

MARY JANE MCLEOD BETHUNE
1875 – 1955



Mary Jane McLeod Bethune was born to former slaves, Samuel and Patsy McLeod, on July 10, 1875 in Maysville, South Carolina. She was born free, 17th of 19 children, all of whom worked the fields to help the family.

In her early life, Bethune was the one and only child in her family to go to school when a missionary opened a school nearby for African American children. Traveling miles each way, she walked to school each day and enthusiastically shared her newfound knowledge with her family.

As a beneficiary of the efforts to educate African Americans after the war, Bethune received a scholarship to the Scotia Seminary (now Barber-Scotia College), a boarding school for girls in Concord, North Carolina, where she later graduated in 1893. After graduating, she went to the Dwight Moody's Institute for Home and Foreign Missions (also known as Moody Bible Institute) in Chicago, Illinois.

After completing her education at Moody Bible Institute, she returned to the south. But with no church willing to sponsor her as a missionary, Bethune became an educator. While teaching in South Carolina, she married fellow teacher Albertus Bethune, with whom she had a son in 1899. The couple eventually moved to Florida where her life for advocacy truly began.

Bethune believed that education provided the key to racial advancement. Hence, she founded the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls in Daytona, Florida, in 1904. Attendance grew from 5 students to 250 students over the next years. Bethune became one of the most important black educators, civil and women's rights leaders and government officials of the twentieth century.

The college she founded set educational standards for today's black colleges, where she served as the school's president, and remained its leader even after it was combined with the all-male Cookman Institute, to form Bethune-Cookman College.

A champion of racial and gender equality, Bethune founded many organizations including the first Black hospital in Daytona, Florida. Black people would not fully integrate the main hospital until the 1960s. She led voter registration drives after women gained the vote in 1920. In 1924, she 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 also played a role in the transition of black voters from the Republican Party—"the party of Lincoln"—to the Democratic Party during the Great Depression.

Bethune's activism landed her key roles in government as both an advisor to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. In 1936, Bethune became the highest ranking African American woman in government when President Franklin Roosevelt named her director of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration, where she remained until 1944. She was also a leader of FDR's unofficial "black cabinet." As such, Bethune gave African Americans a true advocate in government, as she sought to improve the lives of African Americans through education and political and economic empowerment, while fighting to end discrimination and lynching. In 1940, she became vice president of the NAACP, a position she held for the rest of her life. She died on May 10, 1955 from a heart attack.

Appointed by President Harry S. Truman to a committee on national defense and to serve as an official delegate to a presidential inauguration in Liberia, Bethune was the only woman of color at the founding conference of the United Nations in 1945.

Bethune's extraordinary life was celebrated with a memorial statue in Lincoln Park, Washington DC in 1974, a postage stamp in 1985, and her homes in Daytona and Washington, DC were designated historic sites.

In 2016 the Florida legislature voted to replace a statue of a confederate general in the United States Capitol Hall with a statue of Mary McLeod Bethune. Bethune's statue is scheduled to be installed in 2020 and will be the first African American with a statue in the U.S. Capitol's Statuary Hall Collection.