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Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

**"I leave you a
thirst for education.
Knowledge
is the prime
need of the hour."**

***Last Will & Testament
Mary McCleod Bethune***



Scurlock Studio Records, Archives NMAH, Smithsonian Institution

The First Lady of the Struggle: Mary McCleod Bethune



Mary's sisters in front of the home where she was born.
Florida State Archives

Born in 1875 to formerly enslaved parents and later known as "The First Lady of the Struggle," [Mary McLeod Bethune](#) was a pioneering educator, civil rights activist, and advisor to four U.S. Presidents.

From an early age, Bethune worked alongside her seventeen siblings in the cotton fields of South Carolina. When a missionary school for African American children opened nearby, she enrolled, and at age 10, became the first

of her family member to receive a formal education. She later [noted](#) that when she learned

to read, "the whole world opened to me." Walking several miles each day to school, Bethune was keenly aware of her family's plight and vowed to use her education for the betterment of all. At night, she instructed her family on what she had learned that day.

In 1888, Bethune earned a scholarship to a nearby seminary, and after graduating in 1893, she attended the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago with the dream of becoming a missionary. Two years later, Bethune returned home to teach. She married a fellow teacher in 1898 and had one son. Soon after, they moved to Daytona, Florida, in search of better jobs.

Convinced that education lay at the heart of ending the cycle of poverty, especially for Black women, in 1904, Bethune [founded](#) the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Girls with \$1.50 as capital. The curriculum focused on teaching employable skills such as sewing and domestic science, plus agriculture and teaching. Within two years, it grew from five students to more than 250. When Bethune's husband left her in 1907, she remained determined to keep the school operating.

Bethune's finances were so precarious that she wore hand-me-downs mended by her sewing students and she could be seen scouring the local garbage dumps in search of reusable supplies for her students. She also made what she could: pencils from charred wood, ink from berries, and mattresses from moss-stuffed corn sacks.

But Bethune also became a convincing fundraiser. Her efforts drew the attention of Black and white philanthropists who vacationed in Florida. In addition to becoming donors, many joined the school's board of directors including titans John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and the cosmetics giant and Black entrepreneur, [Madam C.J. Walker](#).



Mrs. Bethune and students, 1905. Florida State Archive

Less than a decade later, Bethune added a high school. In 1912, she opened the [Mary McLeod Hospital and Training School for Nurses](#) to meet two needs: access to medical care for African Americans and job training.

As educational opportunities for Black women improved, in the early 1920s, Bethune expanded her vision. She merged her school with the Cookman

Institute for Men in Jacksonville, renaming it [Cookman-Bethune College](#). Bethune served as president until 1942. Under her leadership, it grew into a four-year college with 600 students, a thirty-two-acre campus, and fourteen buildings. Bethune's educational philosophy, "enter to learn, leave to serve," set the standard for other Black colleges. Today, the school, now a university, is still in operation.

Bethune was also an early and vocal critic of lynching and all forms of segregation. During WWI, while her son served in the Army, Bethune mounted a successful campaign to pressure the Red Cross into providing services for minorities as well as white people.

Never one to miss an opportunity to insist on racial dignity and respect, when she was introduced as "Mary" at a Southern Conference on Human Welfare, she insisted on being called the more formal "Mrs. Bethune." It may seem a small gesture today, but at the time, in the deeply segregated South, it made a bold statement. Bethune was also known to join picket lines in protest of discrimination in hiring practices.

Bethune's influence expanded nationally in other ways. In 1935, she founded the [National Council of Negro Women](#) and was president until 1949. She was also vice president of the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) (NAACP from 1940 to 1955).

Bethune became the [first](#) African American woman to serve on special councils under Presidents Coolidge, Hoover, Roosevelt (FDR, and Truman. But it was her close friendship with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt that helped her bring race to the forefront of national public policy. In the era of fierce Jim Crow segregation, Bethune and Roosevelt were intentionally photographed breaking culture taboos such as shaking hands or dining and attending events together. Behind the scenes, they worked to inform and influence President Roosevelt's policies on racial issues.

Under the Roosevelt administration, Bethune was [appointed](#) director of the Division of Negro Affairs for the National Youth Administration (NYA, becoming the highest-ranking Black woman in the federal government. At her urging, several Black men were appointed to leadership roles in FDR's "New Deal" projects. Bethune was also a member and the only woman in Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet" advising him on issues related to African Americans.

As assistant director of the [Women's Army Corps](#) during WWII, Bethune fought to desegregate the defense industry and the military. When Black fighter pilots, later known as the [Tuskegee Airmen](#), were sidelined from combat because of race, Bethune and Mrs. Roosevelt brought public attention to the issue, eventually enabling the legendary pilots to join the fight.



1920, Florida State Archives

In 1942, Bethune left Bethune-Cookman College and moved to Washington, D.C. She took up residence at the National Council of Negro Women headquarters.

When the war ended, Bethune was named an official delegate and the only woman of color to the conference establishing the United Nations. In the early 1950s, she was appointed by President Truman to serve on a national defense committee and also as an official representative to Liberia.

Bethune retired to Florida where she penned her ["Last Will and Testament."](#) In a moving document, she explains her core values: love, hope, education, racial dignity, and support for future generations.

Bethune died from a heart attack in May 1955.

In 1973, Bethune was inducted into the [National Women's Hall of Fame](#). The following year, a statue of her was unveiled to a crowd of 18,000 in Washington, D.C. and in 1985 the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp in Bethune's likeness.



*Statue of Mary McLeod Bethune,
National Statuary Hall, U.S. Capitol*

The first headquarters of the [National Council of Negro Women](#) (Bethune's last home in Washington, DC, was [designated](#) a National Landmark in 1995. It houses the [National Archives for Black Women's History](#), also started by Bethune. It is the only archive dedicated exclusively to the collection, preservation, and interpretation of African American women.

More recently, in 2022, a [statue](#) of Bethune representing the State of Florida was unveiled at the [National Statuary Hall](#) at the U.S. Capitol. It is the first statue of an African American in the Hall and it replaced a monument of Confederate General Edmund Kirby Smith.

Ask a Friend: What are the greatest challenges facing the world today and how are you working to improve them?

Ask Yourself: How does real change happen through our relationships and our communities?

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[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

Sharon has spent twelve years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her essays about Dennett have appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), and [New Hampshire Magazine](#).

Sharon is a popular speaker at women's and civic groups, and also book clubs. She is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. [Schedule](#) a talk with your group!

Sharon lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs, Gus and Hank.

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Please share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. www.SharonSpaulding.com

