worsened. Finally a woman from Sojourner's church suggested an alternative for Peter – he was signed aboard the crew of the Nantucket. Perhaps life at sea could give Peter the discipline he so desperately needed.

INTERVIEW about Nantucket and disappearance

Solemn Sojourner

Peter's disappearance came as a terrible shock to Sojourner, who was only trying to do right by her son. In the last letter Sojourner received, Peter begged for his mother's response and looked forward to when they would meet again.

Water sfx

Boat on water

(To be read by a male)

*"My Dear and Beloved Mother,
This is the fifth letter that I have sent to you and received no answer, and it makes me very uneasy.*

I should be home in 15 months. I have not much to say, but tell me if you have been up home since I left or not. I want to know what sort of time is at home. So write as soon as you can, won't you?

Boat ripples out

*Your only son,
Peter Van Wagener"*

Tight shot Peter on harbor

The ship returned to port, but no one aboard could give any account to Peter's whereabouts. He was never seen nor heard from again.

New York city scene

Sojourner would spend about 2 more years in New York after that last letter had arrived. On June 1, 1843, forty-six year old Isabella Baumfree boarded the ferry and never looked back.

Ferry

Traveling

For several months, sojourner traveled though New York State, accepting 25 cents for a day's work and never staying in one place too long.

Large outdoor group

One day, Sojourner came upon a large outdoor religious meeting. After watching them for some time, she decided to ask them if she might speak. They gathered around her in awe as she spoke to them about her trials.

Gathering crowd

Posting flyers

Word spread about Sojourner Truth and her inspirational words of wisdom, and when she entered the camps, all would come running to greet her. Sojourner moved from place to place, speaking to all who would listen, until one day when she arrived in North Hampton, Massachusetts.

Sojourner at podium

Interview about North Hampton association

North Hampton lodging

While at North Hampton, sojourner adopted the women movement into her lectures. In 1851, she attended a women's convention in Akron, Ohio, organized by Ms. Frances Gage. Many of the women in attendance disagreed with allowing a Black woman to speak; for fear that it may undermine their credibility. Nevertheless, Sojourner took the podium. She then delivered one of her most cherished speeches, entitled "aint I a woman?" She spoke about equality for all people, and directly refuted claims that women were an inferior race.

Women's movement montage

Sojourner at podium

Sojourner Truth

Though her speech took most of the attendees by surprise, her thought-provoking and passionate speech became an indelible print in their minds. Sojourner had shown them the truth.

Frederick Douglass

Sojourner's message also reached fellow abolitionists when they struggled with their cause. Frederick Douglass, in particular, was touched by the words of Truth when she spoke to him the words that would later be inscribed on her tombstone.

Interview about Frederick Douglass

INTERVIEW

Harriet BS

7 In 1853, Sojourner took time out of her lecture circuit to visit the home of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe had just completed her renowned "uncle Tom's Cabin" a year before, and knew well of Sojourner, who was now a nationally recognized abolitionist speaker. Stowe later wrote about her encounter with Truth for the Atlantic Monthly. It appeared in the April 1863 edition, volume number 11, entitled, Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl.

HBS house

HBS

Atlantic Monthly Article

Sojourner Cartes de visite montage

"I do not recollect ever to have been conversant with anyone who had more of that silent and subtle power which we call personal presence than this woman. In modern spiritualistic phraseology, she would be described as having a strong sphere. Her tall form, as she rose before me, is still vivid to my mind. She was dressed in some stout, 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, in fact, 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. Her whole air had at times a gloomy sort of drollery which impressed one strangely."

Battle Creek

In 1857, Sojourner, a woman the age of 60, moved to the Battle Creek area in Michigan. Battle Creek was still a town in early development, yet it had already set an example of new and modern society - with the Kellogg sanitarium making advancements in healthcare and the Adventist church teaching new ways of worship.

Church
Sanitarium

INTERVIEW about moving to battle creek

Harmonia

She kept her Harmonia residence for about ten years, while continuing her lecture circuit. In 1867, she returned to Battle Creek, sold her Harmonia lot, and bought an old farmhouse from her friend, William Merritt.

Battle Creek

Interview about living in Battle Creek

Road to White House

During Sojourner's time on the road, she made a journey in 1864 to speak with President Lincoln. She had requested to speak with him about his decision to free the slaves.

Abe Lincoln

Lincoln and advisors

Interview about how encounter went

INTERVIEW

Sojourner mature

Though considered an old woman by the standards at this time in history, Sojourner traveled for another 16 years after buying her Battle Creek home,

Map of states she traveled

Including trips to see president Grant, and a long lecture circuit accompanied by her friend and trusted scribe, Frances Titus. Frances, a Quaker, also published 3 subsequent editions of Sojourner's biography, because Sojourner never learned to read or write.

