

This Day in History... July 10, 1875

Birth of Mary McLeod Bethune

Educator and activist Mary Jane McLeod Bethune was born on July 10, 1875, in Mayesville, South Carolina.

Bethune was the 15th of 17 children born to former slaves. She was curious from a young age and wanted to learn to read and write. Bethune was the only child in her family to attend school, and she taught her siblings what she learned each day.

Bethune showed an early interest in education, attending the Scotia Seminary and the Moody Bible Institute. She first hoped to become a missionary in Africa but was told she wasn't needed. Instead, she decided to be a teacher. In 1899, Bethune moved to Palatka, Florida to run a mission school and organized outreach to prisoners.

In October 1904, Bethune rented a small house for \$11 a month. With just \$1.50 in funds, she started the Literary and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls in Daytona, Florida. Her first year, she had six students. A clever fundraiser, Bethune, parents, and church members made sweet potato pies, ice cream, and fried fish to sell to nearby construction crews to raise funds for the school. They used elderberry juice for pen ink, burned wood for pencils, and got furniture from local businesses. Bethune also received financial support from the Ladies' Palmetto Club, James Gamble (of Proctor and Gamble), and John D. Rockefeller. She once said, "I considered cash money as the smallest part of my resources. I had faith in a loving God, faith in myself, and a desire to serve."

The school's courses included Bible study, home economics, dressmaking, millinery, cooking, and other skills for self-sufficiency. Students soon were also taught science, business, math, English, and foreign languages. In 1923, the school merged with the Cookman Institute for Men which was in Jacksonville, Florida at the time. The school then moved to Daytona Beach and became the Bethune-Cookman College in 1929.

Bethune also opened the first black hospital in Daytona. After one of her students fell ill, she was horrified at her treatment. At first, no hospital would admit her. And once she was in the hospital, she was neglected and segregated to an outdoor porch. Bethune raised the money to purchase a cabin near her school in 1911. The hospital remained in operation for 20 years, saving countless lives.

As a civil rights leader, Bethune served as the president of the Florida chapter of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) from 1917 to 1925. In 1924, she was elected national president of the NACW, after which she opened the first black organization's headquarters in Washington, DC. Bethune was also president of the Southeastern Federation of Colored Women's Clubs from 1920 to 1925 and founded the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) in 1935. During WWII, the NCNW campaigned to get black women commissioned as officers in the Women's Army Corps.

Bethune ensured that African-American colleges participated in the Civilian Pilot Training Program, which produced some of the first Black pilots. As part of President Franklin Roosevelt's Black Cabinet, she showed African-American voters that the president cared about their issues. She also affected political appointments and made sure funds reached organizations that benefited the Black community. She worked for the National Youth Administration and was made Director of the Division of Negro Affairs, the first African-American woman to hold such a position. In 1944, Bethune helped found the United Negro College Fund.

Bethune died of a heart attack on May 18, 1955. Upon Bethune's death, columnist Louis E. Martin said, "She gave out faith and hope as if they were pills and she some sort of doctor."



Issued for the 50th anniversary of the National Council of Negro Women.



Bethune was the only female African-American delegate at the convention to create the UN charter.

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