Isabella decided she could no longer live under these conditions. She began to make plans to escape with her infant daughter, Sophia, and was forced to leave her other children behind. In later years, she spoke of how God remained with her during this uncertain time, giving her direction and declared, “I did not run off, for I thought that wicked, but I walked off, believing that to be all right.”

During her flight to freedom, a Quaker couple, Isaac and Maria Van Wagenen, learned of her predicament and took her in until the state’s emancipation took effect. Because of the Van Wagenen’s benevolence, she began to learn what it meant to love those who had oppressed her and had a life-changing religious experience - becoming “overwhelmed with the greatness of the Divine presence”, and was inspired to preach.

Now that she was finally free, she moved to New York City and found work as a domestic servant and soon became active in a Methodist church. Later joining the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, she did volunteer social work helping former slaves. On June 1, 1843, she changed her name to ‘Sojourner [Traveler] Truth’ and told friends, “The Spirit calls me [East], and I must go...the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the truth to the people.” She wandered in relative obscurity, depending on the kindness of strangers. In 1844, she joined the Northampton Association of Education and Industry in Massachusetts, founded by abolitionists to promote cooperative and productive labor. They were strongly anti-slavery, religiously tolerant, women’s rights supporters, and pacifist in principles. She began dictating her memoirs to Olive Gilbert, one of the Association’s members. The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave was published privately in 1850 by William Lloyd Garrison. It gave her income and increased her speaking engagements. In 1854, at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, she gave her most famous speech, with the legendary phrase, “Ain't I a Woman?”.

Sojourner was well into her 60s when the Civil War broke out, but she solicited supplies for the Union Army’s Black volunteer regiments. She met President Lincoln on October 29, 1864, when he showed her a Bible that was presented to him by the Black people of Baltimore, Maryland. She continued to teach and lecture after the war. When at last she retired, Sojourner moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, where she died on November 26, 1883. Isabella Baumfree not only left a given birth name behind, but also a magnificent legacy.

Excerpts taken from adaptations of “Great Women in American History”, by Rebecca Price Janney.