Frances Titus

Frances Titus interview

INTERVIEW

Battle Creek Sanitarium

In July of 1883, Sojourner returned to Battle Creek once again, this time being admitted into Kellogg Sanitarium to be treated by Dr. Kellogg himself. On November 26, 1883, Sojourner died in her college street home. She was 86 years old.

SJ's house

Oak Hill

Sojourner was buried at Oak Hill Cemetery, next to her two grandsons. It is estimated that nearly 1000 people attended the service. One Battle Creek resident described the scene: "the long line of carriages, the hearse with its long black plumes, the people - all so motionless - the cloudless sky, the great, round red sun lying low on the horizon... This country has lost one of its most remarkable personages."

Gravesite

Tree

Old grave

INTERVIEW about Truth's funeral

Truth

Sojourner's legendary legacy would not soon be forgotten by the residents of Battle Creek. Over the next 200 years numerous memorials and events were planned in honor of her life and accomplishments.

INTERVIEW about a few of the events

New headstone installation

In June of 1946, a new headstone was purchased by the sojourner truth memorial foundation to replace the one that had stood for nearly 60 years. Worn and ragged, this site was in desperate need of a more suitable memorial. The one that stands today is this very stone.

Part of M-66
Dedication sign

In 1976, The City of Battle Creek further honored their most famous resident by renaming the Calhoun County portion of state highway m-66 as the "sojourner truth memorial highway." Local papers printed that was "a most fitting tribute to a person who spent her life in travel, while preaching the equality of man."

Text

SJI logo

In 1995, a group of Battle Creek residents organized the Sojourner Truth Institute, in honor of the 200th anniversary of truth's birth.

Historical Society magazine

In addition, the historical society of Battle Creek operates a research center which houses the most extensive archive of Sojourner Truth artifacts and records in the United States.

Sculpture montage

In 1999, a 12-foot monument of Sojourner was sculpted by internationally recognized sculptor, Tina Allen. It stands in memorial park in Battle Creek, at the intersection of Division and Sojourner Truth Parkway.

Truth plaques

The Sojourner Truth Institute is still not ready to rest after this accomplishment, though. Plans for the future circulate around the spreading of education, and of course, the preservations of artifacts and archives that relate to Truth.

Short clip about Sojourner's legacy

Truth lecturing

Suffragists

Auction block, ship at sea

Tight shots of monument face

Credits

Truth's life was based on the spreading of equality for all of humankind - women, men, blacks and whites, rich and poor. Her quest touched the nation, and honored the works of famous abolitionists and suffragists, including Susan B. Anthony, John Brown, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Dredd Scott, Harriet Tubman, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Her example defines character at its greatest, and her uncompromising battle in the face of adversity reflects perseverance few in time could match.

A visionary for the future, Sojourner used her wit and presence to help shape those minds who would resist, and used her countenance and resilience to quite her own mind in the most unimaginable of hardship. This woman, this legend, must live on.

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Kalamazoo, MI, 49006
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To Whom It May Concern:

For my Honors Thesis Project, I have elected to do a video documentary presentation on Sojourner Truth. The presentation will be centered on Sojourner's life while living in Battle Creek, Michigan, and will be exemplified by pictures, live video, and taped personal interviews. The interviews will be with historians and experts on the subject of Sojourner's life, and questions will be formed from research I am doing and conversations I will have with the interviewees prior to filming them. There will also be a narrative voice-over running beneath the montages of pictures and video presented, from a script developed from the research and interviews I am doing. The piece is intended to run around thirty minutes in length, and is targeted for completion by the end of term, Winter 2002. Any questions about the project or its nature can be answered via e-mail or home phone. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Christina Laemers

Subj: Re: Honors Thesis
Date: 1/16/2002 1:33:35 PM Eastern Standard Time
From: mary.lagerwey@wmich.edu (Mary Lagerwey)
To: CMLaemers@aol.com

Hi Christina,

Thank you for your message & the discription of your planned work. Since your work is regarding a person no longer living it does not need to be reviewed by the HSIRB. This is different from the "exempt" status which does require a full application. Wishing you the best,

Dr. Mary Lagerwey

At 04:08 PM 1/11/02 -0500, you wrote:

>Hello, my name is Christina Laemers. I am currently working on my honors
 >thesis, a video documentary of Sojourner Truth. Recently my thesis
 >chairperson, Dr. Cornwell, contacted you in regards to HSIRB requirements,
 >and you had requested that I draft a summary of the project for consideration
 >toward an exemption. I have attached said summary. Please contact me as
 >soon as possible with further instructions, or with any problems. Thank you
 >for your time and consideration.

>
 >Christina Laemers
 >CMLaemers@aol.com

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 instructions, or with any problems. Thank you for your time and co
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>
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