

Tribute to Sojourner Truth: Unveiling of Bust in Emancipation Hall at the U.S. Capitol

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Remarks

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Secretary of State

Emancipation Hall, U.S. Capitol

Washington, DC

April 28, 2009

SECRETARY CLINTON: What a wonderful day it is to be here in Emancipation Hall for this great occasion when Sojourner Truth takes her rightful place alongside the heroes who have helped to shape our nation's history.

This is an achievement that did not come easily or quickly. It took years of hard work and faith by many people to make this day possible. And what a great honor and pleasure it is to have with us for this extraordinary moment in our nation's history our First Lady, Michelle Obama.

I want to thank the Speaker for her leadership and also Congressman Boehner and Leader Reid and Senator McConnell, because this was a bipartisan effort. But I especially want to thank my partner in this project from the very beginning when we first co-sponsored the legislation for this extraordinary memorial years ago, Congresswoman Sheila Jackson-Lee. This dream began with C. DeLores Tucker. All of us who knew and admired and loved C. DeLores remember that when she had her mind made up, you could not change it. She saw this through almost to the very end, and I know she is smiling down on us today in celebration and pride. And it is such a great delight to have with us her husband, William "Bill" Tucker. Mr. Tucker, thank you.

All the members of the National Congress of Black Women deserve our thanks, because you raised the money for this memorial. You raised it one dollar and five dollars at a time. It was a true grassroots effort. And you have every reason to be so proud of what you have achieved here.

I also want to take a moment of personal privilege and recognize another one of my heroines, Dr. Dorothy Height, who is here with us. You know, leaders like Dr. Height and E. Faye Williams and Michelle Battle and so many others stand in the footsteps of Sojourner's legacy. It is all around us today. You heard the bishop. We're here because of barriers she challenged and fought to tear down and paths she helped to forge and trod alone. So we

honor her memory and we pay tribute to her life's work, and we recommit ourselves to fighting to end injustice and inequality wherever it remains.

One hundred and fifty-eight years ago, hundreds of women and men from across the country gathered in a church in Akron, Ohio to declare a simple but revolutionary idea, that the rights afforded to men, particularly the right to vote, belonged to women too.

Now, in a few minutes, we're going to hear from one of our great actresses, Cicely Tyson, who will recount those words. But inside that crowded church when this former slave stood to speak, at first, people were not paying attention. Some were kind of rude, if you read the history. But she knew firsthand the cruelties of slavery and oppression and the burden of gender inequality, and she drew vital connections between the two.

On that day in Ohio, she told the crowd of suffragettes that if they cared about women's rights, they had to fight for the rights of current and former slaves, and that slaves deserved their support, just as the larger society should support the rights of women that they were campaigning for.

She lived for nearly 90 years. She never stopped fighting to extend the rights and protections of our democracy. She preached against capital punishment and advocated for prison reform. She recruited African American troops for the Union Army. She helped to desegregate the streetcars that ran through Washington, and she worked diligently to improve living conditions for freed men and women.

She did not know how to read or write. Her life was from the most humble and improbable circumstances. But she ended up counting President Lincoln and President Grant among her acquaintances. She never, never, despite what she went through, stopped believing in the promise of liberty. She lived long enough to see the end of slavery, but not the establishment of voting rights for women. The 19th Amendment would not be passed until 37 years after her death. But today, she takes her place in this Capitol, and we are the better for it.

Was any person ever better named? Think about it. She is a sojourner of truth, by truth, and for truth. And her words, her example, and her legacy will never perish from this earth, so long as men and women stand up and say loudly and clearly: We hear you echoing down through the years of history, we believe that your journey is not yet over, and we will make the rest of that journey with you. God bless the memory of Sojourner Truth.

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