

Understanding Primary Sources: Censuses

Primary sources may not always agree on the facts. A historian must look deeply at the evidence to find answers. Below are two U.S. censuses for Sojourner Truth, a famous 18th century African American civil rights activist.

1860 U.S. Census, Calhoun County, Michigan

Elizabeth Binson	29	F	W			New York
S. Truth	70	F	B		400	do
Elizabeth Banks	35	F	B			do
James Colvin	19	M	B			
Sam Banks	8	M	B	student		

Here's what the handwriting says:

Name	Age	Sex	Race	Job	Value of Property	Birthplace
Elizabeth Binson	29	F	W			New York
next home						
S. Truth	70	F	B		\$400	ditto (New York)
Elizabeth Banks	35	F	B			ditto (New York)
James Colvin	19	M	B			
Sam Banks	8	M	B	student		

1880 U.S. Census, Calhoun County, Michigan

Truth, Sojourner	104	F	W	Keeping House	New York	Unknown	Unknown
Boyd, Eliza	50	F	B		Mich	N.Y.	N.Y.
Boyd, William	18	M	B	At School	Mich	Mich	N.Y.

Here's what the handwriting says:

Name	Race	Sex	Age	Job	Birthplace	Father's Birthplace	Mother's Birthplace
Truth, Sojourner	B	F	104	Keeping House	New York	Unknown	Unknown
Boyd, Eliza	B	F	50		Michigan	New York	New York
Boyd, William	B	M	18	At School	Michigan	Michigan	New York

In the 1860 census, Sojourner Truth (S. Truth) is listed as 70 years old. What year does this mean she was born?

Sojourner Truth's birth years are very different. If you were a historian, what would you do?

In the 1880 census, Sojourner Truth is listed as 104 years old. What year does this mean she was born?

- A. Believe the 1860 census
- B. Believe the 1880 census
- C. Look for other sources for her birth year.
- D. Pick a year between the two dates.