

African American Christian Contributors: Mary McLeod Bethune

Angelica A. Fleming

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Biographical Information

Mary McLeod Bethune was born July 10, 1875 in Mayesville, South Carolina. She was one of seventeen children born to former slaves. Bethune grew up in poverty, therefore, everyone in her family had to work in the fields, toiling the land and picking cotton. Mary was the only child in her family, whom had the opportunity to attend school. She walked several miles each day to get to school. Bethune ensured that she shared knowledge with her family. Bethune received a scholarship to Scotia Seminary in Concord, North Carolina. After graduating in 1893, Mary McLeod Bethune attended Dwight Moody's Institute for Home and Foreign Missions (also known as Moody Bible Institute) in Chicago. Upon completing her studies, Bethune returned home to South Carolina, where she began work as a teacher. In 1898, Mary McLeod married fellow teacher, Albertus Bethune and they gave birth to one son, Albert McLeod Bethune.

Achievement

For more than 10 years, Bethune served as an educator in South Carolina. In 1904, Bethune established the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Black Girls in Daytona. The school initially started with five students, however, Bethune helped to grow the population to approximately 250 students over the next few years. Bethune served as the school president for several years, even after the merge with Cookman Institute for men. She was, at the time, one of the few female college presidents in the nation. Bethune-Cookman College was one of the only institutions, in which African American students could pursue a college degree. Mary McLeod was known as the "First Lady of the Struggle," and devoted her career to improving the lives of

African Americans through education, political and economic empowerment. In 1935, she founded a more politically oriented organization, the National Council of Negro Women, a coalition of black women's organizations focused on ending segregation and discrimination and cultivating better international relationships.

Contributions

In 1924, Mary McLeod Bethune was elected president of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, and in 1935, she became the founding president of the National Council of Negro Women. Bethune was a champion of racial and gender equality. During the Great Depression, Bethune also played a role in black voters transitioning from the Republican Party "the party of Lincoln" to the Democratic Party. Bethune became close friends with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. In 1936, President Franklin Roosevelt appointed Bethune director of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration, where she became the highest ranking African American woman in government. Bethune was also a leader in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's unofficial Black Cabinet. In 1937, Bethune organized a conference on the Problems of the Negro and Negro Youth. She fought to end discrimination and lynching. In 1940, she became vice president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons (NAACP), a position she held until her death. Appointed by President Harry S. Truman, Bethune was the only woman of color to attend the United Nations founding conference in 1945. During her lifetime, Bethune regularly wrote for leading African American newspapers, the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Chicago Defender*. In addition, Bethune was a businesswoman, as she owned a resort in Daytona, Florida and co-founded the Central Life Insurance Company of Tampa.

Belief

Bethune initially planned to travel to Africa to become a Christian missionary. After teaching and working among South Carolina blacks, she realized that “Africans in America needed Christ and school just as much as Negroes in Africa. My life work lay not in Africa but in my own country”. She believed that education provided the key for racial advancement. Bethune did not confine her efforts on behalf of African Americans to government-sponsored programs. She was outspoken in her support for civil rights and actively supported efforts to end lynching and the poll tax.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mary McLeod Bethune died of a heart attack on May 18, 1955 at the age of 79. She lived long enough to see the US Supreme Court strike down school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*. She is remembered for her work to advance the rights of both African Americans and women. Since her death, Bethune has been honored with many awards. In 1973, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. Her life was celebrated with a memorial statue in Washington DC and the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp with her likeness in 1985. In 1994, the U.S. Park Service bought the former headquarters of the NCNW. The site is now known as the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site. Before her death, Bethune penned "My Last Will and Testament," which served as a reflection on her own life and legacy in addition to addressing a few estate matters. Among her list of spiritual bequests, she wrote, "I leave you a thirst for education. Knowledge is the prime need of

the hour." Bethune closed with, "If I have a legacy to leave my people, it is my philosophy of living and serving."

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